

# Spanish Wine

## The Fayetteville Wine Society

Monday, March 30, 2009—Updated 12/2013, 7/2018

---

### Introduction

Spain has a long history of producing fine wines, particularly the red wines of Rioja. Surprisingly, however, this famous name is just one small region among many, some of which produce equally good wines, although many produce enormous quantities of uninteresting backwater. Some of these regions are huge, and account for the fact that Spain has the largest area of land dedicated to viticulture of any country in the world. Unfortunately for lovers of *fine wine*, much of these vines are Airén, an undistinguished white grape responsible for much of the aforementioned backwater.

### Spanish Wine Classifications

Since the start of the 21st Century, understanding Spanish wine labels has become more complex, with the introduction of three entirely new levels of wine classification: *Vino de La Tierra*, *Vino de Calidad* and *Vino de Pago*. There are now more than 150 Spanish wine appellations divided between five quality tiers:

**DOCa (Denominación de Origen Calificada)** is the highest level of Spanish wine classification, arguably alongside *Vino de Pago Calificado* (see below). The term *Calificada* translates as 'qualified' or 'guaranteed' and implies a guarantee of high wine quality. Only two regions currently hold DOCa status for their wines: Rioja and Priorat.

**DO (Denominación de Origen)** indicates the geographical origin and the style of a wine. Almost all *Rias Baixas* wines, for example, are crisp, white Albarino-based wines from a particular area of southern Galicia. To earn the use of a DO title, wines must conform to various production conditions, which apply both to vineyard management (e.g. permitted grape varieties, planting densities, and vine yields) and winemaking techniques (e.g. aging regimes). There are about 70 DO titles, making this the broadest rung on the Spanish 'wine ladder'.

**VP (Vino de Pago)** is a single-estate classification for high-end wineries unable to claim a DO title for their wines. This may occur because the vineyard is outside a DO catchment area, or because the wine style does not conform to the local DO production laws, but is nonetheless of high quality. In the first case, the estate is given standard 'Vino de Pago' status. In the second case, it is given the higher 'Vino de Pago Calificado' status. The category was introduced in 2003 and there are now 14 *Vino de Pago* estates. For more information about these special estates and their wine, see *Vino de Pago*.

**VC (Vino de Calidad con Indicación Geográfica)** means literally 'wine of quality with a geographical indication'. These wines are theoretically a step up in quality from *Vino de la Tierra*, but are not yet considered to be of DO quality. The VC category might be viewed as a temporary, intermediate status between VT and DO (similar in this way to France's former VDQS category). There are a handful of *Vino de Calidad* titles, of which one example is *Valtiendas VC*. For a decade *Cangas* was probably the best known VC, but it achieved DO status in 2018.

**VT (Vino de la Tierra)** means literally 'wine of the land', and focuses on the origins of the wine, rather than its quality or style. This is a very flexible category; VT wines may be varietals or blends made from a broad range of grapes, and VT law imposes few limitations on vineyard yields. In this sense it might be viewed as equivalent to France's VDP or Italy's IGT. There are about 46 VT titles, of which an example is *Cadiz*.

# Spanish Wine

## The Fayetteville Wine Society

Monday, March 30, 2009—Updated 12/2013, 7/2018

Further, red wines are often labelled as Crianza, Reserva or Gran Reserva. In Rioja and the Ribera del Duero, Crianza wines are two years old, with at least twelve months spent in cask (elsewhere the oak ageing may legally be restricted to just six months). Reservas are three years old (at least one year in cask), Gran Reservas five years old (two in cask, three in bottle).

With the most recent explosion of Spanish wines being imported into the country, and many of them coming from regions unheard of before, it is much more complicated writing a simple guide to Spanish wine. In an effort to simplify it as much as possible, we have broken the country into three regions: north, central, and south. Let's see what each region has to offer.

### Northern Spain

White Rioja, traditionally, is not the most memorable of wines. Accounting for only 9% of Riojas production, it has not been the focus of the region, however, more recently, the government has changed the rules for the production of white Rioja (now there will be more grapes allowed) and soon enough, we may see some very interesting whites. There is some good white wine to be found in Spain, however. In Galicia, the most north-western part of Spain, **Rias Baixas** can be very drinkable. The wines are made from the Albariño grape, and many are cold-fermented to maintain freshness, the antithesis of old white Rioja.



As a historic winemaking area, **Toro (DO)** has made a huge comeback in the last fifteen years. Its rich, ripe and powerful red wines, based on the native Tinta del Toro (Tempranillo) grape, began to show their potential after a new generation of trained oenologists began work here and the necessary investment was made in equipment. Additionally, Toro still has a number of very old vineyards with pre-phylloxera *Tinta de Toro*, which in recent years have been used to source grapes for special cuvées. In the last decade there has also been a continuous upgrading of harvesting methods. We are beginning to see some really exciting reds coming from this region.



Further to the east, and just a little south, is **Rueda**. The reputation of this DO once rested on the flor-influenced sherry-like wines it produced, but it is now the home of some more examples of drinkable Spanish white, this time made from the Verdejo grape.

Coming further across is the **Ribera del Duero** (Which was supposed to be upgraded to DOCa status as of 2008- the third DOCa after Rioja and Priorat-- I was unable to find any confirmation that it has changed yet), a region of vineyards situated around the Duero river, which, as it flows west through Portugal, becomes the Douro, home to the vineyards that give rise to Port. Despite Rioja's reputation, it is in fact the Ribera del Duero that is home to Spain's most expensive wine, produced by Vega Sicilia. There are some splendid wines to be had in this region, based on a mixture of international (Cabernet Sauvignon) and indigenous (Tempranillo) grapes.



# Spanish Wine

## The Fayetteville Wine Society

Monday, March 30, 2009—Updated 12/2013, 7/2018



Further east, and back to the north a little, is **Rioja (DOCa)**. This is clearly the most recognized of Spain's wine production regions and the one which has been exported for the longest period of time. The epitome of fine red Spanish wine for generations, Rioja can still be superb. Styles vary, from easy drinking Crianzas and some Reservas, to the Reservas and Gran Reservas of the top estates which may cellar and improve for decades. The grape of note is the Tempranillo, although there are some plantings of lesser grapes, including Garnacha Tinta (known as Grenache in France). Rioja is divided up into three regions, by far the most important of which is the Rioja Alta (which is also the name of one of the top estates). Slightly to the east are Rioja Alavesa and Rioja Baja, the former producing some drinkable wines, the latter less so.

It is worth noting that much of Rioja's character depends on the long ageing in American oak, with Gran Reservas having the longest contact (as explained above) and also the best cellaring potential. For an alternative to Rioja, just to the northeast is **Navarra (DO)**, often cited as an up and coming rival. Navarra produces many quality red and white wines today, but it is best known for its traditional rosé wines.



Moving across to the Mediterranean coast there are a number of DO regions, such as **Priorato**, **Montsant**, and **Tarragona**, which for many years produced nothing of great interest. Quite recently, however, Priorato has been making waves, with big, age-worthy and exciting wines and Montsant, one of the youngest DO's, has gained a considerable



reputation for quality. **Penedès** is also worth a mention, not least because it is home to one of Spain's most well known wine makers, Torres. This company, led by Migual Torres, produces a vast array of styles using a number of indigenous and international grapes, from sparkling Cava through to Gran Reserva reds. They also have related outposts in Chile (Migual Torres) and



California (Marimar Torres).

## Central Spain

One region dominates central Spain, and that is **La Mancha**. This is a vast million acre DO, which relies on Airén for its whites, and Cencibel (another name for Tempranillo, just to confuse you) and Garnacha Tinta (Grenache), among others, for its reds. La Mancha is the world's largest wine producing area, with a total of 191,699 hectares of vineyards, a truly remarkable figure that allows the production of a large proportion of all the wine produced in



Spain. A recent editorial stated that La Mancha was going to be the next big success story, following in the footsteps of some other reborn wine regions. There has been considerable improvement in the quality of production, however, I have as yet to see any real evidence of this.



# Spanish Wine

## The Fayetteville Wine Society

Monday, March 30, 2009—Updated 12/2013, 7/2018



Just to the south of La Mancha is **Valdepeñas**, a red wine region, much less important than Rioja or the Ribera del Duero, which produces a few good wines. Some of the best producers are using oak-ageing to add more appeal to their wines. Good value drinking can be found here, from one or two producers.



Further to the east are the DOs of **Almansa, Valencia, Alicante, Jumilla, Yecla** and **Utiel-Requena**. There are some good value



wines to be found here, and I have been particularly impressed with some of the wines from Jumilla and Almansa.

## Southern Spain - Sherry

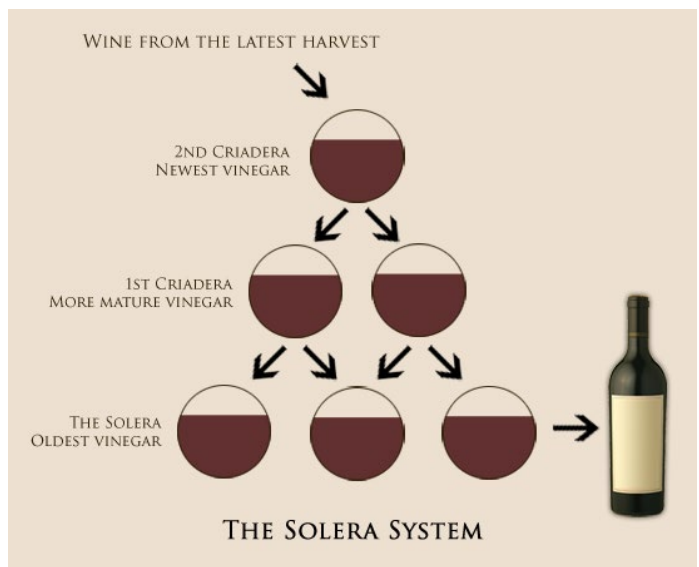
It is clear that Spain's finest table wines are to be found in the north, for the central region has little to offer, and here in the south, within sight of the continent of Africa, there are none. But the region is not devoid of viticulture, and there are some very fine wines here. This is the home of **Sherry**, produced from a small region around the town of Jerez.



Sherry is made principally from the Palomino and Pedro

Ximénez (PX) grapes, with a splash of Moscatel. The grapes are harvested and fermented in the normal way, but the wines are then left in contact with air for a prolonged period of time. Some will simply oxidize, whereas some develop a coating of flor, a thick layer of yeast, on the surface. This yeast imparts a distinctive flavor.

The wines then pass through a solera system, a tier of barrels containing wine of differing ages, oldest at the bottom and youngest at the top. The wine in the lowest barrel is drawn off and bottled, and each barrel is topped up with wine from the one above. This maintains a



Sherry barrel with transparent front so visitors can see the natural development of *Flor*

steady stream of wine of similar character year after year, and explains why sherry is almost never vintage dated.

why sherry is almost never vintage dated.

# Spanish Wine

## The Fayetteville Wine Society

Monday, March 30, 2009—Updated 12/2013, 7/2018

---

Sherries come in a number of styles. These can broadly be divided into dry, medium or sweet.

**Dry:** *Fino* is the most commonly seen dry Sherry, a flor wine generally intended for drinking young. *Manzanilla* is a light style of *Fino* from Sanlúcar de Barrameda, a small fishing village on the Mediterranean coast. *Amontillado* is a wine left in cask until the flor has died and sunk to the bottom, the wine then darkening and taking on a more nutty character. Wines that are halfway between the *Fino* and *Amontillado* stages may be termed *Fino Amontillado* or *Manzanilla Pasada*. *Oloroso* is a wine which did not grow the flor yeast (the opposite of *Fino*), and it may be used as the base for medium or sweet Sherry. It may also be sold dry (*Oloroso Seco*).

**Medium:** The most common medium sherry is a sweetened *Amontillado*, but they may also be created from *Oloroso* wines.

**Sweet:** At their best these are made from *Oloroso* wines, sweetened with PX. In modern times they are just as likely to be poor *Finos* sweetened up with some Moscatel. Sweet Sherries made from just PX can be astounding. At the sweet end of the spectrum we also have the cream and brown Sherries, which I shall discuss no further.

As a final point, it is worth mentioning the regions of **Montilla-Moriles** and **Málaga**, which lie east of Jerez. Both produce some wines of note, very much in the style of Sherry. Some similar wines, as well as some dry whites, originate from **Condado de Huelva**, to the west of Jerez.

### Document Resources:

WinesfromSpain.com – from the Spanish Institute for Foreign Trade

Wikipedia.com

Thewinedoctor.com- an independent opinion on wine

Winespectator.com

Karen MacNeil's The Wine Bible