

# Attractive profile and reliable quality

Over the decades, Rioja has seen a lot of changes. As winemakers in Spain's oldest and most celebrated wine region became aware of the progress being made in other areas of the country, they set to work on further improving their profile. Today, the region's wines are more varied than ever, with strong, exciting products in every quality grade and style, as the results of an important tasting make clear.



Logroño, Rioja



**F**or more than two decades, the DOCa Rioja range has once again stood for reliability and quality. The region's renaissance dates back to the 1990s when, primarily due to the emergence of domestic competition, the appellation faced the choice of either altering its course or sinking into meaningless mediocrity. Rioja reinvented itself to some extent and very successfully expanded its profile to include not only the large brands but also a number of small- and medium-sized companies that have set completely new standards in terms of quality.

When the former president of the region's control board was asked at an international press conference in Paris how such a large and prestigious growing area as Rioja was planning to meet the challenge of low-price competition from overseas, as well as within Spain itself, his laconic reply was: "With quality".

Rioja's medium-priced wines, in particular, compare very favourably with other famous red wines of different provenance. The most recent generation of winemakers has succeeded in emphasising the qualities that made Rioja great in the past, namely accessibility, harmony and balance. The brief popularity of dubious trends such as over-extracted, fully ripe and powerful wines was a passing phase. The appellation is attaining one sales record after another, and the large bottlers are no longer finding it as easy to obtain wine as it was seven years ago.

However, even in Rioja, not everything in the garden is rosy. A fierce international price war is being fought by the large supermarket chains and there are repeated warnings of a dangerous downward spiral of prices, as well as calls for products to be more carefully positioned. Thanks to its stable image, Rioja's trading position is safe and, for many consumers, Rioja and Tempranillo have become synonymous. This is the case not only in Germany, but also in Switzerland and the Scandinavian markets, as well as in the USA and Mexico. Without doubt, the sales situation for Rioja is currently very good. On the one hand, sales figures for the last three years have been higher than production volumes – a situation that causes many a renowned competitor to turn green with envy – whilst, on the other hand, Rioja has experienced several years of meagre harvests, although



The use of oak barrels is an important tradition in Rioja.

of course there is sufficient stock available. But this must not be allowed to disguise the fact that, since its classification is linked to storage times, Rioja needs to have a stock of at least two and a half harvests in the cellars in order to be able to maintain the famous Rioja system of classification, based on the length of the ageing process. It is therefore not currently in the region's interests to push sales at any price by offering significantly cheaper products. For this reason, promotional efforts in key markets such as Germany are now focusing on the mature wines, with Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva expected to be at the forefront of new promotional campaigns. It is Rioja's intention to obtain more direct access to end consumers, and to encourage them to develop a more sophisticated perception of the region's wines. To this end, Rioja is taking part in major events such as Hamburg Cruise Days and the Museumsufer Festival in Frankfurt. But it is also planning to have a larger presence at Pro-Wein 2015. As part of the restructuring of the trade fair next year, Rioja may finally be able to realise its ambition of having a large stand with its own tasting zone.

## CONFIRMATION OF ORIGIN

The Ebro valley is considered the cradle of the Tempranillo we know today, and the winter of 2011 saw its origin firmly established. A research team from the Instituto

Madrileño de Investigación y Desarrollo Rural, which maintains an extensive testing ground of 430 grape varieties at Alcalá de Henares south of the Spanish capital, announced two and a half years ago that the search for the genetic parents of the most famous of all Spanish grape varieties was over. After a decade of research, it has been established beyond doubt that the undisputed star among Spain's red grape varieties is descended from the white Albillo and the virtually extinct red Benedicto. Whilst the Albillo is still cultivated on nearly 850 ha in the north of Spain, the Benedicto from Aragón has almost completely disappeared. The researchers assume that the two grape varieties interbred naturally, probably on the southern slopes of the Ebro valley between Haro and Alfaro in the 11th century. Initially, the new variety was slow to establish itself. In the late Middle Ages, white varieties were favoured by the clergy and nobility. So, for a long time Tempranillo had a limited role to play, rather than enjoying a triumphant advance. Only later was it referred to in writing by its present name; this was no doubt because dispersal of the variety was very slow and it was only in recent times that it became known beyond the confines of the Ebro and Duero valleys. As Tempranillo needs warmth to flourish, the unfavourable climatic conditions that prevailed during the late Middle Ages are unlikely to have been conducive to its growth.



Above: From the more than 60,000 ha of vines come Rioja's most renowned and prestigious wines of Spain.

Right: The principal asset of Rioja is the Tempranillo grape, although Garnacha, Graciano and Mazuelo also play a role in the creation of red wine.



## MULTIFACETED TEMPRANILLO

DOCa Rioja is without question the best-known of Spain's Tempranillo appellations. Over 50,000 ha of the main red grape variety are recorded in the land register of the viticulture authority in Logroño. Although it is grown alongside the three other so-called main red grape varieties – Garnache,



Mazuelo (Carignan) and Graciano – its dominance is absolute. Rioja's starting position is similar to those of Bordeaux and Chianti, two world class appellations which are likewise defined by a red grape variety. This seems to indicate that, in spite of the absolute dominance of one grape variety in Rioja, it has never become boring. Quite the contrary, since Tempranillo definitely ranks among the most versatile of major grape varieties. Whilst Cabernet Sauvignon is a varietal wine and virtually always recognisable as such, Tempranillo is not quite so straightforward. Similar to the sensitive Pinot Noir, Tempranillo adapts very well to the characteristics of the soil in which it is grown. Tempranillo can be delicate, slender, indeed almost filigree, while yet other Tempranillo are concentrated and powerful. Even its trademark features, the soft berry-like fruit and distinguished balsamic character, can be hidden behind earthy or spicy components that even professionals can find it hard to identify. This ability to transform itself is a major advantage, enabling winemakers in a large growing area like Rioja to span the gamut of wine styles. Nonetheless, Tempranillo displays a more consistent appearance than the likewise extremely versatile Riesling, quite simply because red Rioja is always vinified dry.

## BIG NAMES OR SMALL WINEMAKERS?

Big names in Rioja are neither an elite exception nor an unaffordable luxury, and 'big' describes not only very high quality establishments, but also growers who produce on a large scale and have a significant history. Above all, those who favour tradition will find that they are in the best hands with the famous names. But what counts as traditional and which companies can you rely on? Among some arch-traditionalists it is considered good form to place top wines on the market late. Its amazing potential, enviable refinement, unconventional aroma of smoothly sweet fruit and balsam, together with a distinctive spiciness and energy that plays on the palate, make the ultra-traditional Rioja an almost eccentric wine experience. At the top of this league are Rioja Alta, López de Heredia/Viña Tondonia and the more unusual wines of the Conde de los Andes brand. Their uncompromising and conservative style is probably unique and helps enormously to reinforce the position of Rioja as a style par excellence. In a broader sense, Riojanas, CVNE Viña Real, Bilbaínas, Muga and Marqués de Cáceres can also be described as traditional and 'big'. The last of these, however, set an



Both classical training and modern trellising systems are used in Rioja. The wines are equally diverse, ranging from traditional to ultra-modern styles.



excellent example for bodegas that produce traditional as well as fashionable wines.

It should be noted that Rioja cannot simply be divided into traditional and modern categories. Many producers blend a number of components and the wines can scarcely be categorised at all. Common denominators are typical Tempranillo elegance with soft, full fruit and a woody overtone that has increasingly diminished

over recent years. Even among producers with a soft, timeless Tempranillo style, there are impeccable establishments to be found, such as Barón de Ley, Beronia, Campillo, Ramón Bilbao, Valdemar and even Bodegas Palacio in Laguardia, which after a fairly long lean period in terms of quality has made a comeback in the upper mid-range.

and Bodegas Riojanas. The surprise package of the event was Bodegas Escudero, whose wine was judged to be the best. This family of vintners has been producing wine for over 150 years in Rioja Baja and benefits from some outstanding locations in the Monte Yerga hills, demonstrating that the appellation's often underestimated eastern area is quite capable of producing great wines.

### BEST OF RIOJA

With such a huge range of bodegas and wines to choose from, even a large-scale Rioja tasting can only reflect a fraction of the DOCa wines available. Nevertheless, the big Rioja tasting of the Meininger publishing house must be considered representative, since it included the products of many small establishments alongside those of major producers. What was striking was the extensive participation of moderate, traditional firms which stand for wines that are timeless and therefore very typical of the region. In this respect, the choice that was presented on the four large tasting tables was consistent with current trends. The results proved noteworthy too. The ten best wines from the tasting included six Gran Reservas, some of which might be considered 'old school', such as Montecillo



# The Best of Rioja

(With points out of 100)



**96**

**Solar de Becquer Gran Reserva 2001, Bodegas Escudero**

Ultra elegant style, with delicate floral aromas; wild cherry, sandalwood and tobacco; always zesty and taut on the palate, and impressively mature.

**95**

**Montecillo Gran Reserva Selección Especial 1982, Bodegas Montecillo**

A monument to elegance and maturity, offering prominent dark cherry fruit, noble spices, roundness and warmth. The tannins are perfectly polished; very accessible and almost youthful.

**94**

**Roda I Reserva 2007, Bodegas Roda**

Premium, rather modern example.

Excellent use of wood. Lots of dark berry fruit, also mint, cinnamon and bitter chocolate; very nice tannins, full-bodied and still offering plenty of potential.

**Ramón Bilbao Gran Reserva 2006, Bodegas Ramón Bilbao**

Pronounced spicy aromas. Good balance, lots of coffee; harmoniously integrated wood; has a bright future ahead of it.

**Monte Real Gran Reserva 2006, Bodegas Riojanas**

Shows lots of mint. Very spicy, very harmonious, super long finish.

**Gaudium Reserva 2005, Bodegas Marqués de Cáceres**

Exciting smoky and spicy notes of grilled peppers and bacon, also beautiful berry fruit. Very harmonious. Modern, but with the structure for long maturation.

**Marqués de Cáceres Gran Reserva 2005, Bodegas Marqués de Cáceres**

Very elegant character. Lots of plum jam, extremely balanced, noble spice, very complex and harmonious. Fine-grained tannins.

**Marqués de Murrieta Gran Reserva 2005, Marqués de Murrieta**

Intense berry aromas, subtle spiciness and well-integrated wood. Refined alcohol sweetness and good length.



**Vidau 2004, Bodegas Escudero**

Exciting character, with lots of malty, earthy spice, all spice and noble leather. Very fine tannins, great structure, and persistence.

**Altos de Corral Single Estate Reserva 2004, Bodegas Corral**

Classic style: lots of coconut, cherry, praline and caramel; supple on the palate, yet always taut. Delicate.

**93****Cosme Palacio 1894 Reserva 2008, Bodegas Palacio**

Lots of spice, bitter chocolate. Appears youthful, with fresh fruit. Harmonious on the palate; long and dense, ripe tannins, great potential.

**Señorío de Olartia Gran Reserva 2004, Bodegas Olartia**

Lots of harmony, hugely elegant, peppery spice, quite a classic Gran Reserva character. Coffee and dark chocolate from the wood, powerful and balanced.

**LAN A Mano 2010 Bodegas Lan**

Much more modern style. Lots of cassis, intense black fruit and intense wood. Loads of body. Prominent, ripe tannins, very taut.

**Malpuesto 2011, Orben/Grupo Artevino**

Still much too young, but brilliant structure. Cool minerality, fresh dark fruit, very complex; enormously dense and endlessly long, extremely mineral, fine-grained tannins.

**92****2007 Izadi Reserva El Regalo, Bodegas Izadi/Grupo Artevino**

Coffee, good complexity, rich, tart red fruit, rather delicate woody notes; also a typical appearance on the palate, dense but not rich, nice acidity.

**2006 Dominios de Berceo Reserva 36, Bodegas Luis Gurpegui Muga/Grupo Berceo**

Smoky aromas and tar. Lots of chocolate. Also, animalistic hints and dried fruits. Still appears youthful and vigorous. Beautiful minerality.

**2010 Finca La Emperatriz Parcela N° 1, Bodegas La Emperatriz**

Plenty of power. Leather, orange, black fruit, liquorice and minerality; also very robust and concentrated on the palate. Powerful, youthful tannins.

**2009 El Pacto, Bodega Classica/Vintae**

Plenty of vegetal flavour, and enor-

mously earthy character plus ethereal herbal notes. Iodine. Taut and needs some air, which gives it more elegance.

**2009 Alfar Reserva, Hispanobodegas**

Appears classic. Great harmony of fruit (sour cherry), ethereal spiciness and a touch of wood; full-bodied, elegant and balsamic.

**2007 Señorío de P. Peciña Reserva, Bodegas Hermanos Peciña**

Traditional style. Complex, exciting aromas. Lots of berry fruit, mint, noble oak spice; delicate and with a fresh acidic finish.

**2007 Señorío de Olartia Reserva, Bodegas Olartia**

Spicy and strong example with plenty of berry fruit, tobacco, tea and wood; taut and present, still has potential.

**2007 Marqués de Vargas Reserva Privada, Grupo Vinícola Marqués de Vargas**

Lots of black tea, delicate spiciness, superb, juicy berry fruit; extremely balanced, sweetish extract, lots of potential.

**2006 Señorío de P. Peciña Vendimia Seleccionada, Bodegas Hermanos Peciña**

A fairly traditional style. Very spicy, with caramel and ripe red fruit; complex and with a strong presence on the palate. Rounded tannins.

**2005 LAN Gran Reserva, Bodegas Lan**

Super spicy, with vanilla nuances and coffee from the wood. Also lots of dried fruit, leather and leaves; rich fruit, dense and long.

**2002 Viña Tondonia Reserva, R. López de Heredia**

Needs a lot of air, then appears very noble and elegantly matured with leather and balsamic spiciness. Very traditional and classic on the palate, rather slender and delicate.



Christoph Nicklas, David Schwarzwälder, Jürgen Mathäß

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**2010 Martin Cendoya Reserva Club de Barricas, Eguren Ugarte**

Still at a very young stage, but promising structure. Fresh red fruit, wood well integrated. Youthful on the palate, with potential.

**2009 Orben, Orben/Grupo Artevino**

Also appears very young still. Complex aromas. Cool with dark fruit; great length, also appears very modern on the palate.

**2006 Glorioso Gran Reserva, Bodegas Palacio**

Very harmonious aromas with cherry, cassis, bay leaf and chocolate; very balanced on the palate, with a nice length.

**2004 Pagos de Labarca Gran Reserva, Bodegas Covila**

Dark spiciness, some gum, vanilla; very juicy and fruity on the palate, round and balanced.

**2004 Coto de Imaz Gran Reserva, El Coto de Rioja**

Classic style, with really beautiful drinkability. Earthy, peppery spice, tobacco. Very round and soft, with mature, subtle tannins, and a very long finish.

**2009 QP Vintage, Bodega Classica/Vintae**

Needs air initially. Rather animalistic, then becomes more elegant, showing taut red fruit and tobacco; powerful and punchy, while never being too dense or heavy.

**2009 Finca La Emperatriz Terruño, Bodegas La Emperatriz**

Very earthy spiciness, also fresh red fruit and some wood (vanilla); well matured, not too rich, spicy finish.

**2009 Mirto, Bodegas Ramón Bilbao**

Very modern example. Toasty vanilla taste with dark balsamic fruit; also berry-tasting, dense and voluminous on the palate.

**2009 Dalmau Reserva, Marqués de Murrieta**

Pleasant individual style. Tobacco, black fruit (cassis, cherry), also cedar; lots of juice, very dense, but not broad, taut finish.

**2010 Pagos de Labarca AEX Bodegas Covila**

At first, lots of sweet new wood, vanilla, tobacco and soft red fruit; taut and still young on the palate, tannins still slightly drying.

**2010 Beronia III a.C., Bodegas Beronia/González Byass**

At the beginning, a rather vegetable-like nature (not harmed by air), fine red fruit, dried salami, cinnamon/clove; elegant in the mouth, not too much wood.

**2008 Inspiración Valdemar Edición Limitada, Bodegas Valdemar**

Lots of roasted wood and smoked bacon, becomes better with air. Black olives, peppery, herbal notes; despite its density, it's slender and taut.

**2007 Señorío de Librares Reserva, Señorío de Librares**

Appears very present and young. Leather and tar, also delicately floral, bitter chocolate; wood quite present on the palate, but also juice with super acidity.

**2006 Beronia Gran Reserva, Bodegas Beronia/González Byass**

Traditional character. Well matured, dried fruit, elegant wood and floral spiciness; lively, present and taut in the mouth.

**2005 Inspiración Valdemar Graciano, Bodegas Valdemar**

Very individual, made entirely from Graciano: very dark, earthy, floral, peppery spice, liquorice, black fruit; very dense and firm on the palate, with great tannins.

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**2009 Conde de la Salceda Reserva, Viña Salceda**

Light but very skilfully made, with undergrowth notes, balsamic spiciness, black fruit (elderberry) and a long, spicy finish.

**2009 Viña Salceda Reserva, Viña Salceda**

Dark fruits like sloe and black cherry; ethereal herbal spice and some smoke. Velvety, round, long spicy finish.

**2004 Jaun de Alzate Gran Reserva, Bodegas Loli Casado**

The maturity is clearly discernible, but currently still appropriate and elegant. Lots of dried fruit. Very liquoricy; rather slender, medium finish.

**2011 LAN D-12, Bodegas Lan**

Distinctive, rather animalistic character. Still very young. Chocolate, coconut and some herbal spice. Still needs some time to develop. Good acidic freshness.

**2010 Carpens Crianza, Finca Egomei**

Exciting, complex aromas. Delicate floral spice and fresh red fruit; harmoniously integrated wood, taut finish.

**2008 Medievo Gran Reserva, Bodegas del Medievo**

Quite dense. Beautifully mature. Well-integrated wood with a harmonious feeling in the mouth. Still definitely has potential.

**2009 Cerro Añón Reserva, Bodegas Olarra**

Has a very clean appearance; almost clear, plump red fruit, with only subtle spiciness; very juicy and open.

**2007 Montecillo Reserva, Bodegas Montecillo**

Noticeably traditional style, with dried red berries, malty, earthy spiciness. Appears very light on the palate, yet with a long, elegant finish.

**2007 Beronia 198 Barricas Reserva, Bodegas Beronia/González Byass**

Altogether classic style, with lots of tobacco, ethereal herbal spice (rosemary, thyme), dark fruit; elegant, and acidic on the palate.

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**2011 Dominio de Berzal 7 Varietales, Dominio de Berzal**

Powerful and intense; at the same time a rather modern style, with roasted new wood aromas, and fruits of the forest. Balanced on the palate, nice length.

**2010 El Nómada Selección de Parcelas, Finca de la Rica**

Quite fruity, also rather spicy, soft, slightly jammy style but technically great; round and inviting, rather modern.

**2010 Obalo Crianza, Avanteselecta**

Roasted character, coffee, smoked bacon, but also herbal and mint. Subtle vegetal hints; very juicy on the palate.

**2010 Coto Real, El Coto**

Super intense on the nose, with a nice diversity of berry fruit, juniper; lots of power; just at the start of its drinking maturity.

**2007 Segares Reserva, Bodegas Nestares Eguizabal**

Strong berry fruitiness, also with a distinctive spiciness. Very full-bodied, quite powerful. Lots of wood on the nose and on the palate.

**2009 Marqués de Vargas Reserva, Grupo Vinícola Marqués de Vargas**

Some dried plum (also on the palate), savoury and oil, allspice/cinnamon spiciness, leather; taut character, slender, quite ethereal.

**2009 Summa Reserva, Bodegas Olarra**

Chocolatey, malty, earthy spiciness, then also pepper, juniper and liquorice; fine-grained tannins, great acidity, harmonious finish.

**2008 Hacienda López de Haro Reserva, Bodega Classica/Vintae**

Very rustic, earthy animalistic example, with classic elements of tobacco, orange and dried fruit; very taut and not too heavy.

**2004 Casado Morales Gran Reserva, Bodegas y Viñedos Casado Morales**

Noticeably mature as expected, but still with a nice, typical nose; still present on the palate with noticeable acidity.

**2009 Egomei Alma, Finca Egomei**

Lots of cherry fruit. Also rather jammy, but super harmonious; very little wood overall.

**2009 Viña Herminia Reserva, Viña Herminia**

Berry fruit, harmoniously coordinated, subtle use of wood.

**2007 Chobeco de Peciña, Bodegas Hermanos Peciña**

Subtle, minty spiciness, berry fruit, good balance and harmony.

