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RIOJA: SETTING THE STYLE FOR WINE DESTINATIONS

Spanish wine authority John Radford says that there are three factors behind the world-class quality of Rioja's reds: climate, food availability and the nature of the Riojans.

Though other wine regions may attempt a similar claim, the symbiotic relationship among the three – climate, food and the nature of the locals – is epitomized to the extreme by the region in north-central Spain called Rioja.

A Tale of Two Riojas

There are really two Riojas. The first is the province of La Rioja, one of 17 regions that make up Spain. The second Rioja refers to the wine district, located mainly in La Rioja, but also in part of the Basque province of Alava to the north and Navarra to the northeast.

The word 'Rioja' is generally thought to be an abbreviation of 'Rio Oja' (river Oja), one of the seven tributaries of the Ebro, a major river that bisects the region. The name first appeared in print as 'Rioxa' in 1092.

Travelers will want to explore the entire Rioja wine district nestled in the verdant valley between mountain ranges to the north and south, and dotted in-between with winding country roads intersecting seemingly endless miles of manicured vineyards, older stone bodegas, or wineries, and centuries-old villages juxtaposed with architecturally adventurous wineries and their surrounding structures designed by internationally famous architects like Frank Gehry, Santiago Calatrava and Zaha Hadid.

Riojans Just Want To Have Fun

Riojans have one of the highest per capita incomes in Spain and take a *carpe diem* attitude when it comes to spending on wine and food. One just has to go to the Calle Laurel in the city of Logroño, the political capital of La Rioja as well as the commercial hub of the local wine trade, to observe just how much Riojans like to have fun.

A narrow cobblestone street in the old section of Logroño, the Calle Laurel is lined with small tapas bars, each of which serves a single specialty accompanied by a glass of Rioja. Crowded nightly with locals taking advantage of a climate that encourages outdoor socializing all year round, Calle Laurel is a microcosm of the Riojan people: outgoing, welcoming, vibrant, style-conscious, passionate about their food and wine and enthusiastic about their leisure activities, including teeing off at some of northern Spain's best golf courses and skiing at the Valdezcaray resort near the 11th-century town of Santo Domingo de la Calzada.

The Ancient Roots of Riojan Hospitality

Hospitality is one of the defining qualities of Riojans and no wonder: the region has been welcoming travelers since 950 AD when the Bishop of Auvergne started what has come to be known as the Camino de Santiago, or The Pilgrim's Way. With the tomb and church of Saint James the Greater at Santiago de Compostela considered one of Europe's most spiritual destinations, the Camino de Santiago traverses the entire length of La Rioja including Logroño, which was a major crossroads along the way, as it extends from Auvergne, France to Galicia in northwestern Spain.

Food was never consumed without wine during the Middle Ages, and the monasteries, where the pilgrims often stayed, were among the most enthusiastic producers of wine.

Traveled by millions of pilgrims since then, today the Camino de Santiago is credited by Riojans themselves as perhaps the most important factor in the development of the region's tradition of hospitality as well as the international reputation of its wine. Thanks to the Camino de Santiago as well as such attractions as the centuries-old convent of Santa María la Real in Nájera, and the Suso and Yuso monasteries in San Millán de la Cogolla, today's travelers to Rioja can find welcoming luxury hotels and lovely inns nestled among the vineyards in such historic villages as: Laguardia, Haro, Calahorra, Cenicero, Casalarreina, Nájera, Santo Domingo de la Calzada, Briones and Viana.

A Tradition of Food and Wine

Food and wine remain a constant theme when traveling throughout Rioja. Restaurants run the gamut from the rustic to the world class, most notably El Portal de Echaurren—a “destination” Michelin-rated restaurant for Spanish and international gourmets—and its more traditional sister restaurant Echaurren in the picturesque town of Ezcaray.

The cuisine is influenced by a combination of Rioja’s landlocked geography—where fresh produce and meats such as lamb and game are the culinary mainstays—and the apprenticeship abroad of many local chefs which has made the region into a hotbed of gastronomic innovation.

The Architecture of Wine

Given Rioja’s deep roots in medieval history, and its bucolic and timeless landscape, it’s interesting that the region is emerging as a capital of avant-garde winery architecture by innovative architects like Canadian Frank Gehry, Spain’s Santiago Calatrava and English-Iraqi Zaha Hadid. But then again, Riojans seem to be genetically predisposed to doing everything in style.

The trend toward cutting edge architectural design really started a little to the north of Rioja in Bilbao, where the fireworks of titanium panels that is Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum has put that city on the architectural map.

The funky architecture is not limited to wineries, or foreigners for that matter. The distinctive work of Spaniard Santiago Calatrava, who most recently designed the gleaming new PATH train station at New York’s Ground Zero, can be seen in the Bodegas Ysios winery in Laguardia as well as at the Sondica Airport and Campo Volantín footbridge in nearby Bilbao.

Whether it is wine, food, architecture or lifestyle in general, Rioja is setting the trend for wine destinations, juxtaposing the region’s illustrious history and local traditions with the “shock of the new.” As such, Rioja is unique not only among wine regions, but international travel destinations in general.

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