

# WINES *from* SPAIN

NEWS

VOL. XX NO. 1



ALVARO PALACIOS  
IN BIERZO

ENJOYING WINE  
AND TAPAS  
IN SAN SEBASTIAN

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## letter from the editor

As summer approaches, we think of spending more time out of doors – of traveling to new places, trying new wines, and sampling new foods. In our Regional Focus article, Bruce Schoenfeld visits Alvaro Palacios, one of Spain’s highly regarded pioneer winemakers, whose starring role in the development of the Priorat wine region invites great interest in his new venture in Bierzo, in northwest Spain. Bruce spends some time with Palacios at his Bierzo bodega and vineyards, and their surroundings, sharing with us some of the excitement and vision of Palacios, and why he sees such promise in this small and often overlooked region.

Warmer weather and longer days signal a call for the refreshing crispness of white wines. Some of the most enticing of Spanish white wines is the unique Txakolí produced in the Basque country of northern Spain. Penelope Casas provides a glimpse of the Txakolí wine industry and reports on her visit to one of its top producers, whose vineyards sit high above the sparkling blue Cantabrian Sea.

Penelope also shares with us her impressions of a recent trip to the city that is the culinary heart of the Basque country, San Sebastián, on the beautiful coast of the Bay of Biscay. She calls it one of the greatest places in Spain to enjoy tapas, and reveals her favorite stops on a tapas tour of that noted culinary mecca.

Alone or on the rocks, a glass of Patxarán is a wonderful treat on a hot summer day or after dinner. Get the inside scoop as you read about the production and unusual flavors of this delicious and unique artisanal liqueur.

In this issue we also introduce the new ad campaign for Wines from Spain. You will be seeing much of it this summer and we are sure you will find the new look as appealing as we do.

Here’s to a wonderful summer. Sit back, relax and enjoy the halcyon days with good friends, good food and of course, the great wines of Spain.

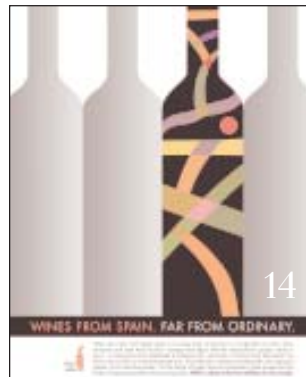
Salud!

Lavinia B. Miró  
Editor in Chief



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# ALVARO PALACIOS

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*in* **BIERZO**



Bruce Schoenfeld visits the winemaking pioneer, who has branched out to yet another overlooked wine region of Spain, only to find a perfect match between the local Mencia grape and the district's terroir

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**H**e pulls in from points east in his Mercedes-Benz, the vehicle of choice for itinerant Spaniards such as bullfighters and traveling winemakers. He parks at a Parador de Turismo, amidst a sea of SEATs and Renaults, where he has stayed often enough to know the names of most employees.

Ten minutes later, after a short walk along a busy street, Alvaro Palacios stands in his winery office in Villafranca de

Bierzo with his arms akimbo, surveying the scene with a certain pride. It is a handsome office. Constructed in a walled-off area at the end of a narrow room that runs the length of the facility, it has exposed rock walls, hardwood floors, and a large window looking out on the surrounding hillsides, where a storm is massing. It has a small sink and laboratory, two desks, and two computers. A framed map of

the world hangs on a wall beside a cabinet holding perhaps a dozen empty wine bottles, including a 1947 La Conseillante Pomerol from Bordeaux, a 1959 Royal Tête de Cuvée from Rioja, and a bottle of Port from the 19th Century. These are not wines most Spanish winemakers would consume, let alone bottles they would save.

Palacios was raised in Rioja as the heir to his family's Herencia Remondo winery. But he made a home and a name for himself in Priorato, south of Barcelona. When he arrived there in 1989, it was Spanish wine's equivalent of the Wild West, a world away from the mature and stratified wine community he left behind. The wines Palacios and a small cadre of friends made on the viticultural frontier tasted like nothing else in Spain. They helped foment a stylistic revolution.

Five years ago, he and his nephew, Ricardo Pérez Palacios, started the Bierzo project they eventually named Descendientes de J. Palacios, S.L. Though Palacios still lives with his wife and six-year-old daughter in Priorato and sleeps at the Parador on the few days each month that he comes to Villafranca, he has immersed himself in the region. He revels in its culture, its history, its wildlife. He has a favorite local chef, Fernando Fernández of the restaurant Menta y Canela in Ponferrada, and many friends in the small winemaking community. At times, it seems that he is more at home in Bierzo than in Priorato, which can be gossipy and contentious, or anywhere else in the world.

Just now, though, he could be anywhere. He is watching a Power Point presentation that a burgeoning enologist, one of only a handful of employees in the winery, has prepared on her own initiative for a speech Palacios will give in Madrid. As it happens, Palacios considers such audiovisual aids dog-and-pony shows that detract from whichever wines he is showing. Still, he tries to be as appreciative as he can of the effort. And when she maneuvers a three-dimensional, 360-degree photographic map of Bierzo on the screen, he watches with growing excitement.

The map reveals with startling clarity how the pitch of many of Palacios's vineyards are positioned to receive maximum sunlight. "Can you see that?" he says. "That is La Faraona. It is the highest vineyard we have, more than two-

thirds up the highest mountain in the area." He jabs a finger at the screen. "Look!" he commands, his voice rising. "Look how incredible ..."

Before Palacios arrived, Bierzo was one of many of Spain's lightly regarded and all but disused *Denominaciones de Origen*. Its history of grape-growing and wine production was long, but the local red grape, Mencia, had traditionally been grown for quantity rather than quality, and the vast majority of wines were sold in bulk. Few people outside the area ever tasted them, and nobody missed them. They were light in color and body, not often ripe, and generally uninteresting. They were also said to be impossible to age, though why anyone would want to age a wine with such characteristics is unclear.

Palacios was far from alone in expanding his base from a single Spanish wine region. Eager to find the next hot appellation following the success of Priorato, many winemakers and bodegas rushed to make land deals in Toro, where vines were decades old and the local Tempranillo had mutated into a unique form. Others chose La Mancha or Jumilla, where the Syrah of southern France has had success, or joined the third or fourth wave to invest in Ribera del Duero, where the number of new wineries built in recent years is only matched by the precipitous drop in the average age of the vines.

Palacios never had an interest in those places. He had his eye on Bierzo all along. He remembered visiting the area a decade before, in the late 1980s, while scouring Spain for a place to stake his claim. He'd been impressed by Bierzo's dramatic landscape, its range of soil types, and the hardiness of its Mencia vines. In the end, he chose Priorato because René Barbier already had established a beachhead there; it meant that he could create a wine and a winery as part of a growing movement, albeit one whose leader was living out of a Volkswagen bus. But Palacios never forgot Bierzo, and the way that the old vines, that hadn't been pulled out through the years for more profitable crops, played over the terrain like checkerboards. Occasionally he'd wonder why the boom in Spanish wine, which ranged from the Atlantic coast in Galicia to obscure appellations on the Balearic

Isles, had missed what he considered to be perhaps the most interesting stretch of vineyard land on the peninsula.

In 1998, his sister Chelo's son, Ricardo Pérez, then 21, stopped through Bierzo on the way back to Rioja from Bordeaux, where he'd been studying enology and working at various wineries, including Château Palmer and Château Margaux. Palacios, who also worked in Bordeaux, has always seen much of himself in his nephew. "We have the same personality," he says now. "The same sense of humor, the same way of looking at the world." Though 12 years apart in age, they're at once strong-willed and imaginative, nonconformist, and charmingly persuasive: far more like each other than like the rest of their family. They also each have a keen understanding of the conditions necessary to grow grapes that can create a truly singular wine.

Exploring the hillsides around the town of Corullón, the very hillsides that are now showing up in such detail on the Power Point presentation, Pérez was amazed by what he saw. Soon after, he implored Palacios to make wine with him in Bierzo. Not wine from the Cabernet Sauvignon or Syrah that were *de moda*, or even Spain's traditional Tempranillo, but from Mencia, a grape that was considered minor and unimportant by nearly every winemaker in Spain.

If Palacios didn't do it, Pérez told him, nobody would.

Palacios understood. His own success had come at the personal cost of a decade spent in virtual exile. His father and brothers, in particular, couldn't forgive him for spurning the family business for a provincial backwater that lacked even rudimentary vegetation. Now Palacios understood that Pérez was facing the same dismissive pessimism from the family, which needed help in Rioja and saw the same Palacios hardheadedness manifesting itself all over again. It was as if, Palacios thought, he had gone to Priorato and *failed*, rather than created L'Ermita, one of the most coveted wines in the world.

He saw a chance to trade on his success and help his nephew, who is perhaps the nearest to a son that Palacios will have. "It was the right moment," Palacios says now. "Ricardo came back and wanted to do something together, and he was talking about Bierzo, where I'd been years be-

fore. My father hadn't yet died, so I didn't have all the responsibility of the Rioja winery." It was all too much to resist. The first vintage of Villa de Corullón, the 1999, was released two years ago.

"And now," Palacios says with a broad smile and his arms flung wide as if to encompass the room, "here I am."

Over the past several years, whenever I'd see Palacios at tastings or other wine events, he would tell me about Bierzo. Though I understood that a winemaker with his track record was to be doubted only at my peril, I couldn't help wondering how much of his interest in Bierzo was pure contrarian enthusiasm: the product of an urge to challenge conventional wisdom once more, and help a family member along the way. I knew there had been little outside investment in the appellation, even though several renowned enologists had looked hard at it. Either Palacios knew something they didn't, or they'd made a more pragmatic assessment of the conditions of the area. All I knew about the wine of Bierzo was, I'd never heard anyone taste it and have anything positive to say.

Beyond that, Bierzo may be the most difficult appellation in which to do business in all of Spain. It resembles Burgundy in that it is divided into hundreds of vineyard parcels, each of which is further divided among dozens of owners. Many of those are weekend farmers with little knowledge of or interest in the Spanish wine scene. They don't want to sell their land, which has been in their families for generations, but they do want to sell their grapes ~ and at as much of a profit as possible. Yet because they have sheep to care for or a shop to run, they don't make the effort to so much as pull the weeds from between the decades-old vines. Their grapes, for the purposes of the international marketplace, are all but useless. Imagine a famous vineyard such as Burgundy's Le Montrachet subdivided into various parcels, some of which are immaculately kept and others that almost seem as though they've been abandoned, and you understand how even the best vineyards in Bierzo look.

Descendientes de J. Palacios, S.L., owns 95 parcels in Bierzo, spread over 26 vineyards. With a stiff wind gusting

and rain beginning to fall, Palacios takes me to see some of them. The roads we traverse in a small SUV are narrow, built for mules. At one point, as we make a left turn from a small road to an even smaller one, a peasant has to push himself against the sheer wall of rock to give Palacios room to pass. They exchange waves and smiles.

Palacios is a celebrity now, recognized around Spain, but he still carries himself like the unheralded winemaker who arrived in Priorato in 1989, ready to show his father and the rest of the Rioja orthodoxy that Spain could produce seriously rich wine in the manner of Château Pétrus, if enough care was taken with the process. Even among that original group of Priorato pioneers, Palacios didn't necessarily seem the most likely to succeed. He remembers an



Landscape in Bierzo. © ICEX

early visit to Gratallops by Jorge Ordóñez, who is probably America's most successful importer of Spanish wine, and a keen scout of enological talent. Ordóñez called several of the Priorato producers to talk about representing their wines, but not Palacios.

Palacios tells that story now with a thin smile. Clearly, he has not forgotten how it felt ~ and if he had, the Bierzo experience would have reminded him. Over the past few years, the same Spanish wine writers and wine distributors who rhapsodized about Palacios's Priorato wines one minute would disdain his investment in Bierzo in the next. "Everyone told me, 'Alvaro, don't you realize that the grapes just will not ripen in Bierzo?'" he says, pulling his vehicle to a stop at an overlook. "They all said it, one after the other. But we came here, and we looked, and we saw these vines, and we said, 'How can that be? Look at that sunlight. Look at that exposure.' From the first taste of our first vintage, we knew we were right."

He stands at the overlook, oblivious to the wind, the valley spread out before him. He is wearing a collarless, brown corduroy shirt that is buttoned to the top. He has straight, dark hair that looks, as it often does, like it came away on the losing end of an encounter with gardening shears. He has single lines of sideburn that extend down both sides of his face like afterthoughts. He has expressive eyes of sky blue and ears turned open from his face. He laughs loudly and easily, often at himself. He is susceptible to colds and stomach upsets and carries the equivalent of a full medicine cabinet with him wherever he goes.

Palacios is a pragmatic thinker, but he also has a mystical side. That led him to Priorato, he believes, and to Bierzo, too. He is attuned to coincidences, and considers them far more than mere chance. If a certain flower is found growing on a hillside, Palacios believes it was meant to be there, and it can offer up clues as to what types of grapes should be grown. Such thinking sounds eminently logical, but it is surprising how few winemakers bother to notice the role that other flora and even fauna play in the ecosystem in which the grapes they're using are being grown. "This is the flower of here, the *jada*," he'll say later, when we have left the



Panoramic view of Bierzo. © ICEX

overlook and are hiking up a hill toward one of his vineyards. He'll rub it between his hands and cup them to his face, inhaling the fragrance. "Smell the grapefruit, the cinnamon. The wines we make from this site have *exactly those flavors.*"

Palacios points out that Bierzo was the last major religious settlement along the Camino de Santiago. "The wine culture here has been created by the finest university of enology, the monasteries," he says. "This site was chosen for red wine all those centuries ago, and they brought in the right varieties for the land." In this case, they brought Mencía. Its short vegetation cycle fit the local climate ~ torrid days, chilly nights, plenty of rain ~ and the range of soils in the area, from slate to clay to chalk. There is some evidence that pilgrims walking the Santiago road brought

vines with them from France, and that the grape might actually be a mutated relation of a French variety. Some believe Cabernet Franc, others Pinot Noir. "Until about 60 years ago," Palacios says, "it was called *Borgoña de Mencía*. The Burgundy of Mencía. That says something."

We drive along the ridge of a hillside, gazing down at vines that are many decades old, then leave the car and walk along a path with vineyards both below and above us. Every so often, Palacios points out a vineyard on an adjacent hill. "That one's ours," he says. Invariably, it is perfectly manicured, in contrast to those around it. We hike up the underbrush to Moncerbal, a series of south-facing vineyards on a very steep slope, almost a cliffside, and one of the sites Palacios is using for his single-site wines. (The three others are La Faraona, Las Lamas and San Martín.)

Across a small canyon is a hill filled with chestnut trees, colored lime-green: a wall of color swaying in the wind. It is a mystical moment.

Palacios pauses. He surveys the flowers, purple and yellow and white, that color the landscape around his vineyard, then sifts a handful of dun-colored soil through his fingers. He is careful, he says, not to try to make more of a site than it actually offers. That is the secret to making balanced, drinkable wines. "Never forget," he says, looking up from the dirt in which he is crouching, "that wine is a product that comes from nature."

**T**hat night, some of Palacios's Spanish distributors meet him at the Parador to taste the Bierzo wines. They arrive in sweaters or sportcoats, pleated pants or khakis, shoes that have spent time in vineyards. Salamanca is there, and Soria, Oviedo, Valladolid, León, Vigo, and so on.

Palacios gives them a tasting of his basic Corullón wine. The 1999 has freshness and spice, but seems watery on the finish. "It was our first try," he says. Though the vines were old, Palacios and Pérez didn't know how to best work them, nor where the best parcels were. It was an experiment, though the wine stood upon release ~ hands down ~ as the best Mencia ever made.

Palacios spent that harvest burning up the highway between Barcelona and León. It was an innocent time, he says, not unlike the beginning of his career in Priorato. He and Pérez could keep their heads down. They didn't give interviews or invite anyone in to see what they were doing. They reveled in the skepticism they heard through the winemakers' grapevine. Each time they'd taste a cuvée, they'd feel more secure. They knew that wines of extraordinary quality were coming.

Those wines have arrived. The first of them is the 2000 Corullón. It is a dark wine, with notes of black raspberries and roasted meat, but it still has a core of elegance. It is not an overstuffed wine, a wine made for tasting, but a delicate wine, made for drinking. It has the strength of a dancer, not of a body-builder.

Then comes the 2001 La Faraona, the first of four single-

site cuvées, poured from two of 547 bottles that ever existed in the world. It has a nose of cocoa, blueberries in the front of the mouth, and a taste that reminds me of a wine that Palacios and I tasted together a few months before in California. The wine is the 1990 Cheval Blanc, from Bordeaux's St.-Emilion appellation, made mostly from Cabernet Franc. It is hard for me to believe, I tell Palacios, that what is in the glass before me now isn't the same Cabernet Franc. "Yes, but wait until you taste the other three tomorrow," he says. "You'll see. These wines are all from here, all from the same grape, all made exactly the same way, but they taste so different. In one, Mencia can be Cabernet Franc. In the next, it can be Pinot Noir. In the next, you'd swear it was Syrah. It all depends on the soil."

The next morning, we wake to rain splashing in the parking lot of the Parador. Palacios and Pérez plan to take the distributors on a vineyard tour, but if the rain continues, the vehicles will be stuck in the mud. "I want them to enjoy themselves," he muses. "They will not enjoy themselves if the cars go rolling down the side of the hill." For a moment it appears that the distributors will spend the morning inside the office, crowded around the Power Point presentation. Then the rain stops. As three cars leave the parking lot, the hillsides are filled with color ~ lilac, yellow, lime, forest green.

We arrive at a vineyard and see two mules working the field, plowing earth. The hillside is so steep, machines wouldn't stand a chance. Miguel Sánchez, who distributes Alvaro's wines throughout Spain and also owns the Dominio de Atauta winery in Ribera del Duero, looks at the scene with wide eyes. "We're in the 13th century here," he says. On the other side of the knot of distributors, Alvaro is talking. "This isn't marketing," he says. "This is real."

Back at the winery, a tasting table has been set up between fermentation tanks and barrels. One by one, Pérez pours the three other 2001 cuvées. The San Martín has a savage note, very Côte Rôtie. It is a huge wine, colored purple-black. It could be a Syrah barrel-sample. Las Lamas has a blackberry nose and a bit of the same savageness at first, but as it stays in the glass it evolves into a complete wine. Black and red fruit leap from the glass, lots of minerality,



Vineyard view in Bierzo. © ICEX

and a refreshing quality that would make it suitable for the hottest weather. Moncerbal is last. It is a crystalline wine, the least gaudy of the four, transparent in its flavor, full of minerality, with an incredibly long finish. It has the clean lines and complex tastes of an exciting young Echezeaux, but a personality all its own.

Barrel samples of the 2002s come next, but the room is already in an uproar. These are, it is plain to see, some of the most compelling wines in Spain, a stylistic departure from Palacios's distinctly Mediterranean wines in Priorato. Conceptually, we agree, these wines are from a small, previously unknown part of vinous Spain that is situated in a fictitious D.O. somewhere between the Rhone, the Ribera del Duero, and deepest Burgundy. All have, in varying degrees, that refreshing character unique to Mencia. Otherwise they are distinct.

Food comes, catered by Fernando Fernández. Foie with pickled figs on toast is followed by quail eggs in Russian

dressing. It is interesting food, yet we can hardly taste it ~ the rest of us because we're so excited about the wines we're tasting, Palacios because he seems to have caught a cold tramping through the rain. First, he is coughing, then sneezing, then huddled in the back office trying to get warm. At one point, we look up and notice he has disappeared entirely. "He's back at the Parador, taking medicine, trying to get better," Pérez tells me. One of the distributors overhears him and gives a dismissive shrug. "He left us the wines," he says, just the words Palacios would have wanted to hear.

A frequent visitor to Spain, Bruce Schoenfeld writes regularly for *The Wine Spectator*, *Saveur*, *Men's Health*, and other national and international magazines. He is the author of *The Last Serious Thing: A Season at the Bullfights*, published by Simon + Schuster and *The Match: Althea Gibson and Angela Buxton: How Two Outsiders -- One Black, the Other Jewish -- Forged a Friendship and Changed Sports History*.

# ENJOYING the Food & Wine of San Sebastián

Penelope Casas travels to San Sebastián to enjoy the glories of tapas and the local wine, Txakolí

I traveled last summer with my husband, Luis, to the Basque Country ~ specifically to San Sebastián and to the gloriously green interior of Álava province ~ for the express purpose of gleaning information on *txakolí*, a unique Basque wine, and on a local liqueur called *patxarán*. Nevertheless, whenever we go to San Sebastián, food is always our first priority. San Sebastián is one of the world's great cities for eating ~ a city that says "food" like no other in Spain, with as many top-rated restaurants as Madrid or Barcelona in a city a small fraction of their size. San Sebastián is also one of the three greatest places in Spain to enjoy tapas (it shares the honor with Madrid and Sevilla).

Besides being a gastronomic hot spot, San Sebastián is also one of the world's most beautiful cities, set on a shell-shaped bay ringed by a fine sand beach and a lovely promenade, and filled with Belle Époque buildings, thus combining the ambiance of a beach resort and that of a full-fledged, sophisticated city. Go where you may, tapas ~ called *pintxos* in the Basque Country ~ will be exceptional because the tapas tradition is deeply embedded in the Basque psyche. Even the humblest tavern takes extraordinary care with produce and preparation ("after all," one tapas bar owner told me, "we shop in the very same markets as the city's great chefs").

So on arrival we immediately plunge into the tapas circuit, a somewhat daunting endeavor, considering the countless number of bars and the variety and complexity of tapas in this city. We make a beeline to the Old Quarter, where brightly painted red and green fishing boats bob in its tightly enclosed harbor, and begin making the rounds of our favorite tapas bars. Portaletas, Bar La Ceba, and Martínez are all here, among dozens of others that stand shoulder to shoulder along the narrow streets, and the astonishing array of *pintxos* on display, artfully arranged on platters and plates, is a spectacle to behold. Donostiarra, as the people of San Sebastián are called, are finely attuned to great food, and not an inch of space is wasted as customers crowd in at peak afternoon and evening tapas hours. *Pintxos* are served on the honor system: take them as you please and repeat as you wish and give the barman as accurate a count as possible when you finish.

*Pintxos* most often consist of painstakingly constructed canapés or a variety of ingredients simply speared together on toothpicks. Some typical combinations are hard boiled egg, shrimp, olive, and a dab of mayonnaise on bread rounds, tartlets of crab, pickle, egg and pimiento, and fried bread topped with tuna and onion and garnished with sieved egg yolk and a slice of pickle. Mini rolls of Serrano ham, cheese and so many other enticing fillings are equally popular. Some *pintxos* are multiplex towers, a challenge to fit in the mouth in one bite. It's mind-boggling to imagine the time and labor expended in putting together the hundreds upon hundreds of tapas that can be found in just about any bar in San Sebastián.

Bars will, of course, also typically serve *pintxos* of potato omelet (*tortilla española*) and other kitchen-prepared specialties like batter fried squid, *txistorra* (a long skinny chorizo sausage) and croquettes. Drinks to accompany *pintxos* are usually beer, hard Basque cider, or *txikitos*, squat glasses of red wine or the Basque white wine, *txakolí*. Since we are focused on *txakolí*, the foremost producer of which is on our itinerary the next day, we order it. Pleasantly light, fruity and refreshing, it is ideal with *pintxos* and is the traditional wine typical to this damp coastal climate.

Recently a new breed of tapa has emerged, forming a link between traditional bar food and the innovative cooking of the city's celebrated dining establishments. Indeed, tapas bars in the trend-setting neighborhood of Nueva Gros take their cue from upscale restaurants that feature tasting menus that include small portions of many dishes ~ in essence, tapas. "Tapas are an integral part of our cooking," says Juan Mari Arzak of esteemed Arzak restaurant, "a mini-cuisine transformed into art." Bar Bergara championed "nouvelle" *pintxos* a few years ago and continues to be a leader, along with Aloña-Berri, in this growing movement. Such sophisticated *pintxos* as foie gras with apple compote, vegetables and prawns enclosed in phyllo pastry with leek sauce, and sweetbread and wild mushroom tartlets take *pintxos* to new heights.

In the evening we switch gears, dressing in our finest to dine at Arzak, the temple of extraordinary dining that has

## WINE & FOOD / SAN SEBASTIÁN

garnered three Michelin stars and belongs to our good friend Juan Mari Arzak and his daughter, Elena. Located in a residential neighborhood of San Sebastián, in the house where Juan Mari grew up and where his mother once cooked in the family's tavern, the restaurant was elevated to world class status when Juan Mari founded *la nueva cocina vasca* movement with chef and close friend Pedro Subijana, who holds court at another great San Sebastián restaurant, Akelare.

The food at Arzak is ethereal and the wine list extraordinary, featuring the finest vintages from all over Spain and from all the great wine producers of the world. But Juan Mari is a passionate advocate of Basque wines, and the fine Rioja Alavesa wines from the Basque province of Álava are prominent on his wine list. He also offers *txakolí*, under the Txomin Etxaniz label, as his white house wine. We sip it with an appetite teaser of creamed Cabrales blue cheese and apples. The combination is perfection and a wonderful beginning to one of so many extraordinary meals we have had over the years at Arzak.

The following day finds us in the nearby seaside town of Getaria, where the bodega Txomin Etxaniz has its headquarters. We drive up a steep winding road that takes us into another world, where the hills are covered with lush greenery and the vineyards, elevated from the ground to protect from humidity, seem suspended over the sparkling blue Cantabrian Sea. Affable Ernesto Txueka Isasti greets us outside his nineteenth century winery. As we chat, he proudly sketches his family tree on a scrap of pink paper, and it goes back to founder Txomin Etxaniz six generations before, although *txakolí* has been made in the region since the thirteenth century.

Nevertheless, in the twentieth century *txakolí* fell on hard times. "We are forever grateful to Juan Mari Arzak for championing Basque products and singlehandedly reviving the *txakolí* industry," Ernesto says. "This led to greater recognition and gave us the means to modernize our facilities:"

Indeed, today in the Basque province of Guipúzcoa, *txakolí* has its own Denomination of Origin, Getariako Txakolina, and the remaining two Basque provinces of Álava and Vizcaya were also recently awarded the D.O's Arabako Txakolina and Bizkaiko Txakolina.

It is a gloriously sunny summer day, uncommon in a region known for its rainy weather, and a panorama of grape vines stretches in all directions, descending precipitously

to the sea. Here, two autochthonous varieties grow side by side: Hondarrabi Zuri, which yields the white grapes that make up 85% of the *txakolí* blend and gives the wine its character, and Hondarrabi Beltza, a red grape that favorably softens the wine's acidity. Grapes are harvested by hand from both young and older vines for optimum quality and transported in small boxes to prevent damage. The must is quickly extracted from the grapes to avoid coloration, then a slow fermentation takes place in stainless steel tanks kept at low temperatures to preserve young fruity flavors. The wine remains there until bottled several months later and retains its pleasing natural carbonation.

To be at its best, *txakolí* should be consumed within the year. Ernesto pours us each a glass, and we appreciate its unique personality and crystal clarity and savor its extraordinary aromas of herbs and wild flowers. The sun is fading as we make our way back to San Sebastián, now magnificently aglow, to unwind at a waterfront café and watch the crowds, dressed in their fashionable best, taking their customary evening promenade along the beach of La Concha. Once more tapas bars will fill to overflowing, and we easily fall into the relaxed rhythm of life in this captivating city.

Penelope Casas, Spanish food and travel expert, is the author of *The Foods and Wines of Spain*; *Tapas: The Little Dishes of Spain*; *Delicioso! The Regional Cooking of Spain*; *Discovering Spain: An Uncommon Guide*; and *Paella: Spectacular Rice Dishes from Spain*. She is a frequent contributor to *The New York Times* and to many leading food and travel publications.



Txomin Etxaniz bodega and vineyards. ©Luis Casas.

## PATXARÁN *Penelope Casas Takes a Look at this Beguiling Age-Old Liqueur*

**P**atxarán, made from the maceration of blue sloe berries in anisette, has wide appeal and is found in just about every restaurant in Spain. It began as a home-brewed liqueur and in times past was used for medicinal purposes. Although many think of Patxarán as a liqueur from the region of Navarra (Navarra was, in fact, the first to commercialize it) Patxarán is also a traditional Basque drink, produced and enjoyed in the Basque Country as well.

To check out *patxarán* we establish our base in a charming rural hotel, Caserío Iruaritz, in the lushly green rolling hills of the Basque interior in the province of Álava. We could not have wished for a more delightful place. The setting is idyllic ~ so close and yet so far from urban Bilbao ~ and surrounded by emerald green farmland and peacefully grazing cows and sheep. Exquisitely appointed and expertly run by Francisco Hierro, this hotel belongs to peripatetic Luis Lezama, native of this tiny town of Lezama. His restaurant empire extends to La Taberna del Alabardero in Washington D.C., where, naturally, he serves his hometown liqueur.

Just a few minutes away from Lezama in Amurrio, Barañano Atxa makes *patxarán* and a wide variety of other fruit, herb and honey flavored liqueurs. Owner Victor Barañano Atxa is a stickler for quality, and his *patxarán* is strictly an artisanal product. He insists that the best *patxarán* must be made from local sloe berries. "Berries that are transported from elsewhere," Victor explains, "will never produce the quality and fresh flavor of our just-picked berries that grow wild here in the mountains of Amurrio and in the Sierra de Orduña." He describes a cloud known as El Bollo ("The Plug") that becomes lodged in mountain passes, pro-

ducing a unique microclimate of mist and drizzle that enhances the quality of the berries.

Sloe berries grow on the blackthorn, a bush that is found all over Spain. In early spring the plants are awash with tiny white flowers, and in summer the fruit appears as a green berry that matures to a deep purplish blue (the berries we have been seeing everywhere in northern Spain are, in fact, none other than ripening sloe berries). After harvesting at the end of summer, the sloes are washed and placed directly in vats of anisette. Victor determines when the balance of fruit and anisette is ideal, usually after two or three months, "when the flavor of fruit predominates over the anise," he declares. To further accentuate the fruit flavor of his *patxarán*, Victor enriches it with a hint of apple, cherry, and plum, a family formula that goes back to the early nineteenth century.

Patxarán Barañano is indeed exceptionally fruity and elegantly red tinged ~ not too sweet, but never bitter. Of course, there are many other fine brands of *patxarán*, most notably, Baines Gold Label, a favorite in Spain's top restaurants. *Patxarán* is an excellent after dinner drink that may be

served straight up, or more typically, poured over ice.



Sloe berries on the bush. © Luis Casas.

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## New Image and Logo Design for Wines from Spain Reflects the New Spain

Wines from Spain has unveiled a sophisticated new look for its print advertising campaign, which will launch later this month nationwide. The full-page ads will appear in *The Wine Spectator*, *Wine Enthusiast*, *Wine & Spirits*, *Wine News*, *Sante*, and *Food Arts*.

Fresh, new colors of green, gold, purple and cantaloupe with a dash of bold red, all laid out in streams and flashes of color under the headline “Wines from Spain: Far from Ordinary” replace the traditional images and colors of the previous ad campaigns.

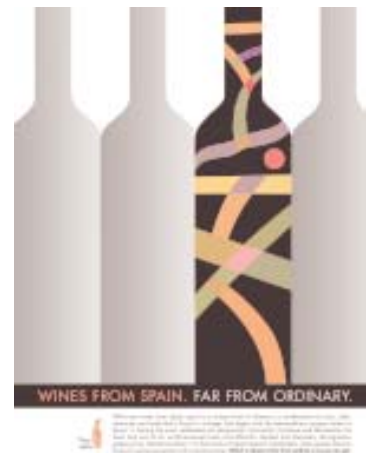
“We want to turn heads and encourage consumers to think of Spanish wines in a non-traditional way with a more contemporary feel and attitude,” says Katrin Naelapaa, Director of Wines from Spain. Spanish gastronomy has been breaking new ground on the culinary front in the past few years with the emergence of some highly creative chefs, and Spanish winemakers are no different. There is a new generation of Spanish wine producers who are making more extraordinary wines than ever. The campaign has been developed to reflect the new Spain and its many styles of wine, from the modern to old-world.

Another change is a focus on the indigenous grape varieties of Spain rather than the winemaking regions themselves.

The ad copy lists some of the more well-known grapes of Spain such as Tempranillo, Garnacha, Cariñena, Albariño and Verdejo. “Focusing on the unique grapes grown primarily in Spain and found only in Spanish wines helps set us apart from other countries,” notes Naelapaa.

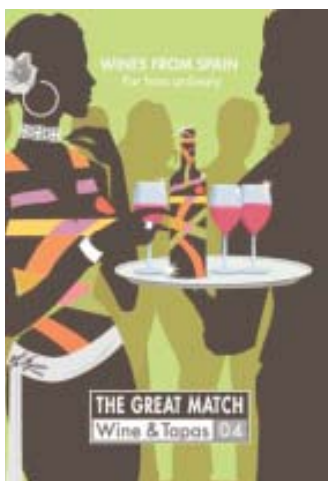
The bottle design for the new Wines from Spain campaign was created by

Valencia-based graphic designer Ajubel. The design updates Wines From Spain’s previous bottle logo and better reflects today’s Spanish creativity and modern image. The bottle is a highly attractive graphic design, intended to symbolize the color, quality and innovative character of Spain and its wines. Chosen from 20 designs, Ajubel’s bottle stands out for its simplicity, visual impact and adaptability to the ten international markets where ICEX (Foreign Trade Institute of Spain) carries out its Wines from Spain program. The U.S. ad campaign was designed by New York-based Robertson Brand Communications.



In addition to appearing throughout the advertising campaign, the new bottle image will appear in all materials produced for Wines from Spain’s promotional activities, including tastings, international fairs, seminars, and events. The image will also be prominent in the new web design for Wines from Spain which will be available later this year as a reference center for people interested in learning about Spanish wines.

The other significant piece of the new promotional and advertising campaign for Wines from Spain is its slogan: “Wines from Spain, Far from Ordinary.” This phrase is intended to encourage the consumer’s discovery of the diverse wines produced in Spain, both from native and international varieties. Regional diversity of Spanish wines, where indigenous as well as international grape varieties are successfully grown, is a significant factor in the campaign. The overall goal of the new campaign is to expose consumers to Spain’s richness and variety through the new design, slogan, and sophisticated yet fresh approach.



## The Grapes of Spain Will Reign in Aspen

At the 22nd annual **Food & Wine Magazine Classic in Aspen**, Colorado, from June 18-20, guests will be able to taste more than 100 wines representing many of Spain's 63 wine producing regions. The

**Wines from Spain** tent will be the largest country pavilion in the Grand Tasting complex, festooned with bright colors and scented with flavors of saffron and garlic from tapas, prepared on-site each day by local Spanish chef **Javier Gonzales-Bringas**. Aspen attendees will have several opportunities to experience Spanish wines. In addition to the pavilion, there will be two seated seminars. **Andrea Immer**, Master Sommelier, educator and author of *Great Wine Made Simple*, will lead a discussion and tasting called

**"Spain: What's Next"** which will focus on new developments, regions and releases, and rediscovered grape varieties. (Friday June 18 at 10 am and at 3:30 pm). **Richard Nalley**, noted wine educator and columnist, will host a tasting called **"The Rioja Revival"** on Friday at 2 pm and again on Saturday at 3:30 pm. In addition, Wines from Spain is hosting a welcome party for press and top chefs and restaurateurs at the Baldwin Gallery, which will feature a selection of fine Spanish wines paired with tapas.

For further information call **877-900-WINE**.

## Wines from Spain Launches Season of Great Match Wine & Tapas Tastings

More than 200 wines representing many of Spain's 63 wine-producing regions were available for tasting at

**Wines from Spain's Great Match: Wine & Tapas**, on Wednesday, June 2, from 6 to 8:30 pm at Morton Meyerson Symphony Center in Dallas, Texas. This walk-around wine and food tasting, open to consumers and wine professionals, is the largest showcase of Spanish wines in the U.S. All proceeds will go to help support North Texas Food Bank, the Dallas area's premier non-profit hunger relief organization.

In addition to Dallas, Great Match events will take place in San Francisco on September 28, New York on October 6, and in Miami on October 14. Please visit [www.greatmatch.org](http://www.greatmatch.org) for further information.

## Luxury Wine Tours in Spain

**Cellar Tours** offers luxury gourmet wine tours in Spain, working with renowned wineries such as **Marques de Murrieta, Marques de Riscal, Martinez Bujanda, Vega Sicilia, Aalto, Pesquera**, and more. Some of their many tantalizing tours are: Balearic Island's Best Kept Secrets; Cooking Weekends in Priorat; Classic Spanish Wine Regions; Don Quixote's Footsteps in Wine Country; Sherry, Sevilla and Dancing Horses; Northern New Wave Architecture and Cuisine in Bilbao; Ronda, Roman Ruins and Ancient Wines in Malaga; and Wine Journeys in Old Castille. Located in Madrid, Cellar Tours can be reached at [info@cellartours.com](mailto:info@cellartours.com), and you can visit their website for further details at [www.cellartours.com](http://www.cellartours.com).

## Classical Wines Celebrates 20 Years as Pioneering Importer

**Classical Wines**, the Seattle-based importer, recently celebrated its 20 years in the wine importing business. Founded and owned by **Steve Metzler** and his wife **Almudena de Llaguno**, Classical Wines was the first U.S. company to exclusively import Spanish wines. They are responsible for introducing **Pesquera** to the United States market, in addition to numerous other fine Spanish wines that were hitherto unknown in this country. To celebrate their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Classical Wines invited their distributors and customers from around the country to join them in an exciting weekend of activities. At the opening reception on April 30, guests were officially welcomed by the Governor of the State of Washington, the Honorable Brad Owen. An accomplished classical pianist, Steve Metzler, treated guests to a selection of pieces by premier Spanish composers as they enjoyed wine and tapas. The weekend continued with seminars and wine tastings, meals at some of Seattle's finest restaurants, as well as the unique opportunity to meet producers of many of Classical Wines renowned bodegas, including **Guelbenzu, Valenciso, Can Feixes**, and **Hidalgo**. For further information, contact Classical Wines at [mcgarcia@classicalwines.com](mailto:mcgarcia@classicalwines.com).



## WINES FROM SPAIN. FAR FROM ORDINARY.



What sets wines from Spain apart is a unique kind of vibrance: a combination of color, style, character and taste that's found in vintages that begin with the extraordinary grapes native to Spain. • Among the most celebrated are Tempranillo, Garnacha, Cariñena and Monastrell, the heart and soul of our world-renowned reds. And Albariño, Verdejo and Macabeo, the signature grapes of our distinctive whites. • In the hands of master Spanish winemakers, these grapes become wines of surpassing quality and surprising value. **Which is about as far from ordinary as you can get.**