

Central and Southern Spain

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This vast and important wine production centre is a sleeping giant in the process of being awoken by all sorts of outside winemaking influences and preferences - to the great benefit of us all. It makes some crisp, cheap whites and some powerful, good-value reds.

La Mancha, Valdepeñas and environs

In a nutshell: Low rainfall, low prices.

Main grapes: Airén (white); Tempranillo (red).

The great majority of Spain's vineyards lie on the tableland around the capital Madrid, particularly on the plains of **La Mancha**, which provide much of the country's basic *Vino da Mesa* and raw ingredients for the Brandy de Jerez that was traditionally drunk in such quantities by the Spaniards. This was supplied by the relatively characterless dry white made from the Airén grape, once so common here - and planted at such a low vine density in these extremely arid, non-irrigated vineyards - that its total acreage was greater than that of any other single grape variety in the world. However, planting of dark-skinned grapes - including such international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah - increased so considerably in the late 1990s that by 2005 more than two-thirds of all the wine made in the region was red. La Mancha itself is Europe's largest single demarcated 'quality' region (ie DO), encompassing 400,000 acres, although very little of its produce is seriously superior and a substantial proportion of its produce provides the raw material for Spanish spirits such as Brandy de Jerez.

This is inhospitable country, whose name is derived from *Manxa* or 'parched earth', as it was known by the Moors. In summer it is boiling hot and there is hardly enough rain to sustain a crop. In winter it can be freezing cold for weeks at a time, with frequent frosts. The one advantage of this dry climate is that vine diseases are practically unknown, so no expensive spraying is required. Because most of the vines are grown as low bushes, no careful vine training along wires is needed. This is minimalist vine-growing. Since 2003 irrigation has been allowed theoretically, but most growers cannot afford the installation and running costs.

Since the mid 1980s, modern winemaking has gradually invaded La Mancha, and in particular temperature controls for fermentations, which have resulted in inexpensive fresh, crisp, if fairly characterless reds and dry whites.

Such vineyards not planted to Airén tend to be planted with Cencibel, the local name for the ubiquitous Spanish red Tempranillo. This is a speciality of **Valdepeñas**, a southern enclave within La Mancha which is a source of some delightfully keenly priced, juicy, sometimes carefully aged reds. So dense is the colour of much of the Tempranillo harvested from the low-yielding vines of La Mancha and Valdepeñas that the wines were traditionally lightened by adding the white grapes of which the region has such a surplus.

As evidence that even the most workaday wine region can today attract ambitious outside investment, La Mancha now has at least two better quality estates, both of them at altitudes of almost 1,000m (3,000 feet). Baronia and Manuel Manzaneque have, perhaps inevitably, introduced international grape varieties and have been rewarded with rapturous acclaim by Madrid's fashion-conscious wine drinkers. Such is the power of this local market that the **Vinos de Madrid** zone between La Mancha and the Spanish capital is experiencing a revival. Nearby **Ribera del Júcar Mondejar** and even **Uclés** may yet follow suit.

Méntrida to the west (where Jimenez Landi does a fine job), is most famous for the strength of its largely co-operative-made Grenache-based reds. Just to the south, near Toledo, is the dynamic red winemaking estate of Marqués de Griñón, which has been awarded its very own DO. In splendid isolation **Dominio de Valdepusa** produces some of Spain's most respectable Cabernet Sauvignon as well as some extremely good Syrah and even some interesting Petit Verdot. Clever canopy management techniques for training the vines in such a dry climate have played an important part here.

The Mediterranean coast

In a nutshell: Alcohol, mitigated by altitude.

Main grapes: Monastrell, Cencibel (aka Tempranillo), Bobal (red); Airén, Moscatel (white).

The Levante traditionally produced wine too sweet, sickly and strong to appeal to the serious wine drinker but all this has been changing as the Monastrell is re-evaluated (largely in the light of its French counterpart Mourvèdre's international stardom). This heavily-planted, sun-drenched stretch of vineyards has already yielded some of the world's best-value reds and we can expect to see many more. Initially what was required was the combination of the Levante's inexpensive, easily-ripened grapes with some imported expertise mindful of the requirements of the international consumer. Today, increasing numbers of local wine producers are cottoning on to and investing in more sophisticated winemaking techniques and equipment. Another key ingredient in the taming of the ultra-ripe Monastrell and Bobal grapes grown here has been planting and blending in other varieties such as Merlot, Syrah and Tempranillo that lighten the overall effect. Salvador Poveda and Enrique Mendoza in **Alicante**, Bodegas Piqueras in **Almansa**, Julia Roch and Agapito Rico in **Jumilla** (who blend in a little Merlot to add breed) have pioneered this trend, which is producing a new wave of rich but well-balanced, inexpensive Spanish reds. **Yecla** is dominated by La Purísima, the largest co-operative in Spain, but is also home to the more ambitious Bodegas Castaño, where Cabernet, Merlot and Tempranillo are blended with Monastrell. **Bullas**, too, is dominated by Monastrell.

Official DOs in the Levante include, roughly north to south, **Valencia**, **Utiel Requena**, **Manchuela**, **Almansa**, **Alicante**, **Yecla**, **Jumilla** and **Bullas**. Producers in and around these regions who have already won some international recognition include Hispano-Suizas of Utiel-Requena, Finca Sandoval of Manchuela, Agapito Rico of Alicante, Casa Castillo and El Nido of Jumilla, Laderas de El Seque of Alicante and Solanero of Yecla.

The blending of local and international varieties is producing good results on the high plateau of Manchuela, with Finca da Sandoval demonstrating the successful partnership of Monastrell and Syrah. The local Bobal variety is characteristic of this region and neighbouring Utiel-Requena, which also benefits from its altitude.

Alicante was long known for tooth-rottingly sweet wines and Enrique Mendoza with Dolç de Mendoza and Gutierrez de la Vega with Casta Diva Cosecha Miel carry on that tradition in a way that even modernists will appreciate – not least for the value they offer

Sweet Moscatel is still a popular local product, particularly in Valencia, named after the port on which the wine industry is centred, but this represents the old Spanish wine industry. The new one has no shortage of aces up its sleeve.

The Islands

For years the Balearic Islands and the Canaries were ignored by Spain's growing band of sophisticated wine fanatics. Today a handful of inspired wine producers on Mallorca is making waves with the quality of their intense, sensitively-oaked reds, often but not always based on the local Manto Negro grape. Anima Negra is one of the most talked-about wines to qualify for the relatively new **Pià i Llevant** DO but is no longer alone. If rich reds are the keynote of Spain's islands in the Mediterranean, fine-boned whites represent the best of the extremely varied produce of its islands in the Atlantic, the Canary Islands. These islands boast no fewer than 10 different DOs, which may smack of an excess of local politicking but, as I say, the wines really are very varied – not just stylistically but qualitatively. One of the best producers is Viñátigo which makes extremely stylish dry whites, including one from the local Marmajuelo grape, as well as a light, sweet but spine-tingling pale Malvasia Classico. Wines like this must have been made since the Middle Ages when merchant fleets brought the Malvasia grape from the Aegean to these islands and, fatefully, Madeira to the south.