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DINING, FOOD & WINE

Better with Age

Rioja is the only wine region on the planet that ages its wines perfectly before it sells them to you. And at a great price.

BY ANTHONY GIGLIO

My friend Peter recently mailed me a printout of the contents of his wine cellar, amounting to several thousand bottles of wine, and asked if I would mind—"as a birthday gift"—telling him which were ready to drink and which he should hold on to. And for how long. You can imagine my initial glee as I reviewed his collection—the cases upon cases of Masseto (a rare merlot made by Italy's famed Tenuta dell'Ornellaia), the magnums of Krug Clos du Mesnil (one of the best Champagnes), the crates of super-Tuscans.

Needless to say, I was already planning my thank-you wish list long before I finished.

Then, somewhere around page 19, I realized that there wasn't a single Rioja on the list. Why should that matter? Because the Rioja region is, for me and many others, the "Bordeaux of Spain," meaning that it's similar to its famous French neighbor both in style and quality—but not in price. I had hoped to find a few cases of Rioja so I could just write, "Drink now!" regardless of the vintage. That's because Rioja is one of the only wine regions on the planet where the producers actually age the wines perfectly before releasing them. That means they're ready to drink when you buy them—ready to release beautiful aromas ranging from strawberries to leather, and flavors from ripe black cherries to chocolatey-coffee.

Just walk into any wine shop and take a glance at the Spanish selections. I bet the bottles you'll find will be among the oldest in the store outside of those in the reserved "library" lockup. What confuses most people who don't know about Rioja is that the bottle of Bodegas Montecillo Rioja Gran Reserva 1995 hasn't been on the shelf for eight years. It's the current release. So is the Coto de Imaz Rioja Reserva 1998 and the Bodegas Lan Rioja Crianza 1998. None of them is less than five years old, and by law the youngest could have been released three years ago. Why wasn't it? Pride and tradition. This is what makes Rioja one of the greatest wine regions on earth.

First, a little background. According to *The New Frank Schoonmaker Encyclopedia of Wine*, Rioja wines take their name from the Rio Oja, a tributary of the Ebro, which it meets on the border of Basque country, not far from the western Pyrenees and the French border. Despite its proximity to the Mediterranean, Rioja's vineyards are relatively high up, averaging more than 1,500 feet above sea level. The cool air brings balancing acidity to wines that are—traditionally—medium-bodied with soft, ripe fruit and noticeable acidity. Over the last 20 years, however, many producers have moved toward a more "international" style, with far more assertive fruit and bigger, fuller flavor.

Comparisons between Rioja and Bordeaux aren't uncommon—or accidental—says the *Encyclopedia of Wine*. When the *phylloxera* grape epidemic began to wipe out most of Bordeaux's grapes in the 1880s, hundreds of French winemakers crossed the Pyrenees to the uninfected Ebro Valley, bringing with them their skills and winemaking methods. Even though the French eventually returned to Bordeaux, the French influence had been, ahem, planted, and Rioja benefited greatly. It would be unfair to say that Rioja and Bordeaux taste at all alike, but they do share a kinship of pedigree and tradition.

What they don't share, however, is the same price structure, and, more important, only Rioja holds its wines back for aging, at great expense. You'd be hard-pressed to find a single Bordeaux producer (or California producer, for that matter) willing to do so. And yet, incredibly, despite the great expense of pre-aging, Rioja's prices are a fraction of Bordeaux's, or of those of any maker of great California cabernet.

Prices in general depend on the wine's classification. Spanish wine laws govern the aging of wines as well as grape-growing and winemaking practices. Rioja has a three-tier system of requirements for aging red wines: *crianza*, the youngest wines, which must spend one year in the barrel and one year in the bottle; *reserva*, requiring at least one year in the barrel and two years in the bottle; and *gran reserva*, mandating at least two years in the barrel and then three years in the bottle. Most producers, however, age them much longer, and release them only when they think they're ready to drink—making my task for Peter much easier, if only he'd buy some Rioja.

If he did, he'd easily fall in love with Rioja's flavor potential. About 80 percent of all the wine made in Rioja is red, with the widely planted tempranillo grape forming the foundation. A fair amount of white wine is also made in Rioja with the viura grape, which produces beautiful, fruity wines with a lovely mineral quality. You'll find them near the reds, and usually priced under \$10. On average, *crianzas* range between \$10 and \$20 and *reservas* between \$20 and \$30. *Gran reservas* start at around \$30.

At Bauer Wines, owner Howie Rubin stocks the Bodegas Montecillo Rioja Gran Reserva for only \$30. "It's an amazing value," says Rubin. He says he sells a great deal of the aforementioned Bodegas Lan Rioja Crianza 1998 for \$10 and the 1997 Reserva for \$15. Gene Beraldi, owner of Beacon Hill Wine & Spirits, says his customers respond well to his description of Riojas as wines that should be drunk immediately. "I tell them, 'When they release them, they're ready.'"

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