



Tempranillo grapes at the Ygay Estate of Marqués de Murrieta.

# The Many Faces of Rioja

By Joseph Campanale, CWE



An employee of Marqués de Murrieta holds an old bottle from the bodega collection.

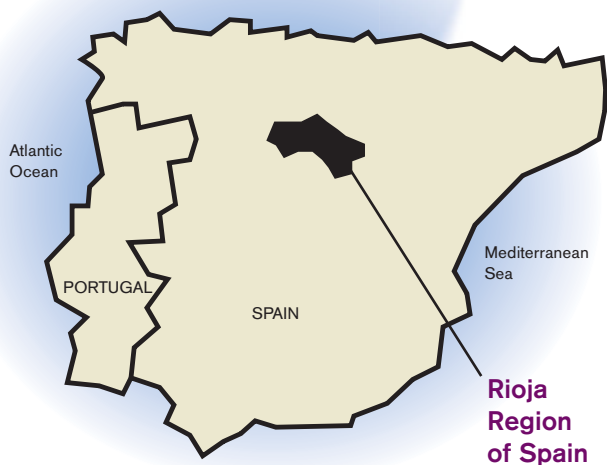
**F**or the past 150 years, Rioja has built an international reputation on complex, rustic reds while also becoming a benchmark of quality for Spain.

While the traditional style has made the region famous, Rioja also produces an astonishing range of fruity reds, crisp whites and refreshing rosés that deserve attention for their unique flavor and surprising value. Add in a strong name recognition among consumers, and Rioja offers a compelling story at all levels in the market and flavors that can satisfy any taste.

“Rioja is the one region of Spain that is actually commonly known by the American consumer; this makes these wines an easy topic of discussion with a guest,” says Ron Edwards, M.S., educator and owner of Five Star Sommelier Services. “The selling point for me in the dining room is that the wines are uniquely suited to a variety of foods as they have wonderful acidity, and a softness and sweetness that also please the palate.”

## Laying Down the Roots

The Rioja wine industry began when vineyards in Bordeaux were ravaged by powdery mildew in the 1840s, and phylloxera in the 1860s. Négociants fled to Spain to fill the empty space in their barrels. At the same time, Marques de Riscal and Murrieta established vineyards in 1860 and 1872, respectively. The Bordelais brought expertise and introduced the principals of small barrel aging. Many of today’s historic Rioja bodegas broke ground shortly after, around 1890. But it wasn’t



until after 1970, when Spain emerged from an oppressive government, that Rioja came into its own and a proliferation of styles flourished.

## A Region of Tradition and Modernity

Today, Rioja has one foot in the 20th century and another in the 21st. While traditional producers are still blending wines for long-term oak aging, others are doing away with the old methods to focus on producing wines with purer fruit flavors. Some producers are embracing experimental methods and making wines from single vineyards, or single-varietal wines. In the middle ground are producers who work with some principals of both schools of thought, making riper wines but aging them for long periods, or using a combination of oak aging and fermenting techniques.

Nancy Selzer, managing partner of Casa Mono in New York City, pairs her Rioja selections to the individual customer. "Our wine list divides Rioja into two separate sections: traditional and modern," explains Selzer. "For people who are wine-savvy, the traditional wines are eye-opening; the fact that you can get a wine with 20 years of age at a reasonable price is very attractive. For our California Cab-drinkers, or those who are just dipping their toes in Spanish wines, I point them towards the more modern, fruit-forward wines, which are equally as good."

Traditional producers such as Lopez de Heredia are still blending wines from the three sub-regions (Alavesa, Alta and Baja), using all four permitted grapes for red wines (Tempranillo, Garnacha, Mazuelo and Graciano), and far surpassing minimum D.O. aging guidelines. Reservas and Gran Reservas are the crown jewels of Rioja. While laws require substantial aging for these wines, the most traditional houses exceed the requirements by decades to make heady, complex wines that are among the best in the world (see sidebar on the four ageing categories of Rioja wines).

At the other end of the spectrum, the most modern producers, like Las Bodegas Palacio and Ramirez de Ganuza, are throwing the old ageing standards out the window in favor of riper, fruitier, juicier wines with intense influence from small, new French oak barrels instead of the old, large American ones. Yet, according to Lisa Granik, MW, director of fine



All prices are suggested retail.

### ■ Bodegas Muga Blanco 2006

This barrel-fermented Rioja Blanco retains a pale-straw color and fresh lemon, grape-fruit character with nuances of golden delicious apple. There are hints of vanilla and coconut from the fermentation and a richness across the palate due to some lees aging. **\$15; Tempranillo Inc.**

### ■ Bodegas Campillo Gran Reserva 1994

This elegant Gran Reserva is ruby with distinct brick highlights and shows very typical, mature flavors of figs, raisins, cooked berries and American oak. On the palate, it is complex and has taken on a sweetness of fruit with age. Chocolate, dark yet vibrant berries and sweet spice dominate the balanced finish. **\$50; Palm Bay Imports**

### ■ Cune Vina Real Crianza 2004

This wine shows a pronounced herbal component of tobacco, basil and cloves. Only medium-bodied on the palate with clean notes of ripe red cherries, some overripe fruit and spice. **\$15; Pasternak Wine Imports**

### ■ Fincas de Ganuza Rioja Reserva 2001

Extremely elegant with notes of black cherries, dark chocolate and plums joined with dried fruit notes of raisin and fig and saddle leather. Rich, powerful mouth-feel and some warmth on the palate. **\$75; Tempranillo Inc.**

### ■ Finca Valpiedra Reserva 2001

Polished with incredible color intensity and fruit con-

centration. Displays notes of plums, black cherries and blueberries, with well integrated oaky notes of toast, vanilla and elegant French wood. On the palate, it's rather full-bodied with a long, complex finish. **\$30; CIV (USA)**

### ■ Montecillo Gran Reserva 1996

Displays classic nutty oxidized notes, raisins, prunes and old-oak aromas and more fruit on the palate, with tart cherries and red plums being the most prominent. Dry, dusty and medium-bodied but without the depth or complexity of more expensive Gran Reservas. **\$26; W. J. Deutsch**

### ■ Ramon Bilbao Mirto 2001

This deep, dark and intense 100% Tempranillo is ideal for your New World drinking customers. Displays concentrated aromas of blueberry, black cherries, plums and balsamic. Ripe and full on the palate with cocoa and familiar toasty notes from 24 months aging in French oak. **\$42; Quintessential**

### ■ Remelluri Red 2001

A deep, dark modern wine with a ton of power yet restrained elegance. Incredible complexity with notes of cinnamon, vanilla, chocolate, coffee, ripe black plums and cherries. Concentrated yet medium-bodied, intensely flavorful yet soft on the palate. **\$32; Tempranillo Inc.**

### ■ Valenciso Rioja Reserva 2001

Valenciso only produces a single wine, released annually as a Reserva. An earthy expression of Rioja with black and red cherries, red currants, plums, sweet baking spice and vanilla. Rather full on the palate yet juicy with bright acidity and incredible balance throughout. Vanilla laced cherries linger in the mouth for a long finish. **\$36; Classical Wines**

# 1/3 AD agavero

## tasting corner

wine initiatives at Empire Merchants (a New York wholesaler), “Even if there is an element of modernity in Rioja, there is a longer tradition and more wines that speak of tradition and place than anywhere else in Spain.”

Reminiscent of the Super Tuscan movement of 40 years ago, many bodegas in the modern school of thought are making “new wave” wines known as *vino de autor* or *vino de alta* expressions which cover a wide range of cuvées from single vineyards to varietal wines. Many of these wines may be labeled simply as a “Guarantee of Origin” with no aging claim, something that used to be for the most basic, everyday wines such as the spectacular Remelluri 2001 Rioja.

### Red and White, Oh So Nice

Grape varieties in Rioja are regulated and while Tempranillo is the most widely planted, other varieties serve an important purpose. Garncha adds necessary body to the sometimes thin Tempranillo and Graciano lends its aromatics and structure.

About a seventh of all the vines grown in Rioja produce white grapes, almost invariably the tart Viura (Macabeo), supplemented by very limited amounts of the traditional Garnacha Blanca. Rich, old, oak-aged white Rioja, such as that made by Lopez de Heredia, is one of the world’s originals but has all but disappeared in favor of cool-fermented and fresher whites such as Muga Blanco 2005 and Remelluri Blanco 2005.

### Buying Like a Pro

In Rioja, a common practice among wineries is to cellar wine to the proper age before releasing it, sometimes for decades. Because of this, back-vintages are widely available—and at a great value—compared to other Old World regions. The release date also signifies the winery’s testament that the wine has been properly aged, ensuring that customers get the best possible experience.

“As for the classic wines of Europe, Rioja remains a good value wine compared to Brunello, Super Tuscans or the great Châteaux of Bordeaux. I usually choose a Crianza for my lists, because they represent a great entry point, as well as the more traditionally styled Reservas and Gran Reservas. And I also offer the more modern style of wines from other areas of Spain,” says Christy Canterbury, national wine buyer, Smith & Wollensky Restaurant Group.

## What are the Standard Aging Requirements for Rioja Wines?

There are four aging distinctions for Rioja wines which refer to the length of time the wine has been aged, specifically the amount of time the wine has been aged in oak barrels.

- **Joven** wines, meaning young, have no barreling requirements or minimum age.
- **Crianza** wines are aged for a minimum of 24 months, at least 12 in oak barrels. Typically straightforward and uncomplicatedly fruit with little oak influence and a lot of Tempranillo varietal character.
- **Reserva** wines, aged 36 months, at least 12 in oak barrels, are deeper and more complex, with hints of vanilla, cherries and wild berries.
- **Gran Reserva** wines, with 24 months aging in oak barrels and 36 further in bottle, are only made in truly exceptional vintages. With their extraordinary depth, complexity of taste and developed bouquet, these wines display hints of cedar, spice, cigar box and wild berries.

Regardless of style, most Riojas are ready to drink now. 2001 and 2004 were both great vintages that produced complex, supple wines. According to Adrian Murcia, assistant sommelier at Chanterelle and Rioja campaign spokesperson, “2001 was one of those vintages where everything fell into place. The Reservas are now becoming available and showing beautifully. With Crianzas, the vintage is less important; it’s really about capturing the fresh fruit.” Gran Reservas should be closely tasted before purchasing because of the vagaries of aging.

Unlike a Barolo or reputable Bordeaux, Riojas of any style are accessible now (though certain bottlings will unquestionably benefit from cellaring). As Maggie Fox, wine club coordinator of Gary’s Wine and Marketplace in Madison, New Jersey, puts it, “The wineries of Rioja have already made the decision for us, taking a lot of the guesswork out of buying and storing. For a consumer public that drinks more than 70% of the wines they buy within 48 hours of leaving the store, knowing that they’re ready to drink now is a really great benefit.” ■