

The wines that come from the region of Rioja in Spain carry the DENOMINACION de ORIGEN CALIFICADA Designation of Origin (D.O.Ca., “Qualified Designation of Origin”) Rioja wine is made from grapes grown in the communities of La Rioja and Navarre, and the Basque province of Alava. Rioja is further subdivided into three zones: Rioja Alta, Rioja Baja and Rioja Alavesa. It is common to have wines made from the blended fruit from all of the zones or the winemaker will experiment and maybe choose fruit from only one zone. Here again is the ever-present reminder that it is always the winemakers decision whether to blend or to use a single vineyard selection of fruit.

The production of wine in Rioja dates back to 873 AD. Documents that support donations to The Monastery of San Andres de Trepeana were discovered. As was the case in medieval times, monks were the chief practitioners of winemaking, and Rioja was no exception. Steady progress has been made from those early times right up until today. Rioja has kept pace with technology, viticulture, and the process of establishing regulatory agencies. Doing so has kept Rioja as one of the top wine producing areas. In 1970 the Regulations for Denominacion de Origen were approved as well as regulations for the regulating Council. In 1991, the prestigious “Calificada” (Qualified) nomination was awarded to La Rioja, making it Spain’s first Denominacion de Origen Calificada (DOCa).

VITICULTURE & GRAPES

Rioja wines are normally a blend of various grape varieties; they can be either red, which is called TINTO, white (BLANCO) or rose (ROSADO). The annual yield is nothing less than huge – 250,000,000 liters of which 85% is Tinto. Among the tints, the best known varietal is TEMPRANILLO. Other grapes are Garnacha Tinta, Graciano and Mazuelo. A typical blend will be 60% Tempranillo and up to 20% Garnacha, with much smaller portions of Mazuelo and Graciano. Each grape adds a unique component to the wine, with Tempranillo contributing the main flavors and aging potential, Garnacha adding body and alcohol, Mazuelo adding seasoning flavors and Graciano adding additional aromas.

With Rioja Blanco, Viuda is the prominent grape. It is normally blended with some Malvasia and Garnacha blanca. In the white wines the Viura contributes mild fruitiness, acidity and some aroma to the blend with Garnacha blanca adding body and Malvasia adding aroma. Rosdos are mostly derived from Garnacha grapes.

WINEMAKING & STYLES

A distinct characteristic of Rioja wine is the effect of oak aging. First introduced in the early 18th century by Bordeaux-influenced winemakers, the use of oak and the pronounced vanilla flavors in the wines have been a virtual trademark of the region. Originally French oak was used, but as the cost of French oak increased and so many winemakers switched to American oak planks and fashioned them into barrels at Spanish cooperages, the solution to the cooperage problem must have been the cause for a great deal of angst. You had Spanish winemakers using French Oak and then the price of French oak barrels rose to an unacceptable level. Spanish wine makers tried American oak planks. The winemakers at Marques de Riscal actually planted American oak trees. The differing solutions all worked, however they must have been expensive to the max. The typical Bodega requires at least 10,000 to 40,000 barrels depending on the size of the operation. The cost of a wine barrel in the present day is \$800-\$1200 per copy. Do the math. Scary! I have seen the operation at Marques de Riscal The wine operation is so large that they have their own Cooperage manufacturing and repair shop.

Rioja red wine is classified into four categories. The first is simply labeled RIOJA. It is the youngest and it spends less than a year in oak aging. The second is CRIANZA. Crianza ages for two years, one of those years is in oak. The third is RIOJA RESERVA. This wine is aged for three years, one of which is in oak. The fourth is RIOJA GRAN RESERVA. This wine is aged for two years in oak and three years in a bottle.

VOCABULARY

- **Bodega:** A wine cellar or wine producing company.
- **Consejo Regulador:** local governing body that enforces wine policy for a given area including the boundaries of the area, the grape varieties permitted, maximum yield, etc. Every Spanish wine region with a Denominacion de Origen has a Consejo Regulador.
- **Hectare:** A unit of land measure equal to 10,000 square meters or 2.471 square acres.

WINESPEAK

Spanish wines are plentiful and are readily available in the Lowcountry. They are usually a good wine value as they are priced competitively, i.e., easy on the wallet. They are food friendly and pair well with any dish. Be brave and experiment. You may be surprised. There are so many opportunities to experiment with Spanish wines because there are seven or eight Spanish wine regions that are exporting to the United States. I tried to introduce Rioja above, but we also enjoy imports from Ribera Del Duero for their Cabernet Sauvignon, Rias Baixas for their Albarino, and Jerez for Sherry . . . and Priorat, wonderful wines; very expensive. Try them one at a time. Have fun!