

There's a Spanish Wine for Every Drinker

BY MICHAEL SCHACHNER



From left to right: Emina 2015 Reserva (Ribera del Duero) and Bodegas Roda 2016 Cirsion (Rioja) / Photo by Tom Arena

Perhaps your wine of choice is a classic, made to age gracefully for decades. Or possibly, you swing modern, where ripeness and richness can't be denied. How about a white wine that's so fresh, you feel transported to the beach?

What if you like unusual or funky wines made from lesser-known grapes from places off the beaten path? Maybe you just want a great deal, where excellence doesn't cost an arm and a leg.

Where can you find all of these types of wines under one flag? The answer is Spain, the country with more acres of vineyards than any other wine-producing nation.

From the rolling hills of Rioja up to the high plains of Ribera del Duero, down to the coastal estuaries of Rías Baixas in Galicia, the Basque Country, the island of Mallorca and beyond, Spain offers something for every palate. It's a top source for world-class wines made from many grapes—some familiar, others obscure.

Following is a report on five prominent Spanish wine styles, along with suggestions for what to buy within each category.

Traditional Stalwarts



From left to right: Muga 2011 Prado Enea Gran Reserva (Rioja) and Marqués de Murrieta 2010 Castillo Ygay Gran Reserva Especial (Rioja) / Photo by Tom Arena

Nowhere in Spain produces wines more classic in style than Rioja, where the Tempranillo grape rules. Old vines abound here in the country's most highly regarded and best-known wine region, especially in the subzones of Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa.

It's mostly in these older vineyards, which are planted almost exclusively to Tempranillo, that the country's most structured and ageworthy reds originate. Garnacha, Graciano and Mazuelo (Carignan) can also be found here.

Riojas made in a traditional style usually fall into the established *reserva* or *gran reserva* categories, which spell out the minimum number of years that a wine must spend in barrel and bottle before release.

While these requirements don't guarantee final composition, structure, balance, ageability, or quality, they are good indicators. The best Riojas are frequently gran reservas, which must be aged at least five years and spend at least 24 months in oak prior to release.

Three to Try

Muga 2011 Prado Enea Gran Reserva (Rioja); \$95, 96 points. Earthy plum and berry aromas set up a palate with plush tannins and layers of depth. Befitting a hot year like 2011, dark berry and plum flavors are full, while this exhibits fine shape on the finish and only gets better the longer it sits. This is no doubt a delicious Rioja from one of the top wineries in Spain. Decant if drinking now. Enjoy through 2035. Jorge Ordoñez Selections. **Cellar Selection.**

Arzuaga 2009 Gran Reserva (Ribera del Duero); \$120, 94 points. Smooth berry aromas are savory and offer a touch of tarry freshly laid asphalt. A deeply layered palate is rich in a chocolaty way, while flavors of blackberry, prune, oak spice and chocolate reflect a warm vintage (which 2009 was). A rounded and full finish is powerful yet balanced. Drink through 2024. Frederick Wildman & Sons.

Marqués de Murrieta 2010 Castillo Ygay Gran Reserva Especial (Rioja); \$139, 94 points. Earthy cherry, plum and cassis aromas are dry and complex, while this feels integrated and balanced. Cherry, red plum and cocoa flavors remain young and vibrant on the palate, while this pedigreed gran reserva offers its usual depth and length on the finish. Ten years in and this still has more in waiting. Drink through 2045. Maisons Marques & Domaines USA. **Cellar Selection.**

Modern Reds

The term “modern” is open to some interpretation, but a modern Spanish red can be defined as one that delivers a sense of ripeness and power, from the nose through the palate, flavor profile and finish. It also should be contemporary, which means the inaugural bottling was in a year that most wine lovers can remember.

For argument's sake, let's say that the modern era in Spain began in the 1990s, when a stampede of wines dark in color and packed with ripe fruit and new oak started to appear. Traditionalists and naysayers often claim that this style was fashioned to appeal to those enamored with bold, beefy reds like Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, Australian Shiraz and Argentine Malbec.

However, the style comes easy to winemakers in sun-blessed regions like Rioja, Ribera del Duero, Priorat and the Levante. They just let the vines do their thing, then harvest later, macerate longer and put the wines into new French oak.

Three to Try

Bodegas Roda 2016 Cirsion (Rioja); \$330, 98 points. Lush black fruit aromas push the limits of ripeness but pull back to show additional complexity, depth and potential for midterm aging. Saucy acidity is perfect for a big-boned red like this. Black plum, cassis

and berry flavors are lightly herbal and savory, while this high flyer is impressively balanced to the end. Simply put: This is a spectacular modern Rioja to enjoy through 2030. Valkyrie Selections. **Editors' Choice.**

Emina 2015 Reserva (Ribera del Duero); \$45, 93 points. Smooth plum and berry aromas are ripe and on the money. A full, direct palate is weighty but not heavy, with racy acidity. Blackberry and black currant flavors are fully oaked but don't taste woody, while this tinto fino is smooth on a finish with wood spice and vanilla residuals. Drink through 2028. USA Wine West.

Monteabellón 2015 Finca La Blanquera (Ribera del Duero); \$90, 93 points. Bold blackberry aromas are sappy and lush, with a whiff of vanilla coming from the barrel. A nicely integrated palate features grainy tannins, while this tastes of black plum, wood spice and oak resin along with herbal complexities. Oak and related spice and cocoa flavors dominate a long finish with some heat. Drink through 2028. Europvin USA.

Elegant Whites



From left to right: Palacio de Fefiñanes 2016 III Año Albariño (Rías Baixas) and Rodrigo Méndez 2018 Sálvora Albariño (Rías Baixas) / Photo by Tom Arena

In Rioja, a quality barrel-aged Viura, also known as Macabeo, can be quite stately, with layers of salty complexity and body weight that's offset by bold acidity. Meanwhile, in Catalonia, white Garnacha, better known as Garnacha Blanca, produces fine wines across the map, particularly in the Terra Alta region.

For truly elegant white wines, however, look to the autonomous region of Galicia in northwest Spain. It's led by Albariño from Rías Baixas but also includes Godello from Valdeorras and Ribeira Sacra as well as Treixadura-driven blends from Ribeiro.

Why is Galicia considered Spain's hotbed for white wine? In a word: terroir. The region is cool and green, with a heavy maritime influence from the Atlantic Ocean. Granitic soils that range from bedrock in Rías Baixas to decomposed schist farther inland play a major role to impart elegance and minerality.

Three to Try

Palacio de Fefiñanes 2016 III Año Albariño (Rías Baixas); \$62, 93 points. Tropical fruit aromas are smooth and elegant, as a high-end Albariño with three years (hence the name) of lees aging should display. A layered palate has minerality at its core, while a tropical fruit basket of melon, papaya, lemon and banana flavors finishes clean and classy. This is in a mature state of grace. Enjoy through 2021. Kysela Père et Fils.

Editors' Choice.

Rodrigo Méndez 2018 Sálvora Albariño (Rías Baixas); \$48, 93 points. This Albariño immediately registers as something special. Upfront, it offers pure white flower, melon and wet stone aromas. Those inviting scents are backed by a palate with notable acidity that's purely integrated, not sharp or cutting. Apple, tropical fruit and summer peach flavors narrow down on a finish that sings of granitic soils. Drink through 2021. Olé Imports. ***Editors' Choice.***

Pago de los Abuelos 2018 Viñedo Barreiros Godello (Bierzo); \$75, 91 points. Apple and light oak aromas make for a creamy, slightly woody nose. On the palate, this barrel-aged Godello feels full and leesy. Flavors of melon, pear, vanilla, wood grain and wood spice fade with grace and consistency on an elegant finish. Cynthia Hurley Wine Imports.

Hidden Gems



The Phoenicians made wine in Spain more than 3,000 years ago, followed by the Romans. Millennia of winemaking in Iberia means there are several hundred indigenous and imported grape varieties that grow today throughout Spain, although most commercial wines are made from around two dozen varieties.

Most Spanish wine lovers are probably familiar with grapes like Tempranillo, Garnacha, Monastrell (Mourvèdre), Albariño, Viura and Verdejo. Yet, the roster of those worth attention expands to include Bobal, Graciano, Godello, Treixadura, Loureiro and Mencía.

There's also room to appreciate wines made from so-called international varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Merlot, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Highly obscure grapes that offer quality bottlings include Maturana, Tintilla, Listán Negro and Listán Blanco. Basque favorites Hondarrabi Zuri and Beltza are used for Txakoli, the often spritzy high-acid wine that flows like water in cities like San Sebastián and Bilbao.

As consumer experimentation increases, diamonds in the rough are also emerging in the Canary and Balearic Islands.

Three to Try

Bodega Son Mayol 2016 Grand Vin (Vi de la Terra Mallorca); \$68, 92 points. A perfumed and punchy nose opens this fit Cabernet Sauvignon-led blend with lean red berry aromas and mild but notable oak. A full, chewy palate is weighty but balanced, with blackberry, blueberry and integrated creamy oak flavors. An elegant, complete finish provides a nice ending to this excellent offering from Mallorca. Drink through 2024. Misa Imports.

Raventós I Blanc 2016 De La Finca (Penedès); \$35, 91 points. Dry elegance defines the nose, with aromas of white mushroom, apple, pear and spent yeast blending well. A lightly citric and minerally palate plays up freshness, while this tastes of just-ripe nectarine and tangerine. A steady citric finish is tangy and edgy. Drink through 2023. Skurnik Wines Inc.

Txakoli Primo 2019 Zarautz Rosé (Spain); \$25, 90 points. If you like Txakoli or are interested in giving it a try, then go with this lightly effervescent rosé. Clean, fruity aromas fall somewhere between tangerine and cantaloupe, while the palate is tight and tangy. Orange flavors with tropical hints finish fresh. W. Direct

Standout Values



From left to right: Ego Bodegas 2017 Goru Red Blend (Jumilla) and Bodegas Luzón 2017 Colección Monastrell (Jumilla) / Photo by Tom Arena

Value should be Spain's middle name. With nearly every part of the country blanketed in vines, there's no shortage of well-made vino that won't break the bank.

A part of Spain that specializes in these so-called value wines is Aragón. The regions of Cariñena, Calatayud and Campo de Borja offer good and very good best-buy Garnachas, Carignans and red blends.

Rueda, located near the city of Valladolid, is home to easy-drinking Verdejo, not dissimilar to your average New Zealand or Chilean Sauvignon Blanc. Meanwhile, simple unoaked Viura-based bottlings from Rioja and the Penedès in Catalonia are a dime a dozen.

The Levante region, in the southeast corner of the country, is a hot, desert-like area that does well with strong-boned, full-bodied reds made from Monastrell as well as Garnacha Tintorera and Cabernet Sauvignon. Within this baking area, the Jumilla and Alicante wine regions have surfaced as some of the country's best spots for rich, spicy, chocolaty reds at everyday prices.

Three to Try

Ego Bodegas 2017 Goru Red Blend (Jumilla); \$15, 91 points. Dark berry and black plum aromas meld with a hint of asphalt on the nose. A full, rich palate is bold in feel, with spicy, peppery flavors of black fruits. The toasty, blackened finish is fitting for this blend of Monastrell and Cabernet. Tri-Vin Imports. **Best Buy.**

Bodegas Luzón 2017 Colección Monastrell (Jumilla); \$11, 90 points. Plum and berry tones are pure and fruity on the nose. The mix of dark fruit and spice notes makes for a solid flavor profile, while this Monastrell offers hints of burnt toast, black licorice and spice on a slightly warming finish. Aviva Vino. **Best Buy.**

Cuatro Rayas 2019 Verdejo (Rueda); \$14, 89 points. Apple, green melon and green-herb aromas are appealing and not too punchy or austere. A citric palate has a linear, lean feel and offers flavors of orange and thyme, while a scallion note rises up on a zesty finish with a pyrazine accent. Vinaio Imports. **Best Buy.**



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