

North West Spain

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In a nutshell: Spain's centre of fine white wine production.

Main grapes: Tempranillo (aka Tinto Fino or Tinto de Toro), Mencía (red); Albariño, Godello, Treixadura and other local specialities (white).

First-time visitors to Galicia in far north-west Spain are almost invariably amazed to find quite how 'un-Spanish' it is. The countryside is green, lush and gentle, sometimes oddly reminiscent of Ireland. Rain-bearing clouds speed in off the Atlantic, which forces its way into the mainland along many-fingered estuaries called *rías*, bringing an enviably rich variety of fish to an originally Celtic population. The political centre is Santiago de Compostela, to which pilgrims have flocked for centuries.

For years Galicia made slightly fizzy, bone dry, light dry whites and reds rather similar to the Vinho Verde made over the border in Portugal. Such wines rarely escaped the fish restaurants of the region itself. But since the early 1980s Galicia has been increasingly valued by Spaniards as their one source of fine, often exotically scented, crisp white wines. The top white Galician wines, usually made from the Albariño grape, are some of the most sought after in Spain and have a growing following around the world.

Rías Baixas, right on the coast to which Christopher Columbus returned with the news that it did not represent the end of the world, is the most famous region in which Albariño seems to thrive. The locals swear it must be related to Riesling, so pure is its aroma and surprising its ability to age in bottle. Agnusdei, Pazo de Barrantes, Martín Códax, Quinta de Couselo, Granxa Fillaboa, Lagar de Cervera, Morgadio, Nora and Pazo de Señorans and are some of the most admired producers, and Adegas des Eiras and Agro de Bazan were the pioneers of barrel fermentation, which may not be ideal for these delicate wines. Rias Baixas' light, fruity reds are increasingly appreciated within Spain.

Ribeiro is slightly further inland and is most like Portugal's Vinho Verde in that it is upstream along the same river (the Miño in Spanish), depends heavily on Treixadura vines but also makes substantial quantities of light, tart, deep-coloured reds made from a special red-fleshed strain of Garnacha for strictly local consumption - often, curiously, in white porcelain bowls. Adegas Fernández, José Merens Martínez, Viña Mein, Emilio Rojo and Vilerma make some fine wines here.

Even further inland is **Valdeorras**, whose best, dry, sometimes ageworthy whites are flavoured by the local Godello grape, most successfully by the likes of Senén Guitián (Bodegas La Tapada), Godeval and Joaquín Rebolledo. The steep, inhospitable vineyards of Valdeorras can produce top quality, mineral-scented dry whites from the local Godello grape. The family of Alvaro Palacios of Priorat has recuperated old vineyards here.

Mencía is the signature grape of the increasingly fashionable **Bierzo** region just east of Valdeorras. Grown on slate terraces, notably by the Palacios family, it can produce wines that are unusually fragrant and elegant. Other wine regions in this north-west corner of Spain include **Ribeira Sacra** and **Monterrei**.

Rueda is Spain's most promising and most versatile white wine region, its produce having rather more body and international appeal than that of Galicia. On the same high plateau as Ribera del Duero, Rueda has its own highly successful grape variety Verdejo, whose crisp nuttiness hints at its previous existence in a sherry-like wine. It now makes very modern, aromatic unfortified table wines and the region's success in this field was much helped by the importation of Sauvignon Blanc vines by Marqués de Riscal of Rioja in the 1970s. Other individual producers experimenting with serious techniques such as barrel fermentation include Belondrade y Lurton, Angel Lorenzo Cachazo, Naia Viña Sila, Palacio de Bornos, Pagos del Rey and Telmo Rodríguez. The region, with its cool climate and good acreage of fashionable Sauvignon, has not yet reached its full potential.

One of Spain's most dynamic red wine regions is **Toro** just west of Rueda. For years it was regarded simply as a source of rather rustic, deep-coloured red from the local **Tinta de Toro** grape, a strain of Tempranillo. But an influx of sophisticated wine producers (including some of Spain's most famous) has changed all this and the region has attracted investment that its reputation, and prices, have risen. One of the most ambitious newcomers is Vega Sicilia of Ribera del Duero whose winemaker is fashioning extremely grown-up red wine at Alquiriz estate. The wines are chocolate-rich and,

in the right hands, can have great sweetness and smoothness. Numanthia is another newish, highly acclaimed producer. Being downriver of Ribera del Duero, Toro is usefully less prone to spring frosts.

Cigales can make agreeable Tempranillo-based reds and some rosés while nervy, appley, light dry **Txacoli** whites are made in Basque country round Bilbao.