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Report #43: The Wines of Rioja—A New Look

Introduction



Rioja is one of the world's great wine regions. Like all great wines, it changes with the times while retaining its traditional character. Today, the classic 19th century, heavily oaked style is in transition to a new style that expresses a sense of place. Winemakers are making wines that reveal the terroir of the region, village, estate, and, increasingly, the vineyard. In this report, we put special focus on this exciting change, the special vineyards and winemakers behind it, and the wines of character that result.

Tempranillo finds its highest expression in Rioja, especially in the cooler parts of the appellation. It's no accident that when phylloxera hit Bordeaux in the late 19th century, French winemakers chose Rioja as a location to make wines for the French market. In this report, we take a new look at this venerable wine region, updating our 2008 report, *The Wines of Rioja: Classical and New Wave*. In that report we noted the transformation taking place in Rioja, especially the move towards what we called New Wave wines that were more vibrant and fruit forward with better integrated oak, giving overall greater drinking pleasure. In this, our new look at Rioja, we find this trend continuing along with other, continued improvements in viticulture and winemaking that have now extended beyond the

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boutique and super-premium producer. In addition, we find winemakers putting an emphasis on expressing the local terroir, be it the village or the vineyard.

To produce this report, we traveled to Rioja to meet with and taste the wines of all kinds of producers—small boutique, large commercial, those sourcing only from estate vineyards, those purchasing and blending fruit from diverse vineyards and regions, those growing vines in high altitude, calcareous clay soils, those growing vines in alluvial soils located in warmer areas, etc. We quickly became reacquainted with the huge diversity of terroir, winemaking, and wines in Rioja. We were especially pleased to find a number of superb white wines, both oaked and unoaked, made from Viura, Malvasia, Garnacha Blanca and other

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grapes. We also discovered wines being made from some of the indigenous varieties that were thought to be lost after the phylloxera epidemic in the early 20th century.

In what follows, we look at the continued influence of 19th century events on today's wines, the diversity of Rioja's terroir and wine, the rediscovery of indigenous varieties, the growing importance of estate vineyards and single vineyard wines, the increasing number of female enologists, the happy marriage of Rioja wine and Spanish tapas, and the booming exports of Rioja, especially to the US where exports (by volume) increased 18.4 percent between 2012 and 2013 and an amazing 206 percent since the year 2000. These gains are due at least in part to the Consejo Regulador de Rioja's very successful Vibrant Rioja campaign in the US. We also provide profiles of Rioja's top producing wineries and reviews and ratings of more than 400 wines.

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