

San Francisco Chronicle

## THE CHRONICLE'S WINE SELECTIONS

### Rioja reds

Lynne Char Bennett

Thursday, June 22, 2006

With many Old World wines, the name of the wine region on a label indicates the grapes in the bottle. For red Rioja it usually means Tempranillo, a small black, thick-skinned grape indigenous to Spain that's the backbone of the country's greatest wines.

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Tempranillo may be blended with Garnacha (also known as Grenache) for body, warmth and intensity, Graciano for aroma and structure, and Mazuelo (also known as Carignan) for tannin and acidity. The addition of some Cabernet Sauvignon is also allowed in some vineyards.

Red Riojas are classified by the grapes' quality and minimum length of time the wine is aged, officially indicated by a DOC (Denominacion de Origen Calificada) seal on the back of each bottle. As the first of only two DOC regions (the other being Priorat), Rioja has more stringent wine quality controls than Spain's other appellations.

A combination of aging in oak barrels and bottles is required by Spanish law for Rioja's three quality classifications: Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva.



The most common quality Rioja is Crianza, an affordable quaffer that's aged a minimum of 24 months -- 12 months in oak cask or barrel, with the rest of the time in a bottle.

Three years of aging -- at least one year in oak cask and two in the bottle -- is required for Reservas, which are made from more select grapes. Gran Reservas, which are only made in exceptional years, must be aged at least 5 years -- two in oak cask and three in the bottle -- though many bodegas or wineries age them longer.

New World-style wine from Rioja is not labeled Crianza, Reserva or Gran Reserva, allowing producers to release their wines earlier and with various amounts of oak aging. These wines can include nontraditional blends or be single vineyard wines. The result is a ripe, juicy, more fruit-forward wine rather than the elegant, traditional Riojas, which have more melodious berry fruit, earth, spice and vanilla flavors with integrated tannins.

Here are our favorites of the 41 red Riojas tasted.

**TWO AND A HALF STARS** 2001 Bilbainas La Vicalanda Reserva (\$20) The very spicy nose is exotic and smoky with red and black fruit aromas, which lead to juicy, ripe black cherry, plum and tart blackberry flavors with a hint of herb. There's moderate tannin and fresh, mouthwatering acidity on the long finish.

**TWO AND A HALF STARS** 2002 Campo Viejo Tempranillo Crianza (\$10) Campo Viejo, one of the largest Rioja producers, has made DOC wines since the 1980s. This readily available, easy-drinking Crianza's dark cherry, plum, slight toasted nut and earth aromas and flavors combine with plush texture and lively acidity. Drink now.

**TWO AND A HALF STARS** 1998 Campo Viejo Tempranillo Gran Reserva (\$20) This affordable Gran Reserva has smooth, velvety tannins and moderate acidity. Perfumey rose petal, dried plum, jammy blueberry and kalamata olive on the nose lead to a dark berry, coffee and spice palate.

**TWO AND A HALF STARS** 2001 Finca Valpiedra Reserva (\$30) Blended with 5 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, this wine is sourced from a single

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vineyard. There's brightness and some complexity from the evident spice and licorice, plus dried plum, cherry and citrus on the nose and palate.

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**TWO AND A HALF STARS 2002 Julian Chivite Vina Salceda Crianza (\$13)** This wine, which includes 15 percent Mazuelo and Graciano, is a good introduction to Rioja. Firm tannic backbone and good acidity support a big, oaky nose and palate with lots of juicy cherry, red licorice, plum and spice.

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**TWO AND A HALF STARS 2001 Julian Chivite Vina Salceda Reserva (\$18)** Ripe blackberry, cherry, earth and toast make this wine good to drink on its own or with food. Eighteen months in American oak barrels adds a spicy finish that's balanced by racy acidity.

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**TWO AND A HALF STARS 2000 Lan Rioja Crianza (\$12)** Here are good concentration, mouthwatering acidity and velvety tannins at a nice price. Sweet bake-shop spice, bright berry and red currant flavors and a long finish make this 100 percent Tempranillo a complete package for everyday drinking.

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**TWO AND A HALF STARS 2004 Marques de Caceres MC (\$38)** This New World-style Rioja is fragrant, juicy and youthful but has slightly drying tannins, which need some time to soften. There's lavender, boysenberry jam, blueberry and cassis with a touch of cedar for those who enjoy a big, fruit-forward wine with 14 percent alcohol.

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**TWO AND A HALF STARS 1995 Mayor de Migueloa Tempranillo 1619 Gran Reserva (\$60)** The aromatic, complex, spicy nose with red currant, black cherry, soy sauce and a touch of earth is promising, while the browning rim says, "Drink me now." This earthy wine has black cherry, cassis, tar and cinnamon on the supple, medium-bodied palate and finishes with tart acidity.

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**THREE STARS 2000 Montecillo Reserva (\$19)** Fragrant and full-flavored, this wine's lavender and rose petal aromas round out a nose and palate of dried strawberry and plum with hints of cocoa. Bright, zingy acidity makes this a complete and thoroughly enjoyable wine.

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**THREE STARS 1996 Montecillo Gran Reserva (\$26)**

The complex nose of racy black cherry, black currant, soy sauce and baking spice follows on the palate with additional red cherry flavors. This warm, slightly smoky Gran Reserva has depth, crisp acidity and a persistent finish.

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THREE STARS 2003 Roda Cirsion (\$205) Eight months in new French oak and four months in the bottle give this modern-style 100 percent Tempranillo a lovely, rich nose and flavors of cassis, blackberry, licorice and dark chocolate with a touch of toast. Evident but integrated tannins, 14.5 percent alcohol and a fleshy, California-like ripeness give it potency without going over the top.

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TWO AND A HALF STARS 2002 Valdemar Conde de Valdemar Crianza (\$12) A nicely balanced Crianza with aromas of pencil lead, tar, black plum, cherry and a hint of cedar. Its juicy, soft fruit palate has some spice and finishes cleanly.

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TWO AND A HALF STARS 2001 Valdemar Conde de Valdemar Reserva (\$18) Aged 25 months in oak, this is a complex wine for the price. It has aromas and flavors of tart red cherry, anise, tea leaf, cedar and spice with hints of dark fruit. With firm tannins and good acidity, it's built to last.

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Key: FOUR STARS...Extraordinary, THREE STARS...Excellent, TWO STARS...Good

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