

# Voice of the Vine Versatile Rioja

By Lou Campoli

How many folks know that Rioja wines are more than just red (tinto)? That's right, the white (blanco) and rosé (rosado) versions of Rioja may not be as well known, but they certainly have earned their places in the enjoyment of wine and food.

Rioja is situated along the Ebro River in north central Spain, just south of the Cantabrian Mountains. According to popular belief, the region is named after the Oja River (Rio Oja), a tributary of the Ebro. Wine has been produced in this region for a thousand years.

While the word "reserve" has no legal meaning in the United States, several such designations do in Spain. For red wines, Joven, Sin Crianza, or simply Rioja, refer to young wines with little or no aging. Crianza wines must be aged for a minimum of two years, one of which must be in barrel. Reserva indicates aging of at least three years, including one year in barrel. Gran Reserva wines are aged for a minimum of five years, with at least two years in barrel and three years in bottle. Similar designations for white wines require less aging time in each category.

Following are a few varieties of Rioja that represent the breadth and depth of the styles of wine in this area.

**2008 Marqués de Cáceres Rioja Blanco (\$9):** Made totally from the viura grape, this white is fresh and clean, with apple, pear and floral flavors. Enjoy it with seafood hors d'oeuvres and picnic fare.

**2005 Sierra Cantabria Organza Rioja Blanco (\$27):** This white is a lot more complex, and more costly (but worth it). It is made predominantly from viura, blended with malvasía and garnacha (grenache) blanca. It is packed with pear, apple, citrus and spice flavors, with hints of smoke and butter on the finish. Seafood, paella and mild cheeses are wonderful accompaniments.

**2008 Muga Rioja Rosado (\$12):** If

you like really dry rosés, this is your wine. Made mostly from garnacha, it is blended with white viura and red tempranillo grapes. Its citrus, pineapple, kiwi and apple flavors lead to a crisp, tart finish. Enjoy it with ham, tapas and all grilled vegetables and poultry.

**2007 Ilurce Solnia Rioja (\$11):** Made entirely from tempranillo, this red is a wonderful value. It has subtle berry and ripe cherry flavors. It pairs well with paella and all grilled meats and vegetables.

**2004 Abel Mendoza Jarrarte Rioja (\$25):** This red is made totally from tempranillo grapes, and as the price would indicate, it is deeply complex wine with notes of sour cherry, pepper, earth, tobacco and saddle leather. This red demands spicy paella or grilled meats.

**2005 Sierra Cantabria Rioja Crianza (\$19):** Made totally from tempranillo, this red shows rich flavors of cherries and plums, with mineral and spicy notes on the long finish. Serve it with steak, chicken and tapas.

**2005 Muga Rioja Reserva (\$25):** What a delicious wine! Made predominantly from tempranillo, this red is blended with garnacha, mazuelo and graciano grapes. It is bright and balanced, with ripe red berry and coffee flavors and charred oak notes in the deep, intense finish. Great with grilled red and white meat dishes.

**2001 Muga Prado Enea Rioja Gran Reserva (\$60):** Wow! This wine is made from virtually the same blend as the reserve. Incredible flavors of red fruit, chocolate, spice and leather leap from the glass. The smooth, almost liqueur-like finish lasts seemingly forever. Enjoy with roasted red and white meats, as well as with sharp cheeses.

Rioja is a very versatile wine that should match anyone's individual palate. And it accompanies, wonderfully, almost any food you choose.

Salud!

