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FACT SHEET: THE TEMPRANILLO GRAPE

Tempranillo, the principal grape in Rioja reds, is Spain's—and one of the world's noble varieties. Its origins are lost in the mists of time but it is plausible, as Jancis Robinson writes in her authoritative Vines, Grapes and Wines, that Tempranillo vines were taken to northern Spain from monasteries in northern France by pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago.

Although the Tempranillo grape is grown throughout Spain and increasingly in other countries such as Australia and the United States, it unquestionably reaches its fullest expression in Rioja.

Variety name: The name Tempranillo comes from *temprano*, the Spanish word for 'early'—a reference to the fact that it ripens earlier on the vine than other red varieties in Rioja.

Vineyard cultivation: Vines in Rioja have traditionally been grown using the bush system, where freestanding plants sit side by side close to the ground to catch reflected heat from the stony soil.

Trellised vines are relatively new to the region but are becoming popular because this allows higher exposure of the leaves to sunlight and facilitates mechanical harvesting, although this is limited due to the fact that most vineyards are located on hillsides and terraced plots with an average size of only 1.2 acres.

Acreage under vine: With about 85,000 acres under vine in the Rioja DOCa subzones of Rioja Alta, Rioja Alavesa and Rioja Baja, Tempranillo represents about 80 percent of red varieties.

Characteristics: Rioja authority John Radford refers to Tempranillo's strong fruit profile as displaying "gorgeous raspberry freshness." On its own it produces juice that is balanced in sugar, color and acidity, but it is often blended with small amounts of Garnacha, Mazuelo and Graciano to add complexity. A typical Rioja blend is 75 to 80 percent Tempranillo, 15 percent Garnacha and small amounts of Mazuelo and Graciano.

Wine made exclusively with Tempranillo, once considered a heresy by Riojan winemakers, is now fashionable and is meeting with wide acclaim by consumers and critics alike.

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