

SPANISH WINE

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Spain is a hot, dry, mountainous country with more vineyard land than any other nation on earth. It ranks third in the world in wine production, after France and Italy. Viticulture has been a part of Spain for what seems like forever, and that is not an exaggeration. There's evidence to prove that vines were planted in the Peninsula so far back as the Tertiary period (65 million to 2.6 million years ago!), long before the Phoenicians founded Cadiz and established it as a trading post, around 1100 B.C. The Carthaginians improved the wine making techniques of the Phoenicians when they arrived in the Peninsula, but the real wine history and culture began after the Romans won the Punic Wars against the Carthaginians and the Peninsula became part of the Roman Empire, who named it Hispania.

Spanish wine has awakened from a long period of dormancy and underachievement. Spain is now one of the wine world's most vibrant arenas. For decades, only Spain's most famous red wine region, Rioja, and the classic fortified wine region, Sherry, had any international presence for fine wines. Now, many other wine regions in Spain are making seriously good wines.

Rioja, in north-central Spain, has historically been the country's major red wine region. Three-quarters of Rioja's wine is red, 15 percent rosado (rosé), and 10 percent white. The principal grape in Rioja is Tempranillo, Spain's greatest red variety. But regulations permit another three varieties for reds — Garnacha (Grenache), Graciano (Carignan), and Mazuelo — and red Rioja wine is typically a blend of two or more varieties.

Ribera del Duero, two hours north of Madrid by auto, is one of Spain's most dynamic wine regions. Perhaps nowhere else in the world does the Tempranillo grape variety reach such heights, making wines with body, deep color, and finesse. Priorato, mountainous and inaccessible, and one of the world's hot new regions for red wine, is north of the city of Tarragona, in northeast Spain. Amazingly rich, powerful red wines — made primarily from Garnacha and Carignan, two of Spain's native varieties — have emerged from the harsh landscape of this region.

Penedés is in Catalonia, south of Barcelona. It's the home of most Spanish sparkling wines, known as Cava. Penedés is also a large producer of both red and white wines. The RíasBaixas region of Galicia, in northwest Spain next to the Atlantic Ocean and Portugal, is gaining acclaim for its exciting white wine, Albariño, made from the Albariño grape variety.

Navarra, an area just northeast of Rioja that is long known for its dry rosé wines, is an increasingly strong red wine region. Navarra's red wines are similar to, but somewhat less expensive than, the more famous wines of Rioja.

Toro, in northwest Spain, west of Ribera del Duero, is quickly emerging as one of Spain's best red wine regions. Toro's climate and soil are ideal for making powerful, tannic red wines — mainly from the Tempranillo grape variety.

Rueda, west of Ribera del Duero, produces one of Spain's best white wines from the Verdejo grape. The wine is clean and fresh, has good fruit character, and is inexpensive.

The basic types of Spanish wine:

Tinto - red

Rosado - rosé

Blanco - white

Cava - sparkling wine, made in the style of champagne.

The different qualities:

Spanish wine labels are not really that difficult to get a grasp of so I'll start with the different quality and price levels, lowest first.

Vino de mesa - wine of the table, general house wine or 'plonk'. More often than not a good, cheap choice in country restaurants, as the locals won't put up with rubbish.

Vino joven - young wine, usually from a Denominación de Origen (D.O.) region, with a bit of ageing.

Crianza - a two year old wine that's been aged at least 6 months in barrel and 18 months in bottle.

Reserva - a quality three year old wine that's been aged at least 12 months in barrel and 24 months in bottle.

Gran reserva - a best-quality five year old wine that's been aged at least 24 months in barrel and 36 months in bottle.

References

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