

VIBRANT RIOJA

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Rioja: Land of a Thousand Wines

“Few countries hold on to and nurture their traditions so tenderly or so enthusiastically [as Spain]...tradition and modernity somehow manage to fit snugly together.”

- Giles Tremett, *Ghosts of Spain: Travels Through Spain and its Silent Past* (Walker & Co., 2006)

Today’s Rioja is a study in contrasts, a winemaking region firmly rooted in its storied past, even as it leaps confidently toward the future. Part of what makes Rioja so compelling for wine lovers and cultural observers alike is these contrasts coexist here without contradiction. Denominación de Origen Calificada (D.O.Ca.) Rioja, as the wine region is officially known, is a uniquely Spanish phenomenon: both a living summation of a rich cultural heritage and a land in constant state of evolution.

Protected by mountains on its northern and southern flanks, Rioja’s upper Ebro basin extends eastward towards the Mediterranean Sea like a giant inverted “V.” A contiguous and self-contained wine kingdom unto itself, Rioja’s geological, topographical, and climatic traits are ideally suited to quality viticulture. Despite age-old internal political divisions, the valley is unified by an ancestral dedication to the vine, a dominant black grape variety (Tempranillo), and a local gastronomy whose flavors are the muse of the wines of the region.

Officially divided into three sub-zones — Rioja Alta, Rioja Baja, and Rioja Alavesa — this expansive 150,000-acre realm includes hundreds of unofficial subdivisions that create a colorful array of distinct viticultural principalities governed by “*terruño*,” or terroir. The vast majority of the region’s bodegas practice traditional grape-sourcing, typically purchasing grapes from growers from all over the region and blending them to create a Champagne-like house style. The result is an abundance of uncharted micro-vineyard distinctions and a seemingly limitless variety of styles and tastes.

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The winemaker's touch adds the final component to this portrait of diversity and harmony of contrasts. Vineyard management, grape provenance, yeast variety, choice of oak (American, French, Central European, Russian), time in barrel, final blend, etc. — all of these factors play a critical role in the ultimate style of the wine. Where once traditional Rioja lovers feared the end of the historically classic style (long-aging in American oak, sublime secondary and tertiary aromas, adherence to traditional age designations), Rioja's historic styles are now more popular than ever, tempering the rush toward extraction for extraction's sake. This pendulum-like evolution in the region continues to add nuance to the picture.

Instead of, "Is it modern or traditional?" the question, increasingly, has become, "Is it a good wine or an exceptional wine?" Heightened awareness and comparative tastings have shed renewed light on the careful winemaking and commitment to site-specific expression that underlie the region's new generation of wines. With centuries of wine culture in its veins, a rich palette of *terruños* in its arsenal, and such extraordinary diversity of styles available on the market, Spain's premier winemaking region offers limitless opportunities to discover the new face of Rioja.

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