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THE VIBRANCY OF RED RIOJA

Not since the so-called “super Tuscans” shook up the hidebound traditions of Chianti has a historically recognized wine region, or appellation, generated so much excitement among connoisseurs as Rioja, the leading wine region of Spain.

Unlike other trend-setting wine regions, however, Rioja is generating excitement not by introducing foreign grape varieties in its vineyards or creating experimental blends – though there is some of both going on here as well. Rather, Rioja’s vintners, many of whose families have been making wine for generations if not centuries, are re-imagining the area’s traditional advantages. Most notably among these are a variety of microclimates; an unusual abundance of what the French reverentially call *vieilles vignes*, “older vines” that in Rioja can reach as much as 100 years to deliver fewer but more intense grapes, and a distinctively Spanish grape variety called Tempranillo that finds its fullest expression in Rioja.

This unique combination of factors is continually refined by Rioja’s vintners to create a new generation of world-class reds intended to appeal to connoisseurs and casual wine drinkers alike.

Red Rioja: Made in the Vineyards

Rioja’s vintners proudly show visitors their spotless state-of-the-art wineries, or *bodegas*, with their rows of gleaming, temperature-controlled stainless steel fermentation tanks and artfully arranged cellars of small casks, or *barricas*, of French and/or American oak, often numbering in the tens of thousands.

But those same vintners will also tell visitors that, heavy investment in their *bodegas* aside, the wines of Rioja are really made in the vineyards. First planted by the ancient Romans and subsequently cultivated largely by the local monks, Rioja’s vineyards provide an irreproducible confluence of factors that bring out the innate nobility of one of Spain’s – and one of the world’s – most venerable grape varieties: Tempranillo.

The wines from Rioja's vineyards, which actually extend beyond the boundaries of the province of La Rioja to parts of the Basque country to the north and Navarra to the northeast, were the first to be recognized with the *Denominación de Origen Calificada (DOCa)*, a legal designation at the top of the quality pyramid similar to France's *Appellation Contrôlée* or Italy's *Denominazione di Origine Controllata*.

In Rioja's case, the DOCa production area runs from west to east in the valley of the Ebro River and is divided into three subzones: Rioja Alta, Rioja Alavesa and Rioja Baja. The area enjoys an unusually diverse set of microclimates from Atlantic influences in the west to a more Mediterranean climate in the east.

To capitalize on this microclimatic diversity, red Rioja has traditionally been made from a blend of primarily Tempranillo grapes harvested throughout the entire DOCa zone, though single vineyard and sub-regional red Riojas are becoming increasingly common. The traditional sourcing of grapes from all three sub-zones allows *bodegas* to create perfectly balanced reds that are less vulnerable to vintage variations.

Tempranillo: Recognizing a Venerable Variety

Because traditional winemaking countries have always emphasized the origins, or appellations, of their wines over varietal content, the Rioja DOCa designation has, until recently, eclipsed Tempranillo's name recognition among wine lovers.

However, with the emergence of varietal identification as an equally important factor in consumer wine purchasing decisions, Tempranillo is beginning to be talked about in the same breath as Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and other noble red varieties.

Tempranillo's role as Spain's contribution to the pantheon of great varieties is based on what Britain's foremost Spanish wine authority John Radford describes as the variety's "gorgeous raspberry freshness." Indeed, contemporary vinification as well as the judicious blend of aging in oak and bottle of Tempranillo – supplemented with about 20 percent of other indigenous grapes such as Garnacha, Mazuelo and Graciano – has transformed Rioja into a uniquely contemporary product that is the wine of choice in the tapas bars and restaurants of Spain and, increasingly, those in other countries.

An Abundance of Riches: The Red Rioja Designations

Rioja has four basic designations: Guarantee of Origin, Crianza, Reserva, and Gran Reserva. These designations are shown on labels affixed to the back or neck of each bottle. According to DOCa regulations, Crianzas, Reservas, and Gran Reservas each have strict aging requirements.

Although DOCa regulations require both barrel and bottle aging, it is customary for wineries to age the wines in the cellar until they are ready to drink. Reservas and Gran Reservas in particular are capable of improving with age, acquiring a velvet complexity.

In addition, many Rioja *bodegas* are making proprietary “new wave” wines known as *vino de autor* or *vino de alta expresión*, which cover a wide range of *cuvées* from 100 percent single vineyard Tempranillo to sub-regional blends.

Though the “house style” of a Rioja differs from *bodega* to *bodega*, the four basic designations share some general qualities. **Guarantee of Origin** is often associated with young wines that are intensely fruity, with little or no oak, and are consumed on an everyday basis at home and in bars. Increasingly, many of the “new wave” wines carry the Guarantee of Origin label with no aging claim. **Crianza** is typically fruity and straightforward, with good Tempranillo varietal character with its hints of cherries. It is what Riojans typically drink with their version of *tapas*. The house red of seemingly every restaurant in Spain, Crianza’s accessibility mirrors the open, fun-loving nature of Riojans at their most relaxed. **Reserva** wines are deeper and more complex, with hints of vanilla, cherries and wild berries. They hold their own with the typical foods of landlocked Rioja such as lamb and game. **Gran Reserva** wines are only made in truly exceptional vintages. With their extraordinary depth, complexity of taste, and bouquet with hints of cedar, spice, cigar box and wild berries, Gran Reservas are what the Spanish call *vinos de meditación* – a wine to drink before the fireplace while contemplating the mysteries of life, love and great gastronomy.

Rioja is undergoing a stylistic revolution, although winemakers prefer to say ‘evolution,’ partially in response to the market demand for forward, fruit-driven wines. Until the 1980s, Rioja reds were usually aged for long periods in older barrels, acquiring complex but delicate aromas of dried or stewed fruit, leather, cigar box, spice and tobacco, drawing comparisons to fine Burgundy. While this style persists in many wineries due to its popularity in Spain, a new style has emerged, emphasizing fresh fruit, new French or American oak barrels and a firm backbone. This style appeals to younger consumers brought up on international style wines.