

¡SALUD! SPANISH WINES GROW IN PROMINENCE AND RARELY FAIL TO IMPRESS

BY ARI BENDERSKY



There's a misconception that when someone asks for a bottle of Rioja they're asking for wine made from the "rioja" grape. Truth is, there is no rioja grape. Rioja is the premier wine-producing region of Spain, lying just south of the vast Cantabrian Mountains, about an hour away from the Basque country. Rioja, where the Tempranillo grape reigns, is home to approximately 600 *bodegas* (wineries). There are mainly three levels of red Rioja wine—*crianza*, *reserva* and *gran reserva*—and the qualification is based on how long the wine ages in oak barrels. While Tempranillo is the most common grape, other official Rioja *clasificada* varieties (often blended with Tempranillo) include Garnacha (tinta), Graciano and Mazuelo, which produce robust and jammy wines. While Rioja is known for its reds, the whites—made from Viura, Malvasia and Garnacha (blanca) grapes—are delicious, crisp and refreshing. I recently visited 10 *bodegas*, sampling a variety of fantastic wine, pairing them with food ranging from lamb and white asparagus to Iberian ham and, my favorite, manchego cheese. Other vintages and varieties of the wines listed here can be found locally at Sam's Wine & Spirits (1720 N. Marcey, 312/664-4394), Binny's Beverage Depot (3000 N. Clark, 773/935-9400) and Lush Wine & Spirits (1306 S. Halsted, 312/738-1900). ¡Salud!

Izadi Blanco 2006

This blend of Viura (80 percent) and Malvasia (20 percent) has such a light golden color that it actually glistens in the sunlight. The floral, crisp nose leads to a slightly acidic grapefruit and prickly pear taste. It pairs well with *tortilla Española* (Spanish omelet), soft cheese (like Humboldt Fog goat cheese) and fish. And it's perfect for a hot summer day—or when you want to remember what those were like when winter hits. Lush carries the 2005 for \$17.50.

Martinez Laorden El Talud 2006 and La Orbe 2004

This is the first sustainable winery in Rioja; it even won a grant from the wine council to help construct the building. I loved their El Talud rosé, which was named the best rosé in Rioja for '05 and '06. It has a light pink hue with a hint of orange color. Soft raspberry and strawberry waft gently to the nose, and the taste, while elegant, is somewhat fleshy and robust with a dash of mint to keep things cool. Another great bottle: La Orbe. This 100 percent Tempranillo is great with red meat and deserves to be decanted to allow the wine to aerate. The palette abounds with dark fruit (blackberries, currant) with a hint of black licorice and a touch of menthol. Sam's stocks the 2001 La Orbe for \$17.99.

Bodegas Martínez Bujanda Conde de Valdemar Crianza 2004

While the majority of the wines coming from Conde de Valdemar are fantastic (look for the 2001 Inspiración, a 100 percent Graciano, if you want a real treat), the Crianza is extremely accessible. This blend of Tempranillo (90 percent) and Mazuelo (10 percent) has a gorgeous reddish-purple hue with vanilla and raisin notes on the nose. But its lush prune and cherry taste is what will wow you. This is a definite food wine with a long finish, so don't be afraid to order some aged meats and manchego. The 2003 can be found at Binny's for \$9.99.

Bodegas López de Heredia Vina Bosconia 1999

One of the oldest wineries in Rioja, they continue to produce wine as their great grandfather did 130 years ago—and the quality keeps getting better. There's no doubt it was one of my favorite stops with some of the best wine and almost-mythical caves with cobwebs and natural penicillin growing. This one, blended with Tempranillo, Garnacha, Mazuelo and Graciano, offers a ripe nose but leads to a spicy, peppery wine with great red fruit. It's full bodied, smooth and velvety—and an absolute treat. Sam's carries the 1998 for \$28.99.