

WINE OVERVIEW



SPAIN

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Closely review the syllabus for this wine level to determine just what items require your attention in each of the region/country overview documents.

Spain boasts over 650,000 hectares of vines, giving her the delightful distinction of having the most vineyard land of any country in the world. However, this honor becomes even more important when you compare Spain's wine lands to her next closest competitors: France and Italy. While both the latter possess slightly less vineyard land, these two countries each produce a lot more wine than Spain, which is a telling statistic about the average yields from the three.

Wine has been a part of Spain's culture for at least 3,000 years, albeit some very different kinds of vino than what hails from the so-called Spanish wine revolution of today. The Iberian Peninsula has been trampled and dominated by various marauders and world conquerors throughout history. Three millennia ago, and for about nine hundred years, roaming Phoenician traders made heavy sweet wine in what is now Sherry country. Under Roman rule from the time of Christ to the fifth century, so-called "modern" Roman wine-making (utilizing stone troughs and smaller amphorae) was introduced, but this was still about a rough, coarse brew. During the Moorish era, grapes were seen mainly as distillation fodder for cosmetics from the eighth century until the time of Christopher Columbus. Even under Muslim rule however, local vine husbandry and farm winemaking continued in the rural hinterlands, where the country-folk churned out a thick, crude, heavy and oxidized wine (an acquired-taste style that still continues to be made in some parts of the country today). It is only in the past four hundred years that Spain has been producing wine in a style recognizable by wine drinkers of the modern era.

Fast forward to the seventies. Spain's wine-making and wine-marketing has undergone an accelerated renaissance in these past forty years. At the end of the Franco era in 1975 up to Spain's acceptance into the European Union in 1986, Spanish winemakers abandoned socialist grape subsidy policies and looked to the rest of Europe to see what their more famous neighbors were doing. The quantity versus quality debate started in earnest. In a remarkably short time, Spanish winemakers learned to make juice that now competes with the world's best.

This rebirth began in the seventies, with a revolution in the vineyards. With the introduction of modern viticultural practices focusing on ripeness and flavor development instead of on merely the production of high yields, quality soared. The decade of the eighties saw a second revolution: this time in the cellar. With the wide-spread introduction of stainless steel and temperature control, Spain began to shed her centuries-old image of being the queen of overly oxidized, tired, dull plonk. Freshness and vibrancy became watchwords. Finally, in the nineties, Spain looked even beyond Europe, and learned the marketing lessons of California and Australia. Public relations and marketing campaigns were paired with new exporters and importers who coaxed winemakers to look beyond their grandfathers' methods to push them to international glory. Today, Spain combines the best of the old and new and has become a strong player in the American market. Some say Spanish wines have it all: old world depth of flavor and complexity combined with new world fruit, power, and dare we admit it, that Spanish arbiter of quality and New World fascinator: oak!

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SPANISH WINE LAW

Spanish wine laws created the DO naming system in 1932 and were later revised in 1970. Five quality tiers exist in the Spanish wine scheme today: Vino de Mesa (VdM), Vinos de la Tierra (VdIT), Vino de Calidad Producido en Región Determinada (VCPRD), Denominación de Origen (Denominació d'Origen in Catalan - DO) and Denominación de Origen Calificada (DOCa/DOQ - Denominació d'Origen Qualificada in Catalan). We will concern ourselves primarily with the latter two levels, the DO and DOCa wines of which approximately 80 exist in Spain today. It should be noted, however, that additionally, the Denominación de Pago (DO de Pago) designation exists for individual single-estates with an international reputation. Today, 12 estates have earned the right to this title.

Each DO or DOCa has a Consejo Regulador, which acts as a governing control body that enforces the DO/DOCa regulations and standards involving viticultural and winemaking practices. These regulations govern everything from the types of grapes that are permitted to be planted, the maximum yields that can be harvested, and the minimum length of time that the wine must be aged and what type of information is required to appear on the wine label. Wineries that are seeking to have their wine sold under DO or DOCa status must submit their wines to the Consejo Regulador laboratory and tasting panel for testing and evaluation. Wines that have been granted DO/DOCa status will feature the regional stamp of the Consejo Regulador on the label.

Even though Spain is a member of the EU and follows the overall EU scheme of place-naming and ranking, Spanish wine law is not a carbon copy of what we find in France or Italy. Instead, Spain, who has always considered that older equals better, at least where wine is concerned, has based her additional guiding legal labeling principles primarily on the concept of wood ageing. Look to France and we see that origin and typicity are tantamount. Hopefully, these core values will work their way into Spanish labeling in the near future. For now, however, the savvy consumer must understand that winding oneself through the maze of Spanish wine laws is all about deciphering the various oak aging requirements.

In an easier country, the words Crianza, Reserva and Grand Reserva would mean the same thing when encountered on a wine label. However, in Spain this is not the case. Rioja and Ribera del Duero, viewed as top, traditional areas, require that Crianzas be aged a minimum of two years, of which one year must be in barrel. Navarra, with its hopeful pretensions of comparable quality, asks the same of its Crianzas. The rest of Spain requires two years aging with a minimum of six months in oak. Rioja Reservas must be aged a minimum of three years, with one year of that time in barrel. Gran Reservas must be five years old before release, and two years in barrel is the minimum, a standard often exceeded by traditional producers. The rest of the country has shortened the minimum barrel time to 18 months. Confused? We are.

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SPANISH WINE GRAPES

RED VARIETALS

While there are well over 100 different grape varieties used in Spanish wine-making, the major red varieties are:

ALICANTE BOUCHET (also known as Garnacha Tintorera)

One of the rare "tinturier" grapes, in which not just the skin but also the pulp of the Alicante is pigmented. This thick-skinned variety is known for adding color and intensity and is a native of the Alicante region in Valencia. Alicante is a true viniferous variety (although a cross between Petit Bouschet and Garnacha) a rarity for vinifera grapes.

BASTARDO (Trousseau in France, Merenzao in Spain)

Bastardo is a dark-skinned wine grape, which is grown in Portugal, France and Northwestern Spain. It traditionally makes deeply colored, cherry-red wines that are high in alcohol and have flavors redolent of dark red berries and other forest fruits.

BOBAL

The Bobal grape is high in both tannins and acidity and tends to produce wines relatively low in alcohol. Bobal wines are generally described as herbaceous on the nose with both red and black fruit on the palate, and show strong color. The grape dominates plantings in its native Valencia and is one of the most widely planted grapes in Spain. Often dismissed as neutral, old vine Bobal can like Cariena, provide the complexity and greatness that young vines cannot. Health enthusiasts take note: Bobal juice contains higher than average amounts of resveratrol.

CALLET

Callet is a unique variety from Mallorca traditionally used in Rosés, but showing promise in stylish reds today. It adds intensity and spice when blended with Tempranillo, Manto Negro or its traditional island partner, Fogoneu Frances.

CARINENA (also known as Mazuelo in Rioja, Carignan in France, Carignano in Italy)

Originally from the eponymous village or Northeastern Spain of the same name, Carinena plantings are declining in its native Cataluña in favor of Garnacha. Thought to be coarse, lacking in fruit and rustic, Cariena's main claim to fame has been its ability to produce wines with color and alcohol, even in torrid heat. Nonetheless, old vine Carinena can be stunning, when grown with low yields in places like Priorat. When blended with Garnacha and/or international varieties, Carinena is the foundation of Spain's world class Priorat.

GARNACHA (also known as Garnacha Tinta, Canannou in Sardegna, Grenache in France)

Garnacha, the third most widely planted red variety in Spain (behind Tempranillo and Bobal), is a grape known for its affinity to sunshine and dry climates. It produces soft, warm and oftentimes highly alcoholic wines with low color, low acid and little tannin.

JUAN GARCIA

Juan García is a minor Spanish red grape variety. It is found mainly in the provinces of Zamora and Salamanca and in the autonomous region of Galicia. It is an authorized variety in the Arribes Denominación de Origen (DO).

MENCIA (now considered being identical to Portugal's Jaen du Dao)

Often compared to Cabernet Franc, this grape carries the red-cherry intensity and herbal note often found in aromatic Cab Franc wines. It is found mostly in the Northwest of Spain, in Bierzo and the surrounding areas. Mencía traditionally has been underwhelming. Even at its best, it is more structured than lush, but there are stunning examples, especially when yields are kept low and the vine is grown on schist (a metamorphic type of rock). An up-and-comer.

MONASTRELL (also known as Mataro, Mourvedre)

Mourvedre (Monastrell) produces tannic wines that can be high in alcohol, and has a particular affinity for Grenache, softening it and giving it structure. Its taste varies greatly according to area, but often has a wild, gamey or earthy flavor, with soft red fruit flavors. Known for giving brambly, rustic or animal aromas, it can take a wine to the wild side. The grape shows the most promise in Jumilla and Yecla.

PRIETO PICUDO

Prieto Picudo is a red wine grape that is grown primarily in Spain. It is a grape of Valdevimbre, in León, Spain. The Prieto Picudo is sometimes blended with the grape Mencía and as a varietal it produces wine with similar characteristics to Tempranillo.

RUFETE

A red grape that is grown mainly in the province of Salamanca that not only produces light wines that can oxidize quickly if not treated with care, but also dark colored wines with rich fruit flavors and noticeable tannins. Recent attempts have been made to make a quality wine from this grape but have yielded mixed results. The future, however, is looking a bit brighter for the Spanish wine grape Rufete as more Bodegas invest in better technology and newer wine making.

SYRAH

This foreign interloper (from France's Rhone valley) has found homes throughout Spain, and is showing up in more and more blends from everywhere. As in its native Rhone valley, it shows an affinity for arid and hot regions, and Spain can certainly deliver in that climatic department. Recent success suggest Syrah may become one of the more important grapes in Spain.

TEMPRANILLO (confusingly, the grape goes by many monikers even in Spain: Cencibel, Aragones, Tinto de Toro, Tinto Fino, Ull de Llebre, Tinto del Pais ...)

Tempranillo is clearly the most important red grape of Spain. Its various clones grown in different parts of Spain have very different characteristics: in the south, it ripens early; in Penedés, growers say that it's low in acidity and doesn't age well; in Ribera del Duero, it's an ideal ager with moderate tannins and alcohol; and even in Rioja, growers accuse it of low acidity, yet it ages far better than its structure suggests. The variety has performed exceedingly well in the traditional style of Rioja - the soft, modern style of red wine - and also in powerful, rich, international school-style wines. If Tempranillo still lacks a high profile worldwide, it is because it has failed at becoming an internationally successful grape—it tastes dull and boring grown almost everywhere outside of Spain. It grows well at a high altitude and seems to respond well to strong shifts in nighttime and daytime temperatures. Few grapes in the world can offer such an intense range of wines.

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WHITE VARIETALS

AIREN

The most widely planted grape in the world, but planted only in the center part of Spain. The million plus acres of Airén situated in Spain's Meseta amount to far more than all the acres of Cabernet in the world or any other grape you can name. Unfortunately, Airén produces thin, dull wines with little character, and its main use is in distillation for brandy-making. Its strongest asset is that it is very productive and of great adaptation to extremely dry and hot climates – perfect for the Meseta.

ALBARINO (Alvarinho in Portugal, Savignan in France)

Depending upon the vintage and the sub region of the grape's ideal vineyards within Rías Baixas, this indigenous variety of Galicia in Northwest Spain can be rich, floral, and expressively fruity, with peach and apricot notes, or minerally, tart, and bracing, like green apples and lemon peels. The US has become the single largest export market for Albarino in the world.

ALBILLO

Pockets of the grape appear in places such as DO Vinos de Madrid or the Canary Islands, but Ribera del Duero has a few examples of wines that offer something more than neutral and refreshing. Native.

CHARDONNAY

The ubiquitous Chard has even found a home amongst the natives in Spain, mostly in the Penedés, Navarra, and Somontano. Some excellent Penedés whites are being made from Chardonnay, and experimentation abounds with Chard based Cava as well.

DONA BLANCA (also known in local Galician as Dona Branco)

A citrusy grape that sometimes shows up in blends in Valedorras or Bierzo. The grapes have thick skins, which help them fare well in the wet maritime climate, but the high levels of polyphenols can impart some astringency and slight bitterness.

GARNACHA BLANCA

Once seen as plain and simple at best, this grape is suddenly popular, perhaps due to the ever-increasing attention paid to Priorat wines. Though its aromatics and flavors are subdued, it is capable of significant alcohols, and the wines can be textured and weighty as a result.

GODELLO

An evolving variety that expresses depth and character in Valdeorras, and increasingly in Ribeiro. Think apples, pears, and plenty of texture (in ripe vintages, add peaches).

HONDARRIBI ZURI

A cause célèbre in some markets, this rare local produces the bracingly tart txakoli (chacolí)-style white wine of Basque Country.

LOUREIRA

A secondary grape in Galicia that can produce rich peach to apricot aromas in Rías Baixas blends, though its name (Gallego for "bay leaf") describes a more herbal note. It is made either as a varietal wine or in a blend with Treixadura. Native.

MALVASIA

A Greek and probably pan-Mediterranean variety with vibrant aromatic qualities, whether vinified as a dry wine or as a sweet and exotic wine. Formerly more widely planted and used in Rioja, it has been eclipsed by Viura there, though it continues its work in Cataluña and the Canary Islands. Foreign.

MOSCATEL DE ALEJANDRIA

Good for sweet wines and for table grapes and raisins, this grape can offer utterly charming dessert wines. The jury is out as to its distinct heritage: its name may originate from early Roman plantings in Alicante (where it has been used to make rich fondillón wines).

MUSCAT A PETITS GRAINS

High quality and wildly aromatic dry and sweet wines are made from this grape in Southern Spain and throughout the Mediterranean basin, where it is known as Moscatel. Foreign.

PALOMINO (also known as Listan)

The grape of Sherry, it can provide the underpinning of the lightest and freshest manzanilla or the richest and most exotic amontillado or oloroso. Native.

PARELLADA

The bulk ingredient of most Cavas and a few pleasant table wines. With Macabeu and Xarel·lo, is one of the three traditional varieties used to make the sparkling wine Cava, which is primarily produced in Catalonia. It is also used for blending in young white wines. Its good acidity and freshness make these wines extremely suitable for the aperitif. A prime example of this is the micro-distilled Obsello Absinthe, which, in addition to being produced in the same region, uses the wine of these grapes in its base spirit. Native.

PEDRO XIMENEZ

Generally speaking, a variety used in the production of sweet Sherry. In Montilla-Moriles, this grape can produce great dessert wines, but also a few dry-styled wines. Native.

SAUVIGNON BLANC

Sometimes a small amount of this grape can dominate in Rueda to the detriment of Verdejo, but it also can offer tasty versions in Penedés. Foreign.

VERDEJO

A delightful and textured grape, with citrus elements covering notes of melon, apple, and stone fruits. Often, it is blended with Viura in Rueda, but Verdejo on its own may be the quintessential Spanish white.

VIURA (Macabeu in the Penedes, Macabeo in France)

A grape that performs differently in different places. In Penedés, especially in Cava production, it's the fat and friendly part of a blend. But in places such as Rioja or Navarra, there are masters who can unlock its character and even longevity with careful vinification.

XAREL-LO

One of the principal constituents of Cava, this interesting variety goes into the production of some lovely wines from Alella. It is often the layered and age-worthy part of Cava. Xarel·lo wine can be strongly flavored, and is more aromatic than the other two Cava grape varieties. Native.

ZALEMA

Zalema is a white Spanish wine grape variety planted primarily in Condado de Huelva. As a varietal, Zalema produces heavy, full bodied wines and is rarely, if ever, encountered beyond Southwestern Andalucía. Traditionally it is used to make an amber-colored oloroso-style fortified wine, Condado Viejo,

WINE REGIONS

Climate, food and culture are the three basic building blocks of how and why wine regions evolve in the old world. Unlike America, where we will borrow wine-making ideas from any country, Spain's food and geographic culture is still the foundation for her wine culture. This historical perspective allows us to break down Spain into roughly nine major wine regions: Green Spain, North-Central Spain, the Ebro River Valley, Cataluña, the Levant, the Meseta, Andalucía and the Islands.



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GREEN SPAIN

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Travel along the Northern Atlantic coast from the Basque country near San Sebastian to Galicia in the far west, and you will find yourself not only a pilgrim on the journey to Santiago but also in Green Spain. Here, the climate is dominated by the sea, where cooler temperatures prevail and unique grapes thrive in the cooler, wet and Atlantic dominated climate. This region is as unlike the rest of Spain as it can be nary a high, dry, dramatic dessert plain in sight. Instead, long, luscious carpets of leafy green vines in trellised rows ripple to the cliffs and the Atlantic winks mistily beyond. Early ripeners fare better in this chilly environment, and whites predominate. Is it any wonder that seafood abounds? Sardines with Albarino? Smoky grilled octopus and Godello? Chacolí from a bota bag poured two feet over your head in a sparkly stream to wash down garlicky clams? Green Spain’s whites may just be the most seafood-friendly wines in the world.

In the West, Albarino is by far the most important grape and wine. It dominates the DO Rías Baixas, the area that sits atop Portugal in the far northwestern corner of the country. The numerous rias – river estuaries – bring the cool Atlantic inland giving the land an almost Irish look and climate. This is the only DO of Spain’s seventy and counting that produces whites only. Some even say Albarino is the white wine of Spain. Even for those who think Spain is all about reds, an introduction to the charms of Albarino with its distinctive structure, rich aromatics, fruit intensity and long, dry, crisp finish should convert any die-hard Tempranillo fan.

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Albarino in Rías Baixas can overshadow its lesser-known neighbors, but just to its east the DO of Ribeira is making great Albarino based wines as well. Continue traveling inland up the Rio Minho, and DO Ribeira Sacra reveals herself to be one of Spain’s most beautiful vineyard areas. The precipitous river valleys, almost gorges, are steeply terraced and provide spectacular but, in practical terms, difficult vineyards offering low yields of grapes with superbly concentrated flavors. In addition to Albarino, Godello and Treixadura make spectacular whites, and some very good reds are coming from Mencía and Brancello. Next, you will encounter the Valdeorras DO, making superb Godello-based whites. Hugging the Portuguese border to the south is the tiny DO Monterrei. Here, the same Galician grapes already noted make fresh whites and youthful reds, but two local curiosities – the Dona Branca and the Bastardo – also make white and red wine, respectively.

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Travels east and south along the Atlantic to the French border and you come to the other side of Green Spain: the Basque country. Here you will find the Basque’s answer to Albarino: Chacolí (or Txakoli or Txakolina or Txakolin, depending upon your fluency with the bizarre local language), another magical white with seafood. Based primarily on the hondarrabi zuri grape, this unique tart and fizzy, low alcohol wine is made seldom elsewhere in the world, although some cuttings have found their way to Chile. Locals traditionally drink from goatskins streamed a foot or so above their head, and this quirky streaming practice is employed even when pouring into glasses. Traditionally, this hard-to-pronounce wine is little known beyond the three Chacolí zones in the Basque country, but exports to the United States are on the rise. Can’t remember how to pronounce this crazy wine’s name? Take the advice of a famous local Master Sommelier, who advises to recall the old Saturday Night Live skit based on “choppin’ broccoli”. At any rate, a visit to this unique corner between France and Spain yields a joy of discovery for the adventuresome wine lover, even if 99% of us can’t make hide nor hair of the language. The three DOs officially are known as Chacolí de Alara, Chacolí di Bizcaia and Chacolí de Guetaria.

NORTH CENTRAL SPAIN - OLD CASTILE

Ah, the heartland, where Ferdinand and Isabella united not only a country but also a world. Hot and continental, here we find classic Tempranillo-based wines and some of Spain's very best. High on the plains, traversed east and west by the stingy Duero, these nose-bleed altitude vineyards bake in the continental sun by day, yet are cooled by the radical diurnal temperature drop at night. Remotely cut off from the rest of Spain by the Demanda and Cantabria mountains in the north and by the Guadarrama and Sierra de Gredos to the south, this unique region is making some of the most exciting Spanish wines today. Even die-hard California fans cannot resist the region's famous Toro or Ribera Del Duero.

The high plains and the Duero river valley form the base of North Central Spain, encompassing the region of Castilla y Leon. Here you will encounter eight Dos and one Vino de la Tierra. Most famous of these is Ribera del Duero, where Tempranillo-based reds (known locally as Tinto Fino) dominate. Many believe these wines represent the highest expression of Tempranillo in Spain, which Riojans of course would argue.

Other noteworthy Tempranillo appellations include the nearby DOs of Toro, Cigales and Rueda, although the latter is more famous for its creamy yet crisp Verdejo-based whites. Although rarely encountered in the US, the DO of Arlanzana in the province of Zamora here also produces Tempranillo-based reds. DO Bierzo, tucked between the western frontier of Castile and Galicia almost warrants its own region, as this is an area of transition between the Meseta and Galicia, with excellent varietal Mencía reds and whites based on Godello.

Obscure in American wine shops is the Arribes DO, hugging the Duero and hence the Portuguese border to the west. The climate there is decidedly Mediterranean and so Arribes finds itself lumped in with Castile more as a convenience than because of its similarities. Wine geeks take note: Arribes is the home of two unique red varietals: Juan Garcia and Rufete.

Finally, the DO Tierra de Leon was recognized in 2008 after over a decade of petition by area winemakers. Looking to distinguish themselves from the rest of Leon, these pioneering entrepreneurs have hung their hats on the local varietal Prieto Picudo, a simple red grape that despite the international attention has failed to live up to the hype. Maybe we will see better examples in the future.



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THE EBRO RIVER VALLEY

From its source in the Cantabria mountains, the Ebro flows east across Northeastern Spain, finally emptying into the Mediterranean near Tortosa, some 100 miles south of Barcelona. Many local rivers feed the Ebro on her journey, creating dozens of perfect wine valleys where the region's two most famous grapes – Tempranillo and Garnacha - reign. These two varieties dominate red plantings, and together represent the yin and the yang of this part of Spain's wine culture. Not surprisingly, warm, ripe Garnacha prospers in hotter, drier spots, while boysenberry-like Tempranillo's more delicate constitution is maintained in cooler, mountainous perches.

Rioja is the most famous appellation here, actually one of only two Spanish DOs to be elevated to DOCa status. Gaining international prominence in the 19th century when the thirsty yet phylloxera-devasted French turned to Spain for wine, Rioja rose to the challenge. Bordelais wine culture introduced the concept of barrique aging, which Rioja has adopted as her own. Now, like then, Rioja has maintained her title as the spiritual heart of Spanish winemaking, and has held it for over two centuries. Both Tempranillo

and Garnacha are used in the Riojan mix, along with some lesser-known varietals such as Mazuelo (Carignan) and Graciano. The greatest and most age-worthy Riojas seem to always be Tempranillo based, however. Traditionally these wines were kept – some say for far too long – in American oak where they softened (faded), mellowed (lost their fruit) and matured (got old). Modern winemakers are experimenting more and more with French and other European wood species, however. The dogmatic adherence to years-long cooeping in wood has given way in the last couple decades to an approach featuring a defter hand with oak, and for this, for the most part, has been lauded by the international community. Die-hard traditionalists cling to the old-school methods, however, so both Rioja styles continue to exist. The debate over modern Rioja versus the so called traditional approach (happily) continues.

If Tempranillo is the king of the Ebro, then Garnacha is surely the queen. As you travel east along the river bed, and as the climate warms and becomes more and more influenced by the Mediterranean, Garnacha takes the starring role. Traveling towards Cataluña you will encounter the appellations of Campo de Borja, Navarra, Somontano and Spanish native grape Cariena's eponymous home of the same moniker. Perhaps surprisingly, Garnacha now rules even here in Cariena, as most of the old Carignan vineyards have been replanted to this more respected varietal.

Interestingly, three of Spain's newly minted DO de Pagos are located in Navarra: Señorío de Arínzano, Prado de Irache and most recently, Prado de Otazu, which just earned its stripes in 2012. All three Pagos use international varieties such as Cabernet and Merlot in addition to Tempranillo in their wines, which suggests a decided trend pandering to international style and taste in Spain's top tier of her Denomination system.

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CATALUNA

The wedge-shaped region of Cataluña, occupying the triangular mass south of the border with France in Spain's Northeast owes its unique wine styles first to the region's lofty elevation, and then to the influence of the Mediterranean. Proximity to the sea determines whether the wines are made in the basking heat, or if they are produced in milder wetter areas. The coast is known for dry and hot summers and mild winters (the Mediterranean climate). Inland it is very hot in the summer and cold in the winter (the Mediterranean Continental climate). And north to the Pyrenees has a climate typical of high mountain regions with very cold and snowy winters and hot summers with abundant rainfall.

The most important wine of the region is Cava, Spain's effervescent answer to Champagne and Prosecco. As a curiosity, it must be noted that Cava is the only Spanish DO that does not require all its fruit to come from one delimited region, and grapes grown closer to Lisbon than to Barcelona can find their way into a bottle of Cava. However, 95% of all Cava grapes do indeed come from the Penedes region of Cataluña. Like Champagne, only wines produced in the traditional methode champenoise can be labeled the real deal. Also like Champagne, there are three main grape varietal players in the mix, although here is where the similarities end. This trio is comprised of the English speaking tongue twisters macabeu, parellada and xarel·lo. Macabeu (Rioja's Viura) provides Cava's characteristic tartness and floral notes and usually comprises half the Cava blend. Parellada produces wines renowned for their intense green apple and citrus bouquet. Xarel·lo gives the earth and spice, distinguished by its full body and unique dried fruit and vegetable-like notes it imparts to Cava. Of course the international interlopers – Chardonnay and Pinot Noir – have crept into the vineyards and also into the wines, but as of today, they are the anomaly not the norm in Cava. Rosat or Rose Cava can be made with the addition of several red varietals of which the curious but native Trepát is the most unusual.

Of course Cataluña doesn't only make bubbles. One of Spain's most famous wines – Priorato – hails from steep terraced vineyards along the Catalan pre-coastal range mountains of the interior of Tarragona. These wines, which commercially really surfaced just twenty years ago, are famous for their density, concentration, robust power but surprising elegance. This impressive combination is what every red winemaker dreams of making, and comes about from the interplay between sunshine, soil and climate.

Priorat's barren and jagged mountainous landscape is harshly beautiful but almost nothing beside the vines can survive the meager soils and relentless sunshine. Grown in this remote mountain dessert, Garnacha and Cariena – Priorat's basic building blocks – create power and grace rarely found from these two grapes anywhere else in the world. Because of the very small plots, miniscule yields and the associated expense of coaxing something from these terraced vineyards, these can be some of the priciest wines from Spain. The regulators agree in its exalted quality as well, as Priorato, or Priorat, is the only other region to be elevated to DOCa status in Spain.

Other important appellations in Cataluña include the Penedes (where in addition to Cava great international style reds are made), Terra Alta, Montsant (the frugal man's alternative to Priorato) and Costers del Segre. Rounding out the Cataluña repertoire is the French border appellation of Emporda, and Conca de Barba.

THE LEVANT

The Levant encompasses the middle Eastern coastal region of the Iberian Peninsula stretching from north of Valencia to just south of Murcia. Although some Spanish wine authorities like to group the entire Mediterranean coast (including Cataluña) together, and others tack this coastal region on to its western neighbor La Mancha, Valencia and Murcia warrant enough differences to examine on their own. Here, as you travel inward from the sea, you find the land literally heating up. As summer temperatures rise, the opportunity to make light wine is baked away. Whites typically are made closer to the sea, while red wine production dominates inland.

Native grape Bobal – one of Spain's most widely planted varieties – is curiously rarely encountered outside of Southeastern Spain. Perhaps this is because historically Bobal has been associated primarily with bulk wine production. Nonetheless, the new generation of winemakers in the DOs of Valencia and Utiel-Requena are now making interesting reds from this historically over-looked grape.

Another native varietal, Monastrell, forms the base for the appellations of Jumilla, Yecla and Bullas. Even though these have been some of the earliest created DOs in Spain, exports to the US have been rare until just twenty years ago. Monastrell - or Mourvedre, as it is known in France – is almost never given the opportunity to stand on its own in the rest of the wine world, but when given star billing here in the searing Murcian sun, the humble Monastrell soars.

Monastrell is also the biggest component for the reds of nearby DO Alicante. When allowed to over ripen, Monastrell can produce the rare Alicante dessert wine specialty of Fondillon. Made in the rancio style, the wine is aged for a minimum of eight years in wood after production, oxidizing and ambering and turning into something unique along the way.

THE MESETA

The Meseta – that arid and huge central plateau of Spain making over two thirds of all Spanish wine– is almost too big to comprehend as a single region. The land is wide and flat, and features long hot summers and very cold winters. This should be a Spanish theme by now, but the Meseta is hot and dry, and features in the immortal words of Cervantes, "nine months of winter and three months of inferno." Cencibel (the local name for Tempranillo), is by far the dominant red varietal, Airén the white. However, there is movement towards the greater use of grapes such as Garnacha, Bobal, and Monastrell, varietals that are more at home in this heat.

The region's biggest DO, La Mancha, is itself the world's largest vineyard boasting nearly a half million hectares of vineyards in its production, churning out nearly 80 million cases of wine annually. That's more wine than the entire country of Australia makes in a year! While this is the land that historically has been associated with Spain's vast wine lake, today the image of La Mancha as an immense plateau of arid lands that produces great quantities of wine with no thought to its quality is fading. Instead, growers are discovering that Cabernet Sauvignon, Garnacha, Syrah and other varietals can do well on this roasting plain, and it is clear the quality of the wines is improving because of their inclusion.

On the eastern edge of the plain separating the Meseta from the Valencian community is the DO Almansa,

producing great Garnacha Tintorera as the plains begin to roll up into low hills. Garnacha Tintorera, otherwise known as Alicante Bouchet, seems to fare well in this in-between land of the Meseta and the sea. This red fleshed grape (not to be confused with Spain's more widespread Garnacha Tinta) is enjoying a new lease of life here thanks to modern viticultural and winemaking practices that enhance its dark fruit and chocolate characters.

LaMancha is ringed by the DOs of Mentrída, Mondejar and Manchuelas, where experimentation with Bobal, Garnacha and international varietals is helping to put these up-and-coming DOs on the map. The introduction of stainless steel and modern winemaking practices has given these once bulk-only producers a new arsenal to compete on the international stage.

It would also be an oversight to dismiss the Meseta without recognizing that this enormous region is, home to eight of Spain's eleven estates that have earned the prestigious DO Pagos classification. This is the highest category on the quality scale of Spanish wines and means that in addition to having a proven track record of consistent quality, the wines have to be both produced from estate-grown grapes and also have to be processed and aged in a winery (bodega) located on the estate. The eight Pagos are Pago Campo de la Guardia, Pago Casa del Blanco, Pago Dehesa del Carrizal, Pago Dominio de Valdepusa, Pago Finca Élez, Pago Florentino and Pago Guijoso. It should be clear from this observation that the Meseta is shedding its old bulk image. Under thoughtful viticultural practices combined with modern winemaking, the Meseta is now producing world class wine.



ANDALUCIA

Americans may think of flamenco dancing, bullfighting and certain Moorish-influenced architectural styles as decidedly Spanish in nature, but in actuality they come directly from Andalusian culture – a unique sub-culture of Spain. So too is the geography and climate of this Southern region different from the rest of Spain.

Located on the Southern frontier of the country, Andalucía is bordered to the east by the Mediterranean Sea, to the west by the Atlantic Ocean, to the north by the Sierra Morena, and to the south by the British colony of the Strait of Gibraltar. In general, Andalucía experiences a Mediterranean climate, with dry summers influenced by the Azores High, but is subject to occasional torrential rains and extremely hot temperatures. It should come as no surprise, then, that the wine from this region is also unlike any other in Spain.

The most famous wine of the region, of course, is Sherry (Jerez-Xérès-Sherry). The DO stipulates that this wine can only be made from one place, that area lying between Jerez de la Frontera, Puerto de Santa María and San Lucar de Barrameda in the province of Cádiz. Even more restrictive is the DO Manzanilla-Sanlúcar de Barrameda, which limits the production area to that

single village. The secret behind both appellations' brilliance is their combination of soil (the chalky, crumbly, moisture-retaining albariz), the damp sea climate that encourages the growth of the flor (a coat of yeast that forms on the aging wine and prevents it from oxidizing) and the solera system used to blend the different vintages.

In all, there are more than 25,000 acres of vineyards in the Jerez region, where the predominant grape is the Palomino, named after a 13th-century Spanish knight. Grown elsewhere, Palomino is a singularly undistinguished varietal and is prone to oxidation (darkening and spoiling). Here, however, due to the magic combination of soil and the prevailing humidity that allows the growth of the protective flor yeast, Sherry acquires its exceptional dryness and earthy aroma.

The production process begins like all wine: the Palomino is crushed and fermented into a still white wine.

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At this point, the wine, like Port, is fortified, meaning that extra alcohol is added to bring its alcohol content up to around 16 percent volume. Unlike Port, however, Sherry wines are allowed to ferment to dryness prior to fortification. After fortification and aging, Sherry undergoes its subsequent development in the criadera and solera system where the finished product is the blend of many vintages and many wines.

Simply put, the Solera represents a vintage blending process in which the outcome yields a consistent style, comprised of many different years' production. The Solera is built row upon row of barrels that are stacked in layers. Each row typically comes from a different year. A portion of wine, destined for bottling, is drawn off from the bottom row, called the "solera", which contains the oldest blend. These barrels are topped off with wine from the row immediately above, and so on to the top row of barrels, which are replenished with the most recent wine, the two year old we started with. For this reason, most Sherries are not vintage wines, being blends from different harvests. In exceptional years, some wine might be set aside for aging separately as Vintage Sherry, which is rare and correspondingly expensive.

Sherry is produced in a variety of styles, ranging from dry, light versions such as Fino to darker and heavier versions known as Oloroso, nearly all made from the Palomino grape. Sweet dessert wine Sherry is made from Pedro Ximénez or Moscatel grapes or blended with Palomino based wine to make cream Sherry.

While Sherry's sea exposure is from the Atlantic Ocean, the Málaga - Sierras de Malaga DO is located on the Eastern Mediterranean Sea border. Here, Pedro Ximénez and Moscatel are much more important and most of the wine is produced in a fortified style like Sherry, but usually in a dessert form.

Lesser-known but up-and-coming is the DO Montilla-Moriles, located the center of a historical triangle that may be drawn between Granada, Seville and Córdoba. Pedro Ximénez stars alone here, and is the primary grape for both young fruity wines and those made like Sherry in the Solera.

Finally, Andalucía is home to another obscure DO, Condado de Huevla, located in the Southwest, close to the border with Portugal. It used to supply Jerez with wines to add to its Solera systems, but it is now entirely independent, making traditional and modern light fruity wine styles. The rare Zalema grape is the

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EXTREMADURA

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It may be an over-inclusion to even list Extremadura as a Spanish wine region, because there is little remarkable to note about this far Southwestern area bordering Portugal except for its one DO: Ribera del Guadiana. The area is situated on the south-central Iberian Plateau, separated from Andalucía in the south by the Sierra Morena mountain range, while the Sierra de Gata divides it from the central plateau and Castile.

The DO of Ribera del Guadiana was established within the region in 1999 to represent the best that Extremadura has to offer. Named after the river that runs through it, a push to export the local wine has also resulted in an increase in quality. Tempranillo has traditionally been the favorite grape variety as it responds well to the regional terroir. More adventurous winemakers are experimenting with other international varieties but they have yet to make a mark on the overall quality of the region's wines. Extremadura's vineyards are also home to local white grape varieties such as Cayetana and Pardina.

THE ISLANDS

Not to be forgotten are Spain's two island regions, the tourist-loving mecca of the Balearics and the exotic Atlantic ocean outpost of the Canaries. Mallorca is home to two DOs: Binissalem Mallorca and Pla I Llevant. Here, the native Manto Negro grape has shown a tremendous potential for ageing, and when paired with local varietal Callet, can achieve amazing power and depth. Equally obscure is the native Fogoneu grape, also making a splash in the hands of some of the island's talented winemakers.

The Canary Islands are technically Spanish, but geographically and geologically they really are part of Africa, situated just about 60 miles off the Southwest coast of Morocco. There, on a scattering of volcanic islands, lie some of the most unusual, visually striking vineyards seen anywhere on earth. Tenerife itself has five DO zones: Albona, Tacoronte-Acentejo, Valle de Guimar, Valle de la Orotava and Ycoden-Deute-Isora. El Hierro, the westernmost and smallest of the Canary Islands boasts a DO of the same name. Likewise sporting their own DOs are the islands of Gran Canaria, La Palma and Lanzarote. Grapes grown on the islands are a mix of not-unheard-of varieties such as Malvasia and such geeks-only choices as Negramoll - the same as Tinta Negra Mole, the workhorse grape of the more famous Atlantic wine island Madeira, 250 miles northwest. Interestingly, lingering on these islands is the Listan Negro (the black version of Sherry's Palomino) - a genetic match for the California Mission grape.