

WINES OF THE TIMES

Rioja, Serene Above the Trendy Fray

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LET me say it straight out: I am a Rioja partisan. While other regions all over Spain have won acclaim in the last decade for their new and exciting red wines, I keep returning to Rioja, the best-known Spanish region, which all too often is overlooked in the obsession for identifying the latest trends.

Spanish red wines from Rioja are ripe for rediscovery and the exceptional 2001 vintage offers the perfect opportunity to do it.

What the Stars Mean:

(None) Pass It By

* Passable

** Very Good

*** Excellent

**** Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the panel's reaction to wines, which were tasted with names concealed. The panelists this week are Eric Asimov; Florence Fabricant; Mani Dawes, an owner and the wine director at Tía Pol, a tapas bar in Chelsea, and Ron Miller, the maître d'hôtel at Solera, a Spanish restaurant on the East Side. The tasted wines represent a selection generally available in good retail shops and restaurants. Prices are those paid in liquor shops in the New York region.

Compared with Priorat, Ribera del Duero or even newly emerging, up-to-the-minute areas like Bierzo, Rioja offers little to those who revel mostly in discovery. The truth, though, is that Rioja is ripe for rediscovery, and the exceptional 2001 vintage offers the perfect opportunity to do it.

The 2001's started coming onto the market a year or so ago. Some have disappeared from the shelves already, while others have not yet been released. Regardless, the Dining section's wine panel was easily able to accumulate 25 bottles for a recent tasting of red Riojas from the vintage. Florence Fabricant and I were joined by two guests, Mani Dawes, an owner and the wine director at Tía Pol, a tapas bar in Chelsea, and Ron Miller, the maître d'hôtel of Solera, a Spanish restaurant on the East Side.

The wines we tasted ran a gamut of styles and, at \$8 to \$250 a bottle, of prices. We included wines labeled crianza, which must be aged at least two years (one year in barrels) before being released, and reservas, which must be aged at least three years, with a year in oak. We also included wines without such designations. These wines are sometimes referred to as new wave or "alta expresión," and often, though not always, are made in a modern, powerful, concentrated style.

It may not seem fair to taste a simple \$11 crianza like our best value, the Conde de Valdemar from Bodegas Valdemar, alongside a \$250 bottle like the Grandes Añadas from Bodegas Artadi. Perhaps not, but the two wines give you an idea of the ends of the Rioja spectrum. On the one hand you get the idea of why Rioja crianzas are

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among the best red wine values in the world, offering juicy, balanced pleasures without the chief afflictions of cheap red wines: overbearing sweetness and heaviness, or wan, insipid character.

Other worthy inexpensive crianzas that we liked but that did not make our list include Campo Viejo for \$12, Montecillo for \$8 and Dinastía Vivanco for \$17.

On the other hand you have the Grandes Añadas, a patently ambitious wine that succeeds in every way, giving you the generous opulence that is characteristic of modern wines today without losing the spicy berry-vanilla character that is so often a mark of Rioja. Its price is a high one for any wine, high enough to put this wine out of reach of people for whom \$250 has any meaning. Yet I suppose it's proof that Rioja can make wines as profound as the most in-demand cult wines of Napa or St.-Émilion.

Personally, when I feel the need for proof of the greatness of Rioja, I'm more likely to seek out a defiantly old-school bottle, like a 1985 Viña Tondonia Gran Reserva from López de Heredia, which you can still find at retail for around \$75. Next to a wine like the Grandes Añadas, this one feels almost weightless, as graceful and subtle as a fine Burgundy. In the old Rioja tradition, the wine was aged for more than 15 years before it was released. It will probably be years before López de Heredia releases its 2001.

As much as I love this classic style of Rioja, I have to acknowledge the excellence of wines like our top choice, the Torre Muga from Bodegas Muga. Even more than the Artadi, it manages to offer a modern expression of Rioja without sacrificing traditional character. Perhaps the biggest difference between wines like the Torre Muga and the López de Heredia is the texture, which in the Muga is rich and concentrated rather than light and graceful. Muga, by the way, makes two reasonably priced reservas, both of which made our list. The more expensive Selección Especial is dense and spicy with plenty of oak, while the other reserva, though a bit disjointed, had tremendous potential for a \$23 bottle.

Incidentally the remaining wines near the top of our list ~ including the Cune Pagos de Viña Real, the Señorío de San Vicente and the Marqués de Murrieta Ygay Reserva ~ all have evident oak aromas and flavors, and frankly we did not have a problem with that.

Ordinarily, I am opposed to obvious oakiness in wine, even though wine and oak belong together like peanut butter and jelly. Just as the sandwich maker is challenged to maintain the proper ratio of ingredients to avoid either glueyness or oversweetness, so must the winemaker create an exquisite balance between the character of a young wine and the powerful aromas and tannins that can be imparted by the barrel in which it ages.

To put it another way, far too often winemakers ruin the sandwich by overdoing the oak: ideally, oak should be felt and not tasted.

But Rioja has a long and proud relationship with oak. And contrary to my attitude toward its presence in most other wines, I like oak in Rioja. It belongs there, though I can't help adding a qualifier: as long as it tastes like an integral part of the wine rather than the sort of garish makeup or cheap cologne ~ choose your metaphor ~ that is so often layered on top of a defenseless wine.

Yet it cannot be just any kind of oak. The spicy vanilla quality of Rioja often comes from American oak. In most wine regions barrels made of American oak are generally thought to overpower most wines, which is why, except for a very few Californian and Australian producers, most winemakers who use small barrels opt for French oak.

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In Rioja the opposite is true. The aromas and flavors of American oak barrels unite seamlessly with Rioja wine, while wines aged only in new French oak tend to have a toasty quality that is a departure from the flavors most often associated with Rioja. My impression is that all of our favorite Riojas spent at least some time in American oak.

Curiously, before American barrels became popular in Rioja in the late 19th century, the Bordeaux influence was predominant, and French oak was far more common. Let's just say that, like most great wines, Rioja is a wine of contradictions.

Tasting Report: The Reds of '01, Aged in Oak and Ripe for Rediscovery

Bodegas Muga Torre Muga

\$85

*** 1/2

Deliciously perfumed, full of spicy fruit; lavish and harmonious. (Importer: Tempranillo, New Rochelle, N.Y.)

Cune Pagos de Viña Real

\$115

Rich, tannic and well upholstered, with balanced spice, vanilla and fruit flavors. (Pasternak Wine Imports, Greenwich, Conn.)

Bodegas Artadi Grandes Añadas

\$250

Rich and complex, with raspberry, spicy vanilla and floral flavors; well balanced and nicely textured. (Wine Cellars, Briarcliff Manor, N.Y.)

Señorio de San Vicente

\$36

**1/2

Deep and complex, with evident oak; improves with exposure to air. (Tempranillo, New Rochelle, N.Y.)

Marqués de Murrieta Ygay Reserva

\$25

** 1/2

Lush, plump and pleasing, with well-balanced oak and fruit flavors. (Paramount Brands, Port Chester, N.Y.)

Bodegas Muga Reserva Selección Especial

\$32

**1/2

Dense and tannic, with pure, spicy flavors and lots of oak; will benefit from a couple of years of aging. (Tempranillo, New Rochelle, N.Y.)

Bodegas Muga Reserva

\$23

**1/2

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Extravagant floral, fruit and oak flavors, still knitting together. (Tempranillo, New York)

Marqués de Tomares Crianza

\$19

**1/2

Spicy, dense and tannic, with earthy, complex flavors. (Parador Selections, New York)

BEST VALUE

Bodegas Valdemar Conde De Valdemar Crianza

\$11

Sour cherry and floral aromas and flavors; intensity without weightiness. (CIV U.S.A., Sacramento)

Castillo Labastida Crianza

\$12

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Spicy and pleasing, light-bodied and well-knit. (Winebow, New York)