

Wines of the
Canary Islands
A Love Affair with
Mencía Wines
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Energized by the Summer, Fall is a good time to unveil discoveries. Captivated by Mencía, an indigenous Spanish varietal that thrives in Galicia and western Castilla y León, Steve Olson shares a sense of wonder as the landscape in the background morphes from remote villages to impossibly steep vineyards. Gerry Dawes follows the trade winds and finds surreal vineyards on volcanic soil – “the most amazing vineyards I have ever seen” – and distinctive grapes (with Malvasía leading the group) in the Canary Islands, Spain’s southernmost territory off the coast of Africa. With Spanish wines as a springboard and Brian Robinson as head coach, we head to Brooklyn in search of African flavors, from Ethiopian to Senegalese. Barcelona Restaurant Group succeeds in combining local and imported ingredients with an inspired wine list to bring Spain to Connecticut. Celia Hernando reports. Mark Vaughan sets out to walk the rocky soils in Calatayud and discovers a new wave of red wines.

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About the author:

Gerry Dawes is a New York-based writer and photographer who specializes in Spain. He has published numerous articles on Spanish wine and food and lectures frequently in the U.S. and in Spain on Spanish wine and gastronomy. In 2003, he won the prestigious Premio Nacional de Gastronomía (Spanish National Gastronomy Prize).



WINES OF THE CANARY ISLANDS

By Gerry Dawes

The Canary Islands are home to the most amazing vineyards I have ever seen. After 40 years of visiting many of the world's most beautiful and inspiring wine regions, I thought I had seen it all. Then in May, as I traveled in the Canary Islands, I saw vines clinging precariously to lava-strewn slopes, surviving in barren volcanic soils, yet producing strikingly good wines despite the daunting conditions. Words like “amazing,” “awesome” and “incredible” somehow seem inadequate to describe what must be seen with one’s own eyes—especially the vineyards on the island of Lanzarote, where vines thrive without any irrigation in small man-made craters that seem to imitate the larger volcanic craters that proliferate on this island. These hyperbolic words would only be of value in describing the vineyard landscape if the wines were not good. But that is not the case in the Canary Islands, especially when it comes to white wines and sweet wines, which here reach their quality apogee in all of Spain.

Sweet wines made from Malvasia (and some with Moscatel and Sabro) came from the same historical lineage that brought fame to the “Malmseys” of Portugal’s Madeira. In fact, La Palma’s Bodegas Teneguía claims that Malvasia (Malmsey) was planted in 1427 in Madeira and from there came to the Canary Islands in 1676. The Madeira Islands are the next major island group north of the Canaries and are part of a far-flung group that also includes the Portuguese Azores. This string of Atlantic Ocean islands, of which the seven main islands of the Canaries—El Hierro, La Palma, La Gomera, Tenerife, Gran Canaria, Fuerteventura and Lanzarote—are a part, are thought by some historians to be the remnants of fabled Atlantis.

The Canary Islands have ten D.O.s (denominaciones de origen) governing the production of their wines. Several of the islands—Gran Canaria, El Hierro, La Gomera, La Palma and Lanzarote—have just one eponymous D.O., but Tenerife has five, which can be very confusing since some of them carry more than one name. They are Abona, Tacoronte-Acentejo, Valle de

Güimar, Valle de la Orotava and the somewhat daunting Ycoden-Daute-Isora. The latter produces some of the best wines of the Canary Islands. There is a move afoot to consolidate the Tenerife D.O.s into one, but these micro-climate-based D.O.s, however confusing, can be quite different. Monte Lentiscal, until recently its own D.O. on Gran Canaria, was absorbed into the bigger Gran Canaria denomination.

I visited the four most important wine-making islands — Lanzarote, Tenerife, La Palma and Gran Canaria — and found wines of distinction on them all. Lanzarote is a fascinating place with 250 inactive and not-so-inactive volcanoes. It is a dry, subtropical island 70 miles off the coast of Africa. The vines, primarily Malvasía and Listán Blanco for white and semi-sweet to sweet wines, and Listán Negro and Negramoll for reds, essentially grow in holes strewn with ancient volcanic sand, protected from strong winds by conical depressions and a small quarter circle of volcanic rock wall stacked up about a foot high. These structures allow air flow, winds carrying Atlantic Ocean moisture, which then collects in the porous volcanic ash and sand mixture, nourishing the low density vines with life-sustaining water. Rain is very infrequent here — only 200 mm per year!

Lanzarote produces some of the most distinguished wines of the Canary Islands. Bodega Los Bermejos produces very good Bermejo Malvasías (dry and semi-dulce), a bright, fresh Listán Negro Rosado and a fine Moscatel Naturalmente Dulce sweet wine. El Grifo winery, in the area of La Geria, is the oldest in the archipelago and has long carried the banner for Lanzarote with some distinctive sweet and semi-dulce Malvasía- and Moscatel-based wines.

But the emerging star in Lanzarote is Stratvs, a new, architecturally stunning winery that is the showcase of the Canary Islands, boasting one of the most striking and advanced designs of all Spanish bodegas. At Stratvs, the winemaker, Alberto González, is also the director of the winery and the man who designed much of the innovative winemaking equipment. The juxtaposition of this state-of-the-art winery and the original pre-



phylloxera rootstock vines that grow in its vineyards is truly remarkable. González produces a superb range of wines, including a brilliant Malvasía Seco, a fresh Tinta Conejera (“rabbit red”) Rosado, a couple of good commercial young red wines, an amontillado seco-like solera Vino Naturalmente Dulce, and a superb Moscatel Vino de Licor solera wine made from Moscatel de Alejandría grapes.

La Palma, called La Isla Bonita (beautiful island), the island with the second highest altitude in the Canaries after Tenerife, is entirely a biospheric reserve. Because of the altitude changes on this small island, the climate differences can be dramatic. A visit might begin in a fine mist with clouds covering one side of the island, while a hail storm is hitting the north and a heat wave rules in the south. Although most of the volcanoes are extinct on La Palma, there was a major eruption near the Teneguía winery in southernmost La Palma in 1971.

It is striking to see Malvasía and Sabro vines, from which some of the island's best sweet wines are made, clinging to volcanic slopes with the vines snaking low across the landscape, providing a dramatic contrast between the bright green of the leaves and the stark grey, lava-strewn ground. Vega Norte is producing some ever-better red table wines from Negramoll and Prieto Picudo grapes, but the stars here are Tamanca, Teneguía, Vid Sur and Carballo, all of which produce truly exceptional Malvasías Dulces dessert wines. And Tamanca and Teneguía produce some spectacular dulces (sweet wines) from the Sabro grape.

On Gran Canaria, the warmest of the islands due to the influence of African trade winds, are some of the most impressive restaurants. The wines, with a few notable exceptions, need to do some catch up with the food but are clearly on an upward trend. My friends from Devour.tv and I were fortunate to sample some of the better Gran Canaria wines during wonderful meals at such restaurants as Salsete in San Fernando, the Hecansa Hotel Escuela in Santa Brígida, the charming Casa de los Camellos in Agüimes, and Mariano García's first-rate traditional cuisine La Cuadra in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

At the superb modern cuisine restaurant La Terraza in the luxurious Hotel Santa Catalina in Las Palmas, chef José Rojano served us some stellar dishes. We enjoyed *gaspacho de mango* with trout caviar, diced apple and prawns; *vieja* (parrot fish) with *papas negritas arrugadas* (Canary Islands black potatoes “wrinkled” by cooking in salt water) served with two of the Islands' famous, deliciously addictive *mojo* sauces (*verde*, made with cilantro, and *rojo*, made with garlic, Spanish olive oil and hot peppers), and *albondigas de cerdo negro de Canarias con trufa* (Canaries black pig meatballs with truffles). With this exceptional meal we drank a superb Stratus Malvasía Blanco Seco (“El Vino del Fuego de la Tierra del Viento,” a Lanzarote “Volcanic Fire Wine from

the Land of Wind”) and a delicious Tajinaste red from Tenerife's Valle de la Orotava.

Among the better wines I tried on Gran Canaria were Las Tirinajas Blanco (Listán Blanco, Malvasía and Moscatel), Las Tirinajas Tinto (Listán Negro, Castellana) and the lemony, off-dry Mondalón Malvasía Dulce. But we tasted the most impressive Gran Canaria wines during a visit to the spectacular Los Berrazales in Agaete, a self-sustaining farm that also produces avocados, mangos, oranges, orange blossom honey and exceptional coffee. Everything on this marvelous farm—including a huge rock that fell onto the property during a earthquake years ago and was incorporated into the winery—has a “sense of place,” (*terruño*), including the wines. From pre-phylloxera vines, Inocencio Lugo, the owner and his son, Victor Lugo, produce Los Berrozales Semi-seco (Moscatel, Malvasía; great with foie-gras and goat cheese), a delicious young red Tinto (Tintilla, Castellana) and a subtle, honeysuckle-and-jasmine laced Moscatel Dulce that was a perfect match to the orange honey and goat cheese.

Tenerife, with more than 2,000 square kilometers, is the largest of the Canary Islands and with nearly 900,000 inhabitants, the most populated. It is also the most important island for tourists, many of whom come for the beaches. Tenerife is the island most attuned to marketing its wines outside the Islands. At the Casa del Vino La Baranda in the Tacoronte-Acentejo D.O. near La Laguna and the Tenerife capital of Santa Cruz, I was able to taste some of the best wines of the five Tenerife denominaciones de origen: Abona, Tacoronte-Acentejo, Valle de Güimar, Valle de la Orotava and Ycoden-Deute-Isora. Among the most interesting were the Domínguez Especial Blanco (Tacoronte-Acentejo), an improbable but charming, rosé-tinged wine made from 90% Negramoll (a red grape) and 10% Malvasía; Viñátigo's superb (Ycoden-Deute-Isora D.O.) dry wines as well as their stunning sweet Malvasías (the latter among Spain's greatest dessert wines); wines from Viña Norte/Humboldt (Tacoronte-Acentejo); Bodegas Buten's aptly-named Magma de Crater (Tacoronte-Acentejo); and the delicious, tart Tajinaste (Valle de la Orotava) made from 100% Listán Negro.

Abona's vines on Tenerife are on the lower slopes of the mighty volcanic mountain, Teide, the highest peak in all of Spain. Abona grows a variety of native grapes and foreign varieties in vineyards that are often strewn with a fine, white volcanic sand that helps retain moisture, known as “Jable” soil. At Bodegas Frontos in Granadilla de Abona, I tasted the clean, fresh, mineral Blanco Seco Ecológico (100% Listán Blanco) and a rich, spicy Baboso Negro.

I came away from the Canary Islands vowing not to let another forty months—let alone years—pass before I return to see what other wine treasures are to be found in these remarkable islands.



Using camels during the grape harvest © Patronato de Turismo de Lanzarote

CANARY ISLANDS ILLUSTRIOUS HISTORY

From the 16th to 19th Centuries, when Sherries, Madeira wines and Ports were in vogue in England, wines of the Canary Islands figured prominently among the giants of classical wine. Shakespeare's characters talk about drinking “Canary” (malvasia-based wines) and references to these wines are found in the works of Sir Walter Scott, Ben Jonson, Herman Melville, Robert Louis Stevenson, Theophile Gautier, John Keats, Immanuel Kant, John Locke and Edgar Rice Burroughs.

GRAPE VARIETIES

Canary Island vineyards boast a wide variety of grapes, many of which disappeared from the Iberian Peninsula mainland when it was hit by the phylloxera plague that devastated European vineyards in the late 19th Century. Most of the best dry white wines and sweet white wines—among the greatest dessert wines of Spain—are made from Malvasía grapes, but a number are made with Moscatel, Pedro Ximénez, Torrontés, Listán Blanca, Verdello and Albillo, as well as such little-known Canary Islands varieties as Sabro, Bastardo Blanco, Güal and Forastera Blanca.

Predominant red varieties include Listán Negro, Negramoll, Bastardo Negro, Malvasía Rosada, Moscatel Negro, Tintilla, Baboso Negro (related to the Bastardo of Galicia's Monterrei region) and the more familiar varieties, Tempranillo and the recently planted foreign varieties Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Pinot Noir.



Grapevine of CRDO El Hierro

Winery Regina Varium from Ribeira Sacra, © Luis Carré (ICEX).



A LOVE AFFAIR WITH MENCÍA WINES

By Steven Olson

It is no secret that I am a fan of Spanish wines, as I have now been preaching the gospel for over 20 years. I have nurtured a love affair with many of the regional wines for many years now, as I have passionately extolled the virtues of the many clones of Tempranillo, and shared the knowledge that my favorite grapes, Garnacha and Carineña, were indeed Spanish from the beginning.

I laid my love of life on the line for my beloved wines from Jerez, and even proclaimed to the world that Albariño, Verdejo, and especially Godello, are now to be recognized next to the world's best white wines. I used the value card to get them to listen, but the proof has always been in the glass, and I have since proudly watched as Spanish wine has assumed its rightful place on the world stage. I am known by many as a fanatic of such relatively obscure D.O.s as Toro and Jumilla, and I stashed away my favorite bottles of Priorato when the world was trying to figure out what those crazies were up to. As much as I love all of these brilliant wines, from many amazing regions, today I reveal my true Spanish wine soul: I cannot get enough of the black grape Mencía, and the red wines of that remote area of western Castilla y León and Galicia.

Bierzo is indeed the heart and soul of the Mencía-producing regions, but stopping there would not do justice to the versatility of this very unique grape. Delicious wines fashioned from Mencía are being produced in the D.O.s Ribeira Sacra, Monterrei, Ribeiro, Valdeorras, and yes, even Rías Baixas (even though a miniscule amount of red wine is produced within the D.O.).

When I visited in 1993, I did not taste a single red wine worth writing about or sharing. When I finally returned on a pilgrimage to this magnificent

area in 2006, I was inundated with brilliant *red* wines, from every corner of Galicia, and of course from Bierzo itself.

For many years, red wines from Bierzo, and all of Galicia, were considered light and fruity, simple wines, and thus Mencía was designated a simple grape, capable of producing only this type of wine. This was perhaps a result of phylloxera, when the vineyards were replanted in the valley floors and produced at great volumes and high yields, of course yielding a lighter style of wine. But on the very steep, slate and schist covered hill-sides of this Atlantic maritime area, situated above the Río Sil and its tributaries at elevations often over 2300 feet and sometimes up to 2800 feet above sea level, the old vines were just waiting for someone like Ricardo Pérez Palacios to happen by and pay them heed. When Ricardo and his famous uncle Álvaro (Finca Dofí and L'Ermita) first produced their Corullón wine, from the village of the same name, in 1999, a few of us took notice. Under the name of Descendientes de J. Palacios, the wines have improved with every vintage, and now, in my estimation, the single vineyard designations from this bodega are some of the finest wines in the world today.

When Mariano García (formerly of Vega Sicilia, currently of Mauro, San Román, and Aalto) teamed up with Bernardo Luna, of Luna Beberide, to produce Paixar from 80 to 100 year-old vines at 2700 feet, the game was on. Now Mariano's brilliant sons, Eduardo and Alberto, are in charge, along with Bernardo's son Alejandro, and Paixar continues to be one of the shining stars for the future. I am absolutely in love with this wine, and you will be too... if you can find it.

Mencía grapes. Courtesy of CRDO Bierzo.



About the author:

Steven Olson, aka wine geek, is a New York-based wine and spirits educator and consultant. He teaches, lectures and writes about virtually every beverage under the sun, discussing their integral cause-and-effect relationship with food.

Ribeira Sacra's Roman Vineyards, © Fernando Briones (ICEX).



Production of these wines is extremely limited, and prices continue to climb, as more serious wine lovers are discovering the joys of Mencía, and the wines of Bierzo. Other fantastic bodegas include Dominio de Tares (I adore the Bembibre and the rare Pago Tres) and Casar de Burbia (Tebaida is a drink for the soul, only made in great vintages), both of which, in addition to these mentioned brilliant wines on the high end, offer very affordable value alternatives in a fresh, easy drinking style. Also watch for recent vintages of Castro Ventosa Valtuille, and Tilenus Pagos de Posada.

Lest you should think they are all very expensive (as in Priorato, limited production combined with media attention creates instant supply and demand) some great value alternatives from Bierzo are: Pétalos from Descendientes de J. Palacios, Casar de Burbia, Baltos from Dominio de Tares, and Pazo de Arribi from Bodegas Adriá.

The best Mencía wines are extremely supple, and show great restraint, enhancing the minerality, and exhibiting finesse and elegance. With a judicious oak treatment, they become ultimate wines of place, an embodiment of the terroir. Is there still the danger of over-extraction, over-oaking, over-the-top alcohol... of creating an international style of wine? Of course that danger is always there, yet even with big ripe fruit, these wines truly dictate a more restrained course of winemaking, or, shall we say, less human influence. Mencía grown in the greatest vineyard sites of Bierzo is one perfect example of great wine being made in the vineyard, and great vineyard sites making truly great wine.

Although the D.O. Bierzo is finally getting the recognition it deserves, Mencía actually is the red wine grape of choice of most of Galicia, in Northwestern Spain, as well, and it surely has turned heads in recent years as quality red wine production in this area has blossomed. D.O. Bierzo had only 20 wineries in 2000, but today there are over 50. As we venture west from Castilla y León and cross the eastern border of Galicia, we follow the Río Sil into the D.O. Valdeorras, a region becoming increasingly well-known for its white Godello wines. (Álvaro's younger brother Rafael is doing ground-breaking work here with his As Sortes project.) Yet the red wines should really get more attention than they do. I have only tasted a few of note, but the varietally-labeled Mencía wine of Casal Novo from Adegas O Casal (in Galicia, an *adega* is a bodega, or winery), has to be one of the best red wine values of this year, delicious in a fresh, very drinkable style that still exhibits all of the lovely varietal characteristics that I have now begun to crave. And by the way, while we are in Valdeorras, Casal Novo's Godello is mind-blowing too.

In D.O. Ribeira Sacra, Mencía, among other grapes, is planted on 2000-year-old Roman terraces ascending the steepest slopes, in one of the most remote wine regions in the world, and great things are happening. Since there is now even a paved road coming out of there, we may actually, finally, be able to taste some of these amazing wines on our shores. Seek out a bottle of the 250 cases of Dominio de Bibei Lacima, crafted by Sara Pérez and her life and business partner (and father of her children), René Barbier, Jr, both of D.O. Ca. Priorato fame (Clos Martinet and Clos Mogador,

respectively). The steep vineyards and difficult growing conditions of Ribeira Sacra are similar to those of Priorato. If that is too steep for you, check out the Peza do Rei Mencía, which is still a steal, or the newly released Finca Millara.

The producers of D.O. Ribeiro, on the Río Miño, with a rich history of winemaking dating back centuries, and D.O. Monterrei, with its mere handful of wineries, both better known as white wine destinations, are so eager to show us how far they have come with their red wines, it is almost as if the beautiful white wines by which they have carved out their reputations are an afterthought. Even in D.O. Rías Baixas during my last visit, we tasted *illicit* red wines of Mencía grapes, at least two of which were outstanding. From D.O. Ribeiro, you might try Viña Reboreda Mencía from Bodegas Campante (or continue to enjoy Ribeiro's stunning and under-valued white wines!). From D.O. Monterrei, try Bodegas Ladairo.

Unfortunately, Mencía is often mistakenly blended with other grapes, particularly Garnacha Tintorera, Garnacha Tinta (Alicante), Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and María Ardoña (a black grape local to Valdeorras). I believe that Mencía can lose its appeal, its freshness, all of the lovely fruit and floral tones that make it special, when blended with these other grapes, especially with Merlot, which instead of softening the wine, makes it less balanced and too flat, or with Cabernet Sauvignon, added of course for structure, which only hardens Mencía and makes the resulting wines too firm and tannic. Of course, that is only my opinion, and the Garnacha blends have existed much longer than I, so perhaps I am just a purist who adores his pure Mencía!

I will of course continue to enjoy a fine bottle from Montsant or Priorato, a taste of Toro or Ribera del Duero, a gulp here and there of just about any D.O. of Spain, and a sip or two of Sherry before and after my meal. As I continue to watch and admire the renaissance of winemaking, excuse me, winegrowing, throughout Spain, I am most impressed by the sensibility of the wines. I learned long ago that wine belongs on the table, with food, and the wines from Spain seem to have a built-in affinity for food, a natural synchronicity, to taste good with food. If this is something you have yet to experience, or like me, you just cannot get enough good food and wine, then my suggestion is that you slide on into your kitchen with a bottle of Mencía and witness as it unfolds layer upon layer of intoxicating complexity...until it has overtaken your senses with complete delight. Then? Cook whatever you are inspired to eat. I promise, whatever you choose, the match, the pairing, the combination of the wine and the food, will not disappoint.

This grape, Mencía, grown in these conditions, in these places, and tended lovingly by these people, yearns to be consumed with food, and as such, may be the most versatile wine in your cellar, or on your wine list.



Bierzo's vineyards © Juan Manuel Sanz (ICEX).

THE MYSTERY OF MENCIA

So what, pray tell, is this magical grape, Mencía? Is it Cabernet Franc, as many would have you believe? No, for DNA fingerprinting has definitely proven that it is not Cabernet Franc, although some would argue that they have certain similarities. In fact, Mencía may even be the progenitor of Cabernet Franc (the same grape in Portugal is called Jaen), and it has probably been planted in this area since the Romans were encamped here centuries ago. According to Oscar Alegre of Palacios, at least nine different clones have been isolated in a mere one acre plot, (which is an entire Bierzo vineyard for the Corullón project!), which would indicate hundreds of years of vineyard development.

To me, what is important is not from whence Mencía came, but what it has become, or rather what it can be in the right hands. When working with old vines, grown in slate/schist soils, on very steep slopes, at high altitudes, harvested at low yields, in a relatively cool climate, Mencía is capable of producing deep, dark, beautiful wines with good acidity, exotic wildflower floral tones, red, black and blue fruits, and soft, round tannins. In these conditions, in this type of climate, this grape can reach amazing complexity at lower alcohol levels, while still reaching complete phenolic ripeness, which yields sweet, ripe tannins, and yet has a perfect balance of acidity at moderate alcohol (imagine its versatility for food, and the potential to age!)



Harvest, © Nacho Gómez (CRDO Ribeira Sacra).



THE GLOBAL PLATE : CUISINES OF AFRICA

AFRICAN FLAVORS AND SPANISH WINES CONVERGE IN BROOKLYN

By Brian Robinson

When I opened Gnarly Vines in Brooklyn, New York, almost two years ago, I was thrilled to discover that the local clientele of Fort Greene and Clinton Hill was overwhelmingly adventurous, open-minded and unpretentious. Across the board they drank to enjoy, not to impress. It's no coincidence that our neighborhood can support five African restaurants, though pairing wine with their cuisine presents a few challenges.

When pairing food and wine, I don't believe in precise matches. In most instances, people will enjoy the wine they prefer regardless of the pairing, so I generally try to avoid disasters and encourage experimentation. With this in mind and with a little help from my friends, I set out over the course of two nights to sample a dozen Spanish wines with take-out from A Bistro (Senegalese/French), Grand Dakar (Senegal, granddakar.com), Madiba (South Africa, madibarestaurant.com), Bati (Ethiopia, baticitchen.com) and Kif (Morocco, kifbrooklyn.com).

We started with Grand Dakar's Black-Eye Pea Salad and Kif's Goat Cheese Spinach Cigars, both of which had a slightly pasty texture that craved the fruitiness and fizz of the **Dibon Cava Rosado** from Penedés – a blend of the indigenous Catalanian Trepat varietal with a splash of Pinot Noir. The lime dressing in the pea salad returned the favor and gave the Cava a nice little lift.

Barbadillo Solear Manzanilla D.O. Jerez from Sanlúcar de Barrameda, with its light, tangy, brininess was a perfect match for salty African interpretations of Spanish tapas or pintxos via Fort Greene – A Bistro's Dakaroise Octopus Salad and Akara codfish and black-eye pea croquettes), Grand Dakar's Salmon Cassava Croquettes with a sweet and spicy dipping sauce or Madiba's Ostrich

Carpaccio. I'm always amazed by how many knowledgeable wine drinkers still think of sherry as a sweet, rich wine. No wonder the Spanish consume about 80% of their Manzanilla, while they export about 80% of their Cream Sherry!

We found that two opposite approaches to the spiciest appetizers—Bati's Kategna (toasted Injera bread brushed with Berbere—a cayenne, garlic and black pepper rub) and Kiffo (spicy prime beef tartare with Kibe), or Madiba's Mozambique-style Prawns Peri Peri—worked best. First, the **2008 Txomin Etxamiz Txakoli de Getaria** from the Basque Country danced around the spices and cleansed the palate with its cool zestiness and touch of petillance. A completely different yet equally satisfying approach was the **2008 Botani Moscatel Seco** from Sierras de Málaga. This bold, flavorful wine was loaded with exotic flavors—tropical fruit, lychee, honeysuckle and ginger—that more than stood up to the bold flavors of the food.

As we moved on to the reds, we tried A Bistro's legendary Senegalese Fried Chicken, a deceptively simple dish, which paired perfectly with the **2006 Bodegas Alto Almazora Este** from Valle de Almazora in Almería, a medium-bodied blend of predominantly Monastrell with Tempranillo, Garnacha, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot, with good tannic structure.

Bati's signature Doro Watt (spicy chicken stew) begged for the plush, velvety **2007 Pagos de Quintana Tinto Roble** from Ribera del Duero. There's something about the way Tempranillo extracts sweet vanilla flavors from oak barrels better than any other varietal that works great with spicy meats. We moved on to our most powerful reds—the **2007 Atalaya Monastrell/Garnacha Tintorera** blend from D.O. Almansa and the **2006 El Regajal Vinos**

de Madrid, which were both strong enough to tame the powerful harissa in Kif's fabulous Lamb Tagine without being overwhelmed.

With its enticing bouquet of cedar, fresh herbs, violets and wild berries, *Ánima Negra's* estate wine, the **2004 *Ánima Negra AN***, a blend of 95% old-vine indigenous Callet with Mantonegre and Fogoneu from Falanis, Mallorca, matched perfectly with Bati's milder Ye Beg Alichu (lamb stew). The **1996 *Finca Dofi*** (Garnacha, Cab and Cariñena blend) from Priorat, the jewel of the tasting, confirmed my belief about not pairing older vintages of exceptional wines with strong, spicy food. It was a match made in heaven with Madiba's Pap & Boerewors (traditional beef tenderloin sausage with onion and tomato gravy), illustrating how a great bottle of wine can elevate a simple meal like this comforting staple of the bush.

After tasting over a dozen Spanish wines with the cuisine of five African restaurants in Fort Greene and Clinton Hill, I can easily proclaim that if I could only drink from one country for the rest of my life with the foods I enjoy most frequently, it would have to be Spain.

After all the eating and drinking, we didn't leave much room for dessert, but we had a cold bottle of **Alvear Solera 1927 Pedro Ximénez** from Montilla-Morilles waiting. While it was deliciously rich on its own, it was magnificently decadent drizzled over a scoop of vanilla ice cream - vanilla beans from Madagascar of course!

Brian Robinson is a reformed wine-auction specialist who has regained perspective on wine and life since opening Gnarly Vines, a neighborhood wine shop in Fort Greene – the neighborhood in which he lives and loves with his wife and three young children. Gnarly Vines is located at 350 Myrtle Ave., Brooklyn, NY. www.gnarlyvines.com

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Photos: top: Gretchen Thomas; bottom: Sasa Mahr-Batuz.



Courtesy of Celia Hernando

BARCELONA RESTAURANT GROUP SPANISH WINES & FOODS SEDUCE NEW ENGLAND

About the author:

Celia Hernando is a food, wine and travel writer. She has contributed to several magazines including Spain Gourmetour, Lonely Planet, Ronda Iberia, and Vino y Gastronomía. Celia currently lives in Manhattan.

The Barcelona Cookbook, A Celebration of Food, Wine, and Life (Andrews McMeel Publishing), by Sasa Mahr-Batuz and Andy Pforzheimer, was released in July, 2009. This colorful book is filled with mouth-watering images, and contains over 200 pages of drinks, tapas, and the most enticing signature dishes of the Barcelona Group. It is available at www.barcelonawinebar.com, Barcelona restaurants, and major bookstores.



By Celia Hernando

Tapas are going mainstream in Connecticut. This New England state, a stone's throw from NYC, is not necessarily a place you would expect a Spanish restaurant to succeed, and yet, Sasa Mahr-Batuz and Andy Pforzheimer are proving the skeptics wrong. What began in 1996 with a tiny, 38-seat wine bar is now – with its six locations – the biggest tapas *chain* in America. Even so, Barcelona Restaurant Group is not yet complete. The owners strive daily to extend this venture to new territories. Boston? Atlanta? It's just a matter of time till they do. We sat down with co-owner Sasa and wine director Gretchen Thomas before dinner service to share the story of Barcelona and discover their long lasting love affair with Spain

None of you are from Spain... why then a Spanish-themed restaurant?

Sasa: Believe it or not, I played tennis at a professional level and, luckily enough, that passion took me all around the globe. My first overseas tournament was in Murcia, Spain. I fell in love with the country, with a beautiful girl whose name I still remember, and with its food, which I had the chance to taste in my different visits during eight years, on and off.

Do you have any particular memories related to Spanish cuisine from those days?

Sasa: I was amazed by the lively, informal ambience of tapas bars and the easy dining attitudes of Spaniards. It is as simple as sitting at the bar, enjoying some small plates, having a glass of wine and then moving to the next bar for another round of tapas and drinks! I loved this "barhopping."

Paella, gazpacho, boquerones, cabrales cheese...The menu is not solely based on Barcelona and Catalan tradition. How did you come up with the name then?

Sasa: Barcelona is a modern, cosmopolitan, pan-European city. As we planned to feature a wide-ranging selection of Mediterranean food and wine we thought Barcelona would be a terrific name, avoiding at the same time any link with South American cuisine, very different from what we do. Fresh, seasonal food and great ingredients are the driving force of Barcelona group.

What do you buy at the local market and what do you import from Spain?



Sasa: Most vegetables come from local sources. One nearby farm even grows padrón peppers for us. Funny as it may sound, we have our tasty chorizo made in New York, and our morcilla made for us in New Haven! But we always rely on Spanish cheeses, cured meats, olive oils, saffron, canned tuna... and lots of wine.

Speaking about wine... You spend a tremendous amount of time touring around Spanish wine regions.

Gretchen: When we hire new managers and chefs, very few of them have actually ever been to Spain and understand it on a cultural level. So I host them on wine journeys featuring Rioja, Ribera del Duero, Montsant... One of my favorite stories is from the trip in which I brought our West Hartford assistant manager, Anna Beyer, who was only 19 years old. The very first winery we saw on that trip was Vega Sicilia, a place that most wine professionals fantasize about some day visiting, but Anna was experiencing Vega Sicilia as the first winery tour and professional wine tasting in her life! It's like getting a Ferrari as your first car, just setting the bar so high.

What region are you always looking forward to exploring again?

Gretchen: Visiting Priorat is always a highlight on these journeys. It's one thing to be told that the terrain is difficult and very unique, but to actually experience those incredibly steep, terraced vineyards and to see slate soil, something that looks like nothing could possibly grow in...It's all very humbling. We always stay in Falset, at the only hotel that seems to be available, and it's like stepping back in time with the ancient streets and gothic style architecture. And the unforgettable complex

reds of Priorat are as unique as the "terroir"! Full-bodied wines, full of ripe fruit, minerality, tannins and alcohol.

How do you convey the love and excitement of your trips to your customers?

Gretchen: It's such a domino effect – Spain is abundant with passionate and enthusiastic winemakers and it inspires me every time I'm there. For example, when I visited Sara Pérez in Priorat – at the moment we are serving her Martinet Bru from Clos Martinet – she explained to me that her concrete tanks were not epoxy-lined, like all other concrete tank facilities I've ever known. This unique detail may not translate easily in the dining room, but my overall impression of this dynamic winemaker and her wines is easy to describe with energy. My customers now are very accustomed to me coming home from Spain filled with excitement from new experiences and ready to introduce them to my new favorite wine.

So what would you say to those diners who usually stick with the more familiar California Cabernet?

Gretchen: This has been a hot topic at my staff wine classes for years! And it's not just Cabernet Sauvignon, it's all the familiar varieties in the American market that we have to relate Spanish wines to, guiding our customers to a wine with a similar profile. So, if they are California Chardonnay drinkers, we try to point them to a barrel-treated white from Spain, for example 'As Sortes' Godello by Rafael Palacios. If they are asking for Cabernet, we introduce them to red wines featuring oak, alcohol and fruit, preferably all at high levels. The modern style wines of Ribera del Duero, Toro and Priorat never fail to impress. Vina Solorca, Hacienda Monasterio,

Bodegas Aalto, or Juan Rojo, to name a few, are favorites with our cabernet-drinking customers.

Is there any wine that matches the entire menu?

Gretchen: It's tricky to pair any wine with such a huge span of flavors. Many of our tapas contain garlic, sherry vinegar, pimentón... When in doubt, never underestimate the food pairing ability of a Cava – the sparkling wine of Spain. Made from native varieties, Cava can be just as good as many top Champagnes, but typically at a much lower cost. Its high acidity and generally lower alcohol are all very food-friendly elements.

At the moment which are the regions on your list that you are most excited about?

Gretchen: My newest obsession these days is Rueda, for its fresh and mineral Verdejos. Even the least expensive versions are enjoyable. El Hada, served by the glass at \$6.5, has an unbeatable price. Rioja will always remain the "love of my life" though. It's definitely not the newest wine region on the market, but it still offers something extremely unique – well aged red wines! Not to mention that I can easily pick up a bottle of Gran Reserva Rioja at the store, with perhaps 10 or more years of age, and spend maybe \$30 or \$40 a bottle. Try to buy a Grand Cru Burgundy with 10 years of age at a wine store, and it would be impossible to find one at that price!
Barcelona Restaurant Group, 63.65 North Main St., South Norwalk, CT 06854, Tel: 203.899.0088. Look for their other Connecticut locations in Greenwich, Stamford, Fairfield, New Haven and West Hartford. www.barcelonawinebar.com.





Cava Brotherhood Welcomes New Members

Cava Brotherhood Investiture of Pau Gasol, Los Angeles, CA © Ed Carreon



The **Confraria del Cava of Sant Sadurní**, or the **Brotherhood of Cava**, Spain's world-renowned sparkling wine, recently welcomed the newest members of the **Knights of the Brotherhood**, who were inducted during ceremonies that took place in Los Angeles and Sonoma.

The **Confreres of Merit** was awarded to **Ted Simpkins**, Executive VP and General Manager, **Southern Wine & Spirits California**, **Juan Furné**, President of **Freixenet America**, **Eva Bertrán**, Executive VP of **Freixenet USA**, **Daniel Olivella**, Executive Chef and Owner of **B-44 Catalan Bistro** in San Francisco and **Barlata** in Oakland, CA, and **Carlos Hubner-Arteta**, National Director Spanish & South American Wines, **Winebow Inc. Pau Gasol**, power forward of the **Los Angeles Lakers**, received the **Confrere of Honor**. These events were the first investiture ceremonies held in the U.S. by the Cava Brotherhood.

Drink Ribera, Drink Spain

Following a competitive review process, the **Consejo Regulador of Ribera del Duero** has chosen New York-based **Gregory White PR** to oversee the wine region's €1 million plus strategic marketing campaign beginning August 2009. The new campaign – **Drink Ribera. Drink Spain** – will include media outreach, social media PR initiatives, trade education, events marketing, consumer sampling and advertising.

Ribera del Duero is one of the most prominent wine regions in Spain, with sales growth of 54% in the U.S. over the last six years, according to data collected by the Consejo Regulador of Ribera del Duero. Well-known to insiders in the wine industry and consistently ranked among the finest wines in the world, Ribera del Duero is a rising star seeking broader awareness with U.S. wine enthusiasts. For more information, visit www.drinkriberawine.com

Wine Future Rioja 2009



WineFuture-Rioja 2009 is an international conference created by **The Wine Academy of Spain**. This conference, supported by the **DOCa**

Rioja, will be held in Logroño on Nov. 12th and 13th, 2009. World leaders from the wine industry will meet in Rioja to discuss current challenges facing the wine industry, solutions, ideas, strategies and leadership. One of the stars of the conference is renowned American wine critic **Robert Parker**, who will visit Spain for the first time. Other influential participants will be **Jancis Robinson**, **Oz Clarke**, **Steven Spurrier**, **Kevin Zraly**, **Robert Joseph**, **Mel Dick** and **Troy Christensen**, among others. For further information visit www.winefuture.es. Find Wines from Rioja events at www.vibrantrioja.com.

Classical Wines 25th Anniversary

Classical Wines celebrated its 25th anniversary on May 31st, acknowledging the success it has earned as a Spanish quality wines importer in the U.S. Distributors, shops and restaurants from more than 30 states attended the event, which was attended by the Honorable **Brad Owen**, Governor of Washington State, and **Luis Fernando Esteban**, Honorary Consul of Spain in Washington and Oregon.

The philosophy of this pioneering company, headed by the married team of **Stephen Metzler** and **Almudena de Llaguno**, has been to "become a supplier of authentic European wines with a great desire to inform, educate and serve." The company now has more than 30 wineries in its portfolio, all possessing unique personality. For more information about this company and their wines, visit www.classicalwines.com.

Miami International Wine Fair

The **Miami International Wine Fair** (Sept. 26-27, 2009 at the Miami Beach Convention Center) returns for a more diverse and mature 8th edition, benefiting **Educate Tomorrow**. Riding on the success of 2008's attendance, which boasted approximately 6,000 visitors over two days, organizers are planning to raise funds for the Florida-based charity by enticing enthusiasts with more than 1,500 wines; introductory to advanced wine seminars; wine pairing dinners and VIP after-parties. **Iberwine**, one of the lead-

ing Spanish wine fairs, is participating as a "Super Exhibitor" at the Miami Fair. At the 2008 event, more than 150 Spanish wineries, along with a few dozen producers from Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil took part. Tickets are \$75. For more information visit www.miamiwinefair.com.

Secret Sherry Society



The **Secret Sherry Society**, a members-only organization which invites everyone to join, is proud to announce the launch of its new, interactive website, www.secretsherrysociety.com. Members can gather at this interactive site to join the Sherry movement, create their own secret identity, watch videos of Society leaders and celebrity chefs sharing their underground knowledge (watch out for self-destructing video messages), and most importantly learn more about these unique wines from Jerez, Spain. For more information about the Secret Sherry Society, email or call **Shannon Maurer** at 202-777-3530 or visit www.secretsherrysociety.com.

Rías Baixas Contest

Rías Baixas Albariño wines are easily paired with many ingredients, so why not test out your favorite Asian, Italian, or even South American favorites with this crisp white wine from Spain? Need help discovering your perfect pairing? Check out what the experts have to say at www.albarinofromspain.com. Rías Baixas is hosting a contest again this year for the best recipe to go with Rías Baixas wines. Choose your favorite recipe from last year's Rías Baixas Albariño recipe contest winners and runner-ups. One voter will win a trip to Los Angeles and two tickets to the **36th Annual People's Choice Awards** in 2010. Visit www.riasbaixaswines.com/recipes/index.php and good luck!

Spain's Top 100 Wine Values

A total of 114 wines were chosen by **Dr. Jay Miller**, Spanish wine expert and associate to **Robert Parker at The Wine Advocate**, to form part of his '**Spain's Top 100 Wine Values**' list. The list, which sports wines from 30 different regions with prices under \$25 which have earned a rating of more than 90 points, includes 'Veratón 2006' from Bodegas Alto Moncayo, 'Casal Novo Godello 2007' from Adegas O Casal, 'Rosat Trepas Reserva Brut', a 'cava' made by **Agustí Torelló Mata**, 'Pétalos del Bierzo', from **Descendientes de José Palacios**, and 'Emilio Moro 2006'.



The Seafood Wine



Alimentaria 2010

Alimentaria, the international food and beverage exhibition, will be held 22-26 March, 2010 at **Fira de Barcelona** (shown above). The show presents the latest products from the international food and beverage industry. **Alimentaria 2010** expects 5,000 leading food and beverage manufacturers and distributors, and anticipates that close to 160,000 professional buyers from more than 155 countries will attend. The exhibition includes conferences exploring new trends, market and business opportunities. Also included are the **8th International Food Forum**, the **8th International Congress on the Mediterranean Diet**, and **Innoval**. In addition, Alimentaria will present **Spain, the Country of 100 Cheeses; Vinorum; Spain, Land of Oils; The Spain of Cured Iberian Meat Products; BCN Vanguardia**, and the **Barcelona International Gastronomy Conference**. For more information, visit www.alimentaria-bcn.com/en.

2009 Worlds of Flavor Conference

Wines from Spain is a sponsor of the 12th Annual **Worlds of Flavor Conference**, which will present an in-depth exploration of two hot culinary trends: world street food and world comfort food. Reflecting the recessionary budget and cost-cutting pressures, the continuing world cuisines juggernaut, and the ongoing embrace of a 24/7 culture of informal, casual food and dining, these concepts increasingly define how we as Americans now want to eat.

"Frontiers of Flavor: World Street Food, World Comfort Food," will gather top culinary talent from the Mediterranean, Asia, Latin America and the United States. Presenters include more than 60 culinary experts, from street food vendors, hawker chefs, tapas and meze specialists, and barbecue masters to fine dining chefs who have been inspired by world street foods and comfort foods, mothers of chefs, legends of live fire and claypot cooking, as well as cookbook authors, street food chroniclers, and more. Register now at www.ciaprochef.com/wof2009/registration.html.

Great Match

Join **Wines from Spain** at the **Great Match 2009: Wine & Tapas** in NYC (Oct. 6) and Houston (Oct. 30) this fall! Intended to promote Spanish wines that are available in the US market, the Great Match demonstrates to both trade and consumers the quality of Spanish wines accompanied by creative Spanish tapas. Wines from Spain invites restaurateurs, educators, importers, and media to attend the event before doors are open to the general public. Tickets are \$50 in NY and \$45 in Houston, and are already available through our website at www.greatmatch.org or by calling 1 888 772 4694.

Star Chefs Congress

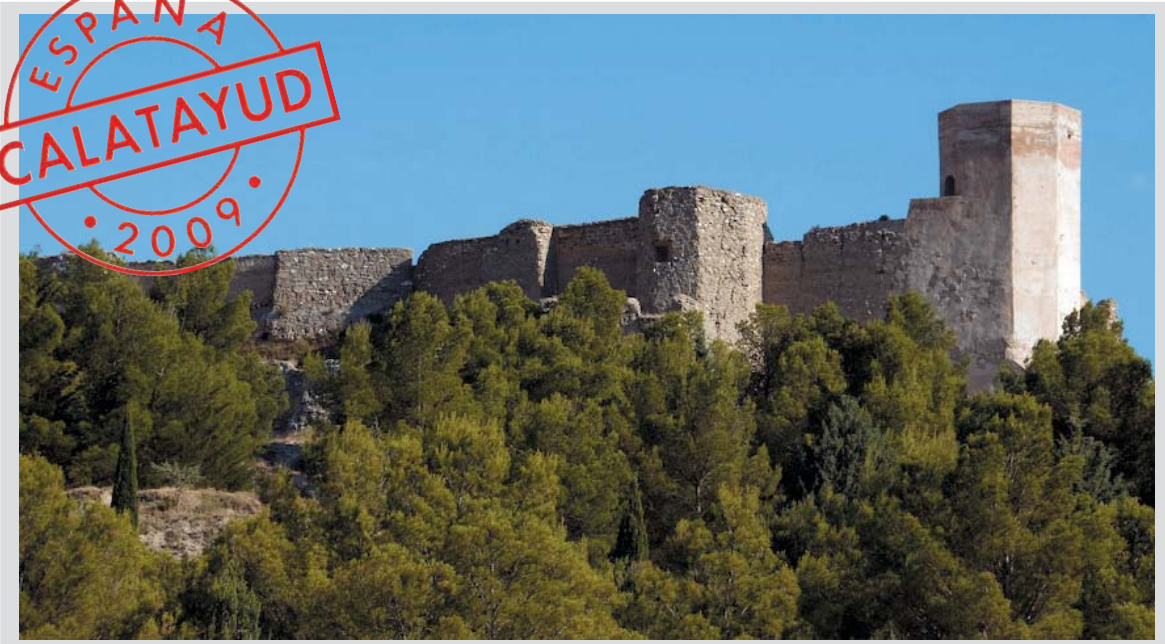
StarChefs Annual International Chefs Congress, a 3-day culinary symposium, takes place in NYC this Sept. 20-22. The world's most influential and innovative chefs will present the latest techniques and culinary concepts to 1,500 of their peers. Innovative chef demonstrations and expert panels on industry topics, and hands-on technique workshops will be a highlight. High-end kitchen equipment, specialty foods, chef tools and world-class wines will be showcased. **Wines from Spain** is participating with the campaign **"Vivacious Varietals."** For information visit www.starchefs.com/events/icc/2009/index.shtml.



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Castle of the Calatayud © Tom Smith



Church facade © Tom Smith

POSTMARK: CALATAYUD

By Mark Vaughan

Having spent six years in Spain during the 1970s, any excuse to return to the land of sun and shade is a good one. So, when the opportunity arose to visit the vineyards of Calatayud, a wine growing region and commercial center that I had not visited before, I jumped at the chance.

Located in semi-autonomous region of Aragón, about 60 miles southwest of Zaragoza, the Calatayud DO is part of the Ebro Valley region, best known for Rioja. Nestle in the arid, windswept food hills of the Ibérico mountain system (Sistema Ibérico?), the climate (hot, dry summers and cold winters) is excellent for cultivating full-bodied, flavored red wines.

Most of the best grapes in Calatayud come from vineyards planted as high as 3,700 feet above sea level in soil so rocky with limestone and shale that it is difficult to understand how anything grows there. The starkly beautiful, desert-like landscape is nearly devoid of trees. Though 11 different red varieties grow in the DO, the indigenous Granacha Tinta (Grenache) dominates, followed by Tempranillo, and small but increasing plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah.

Highlights of my trip included a visit to the town of Calatayud, a wine tasting at Bodegas San Alejandro and a tasting and vineyard tour with Norrel Robertson, a Scottish master of wine and winery consultant who has a passion for the area.

Founded by the Romans, Calatayud (Qal'at 'Ayyub or Ayyub's fort) takes its name from the impressive medieval Moorish fortress that dominates the town. From the fortress, one has an amazing view of the old town below, with its narrow streets and impressive stone and white-washed buildings, which blend Moorish, Gothic, and Renaissance architectural elements. Beyond the old city, modern buildings rise against the stark, hilly landscape.

The Moors dominated the region for nearly 500 years, but by the 12th century, Calatayud was firmly under

Christian control. It was Aragon's own King Ferdinand II (and his wife, Queen Isabella I of Castile) who finally expelled the last of the Moors from Spain in 1492. Ferdinand, an ardent Catholic, encouraged the building of many churches, including Calatayud's beautiful Church of Santa María, which boasts one of the most elegant Moorish-style bell towers in all of Spain.

Bodegas San Alejandro, located nearby in the small hillside town of Miedes, has an interesting story of its own. Founded as a cooperative in 1962, its 350 growers cultivate over 2,700 acres of grapes. Over the past decade, San Alejandro has undergone a major transformation, updating its production facilities, taking a more direct approach to vineyard management, and focusing on quality over quantity. Under the leadership of Yolanda Díaz, the beautiful and energetic managing director, who is one of the few women in Spain to head a major wine company, San Alejandro has gained international recognition for its brands. Notable examples include the Baltasar Gracián Reserva (70% Garnacha, 20% Tempranillo, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon), Baltasar Gracián Calatayud Superior (100% Garnacha), and the Las Rocas Old Vine Garnacha.

Like Yolanda Díaz, Norrel "The Flying Scotsman" Robertson brims with enthusiasm for Calatayud. His personal tour of the region took us up hill and down dale, to some of the most remote and starkly beautiful vineyards I have visited. At nearly 4,000 feet, we came to the edge of the vineyard line, beyond which grape vines simply won't grow. Robertson personally directs the production of his own wine brands, which bear such unorthodox names as La Multa (the traffic ticket), Papa Luna (daddy moon), and El Puño (the fist). His wines are full-bodied and flavorful Garnacha and Garnacha-based blends with Syrah, Monastrell, and Tempranillo. Prices ranging from \$12 to \$50, make Robertson's wines (like many from Calatayud) terrific values.

WHERE TO STAY

There are a number of good to excellent hotels in Calatayud.

I particularly liked the **Castillo de Ayud II**, with its restored Victoria "guest house" adjacent to the new über-deluxe main building that features excellent dining, spa, fitness, wifi, and business facilities.

For more traditional digs try the **Husa Monasterio Benedictino**, which offers a range of modern conveniences in an historical setting.

Hotel Castillo de Ayud II

Avenida de la Diputación 8, Calatayud 50300. Zaragoza
Tel: 976 88 00 88 /976 89 74 63
www.hotelcastillodeayud.com

WHERE TO EAT

For dining, the restaurant at the **Castillo de Ayud II** prepares excellent contemporary Spanish dishes.

Another good choice is **El Patio de Goya** at the **El Patio** hotel, www.hotelelpatio.es, where head chef **José Carlos Martín** offers award winning Aragonese cuisine (for simpler fare, try **Asador San Ramón**).

For more information visit www.docalatayud.com and www.espavino.com/spain_wine_region/wines_calatayud.php

About the author:

Mark Vaughan is editor and publisher of Santé, The Magazine of Wine and Spirits Management, a publication dedicated to increasing on-premise sales of wines and spirits by providing information and management advice pertinent to operating a successful beverage program.



Vineyard © CRDO Calatayud

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3 large eggs, lightly
beaten

1 tablespoon fish
sauce or soy sauce

2 teaspoons chili
garlic sauce

1 teaspoon fresh
grated ginger

6 ounces lump
crabmeat, drained,
flaked and picked
over for cartilage

1 1/2 cups frozen (thawed)
or canned sweet corn kernels

1/2 cup thinly sliced
green onions

3 tablespoons fresh chopped
cilantro or Thai basil

1/2 cup all-purpose flour

Canola oil for frying

Thai Chili Roasted Garlic
Dipping Sauce or other
favorite dipping sauce

In medium bowl combine eggs, fish or soy sauce, chili garlic sauce and ginger. Stir in crabmeat, corn, green onions and cilantro. Add flour; stir until ingredients are combined.

In 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat, heat 1/2-inch canola oil until hot. Carefully spoon crab mixture by rounded tablespoonfuls into hot oil, flattening slightly with spoon. Cook fritters about 2 minutes on each side until golden brown and crisp. Remove to paper towels to drain. Repeat with remaining batter.

Serve immediately with dipping sauce.
Makes 6 appetizer or first-course servings.

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