La Rioja Alta, Vi□a Ardanza Reserva 2000/1

6 Oct 2011 by Jancis Robinson

From $24.99, €17.37, £17.59, 33.90 Swiss francs, Sing$79, Can$65

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As Purple pagers who read my collection of reviews of wines at Majestic last week may have noticed, I was extremely struck by the 2000 vintage of this widely distributed, classic rioja - even though the once promising vintage was blighted by late-season rains.

My love of really fine, mature red rioja was reignited by the most wonderful tasting of top quality specimens which I reported as Most inspiring tasting ever? There were three examples from La Rioja Alta in this collection of wines going back to the 1940s assembled by two of the three authors of a seriously good new book about Rioja, Jesús Barquín and the man who is now our Spanish specialist writer Luis Gutiérrez. (The third Rioja musketeer is prolific journalist, winemaker and Purple pager Victor de la Serna.) The wines as a whole in this magical tasting reminded me just how complex and distinctive mature rioja can be, a wine to which one might glibly attribute the richness of a burgundy and the structure of a bordeaux. There can be strawberry fruit, vanilla spice, the nuance of prolonged age and above all comfort in a bottle of traditional rioja.

This great tasting also reminded me that my very first consumer wine report for *The Sunday Times* when I wrote for that paper more than 30 years ago was a comparative tasting of red riojas, vintages such as 1970 and those of the 1960s, at a time when comparative tastings (can you believe it?) were a novelty.

La Rioja Alta, along with its neighbours CVNE and López de Heredia is one of the big, traditionalist names in Haro, the wine town of the classic subregion of Rioja, also called Rioja Alta (as distinct from the lower-lying Rioja Baja and that which falls in the Basque province of Alava, Rioja Alavesa). But these facts are the most basic about Spain's premier wine region. What you get in *The Finest Wines of Rioja and Northwest Spain* is much, much more detail - and objective opinion - as well as some excellent photographs by Jon Wyand which illuminate the characters behind each bodega (check out this portrait of Emilio Rojo, 'the hermit of Ribeiro', for example). As the authors point out, La Rioja Alta's record is not spotless, and there were some disappointments in some of their wines made in the early 1990s.

We are told, for example, that La Rioja Alta are devout believers in American oak (unlike so many Rioja producers today) and resumed the practice of buying and seasoning their own wood and making their own barrels from the mid 1990s. The wood-ageing period for Viña Ardanza, named for one of the five founding families of the bodega, has been reduced from 42 to 36 months and the Tempranillo, from their vineyards in Cenicero and Fuenmayor, is supplemented by about 20% Garnacha from Villalba just outside Haro which has been bought in but will soon come from their own recently developed vineyard in Rioja Baja. Their vineyard holdings total 425 ha which they say has been enough to supply all their needs since 2007. This is no boutique producer.

The wine I am recommending for drinking now and over the next six or seven years is **La Rioja Alta, Viña Ardanza Reserva 2000 Rioja**. Alcohol level is a modest 13% and it is such a treat to find a fully mature, subtle but rewarding wine in commercial circulation - wide commercial circulation. I found pages and pages of stockists on winesearcher.com, as well as a commendable number of stockists of the wine in useful half bottles. Brits can find it at Majestic in the UK for just £17.60 a bottle if you buy two bottles although there are many other stockists too, as there are in the US.

The next vintage **2001**, is also on general released, and is described as 'fantastic' (one of Barquin's favourite words) in the book. It is being sold as a **Reserva Especial**, only the third time this term has been used by La Rioja Alta for Viña Ardanza, the other two vintages being 1973 and 1964. Purple pagers can read my enthusiastic tasting note on this wine, which tastes more than a year younger than the 2000 and I think will still be delicious in 10 years' time. I'm delighted to report that Majestic now have stock of both vintages and are offering the 'fantastic' Reserva Especial 2001 at the same price as the more evolved 2000. But individual branches tend to have one vintage or the other. I recommend both.

For a wine of this quality and age, this wine is certainly not overpriced. La Rioja Alta's Rias Baixas Albariño, Lagar de Cervera, I find one of the more dependable, for what it's worth.

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