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LIFE & ENTERTAINMENT

Spain's Rioja

Monday, June 16, 2008

David Dickson



If you've been paying attention to wine long enough, you remember a time (more years ago than I care to recall) when Australian wines were first trying to get a foothold in the United States. Many were really good and all were inexpensive. Australian wines are still good, but now that they are well established in the U.S. market, they are no longer inexpensive. Now it is Spanish wines that are trying to establish themselves in the U.S. and, as it was years ago with Australian wines; many are very good and most are relatively inexpensive.

The Spanish Civil War and the Second World War destroyed the Spanish wine industry and it wasn't until the 1950s that it began to see a revival. The death of Francisco Franco in 1975 and the Spanish transition to democracy that followed created a burgeoning Spanish middle-class and a domestic market for Spanish wine. Competition for world markets has spurred modernization in viticulture and production methods, and the quality and volume of premium wines has continued to increase. Spain's reputation entering the 21st century is that of a

serious wine-producing country; one that wants a share of the enormous U.S. wine market.

Spanish wines are regulated by the Denominación de Origen (DO) system. The system shares many similarities with the hierarchical Appellation d'origine contrôlée (AOC) system of France and Italy's Denominazione di origine controllata (DOC) system. Wine produced under a Spanish Denomination of Origin, such as the Rioja, will have that region's DO stamp on the label or bottle seal. This system of regulation goes far beyond our terroir-oriented American Viticultural Districts, governing everything from the types of grapes that are planted and the yields that can be harvested, to the length of time that the wine must be aged and the information required on the label.

Spain is the most widely planted wine-producing nation, having more than 2.9 million acres of vines, but it is only the third largest producer of wine, behind Italy and France. This is likely due to the dry, relatively infertile nature of many of Spain's wine-growing regions. It may also account for roughly 80 percent of the country's wine production coming from only a few grape varieties including Tempranillo, Albarino, Garnacha, Palomino, Airen, Macabeo, Parellada, Cariñena and Monastrell. Major Spanish wine regions include the Rioja, known for red wines made from Tempranillo; Jerez, for Sherry; and Rías Baixas for white wines made from Albarino and Catalonia. While great wines are found throughout Spain, what we see on our local store shelves and wine lists are mostly red wines from the Rioja region, so, for simplicity, we'll focus there.

Rioja was granted Denomination of Origin status in 1926 by the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture and in 1991 became the only Qualified Denomination of Origin in recognition of the high quality attained by its wines and the strict quality control imposed on grapes and wine in the region. Particularly well known for its Tempranillo-based red wines, the Rioja wine district is located in the Ebor River valley of northern Spain, in the three provinces of La Rioja, Alava and Navarra. Rioja is divided into three regions: the Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa in west, and the Rioja Baja, influenced by the warm Mediterranean, in the east. Altitude varies from more than 600 meters above sea level in the west to 300 meters in the Baja. Winters are cold, with some snowfall, while summers are warm with modest rainfall. The Rioja is sheltered from the worst Atlantic influences by the Cantabria and Demanda mountain ranges.

Rioja red wines are classified into four categories based on the amount of aging the wines have received. The four most common aging designations are Rioja, Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva. Wines simply labeled Rioja are the youngest, having spent less than a year aging in oak. Wines labeled Crianza are aged for two years with at least six months in oak. Reserva wines are aged for at least three years with at least one year in oak, and Gran Reserva wines require at least five years aging, at least 18 months in oak. These designations might not always appear on the front label but may appear on a neck or back label in the form of a stamp.

-Cellar Notes-

OK, so now that you're an expert on Spanish wines, let's go buy one or two and give them a try. The first obstacle you may have to overcome is the label. Some Spanish wine labels are very "new world" in that they clearly identify the grape variety, so you shouldn't have any trouble with those. But, you will find others that are very "old world" showing only DO and appellation information with no hint of the grape variety you're drinking. If you limit your initial exploration of Spanish wines to red wines from the Rioja, then the majority of the wines you encounter will probably be Tempranillo or Tempranillo blends. Here are two red wines from the Rioja, each are at least 90 percent Tempranillo, but very different in style. Just a reminder that all Spanish Tempranillo's are not alike, anymore than all Napa Cabernet Sauvignon's are all alike. Mucho gusto!

Marqués de Riscal Rioja Reserva

Herederos de Marqués de Riscal

Rioja, Spain

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