Rioja

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

Rioja in north-east Spain was for long Spain's only high-profile wine region, but in the 1980s it lost many friends by overpricing and under-performing (a pattern which has recurred in Ribera del Duero now that it has taken over the mantle of Spain's most revered red wine region). Although both issues have since been addressed, other regions of Spain crept up while Rioja wasn't looking and seduced consumers with high-quality, characterful wines in a generally more modern idiom.

Rioja has traditionally been American oak's most expressive ambassador. The wine is made from a blend of Tempranillo and Garnacha (Grenache) grapes aged for a considerable number of years in the sweet, vanilla-scented warmth of small American oak barrels. The result of this prolonged ageing was to allow a high proportion of phenolics to be left behind in the bottom of the barrel, making bottled rioja a relatively pale, gentle, soft wine reminiscent of strawberries and stewed fruit It was this flattering, easily appreciated character, and the fact that fully mature examples did not cost very much, that made Rioja the first non-French wine to woo non-Spanish wine drinkers in the late 1970s.

In the old days, quality was measured by time in American oak. The Gran Reservas, the product of many years in barrel, were pale, delicate wines representing Rioja at its finest. Rioja producers have since been confused by the canny fickleness of modern wine consumers. Unimpressed by a succession of younger and younger, duller and duller, yet dearer and dearer wines, Rioja's old customers became disaffected. Seeing the recent success of Ribera del Duero's much deeper-coloured, more tannic and, often, more alcoholic wines, many producers are trying to ape this style. A number of technically well-made red wines which have no American oak characteristics whatsoever are now made by much more careful, slower fermentation and extraction of colour and flavour from the grapes, followed by shorter ageing, often in French oak barrels.

Some producers are deliberately leaning more heavily on the fuller-bodied wines produced in **Rioja Baja**, the region's lower, Mediterranean-influenced vineyards, when constructing their blends. (Very, very few Riojas are estate bottlings, although Contino and Granja Remelluri and an increasing number of others provide notable exceptions.) **Rioja Alta** is in the mountainous far west of the region, so high and Atlantic-dominated that grapes are regularly picked in late October. (Tempranillo, *temprano* meaning 'early' in Spanish, is particularly valued in this relatively cool climate.) That part of the region which falls within the province of Alava to the north is known as **Rioja Alavesa** and can produce some very fine wines on soils that are not too fertile.

Although Tempranillo and Garnacha dominate the vineyards of Rioja, Mazuelo (local name for Carignan) and the much more exciting but relatively rare Graciano are also allowed for red rioja. Viura, the Macabéo of southern France, is the staple ingredient for white rioja and because of that tends to be undervalued by the locals, but white Grenache, Garnacha Blanca, sometimes adds ballast, and the small amounts of Malvasia still grown can also add real character. In 2009 the authorities decided in their wisdom to authorise Verdejo, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chardonnay and to ban new plantings of Viura. Most white rioja is either a squeaky-clean, cool-fermented thirst-quencher as pioneered by Marqués de Caceres or a very oaky, often richly nutty wine such as López de Heredia's Viña Tondonia, although Allende's white is exceptional.

Rioja's fortune was made in the late 19th century when Bordeaux wine producers, devastated by the twin scourges of mildew and phylloxera, brought their techniques over the Pyrenees. The oldest bodegas therefore tend to be centred on the small town of Haro in Rioja Alta, which had good rail links, although Logroño in the centre of the region is its administrative capital. Firms such as La Rioja Alta, CVNE, López de Heredia, Muga, Marqués de Murrieta and Marqués de Riscal belong to what might be called the Rioja aristocracy, all with longstanding reputations and in many cases a mixture of traditional and more modernist wines to offer. Baron de Chirel from Marqués de Riscal for instance presents quite a different, more concentrated rendition of Rioja to the lighter, sweeter reds dating back to the early years of the twentieth century and beyond that, which are stored in the firm's historic cellars in the village of Elciego – now dominated by a futuristic bodega built for the firm by architect Frank Gehry, whose famous Bilbao museum is not that far to the west.

The traditional big names of Rioja are fast being usurped in the international press however by an army of newcomers making seriously deep-coloured, deep-flavoured wines aimed straight at the modern consumer in San Francisco and Singapore more used to New World reds. Some of the most obvious practitioners of this new art are Artadi, Finca Allende, Finca Valpiedra, Marqués de Vargas, Remírez de Ganuza, Roda, Benjamin Romeo, Señorío de San Vicente,

Sierra Cantabria and Torre de Oña.

For many years, Rioja bodegas did little other than blend and age wine. Not only did they not own vineyards, many of them bought wine that had been already made by the local farmers or co-operatives. Today the overall and thoroughly healthy trend in the region's most ambitious wine producers (and there are still far too many producers who are not ambitious or do not understand wine quality) is to control the whole process of production as closely as possible. This means that at long last an increasing proportion of Rioja's vineyards, many on terraces high above the poplar-lined River Ebro, are owned by the people who own the labels we see on bottles from the region. They may still believe firmly in the virtues of blending, and deliberately include wines from all three subregions – Rioja Alta, Rioja Baja and Rioja Alavesa – in their wines. Most will also use a mixture of grapes. Tempranillo still dominates but it is now possible to choose from various Garnacha-dominated wines, a few all-Graciano bottlings and even one or two Mazuelos. There has been a limited amount of Cabernet Sauvignon grown in the region for more than a century, however, and the area devoted to international imported grape varieties, both red and white, is increasing every year, whether officially sanctioned or not.

See Rioja Wine for more information on this region.