

# WINES *from* SPAIN

NEWS

VOL. XX NO. 2



# Introducing The Spanish Wine Cellar & Pantry

Please join us at the newest showcase for fine Spanish wines from up and coming bodegas and regions, including new brands and styles not yet introduced to the US market.

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Wednesday October 6, 2004  
1:00 – 2:00 p.m.

Trade Only Preview  
2:00 - 5:00 p.m.

Trade & Media  
Metropolitan Pavilion  
125 West 18th Street  
New York, NY

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Tuesday, September 28, 2004  
The Regency Center –  
Grand Ballroom  
1300 Van Ness Avenue,  
San Francisco, CA  
1:30 - 2:30 p.m.  
Trade Seminar:  
*Fresh, White and Fabulous –  
Albariño from Rías Baixas*  
by Karen MacNeil  
2:30 - 5:00 p.m.  
Trade & Media Preview  
5:00 - 6:00 p.m.  
Trade Seminar:  
*Spain's Benchmark –  
Great Rioja Wines*  
by Doug Frost, M.S., M.W.  
6:00 - 8:30 p.m.  
Consumer & Media Event

### New York

Wednesday, October 6, 2004  
Metropolitan Pavilion  
125 West 18th Street,  
New York, NY  
1:00 – 2:00 p.m.  
Trade Only Preview:  
*Spanish Wine Cellar & Pantry*  
2:00 - 5:00 p.m.  
Trade & Media Preview  
5:00 - 6:00 p.m.  
Trade Seminar:  
*Spain Goes Native*  
by Doug Frost, MS, MW  
6:00 - 8:30 p.m.  
Consumer & Media Event

### Miami

Thursday, October 14, 2004  
The Biltmore Hotel  
1200 Anastasia Avenue,  
Coral Gables, FL  
1:00 – 2:00 p.m.  
Trade Seminar:  
*Re-discovering Sherry,  
Wines of Jerez*  
by Steven Olson  
2:00 – 5:00 p.m.  
Trade & Media Preview  
5:00 – 6:00 p.m.  
Trade Seminar:  
*Exotic Wines of the  
Mediterranean Levante*  
by Gerry Dawes  
6:00 – 8:30 p.m.  
Consumer & Media Event

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*Wines from Spain News* is a free publication sponsored by The Trade Commission of Spain in New York. This publication makes every effort to verify the accuracy of its contents and does not assume responsibility for any omissions or inaccuracies it may contain.

*Wines from Spain News* is published three times a year by Wines from Spain, a division of the Trade Commission of Spain in New York, located at 405 Lexington Ave., 44th Floor, New York, NY 10174-0331.

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# Somontano

finding its own identity

Countryside in D.O. Somontano ©ICEX/F. Llorio

By Bruce Schoenfeld

Andrea Immer, that famously perky sommelier, author and television personality, called out the question like a game-show host: “Can anyone here name a Spanish wine appellation?” The consumers attending her seminar at Aspen’s Food & Wine Classic certainly could. I heard numerous shouts of “Rioja!,” “Ribera del Duero!,” even “Toro!” and “Priorat!” Then two “Rías Baixas!” from different corners of the room, and finally, after a long pause, a surprising “Jumilla!”

Unscientific, to be sure. But Immer’s brief question-and-answer game confirmed my suspicions. A few weeks before, I’d been sitting in the well-appointed offices of the Consejo Regulador de Somontano, the governing body of Somontano wine. Paging through slick marketing brochures that were larded with impressive-looking charts touting the region as one of Spain’s most important, I was

baffled. I thought back to the last time I’d had a wine from Somontano before visiting the region. I realized it had been ... maybe never. I hasten to add that I drink a *lot* of Spanish wine. “I don’t mean to be negative about this,” I said to Mariano Baroz, the head of the organization, when I met with him later that day, “but you do realize that few Americans have ever heard of Somontano?”

Baroz looked as if I’d told him his nose was on fire. “But we’re quite famous,” he said. “We’re the country’s third wine region, behind only Rioja and Ribera del Duero.”

I’m sure there must be some way of measuring production or marketing budget or length of appellation name in which that was technically accurate. And for a few hours, while eating dinner at the superb Restaurante Flor in

Barbastro, sipping a glass of the exalted Blecua from Viñas del Vero, I might even have believed it. Except that when I tried to explain to friends in Barcelona where I'd just been, they had no idea what I was talking about. Somontano? Barbastro? Was I certain that I'd been in Spain?

Finally someone found it on a map, buried in deepest Huesca. "Ah," he said. "I had no idea they made wine *there*."

**I'D GONE OUT OF MY WAY TO SEE SOMONTANO PRECISELY** because I knew almost nothing about it. It was somewhere between Bilbao and Barcelona, and it was supposed to be beautiful.

I'd heard rumors that a few producers there were making terrific wines, and at least one big-name American importer represented a winery there that he was quite proud of. When I arrived, I found a picturesque river valley at the base of the Pyrenees and plenty of good wine, if not quite as exalted as the locals would have me believe. The name Somontano, it turned out, means the same in the ancient dialect of the area – "at the foot of the mountains" – as Italy's Piemonte does in Italian. "And we're on the way to making wines just as good as in Piemonte," I was told — three times during my brief stay.

Somontano's wine-making history is long, traceable to the Romans. When phylloxera hit France at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Somontano – like Rioja and the Duero valley – became a ready source of red grapes for winemakers from Bordeaux, the Rhône, and beyond. So there's some historic justification for the plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and other international varieties that have come on line in the past decade.

As a result, Somontano isn't like most Spanish wine appellations, where one or two grapes – and usually indigenous ones – dominate.

Viñas del Vero alone makes 25 different wines, using 14 varieties of grapes. And that, I told Pedro Aibar, the winery's technical director, was the beginning of my problem. We identify La Rioja with Tempranillo-dominated blends, and the Ribera del Duero with the local strain of Tempranillo. We know that the Priorat is best for Mediterranean varieties such as Garnacha, Cariñena and some Syrah, while Rías Baixas is for Albariño. Even Bierzo is known for its autochthonous Mencía.

But Somontano? "The appellation is known not for a particular grape, but for the difficulty in knowing what goes where," Aibar said. "There are so many different soils, so many different sites, so many different altitudes. The challenge is matching a variety to each of them."

After a quick drive with him around the area, I understood what he meant. This wasn't one appellation, it seemed to me, but a dozen of them, all grouped under a common name. I saw plantings of Macabeo and Gewurztraminer, of Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Garnacha and Tempranillo, of an indigenous red grape called Moristel that even wine-industry pros confuse with Monastrell, which is something else entirely. I saw hills and valleys, north-facing slopes and prairie flatland, windswept peaks and sun-drenched pockets. Optimizing the area, I realized, might take generations.

This was clearly far too much for consumers to process. Fortunately, they didn't need to remember a single varietal, much less where anyone had planted it. Three wineries, Viñas

del Vero, Enate and Bodegas Pirineos, produce a full 80 percent of Somontano wine, an astounding statistic. (Viñas del Vero alone sells more than six million bottles a year.) They make so much and everyone else makes so little that looking for a range of Somontano producers at your local wine shop becomes an exercise in frustration.



Vineyards at Bodegas Viñas del Vero, D.O. Somontano ©ICEX/ F. Llorio

Instead, consumers tend to identify more with the producers than with the region itself. Looking back, I realized I'd had some of Enate's wines, with their artist-series labels. I just hadn't identified them as Somontano.

"The situation is good for the big wineries," says Angel Borrueel of Bodegas Osca, which turns out a mere 150,000 bottles annually. "They all have the resources to promote and sell their brand. But for us, it's very hard." Borrueel's strategy has been to concentrate on Moristel, the local grape with almost no profile in the international market. "Enate, Viñas del Vero, Pirineos have much force," he says. "But we're the only ones planting Moristel. That will be our point of difference. We are concentrating on an artisanal product."

That sounded good to me. I like nothing better than a wine that speaks of a particular place, a wine that could come

from nowhere else. And yet, I couldn't help thinking that Osca's Moristels – deep and dark, with a hint of roasted meat on the palate – tasted, well, international. "Our wines do seem like they're from the new world," Borrueel acknowledged. And they're far from the only ones. Of the several dozen wines I tried at a tasting sponsored by the Consejo Regulador, only a handful had the sort of earthiness and rusticity I associated with Europe. I liked plenty of them, but they could have been Californian. Or Chilean.

When I told this to the Consejo's Baroz, he agreed. "Our wines just don't taste like Spanish wines," he said. "In blind tastings, even here, almost nobody ever gets it right." That's another strike against a region trying to build its own identity. Especially when, as Baroz acknowledges, the vast majority of the region's bottles sell for less than six Euros, or



Landscape in D.O. Somontano. ©ICEX/ F. Lorrío

about eight dollars.

At Enate, where production is nudging up against the four-million-bottle mark, the line of wines ranges from a six-Euro Cabernet/Merlot to a 60-Euro Reserva Especial. At that volume, the company can't worry about building an image for Somontano, it needs to build an image for Enate. "When you are in a business," said winemaker Jesus Artajona Serrano, "you have to match your ideas and philosophies with the things that sell."

After spending a few hours with Artajona, I can be reasonably certain that he will never try to get his Master of Wine certificate. Each time I tried to draw him out on the unique features of Somontano wine, he resisted. Finally, he offered up a mission statement: "When I make a wine, or even drink a wine, I don't try to say if it's from Bordeaux, Burgundy, the Willamette Valley or South Africa, or anywhere else," he said. "It doesn't really matter. The authenticity to me is not in the origin, wherever that may be, but in the quality of the wine. Quality *is* authenticity."

"That is what we offer at Enate," he added, but he might as well have been speaking for Somontano itself.

#### AT THE END OF MY ENATE VISIT, I STAYED FOR LUNCH.

In the winery's dining room, with windows all around, Artajona poured me a glass of his top Merlot, which he has named "Merlot Merlot" just so there can be no mistake. The wine had raspberry jam on the nose and a nice balance of fruit, spice and tannin, with a bit of the alcoholic heat of an internationally styled wine. It costs 20 Euros, Artajona told me.

As I tasted it, I thought that it could be a wine from anywhere. That disappointed me. But the fruit was ripe, not stemmy, and the finish was long and languorous. I realized that I would be happy to pay 20 Euros for such a wine – and so, I



Bottle chambers at Bodegas Enate. © ICEX/ F. Lorrio

believe, would the rows of consumers shouting out appellation names at Andrea Immer's seminar. And when we upgraded to Enate's Reserva Especial, the effect was heightened. Tasting that wine blind today, I wouldn't know where in the world it came from. But I would know that I'd want more of it.

Just about then, I decided that any preconceived notion I'd had about what an appellation ought to mean was lost somewhere in the drinkable charm of such wines. Identifying a wine by an area that has little intrinsic character only confuses the issue. Everywhere has terroir, just like everyone has a personality – but not everyone's personality is particularly memorable. You go with your strength, and Somontano's strength is that it can produce very good wine.

It sounded simple, but it took a two-day visit to drive home the point to me. I looked out past the art hanging on the wall of the dining room and saw the sun breaking through the cloud cover and lighting up the Pyrenees in the distance. It did look like Piemonte there, I had to admit. Then I took another sip.

*Bruce Schoenfeld's latest book, The Match, was published this year by HarperCollins. He is a frequent contributor to Wine Spectator, Travel & Leisure – and this magazine.*

# A Wine Adventure in Spain's Fine Restaurants:

## *A Veteran Spanish Wine Expert Follows the Recommendations of Sommeliers in the Top Spanish Vanguard Cuisine Restaurants*

By Gerry Dawes

By now, anyone who follows the food world knows about Spanish chef Ferran Adrià and his famous restaurant, El Bulli, located on Cala Montjoi, an isolated cove in northern Cataluña some two hours north of Barcelona. They have heard about his stunning technological cooking innovations that produced such dishes as his famous flavored foams, melon “caviar,” a two-meter long spaghetti de parmesano (a single strand of “pasta” made from parmesan cheese), and even a red mullet skeleton deep-fried and wrapped like a mummy in cotton candy. Not exactly the kind of food that usually goes well with great wines. Nevertheless, El Bulli has an extensive list that is one of the best in Spain.

Creative chefs such as Adrià, Juan Mari Arzak, Martín Berasategui and Santi Santamaría, all of whose restaurants

have been awarded three Michelin stars, have propelled modern Spanish cooking to the first rank of international gastronomy. As Spain's restaurants have risen to culinary prominence, most of the press has logically been on the food with less attention paid to the wine lists. Only in 2003, Atrio, in the Extremaduran provincial capital of Cáceres, became the first restaurant in Spain to win *The Wine Spectator's* Grand Award for its spectacular wine list, which is printed in book form. But recently Spanish wine lists have been growing in importance. This is logical when one considers that modern Spaniards have developed the same mania for wine as the rest of the world and that wine often accounts for half or more of the check in top restaurants.

Beginning in October 2003, I set out on three trips over three months to eat in as many of the important restaurants of Spain as I could. Coupled with my previous experiences over the past three decades of eating in many of Spain's great restaurants—sampling Spanish “cuisines”: regional traditional, modernized traditional, modern signature chef and cutting-edge *cocina de vanguardia*—this would be a culinary Tour de España that would enable me to assess the current Spanish gastronomic picture. I also wanted to assess the role that Spanish wines are playing in this scenario. Even though I visit and taste wines in more than 50 Spanish wineries per year (42 wineries in La Mancha alone in just over 12 months), attend wine events and tastings in the U.S. and in Spain and even teach wine and cheese tasting classes at Artisanal Cheese Center in New York, there are so many Spanish wines coming into the market each year that it takes an iron man with a photographic memory, which I am not, to keep up with all of them—and those are just the ones worthy of serious consideration. So, for a change, I decided to put myself in the hands of the sommelier (*sumiller* in Spanish). It would give me an opportunity to find out where the tastes of Spanish sumillers lay and I would undoubtedly discover new wines.

I was to find that many of the sumillers are quite young



María Jose Huertas, sommelier of La Terraza restaurant. © G. Dawes.

and though some of them are knowledgeable, they are lacking in experience. There was a marked tendency (as there is in many American restaurants) to recommend the sexiest wines of the moment, as I found when I interviewed María José Huertas, a likeable young woman who is the wine director of La Terraza restaurante in the Casino de Madrid where Ferran Adrià is the consultant. Huertas, one of the few Spanish female sommeliers, was recently named the Best Sommelier in Spain by a major culinary organization. When I asked her to bring out a few wines for a photograph, I was surprised to see that most of the wines

she selected were new-wave, highly concentrated wines that were high in alcohol and price.

I began my glorious Spanish food and wine marathon in Cataluña at the lovely, renovated masía, Mas de Torrent, a Relais & Chateaux hotel in a quiet hamlet near Palafrugell, just off the Costa Brava. I put myself in the hands of chef Joan Piqué and sommelier Ricardo Medina. First, Ricardo served me a superb Agustí Torelló Brut Nature Gran Reserva 1999 cava that was disgorged in July, 2003. In the midst of a parade of Joan Piqué's creative market cuisine dishes, he introduced me to a rich, powerful local Empordà-Costa Brava wine, Finca Malveina 2000 from Castillo de Perelada. Dessert was accompanied by glasses of Julián Chivite's Colección 125 Vendimia Tardía Moscatel 1999, a splendid green-gold, late harvest, Navarra dessert wine that is sought after by all of Spain's great restaurants.

At Celler de Can Roca, chef Joan Roca and family's Michelin two-star restaurant in Girona, his brother Josep Roca manages an impressive wine list that is actually several large, bound lists (whites, reds, dessert wines, spirits) parked tableside in a rack. First, Josep served me an excellent, penetrating Sacristía de Garvey 'Jauna' Palo Cortado sherry, then served a procession of Catalan wines to accompany nearly



The Kaia Monte Real being decanted. © G. Dawes.

20 small-portion dishes of his brother's superb creative cuisine. Next came an oddity from Penedès, a wine almost like a fino Sherry. This was the Can Rafols dels Caus Pairal Xarel·lo (native Catalan white grape) 2001, which was fermented in large chestnut barrels. It was followed by a big, rich, peachy, Masía Serra "C Tonia" Garnacha Blanca 2001 from Empordà-Costa Brava; a very concentrated Gneis de Masía Serra 2000 made with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and grapes from 43-year old Garnacha vines; and a sweet, Port-like, Albet y Noya Dolç Adrià 2001, a Syrah-Tempranillo blend made in Penedès.

At two-star chef Carme Ruscalleda's Sant Pau in Sant Pol de Mar north of Barcelona, sommelier Alex Gallardo continued the parade of Catalan wines with a full-bodied, delicious Ferrat Guasch Coupage Sara 1994 Cava; a clean, lemony white, "1/5" Colet Xarel·lo 2002 from Cava Colet (Penedès); and a powerful, concentrated, cherry-flavored Cabrida-Capçanes (Garnacha) 2000 from Montsant. At El Bulli, my fourth restaurant in just over 30 hours, sommelier Lucas Paya started us off with a very dry, palate-cleansing, Macabeo-dominated Cava from Castell Antoni. Such way out dishes as a crunchy rabbit ear, the melon "caviar" with mint and passion fruit (not dessert), a blackberry-wasabi concoction, and that deep-fried salmonete wrapped in cotton candy, needless to say, were not ideal companions to the excellent, mineral-laced Priorat Lo Givot 2000, a Garnacha-Cariñena-Cabernet Sauvignon blend from Celler du Pont. After some 30 small courses, I moved on to some of Alberto Adrià's always surprising, innovative desserts, along with two Andalusian wines: the delicious, characterful, little-known Bodegas Iglesias Vino Par Naranja (a Sherry-like wine from Condado de Huelva that is laced with Seville orange flavors) and an excellent M-R Moscatel, a superb Málaga wine made by the star winemaker, Telmo Rodríguez.

## WINE & FOOD / WINE LISTS IN SPAIN

Down the coast in Valencia, at Ca Sento, Raúl Aleixandre does modern riffs on the great Mediterranean seafood his father Sento selects at the city's thriving fish market. Sento also runs the dining room and sometimes does somiller duty as well. To accompany a parade of exceptional appetizers, Sento served one of Spain's greatest white wines, the remarkable Pazo de Señorans Selección de Añadas Rías Baixas Albariño 1999. After several more memorable dishes, Sento introduced me to a local wine I had never tasted, the surprisingly elegant and silky Bodegas Palmera L'Angelet d'Or 2000, a new wine from the local Utiel-Requena DO.

In Andalucía, at Dani Garcia's highly regarded Tragabuches in Ronda, we were surprised to see no vintages listed. The somiller offered us a choice of the rich, nutty, dry Alvear Capataz Montilla made from 100% Pedro Ximénez grapes fermented dry and a delicious, exceptional Codorníu Pinot Noir Brut Rosado Cava. After a fine bottle of Pazo de Señorans, this time the 2001 normal Albariño bottling, we were served a plummy 2000 Viña 105, a Telmo Rodríguez wine from Cigales (Castilla-León).

In unlikely Castilla La Mancha, new wines are popping up like mushrooms in a misty autumn. At Las Rejas, Manuel de la Osa's brilliant modern interpretations of classic Manchegan dishes have made his restaurant worthy of a significant detour to Las Pedroneras (100 miles southeast of Madrid), the capital of ajo morado (purple garlic). De la Osa loves to turn visitors on to his region's surprising new wines. So he sometimes serves me several Castilla-La Mancha wines with a progression of delightfully inventive and delicious dishes. On a recent visit, I tasted a series of interesting, surprisingly good La Mancha and Vinos de la Tierra de Castilla wines: a fruity Torre de Gazate Airén; a young Canforales Tempranillo; a rich, silky Bodegas Fontana Gran Fontal; a deep,

black fruit-laced Torre de Barreda Selección (with the best version of Spain's classic sopa de ajo, garlic soup, I have ever tasted); an Arva Vitis Tempranillo Selección; and a Vega Moragona Reserva.

At star chef José Rodríguez's top-rated restaurant, El Bohio, also in La Mancha halfway between Madrid and Toledo, wines from Castilla-La Mancha and the designation Vinos de la Tierra de Castilla are also prominently represented. At a luncheon with Mariano García, one of Spain's most famous winemakers (Mauro, Maurodos, Aalto) and consultant (Luna Beberide, Viña Izadi), we drank several regional wines recommended by Diego Rodríguez, the chef's brother. We had a barrel-fermented Manuel Manzaneque Chardonnay; a Vallegarcía single vineyard Viognier; a Martué Merlot-Cabernet Sauvignon-Tempranillo-Syrah blend; and a rich, mocha-flavored Pagos de la Familia, Summa Varietalis, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Petit Verdot, made by Xandra and Támara Falcó, daughters of Carlos Falcó, the Marqués de Griñón, at his Finca Casa de Vacas estate in Toledo (Castilla-La Mancha).

In Madrid, at Zalacaín, rated one of the best restaurants in the capital for more than two decades, veteran award-winning somiller, Custodio López Zamarra presides over one of the city's top wine lists, which has some 500 different wines. Though he carries most of Spain's high-priced new wave alta expresión style wines, López Zamarra refreshingly prefers to let customers order on their own. He also prefers wines that are elegant, not too high in alcohol and not dominated by too much new oak, and often steers his customers, many of whom are regulars, to wines in a reasonable price range. When customers order without asking his recommendations, they usually order wines from La Rioja about 70% of the time and from Ribera del Duero about 30% of the time. For those who want to try something



Sommelier at El Bohio shows wine to winemaker Mariano Garcia. © G. Dawes.

different, he often recommends emerging bodegas from places such as Jumilla, Toro, La Mancha and Vinos de la Tierra de Castilla.

In the Basque Country, in and around the lovely seaside city of San Sebastián, highly rated cutting-edge restaurants abound and a few of them have wine cellars that are among the best in Spain.

So do several traditional restaurants in this area, namely Rekondo, which has one of the greatest wine lists in Europe. Arzak, Spain's first Michelin three-star rated restaurant, has a legendary wine list with many great, perfectly aged, decades-old, Rioja classics represented. But with the restaurant's multi-course *menu de degustación*, the chefs Juan Mari Arzak and his daughter Elena like to introduce interesting new wines with their innovative cuisine. During my recent lunch there, with the first few courses, Elena served a rich, butterscotch-flavored Viña Sofié Rueda Verdejo and an intriguing La Rioja Remelluri Blanco that was a blend of five different white wine grapes. Further into the meal, she produced two standout red wines, the exceptionally well-made, new-wave Rioja, La Cueva del Contador 2000, and the smooth, rich Emilio Moro Malleolus 2000 from Ribera del Duero. She chose the classic González Byass Del Duque Amontillado Muy Viejo for the cheese course.

At rapidly rising star chef Andoni Aduriz's Mugaritz in Renteria outside San Sebastián, the wine list is still in its nascent stage, but somelier Álvaro Ribón recommended two really superb wines, the José Parientes Rueda Verdejo and Álvaro Palacios Les Terrasses Priorat 2001, both of which went well with Aduriz's creative food. At Martín Berasategui's eponymous restaurant in Lasarte, somelier Steve L'Abbe presides over a cellar with 400 different wines. He says when customers order on their own, four of the most often asked for wines are Vega Sicilia from Ribera del Duero, Mariano García's Mauro from Tierras de Castilla y León, Remírez de Ganuza from La Rioja Alavesa and Clos Mogador from Priorat (all Spanish super-star



Xandra and Tamara Falco, producers of Summa Varietalis. © G. Dawes

wines). When I ate there recently, Martín Berasategui, considered by many the best chef in Spain and mentor to such culinary stars as Andoni Aduriz, had his somelier serve several different wines to complement his truly exceptional *menú de degustación*. The aperitif was a glass of the rich, creamy, dry Gramona

Tres Lustros Brut Nature Gran Reserva, one of Spain's best Cavas. With Berasategui's brilliant signature dish, *milhojas caramelizadas*, *de angula ahumada*, *foie gras*, *cebolleta y manzana verde* (a layered foie gras, house-smoked eel, and green apple construction that is covered with caramelized pastry top and drizzled with a scallion cream coulis), I was served an Osborne RF10 Medium Oloroso. The complex Oloroso went beautifully with this strange-sounding, but wonderful dish, which first appeared on Berasategui's menu in 1995 and helped solidify his reputation on his way to three Michelin stars. I continued drinking the Gramona Cava with the next several dazzling dishes until, to go with a squab dish, Martín sent out another wine I didn't know, a rich, sweet, dark blackberry-colored *Finca La Estacada* *Vino de la Tierra de Castilla* 2001, a new winery in northeastern Castilla-La Mancha near Tarancón.

The wine revelation of this entire journey came appropriately at the end of my luncheon at Martín Berasategui with the desserts. A sensational wine, the *Bodegas Viñatigo Malvasía Clásico* 2002 from the *Ycoden-Daute-Isora Denominación de Origen* on Tenerife in the Canary Islands was a delicious, honey-eyed, orange-and-tobacco scented wine with a long, lingering, complex finish, the perfect finale for my gastronomic adventures in the great restaurants of modern Spain.

*Gerry Dawes is a NY-based gastronomy, wine and travel writer who specializes in Spain and visits the country as many as six times per year. According to Food Arts magazine, he is known, for good reasons, in wine and periodical circles as "Mr. Spain." Dawes was awarded the prestigious Spanish National Gastronomy Prize in 2003.*



Poplars along the banks of the Ebro River in Rioja. © Mick Rock/Cephas

## Barnstorming Rioja

By Michael Franz

**I**f you have never had an opportunity to go winery touring in Rioja, but have an interest in what the experience might be like, then read on. I hit 18 bodegas in an intense four-day stretch in late July, and, having now largely recovered, I can report that Rioja is one of the world's most interesting and pleasurable wine destinations. You might wish to adopt a somewhat slower pace than the one I set (since the experience was rather like drinking from a fire hose), but if you love learning about the world of wine, this is a part of it that you must not miss.

I've seen my share of wineries over the years, having conducted over 750 visits around the world, but Rioja had somehow always eluded me. A quick pass through the region in 2001 on my way to other destinations only served to whet my appetite. I began 2004 determined to get up to speed on

Rioja, which was the single most important wine region I'd yet to experience directly.

So, I did what any wine writer would do in this situation: I begged. ICEX, the Spanish Institute of Foreign Trade, kindly granted my requests for logistical assistance with appointments and help from a translator/guide. I sent a long list of bodegas I wished to see, along with a plea to set as many appointments as it might be humanly possible to keep. This plea was also accepted—but only against the better judgment of those helping set my schedule.

Getting a good start is especially important to a hectic trip, but I didn't get one in this case. Equipment problems delayed my flight from Washington to New York by two hours, and I made the connection for my flight to Madrid in a serious panic and a full sweat just as the doors to the plane were being closed. This was a harbinger of things to come.

One thing that does not come is my suitcase. Given the hasty connection in New York, however, this is not exactly a shock to me in Madrid, so I struggle to keep my optimism intact while working through the missing bag and rental car pickup processes. I arrive at my hotel in Logroño only 20 minutes late, which is no scandal by Spanish standards of punctuality. I am greeted by Sonia, my host from ICEX who, to my relief, is quite capable in English and very pleasant.

For my first bodega visit, Sonia directs me off the main road and onto a deeply rutted dirt path that terminates at a set of incongruously magnificent gates. They swing open to reveal Finca Valpiedra, a very large and impressive estate that is the jewel of the Martinez Bujanda properties. Perched on a hillside above the Ebro River, with amazing panoramic views, the estate is absolutely gorgeous. So too are the wines, as I'm able to confirm, following a look at the vineyard and winery, by tasting every one ever made here.

After a delicious dinner, we drive back to my hotel in Logroño, which, as luck would have it, is situated near several department stores. Sonia knows just where to direct me for some early morning shopping so that I won't need to spend yet another day in the same set of clothing. Confident that I'll find some things in the morning to tide me over until my bag makes it up from Madrid, I flop into bed assured that things are on the upswing. In the morning, I bust into the biggest of the department stores precisely at the stroke of 10:00, grab some essentials, and whip back to the hotel for a quick change. I drive even more quickly to our visit at Conde de Valdemar. Our guide mercifully agrees to dispense with a tour of the winery in the interest of my schedule, and leads all of us into a tasting room for a quick run through a dozen wines.

At this point, we really start picking up speed. Late morning and much of the afternoon are spent quickly visiting some impressive vineyards and bodegas of the Sierra Cantabria group, concluding with a superb tasting at the Señorío de San Vicente winery in the lovely town of San Vicente de la Sonsierra.

All the bottles join us for lunch in the town at Casa Toni, an amazing restaurant with a menu split evenly between foods that are firmly traditional and riotously modern, with an equally bifurcated clientele split between well-heeled bankers and muddy-heeled vineyard workers. The meal lurches

back and forth between these extremes, including items such as a Fois Gras Napoleon with Goat Cheese and Port Sauce, as well as Patorrillo a la Riojana (feet and tripe of lamb). I do not want to leave the place (the likes of which I have never seen anywhere in the world), but know that I had better get out, as we're late and I'm growing dangerously fond of the wines.

We hit the road for the day's last visit at Remelluri ahead of schedule, and my luck is running so strong that during the drive I begin fantasizing about an early end to the evening and a full night's sleep. But this is Spain, and my fantasy is snuffed shortly after our arrival. We are greeted by proprietors Jaime and Amaya Rodriguez Salis, highly-civilized people who have reviewed my rat-race itinerary and who insist on imposing some sanity—whether I like it or not.

We spend an hour chatting under a shade tree, then another hour on a lazy drive through the vineyards, then another hour seeing the vegetable garden and an old hermitage and a medieval necropolis on the estate grounds, and then still more time just watching the sunset and shooting the breeze. Jaime is very serious about making wine, but he and Amaya would much rather talk about life, so about five minutes are devoted to seeing the winemaking facilities, and a tasting of the (excellent) wines is merged into an extended dinner with the entire family. This is all totally contrary to my hyper-kinetic way of doing things, but as I'm so thoroughly charmed, I'm unperturbed even by a late return to a hotel room that still contains no suitcase.

The next day is a study in contrasts. The morning visit is to Finca Allende in Briones, a no-nonsense operation producing delicious wines, run out of an unrenovated 18<sup>th</sup> century building that fronts a starkly utilitarian winery. Next is historic Marqués de Riscal, where spectacular investments are being made precisely to make the place something to look at. Looming over the entire site are cranes erecting a hotel and restaurant designed by Frank Gehry, the architect behind many rather wild but also wildly acclaimed buildings like the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Despite the mind-blowing premiums placed on appearances here, I note that a thorough renovation was performed on the winemaking facilities before the hotel project began, so the order of priorities at Riscal seems sound.

Next up are the vineyards and facilities of the Arco Group, starting at the grim-looking Bodegas Langunilla. Many of the wines here (especially under the Marqués de la Concordia brand) are impressively forward-looking, and cask samples of varietal Merlot and Syrah from Rioja Baja are downright revolutionary.

Thursday is a day for bodegas big and famous, starting with historic Marqués de Murrieta. The old stone buildings are beautiful, but the place is strangely depopulated and becalmed. Some portions of the facility are being readied for a major renovation, I learn, and with this being the last Thursday in July, almost everybody in Spain is either leaving for a vacation or is already poised to depart. On such a quiet, windless morning, even the vines seem inactive. But the wines are good, so I'll just have to come back here someday, since you can't evaluate a sleeping racehorse.

I'm growing worried that my last two days may be anticlimactic, with all my hosts champing at the bit to hit the beach. But it turns out that Marqués de Cáceres is buzzing with activity. This is a very big bodega, with every building packed to the rafters. A visit to the equally capacious El Coto at the end of the day offers an interesting contrast. Cáceres is both huge and hugely successful, and is Rioja's leader in sales to the United States. They are still bringing out new wines and tweaking styles on established ones, but I get the impression that the prime concern is to hold onto what they've accomplished, whereas everything about El Coto suggests that these people are out to conquer the world. The facilities are immaculate and there is an uncanny orderliness to the place. You'd never guess that a place this big could seem coiled for action, since we all know that elephants cannot pounce. But that is exactly the impression that I get, and also why I take trips like this: There are things you can feel when physically present in a winery that you can never sense from statistics or press releases.

My last working day begins early. It starts with the most informative and impressive visit of the entire trip, at Remírez de Ganuza. Fernando Remírez leads me past the old church in Samaniego and down

into what may be the most meticulously tended vineyard I've ever seen. I'm thinking that nothing this clean and beautiful can possibly spring from dirt. The bodega can't be as impressive, right? Wrong. It is intelligently designed in every minute detail, and painstakingly maintained. Of course, none of this would ultimately amount to anything if his wines didn't show the fruits of his labors, but the wines turn out to be completely convincing and absolutely delicious.

Next up is the brand new, ultra-modern bodega of Viña Real, which looks like a recently landed spaceship both inside and out. But it grows on me as I appreciate the ingenuity of its design, and I'm favorably impressed by the time we leave. The drive to Contino is very brief, which is a good thing, because the Spanish sun and the new blacktop at Viña Real have conspired to cook the Citroen to a crisp. Contino's bodega is nothing really remarkable, but the 150-acre vineyard is glorious. It comprises the entire interior of a huge, U-shaped bend in the Ebro, and judging from the performance of the wines, it must provide some of the best grapes in all of Rioja.

Dinner this last night is extremely late, having been planned for 9:00 but not actually beginning in earnest until 10:30. An excellent meal at Las Duelas in Haro soothes me somewhat, and some wonderful old wines also have a mollifying effect.

I want to get on the road quickly after an early awakening, but by the time I finally set the little alarm in my wristwatch, I'm so tired that I can barely turn its dials. Surely I'll feel stronger in the morning. But there is no morning. I finally awaken, incredulous and mortified, at 1:35 p.m., having failed to set the watch properly. And while spending the rest of the

day stuck in all that southbound traffic with all those happy vacationers, I've got plenty of time to reflect that when I do this again in Spain, I'd better slacken the pace a little.

*Michael Franz is wine columnist for The Washington Post as well as a wine educator and restaurant consultant. He also hosts "The Grapevine," a live, interactive show scheduled on washingtonpost.com's "Live Online" at noon on alternate Wednesdays.*



The Rodriguez home on the Remelluri estate. © Mick Rock/Cephas

## Innovative Spanish Wine Consortium Debuts

A new generation of innovative, small- to medium-sized Spanish wineries have united to form **Alegria: The New Spanish Wine Group**. Alegria is comprised of one winery per region that most actively promotes developments in technology and wine styles that typify the region.

The group was formed by leading wineries frustrated by their lack of access to the U.S. market. Its mission is to offer the American market a new, simplified way to buy quality Spanish wines by closing the gap between the producer and the market.

The name Alegria, which translates as "joy" or "happiness," represents the energy, passion, and close relationships the group intends to bring to the U.S. market. Unique in terms of its range of regions and superior quality, Alegria offers distributors "one-stop shopping" for leading Spanish wines. In addition, all group members are committed to personal contact with distributors, sales staff, accounts, and customers, providing direct access to winery principals as well. The 11 regions currently comprising the Alegria Group include Montsant, Toro, Jumilla, Yecla, Rueda, Alicante, Almansa, Rioja, Cava, Penedes, and Priorat. The wines of Alegria are imported to the U.S. and available exclusively through **Shiverick Imports**, Cleveland, Ohio ([www.shiverick.com](http://www.shiverick.com); [david@shiverick.com](mailto:david@shiverick.com), tel: 216-861-6800).

## Robert Parker Praises Spanish Wines

In his April 26, 2004 issue of **The Wine Advocate**, wine guru **Robert Parker** notes "the explosion of creativity and energy that has resulted in many formidable wines" in Spain recently. He reports that there are "increasing quantities of great values as well as terrific wines emerging from virtually every region of Spain." Further glowing words in the report included these: "Spain is indeed hot, and I predict that in 2004, Spanish wines will increasingly become the darling of wine consumers throughout the civilized world."

## Big Rioja Story Coming out this Fall

**The Rosengarten Report** (a food and wine newsletter published every six weeks) is including an important story on Rioja wines in its Aug. 31 issue.

**David Rosengarten** and Spanish wine expert **Gerry Dawes**, lovers of old-fashioned Rioja, set out to find which Riojas still have the style they crave, and which modern-style ones they can make peace with. Of the 200 wines tasted, they chose the 50 best to write about. It promises to be a story that will surely pique people's interests. For further information or to obtain a subscription, visit [www.davidrosengarten.com](http://www.davidrosengarten.com).

## Health Benefits of Sherry Wines

A recent issue of *Vinos de Jerez* reports scientific validation of traditional beliefs about the benefits of drinking Sherry. Research carried out by a team from the **University of Seville Medical School** showed that a moderate intake of Sherry wines "significantly reduces the levels of total serum cholesterol levels." Sherry should be regarded as a food, whose moderate consumption has important beneficial effects, notes the president of the Regulatory Council of Jerez-Xeres-Sherry and Manzanilla-Sanlucar Denominations of Origin. For further information visit the website of the Regulatory Council at [www.sherry.org/html/noticiasen.htm](http://www.sherry.org/html/noticiasen.htm).





## 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.**