



SPAIN

upping its wine game

There are plenty of regions and countries around the world to get excited about when it comes to wine. Right now none is more exciting than Spain, a country loaded with wine history, grape varieties second to none, and value in each bottle that can be tasted sip after sip after sip.

The Rioja region is one that typically comes to mind when people think about Spanish wines. While interesting, these wines don't usually excite a wide range of people. As the old saying goes, "It's an acquired taste." That's because Rioja has an old-school approach to its style.

That style still exists, but there is a new generation of winemakers and they are creating new and exciting wines that should be grabbing your attention.

For my palate Rioja wines always seemed a little too dry, too old, too leathery, too dried-fruity and there was also a fair dose of wood. There is a place for those wines, but they are not what people crave these days.

The main grape of Rioja is Tempranillo, and you'll see it on the label of bottle after bottle – but it's the other words on the label that mark the Rioja wine style.

In many cases the words on a wine bottle, designed to protect consumers and reflect what they are buying, don't really mean anything. For example, the word "Reserve" or "Reserva" on a bottle is a made-up term to instill notions in your brain that the wine is somehow special or unique, that it has been held onto longer, aged more, or has better grapes. It is wording designed to make the price jump of \$5



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to \$15 more palatable.

Spain, however, has traditionally taken the wording on its wine bottles seriously. Words such as Crianza (wines aged a minimum of two years, of which at least one year is in barrel), Reserva (aged a minimum of three years with a minimum requirement of one year in oak) and Gran Reserva (aged five years of which a minimum two years must be in wood) all show distinctions within those bottles of wine. And nowhere have these laws been more obvious than in Rioja wines.

But new Spanish wine is different, and it is starting to creep into the wines of Rioja as well, although this applies mostly to Spain's other regions: Gone are those archaic terms like Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva and with that new generation comes innovative names for wines. If the producers still use those terms, the oak requirements have been relaxed outside the traditional wine hubs of Spain. Crianza has been relaxed to a minimum of six months in oak and Gran Reserva is down to 18 months of wood treatment.

But that's not the only change Spanish wines have seen. New areas and regions have opened up and have started to appear on wine labels. Look for wines from Toro, Navarra, Catalunya, Madrid,

Murcia and many others that have upped the game for Spain. In these new regions the days of dried fruit and punchy oak have been replaced by rich plummy, almost jammy wines – but not in the overblown Australian sense of the word. There's great balance between the oaky, the acidity and a plethora of dark and red fruits.

Tempranillo is still king but Monastrell (a.k.a. Mourvedre), Carinena (a.k.a. Carignan) and Garnacha (a.k.a. Grenache) are rising to the fore of the red wine category. To a lesser extent you'll also find Mencia, Tinta de Toro, Bobal and other local varieties. As for white grapes, and we see very little Spanish white wines here in Ontario, you'll see traditional varieties such as Albariño, Verdejo and Malvasia leading the charge.

SPANISH WINES TO TRY

Spain is a treasure trove of delicious wines at great prices and worth a first – or second – look. Try the ones listed here but I also suggest striking out on your own. After all, the price is definitely right and the wines are definitely worth it.

- Borsao Garnacha (\$11.95 - #386961)
- Borsao 2014 Berola (\$18.95 - #371518)
- Borsao 2016 Tres Picos Garnacha (\$19.95 - #273748)
- Palacios Remondo 2015 La Montesa Crianza (\$25.95 - #674572)
- Honoro Vera Garnacha Calatayud (\$13.75 - #440867)
- Tarima 2016 Monastrell (\$14.95 - #310151)
- Gabarda 2015 Selección (\$19.95 - #629139)
- Sinergia 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$14.95 - #629519)
- El Gorú 2016 Monastrell / Syrah / Petit Verdot (\$13.95 - #443945)
- Sabor Real Tempranilla Toro (\$10.50 - #524496)
- Torres Sangre de Toro Garnacha, Catalunya (\$13.95 - #6585)

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