

Three Reds of Rioja

Written by Terry Connor
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Spain has long been the leader in Europe in regards to “acreage planted under vine,” however, quantity did not always mean quality. Until the mid 1980’s Spanish wine was mediocre at best. Mediocrity was the name of the game until progress came along in the form of investment and technology. Here again, as mentioned before, wise investors realized the marvelous potential that existed in Spanish wine and so a great deal of money went into modernizing wineries, formulating sophisticated marketing plans, and far reaching distribution.

Rioja was no exception. I have seen first-hand some of the upgraded wineries, and there is a certain magic in what took place. Old wineries were not replaced, but were made over to combine the new production methods, and at the same time, preserve the older historic image. One winery, for example, is Bodegas Marques de Riscal. From the outside it looks the same as it always did, except that it was scrubbed clean. Inside was added enough production machinery to produce 10,000,000 bottles of wine each year. There are other wineries, to be sure, that were upgraded in the same manner, however, the Spanish are very proud people and preserving the historical look was important. They were very successful.

Rioja, located about six hours north of Madrid, produces both red (tinto) and white (blanco) wine. Red Rioja is produced from four different grapes (tempranillo, garnacha, graciano, and manzuelo.) Tempranillo is the dominant grape and the other three are used for blending. White Rioja is produced from three grapes (garnacha blanco, malvasia, and viura). Here in the states, we are most familiar with the red wines, so let’s talk red for a moment. There are three Rioja red wine classifications, the first being CRIANZA. These are wines that are fresh, youthful, and fruit-forward. The wine is aged in oak for a minimum of one year, and for a minimum of one year in the bottle. Then it is released. Most crianzas are food friendly and cost around \$12-\$20. These are wines that year in and year out will be consistent and will not disappoint. They offer good value for every day consumption.

The next classification for Rioja is RESERVA. Reserva wines are produced from grapes that are selected as superior to crianza. The wine is very complex, tempranillo is the dominant grape, and the leading flavor is cherry. There are strict aging requirements in that the wine is stored for one year in barrels and then for two years in bottles before release. Pricing should be anywhere from \$17-\$35 and maybe a slight bit more. Consider Reservas with lamb, beef, ham or even a grilled meat or fish – yes, I said fish. Try it. You just might like it. A note about Reservas: Vintners only select reservas to be produced in years designated as exceptional.

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Our last classification is GRAN RESERVA. As the name suggests, this is the crème de la crème of Rioja wine. These wines require two years storage in the barrel and a minimum of three years storage in the bottle before release. Gran Reservas are only produced in exceptional years and only by the best vineyards. Gran Reserva wines enjoy a certain status as they always possess depth and intensity. Gran Reservas will compete with any wine at three times the price. Price point here is \$35 and up.

A short note about White Rioja Wines. White Rioja is produced primarily from Viura grapes. Viura has bright, fresh acidity and resists oxidation. The other grapes mentioned above are used to blend the white wine. White Rioja is not enjoying very much popularity as its heyday is past. Only ten percent of the wine produced in Rioja is white. Therefore, exporting to the US is very limited. This was not the case 25 years ago. That was before the explosion of chardonnay and albarino.

Rioja is one of only two wine regions in Spain to enjoy the official recognition of DENOMINACION de ORIGEN CALIFICADA (DOC). The region is Priorat.

All of the wines discussed in this article are available in most of the local wine and beverage stores.

WINESPEAK. What is a **Consejo Regulador**? It is a local governing body that enforces wine policy for a given area, including the boundaries of the area, the grape varieties permitted, and the maximum yield. Every Spanish wine region that carries the DENOMINACION de ORIGEN has a consejo regulador.

Next stop: Ribera del Duero.

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