

SPAIN'S NEW APPROACH

A growing number of winemakers are upending tradition in their pursuit of *terroir* | By Thomas Matthews

"Rioja made a big mistake. We focused on gran reserva, rather than *grand cru*."

When Álvaro Palacios made this observation, in 2012, he was standing in an old-vine Garnacha vineyard at his Bodegas Palacios Remondo estate in Rioja Baja. During the past 30 years, he has made brilliant wines from Rioja, Priorat and Bierzo, always seeking out old vines

One of Spain's most successful vintners, Álvaro Palacios advocates a greater emphasis on origins.





This past May, vintner Telmo Rodríguez brought together more than 150 wine professionals at his Remelluri estate in Rioja to discuss the future of Spanish wine.

and focusing on distinctive *terroir*.

But Spanish wine law mostly takes a different approach.

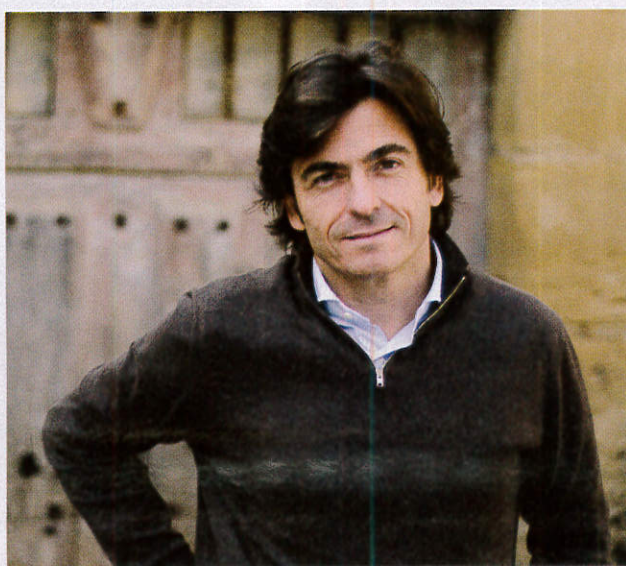
Rioja is a large wine region, with more than 150,000 acres of vineyards. That's three times the size of Napa Valley. Yet unlike Napa, which is divided into 16 distinctive subappellations, all of Rioja comprises only one geographic designation.

Instead of geography, Rioja's quality designations focus on aging. "Cosecha" wines may be released directly after harvest; "crianza" wines must spend a year in oak and another in the cellar before release; and "reserva" and "gran reserva" wines have more extended aging requirements.

In theory, bodegas will choose only their best wines—whether barrel or vineyard selections—to bottle with the higher designations. But even when this is the case, there is no obligation for transparency as to origin. A gran reserva may be blended from widely disparate vineyard plots, and the blends may change from year to year.

This system frustrates vintners such as Palacios who believe that a wine's greatest responsibility is to embody its specific *terroir*. In his view, the Spanish approach to labeling has it backward—labels should reveal, rather than obscure, the origin of the wine inside the bottle.

"Our whole industry is against the grower," argues Telmo Rodríguez, the passionate and influential owner of Remelluri in Rioja.



"We have to valorize the growers and the *terroir* of their vineyards."

—TELMO RODRÍGUEZ

means of a pyramid-like structure. Wines made anywhere in the region would be at the base; village wines would be a step above while single-vineyard wines would be at the very top.

"Therefore, we call upon the Regulatory Boards to be sensitive to the new wine reality that is emerging all over Spain and to approach a classification of the land in terms of quality. We are certain that establishing such distinctions is the first step towards excellence."

In Rioja, this movement faces stiff resistance. The major obstacle

"Rioja is engineered to support brands. Crianza, reserva and gran reserva are all brands. Instead of Burgundy, Rioja took the model of Champagne. But at least in Champagne there's a good understanding of the different villages. In Rioja, we don't even have that. We have to valorize the growers and the *terroir* of their vineyards."

Rodríguez, who produces wines from vineyards all around Spain, gathered a group of like-minded vintners in Madrid last year for a conference on Spain's wine regulations. The Club Matador gathering, as it came to be known, issued a ringing manifesto. It affirmed:

"All the great wines in the world come from exceptional vineyards. That's why the most revered wine regions have passed laws to defend and protect those unique sites.

"We firmly believe that the best way to identify wines based on their origin, quality, identity and authenticity is by

is economic. The largest bodegas have built global brands based on the current system. These wines are generally blends of vineyards from across Rioja, and the bodegas fear they might lose prestige and market share if the region broke itself into smaller appellations.

But elsewhere in Spain, newly emerging regions are adopting this pyramid system of classification. Led by Palacios, among others, Priorat modified its appellation system in 2009 to include new designations: Vi de Vila, or village wine, and Vi de Finca, or single-vineyard wine. There are stringent requirements for each category, which go beyond origin to mandate grape blends and quality evaluations. More and more producers are releasing wines with these designations.

"For so many years, people have been thinking only in the regional concept, in the regional blends," Palacios says. "But all the regions in Spain should start with Vinos de la Villa. Everything has to go slowly, relearning wine and viticulture as it was in the recent past, when the name of the village was on every wine bottle label."

Palacios also supports a similar approach in Bierzo, where he makes wine with his nephew, Ricardo Perez, under the label Descendientes de J. Palacios. "There will be little differences, but it's the same concept," Palacios says. "In the end, it is a universal concept, especially for the Old World."

Palacios, Rodríguez and others believe that ultimately this "universal concept" will replace the current system. It won't happen overnight, though. As even some supporters admit, the obstacles are not limited to big, bad corporations.

According to the blog Spanish Wine Lover, Dominio de Pingus owner Peter Sisseck, who also attended the Club Matarador event, confirmed that his appellation, Ribera del Duero, has set up an investigatory commission as a first step to determine soil qualities in the area. But, Sisseck cautioned, "High-yielding vineyards planted in inadequate locations cannot be removed just because we are landscape romantics." Indeed, many hard-working people depend on these vineyards for their livelihoods.

Rodríguez is undaunted.

"Spain today produces the cheapest wines in the world. I think that's a pity," Rodríguez says. "We have such amazing potential. Now there's a movement." In May at Remelluri, Rodríguez gathered more than 150 winemakers, journalists and others in the wine industry to discuss how to link wine to the land, rather than to wineries or brands.

"We're not fighting against anybody. We just want consumers to have more information about what's in the bottle. We are going to reveal a completely different Spain. Let's hope the market is ready for it!"

Regardless of the debates taking place within Spain, interest in Spanish wine has been growing steadily on this side of the Atlantic. From 2010 to 2015, U.S. imports of bottled wines from Spain (including table wine, sparkling wine, fortified wine and specialty wine such as Sangria) increased 29 percent, according to

Impact Databank, a sister publication of *Wine Spectator*, reaching an all-time high of 8.3 million 9-liter cases in 2015.

Spain's appeal rests on a three-legged stool of character, quality and value. The country's wines are amazingly diverse—ranging from fresh whites to ageable reds, lively sparklers to luscious Sherries—and even the top bottlings are affordable. In 2015, the average price of a Spanish wine receiving an outstanding rating of 90 points or higher on *Wine Spectator*'s 100-point scale was \$61, compared with \$71 for Italy, \$82 for California and \$100 for France.

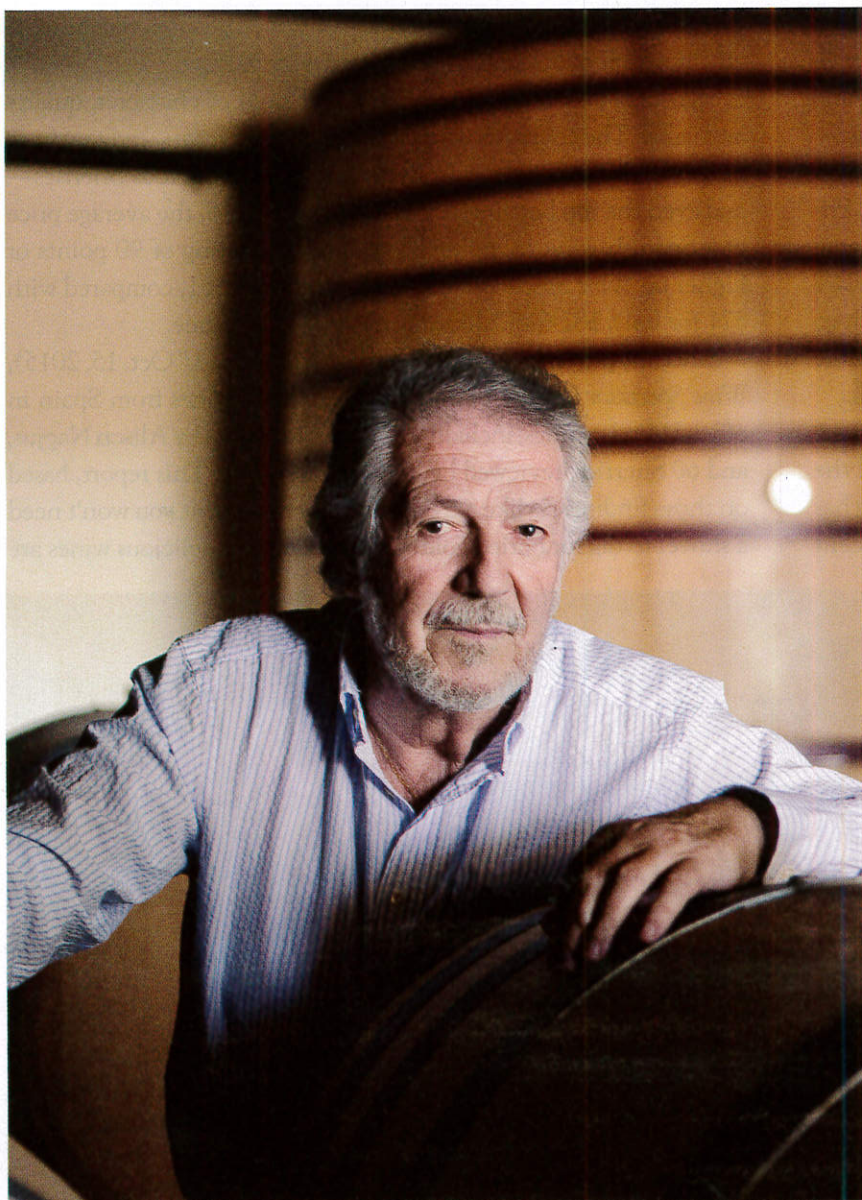
Since my previous report ("Spain Steams Ahead," Oct. 15, 2015), *Wine Spectator* has reviewed more than 1,200 wines from Spain in official blind tastings, including 45 cavas, reviewed by Alison Napjus, and 60 Sherries, reviewed by James Molesworth. This report, based on those findings, is like a treasure map, except that you won't need a shovel to dig for buried gold. The alluring and delicious wines are



more like low-hanging fruit, tempting and accessible no matter where you turn. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/101516.)

Unfortunately, complicated and inconsistent Spanish wine laws don't make it easy to understand what's in the bottle. Take Priorat as an example. During the past year, I reviewed nearly 70 wines from Priorat and the top-rated bottles were labeled in widely different ways: by vineyard, by grape variety, by brand name or simply by the regional Priorat designation. Adding to the complexity, the wines include both varietal bottlings and blends, with the blends containing varying combinations of Garnacha, Cariñena, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot. And that's just for the reds.

The good news is that despite this confusion, you can choose with confidence. More than half of the Priorats I reviewed earned ratings of 90 or more points, with 21 of them priced at \$50 or less. The top-rated Priorat is the Domini de la Cartoixa Clos Galena 2012 (94 points, \$50), a muscular yet fresh red that's also a terrific value. Les Terrasses, a négociant blend from Palacios, is a reliably attractive



An influential figure in modern Spanish wine, Mariano García stands in the cellars of his Bodegas Aalto estate in Ribera del Duero, where he made one of this year's top-rated reds.

wine, and the 2014 (93, \$40) is typically graceful and harmonious. Buil & Giné offers a rare and distinctive rosé (rosat in Catalan); the 2014 (90, \$23) blends Garnacha (80 percent) with Merlot for a dry, firm and full-bodied version, a good match with food.

Another small region making a big impact is Toro. Of the 36 wines I reviewed, 20 rated 90 points or higher, including two at 95 points. Located in north-central Spain, west from Ribera del Duero, Toro grows its local version of Tempranillo to make rich red wines. Rustic in the past, the wines are more plush and modern in style today, offering flavors of black fruits, tar and earth.

The two classic-scorers both lean toward the modern style, but temper ripe fruit with muscle and minerality. The Bodega Numanthia Termanthia 2012 (95, \$228) is a rich and polished version of this perennial leader, while the powerful Bodegas Maurodos San Román 2012 (95, \$65) is a testament to the skill of veteran winemaker Mariano García. Only a step behind is the dense and balanced Alabaster 2013 from Teso la Monja (94, \$234), the winery established by the Eguren family after they sold Numanthia.

Ribera del Duero counts the greatest number of classic-scoring wines in this report, with six. At the pinnacle is the Parcela El Picón 2010 (96, \$240), an old-vine, single-vineyard bottling from Pago de los Capellanes, a bodega that works only with estate-owned

vineyards around Pedrosa de Duero, in the heart of the appellation. Pago de los Capellanes also fields another of the year's classic-scorers, its Reserva 2012 (95, \$52), along with two outstanding bottlings, the Parcela El Nogal 2011 (93, \$75) and Crianza 2012 (92, \$34), all of them balancing power and grace, fruit and minerality.

Other highlights from Ribera include the Bodegas Aalto PS 2012 (95, \$115), another project from Mariano García; the Unico Reserva Especial NV from Bodegas Vega Sicilia (94, \$500), spicy and vibrant; the Bodegas Valderiz 2011 (94, \$29), a great value; and the Bodegas Montevannos Reserva 2006 (92, \$30), a new release showing traditional characteristics of dried cherry, tobacco and orange peel, a testament to the ageability of Ribera reds.

Rioja remains Spain's most important region. Of the more than 250 wines under review, nearly 100 earned outstanding ratings, including one classic-scorer, the Trasncho 2009 from Bodegas Fernando Remírez de Ganuza (95, \$135). This modern-style red is produced from grapes grown in vineyards more than 60 years old, but only destemmed berries from the shoulders of the bunches are used. Press wine is obtained by a unique method using a water-filled bag inserted into the fermentation tank; it is then aged for 24 months in new French oak barrels. The result is dense yet fresh, with vibrant black fruit and mineral flavors.

Among white Riojas, my favorite this year is from R. López de Heredia, whose ethereal whites are distinctive and enticing. The Viña Tondonia Reserva 2003 (93, \$54) carries lively flavors of dried apple, quince, wildflower and tarragon on a lean texture.

Rioja is also an excellent source of values. Cune's Crianza 2012 (91, \$13) leads the way among reds, offering cherry, leafy and vanilla flavors, light and balanced, while its Monopole 2015 (90, \$13), a Viura-based white, is fresh and bright, with depth and firm acidity.

Spain is too vast, and its wines too diverse, to detail all the highlights. But here are a few more that stand out for me.

White wines make up only about 20 percent of the country's production, yet quality has soared in recent years. Crisp, fruity Albariño from Rías Baixas has become deservedly popular, while the fleshier Godello grape, which is more herbal in character, is finding success across multiple regions. Excellent versions of Godello come from Godelia and Castro Ventosa in Bierzo, Campante in Ribeiro, and Rafael Palacios and Godeval in Valdeorras.

On the island of Mallorca, which has a long history of viticulture, a group of new wineries are recuperating old grapes and making exciting wines. Ànima Negra, founded in 1994, now has 200 acres under vine, mainly indigenous grapes farmed biodynamically. The flagship ÀN bottling is mostly Callet grapes, fermented in concrete then aged in new French oak; the 2012 (90, \$50) is savory and lively. The white Quíbia 2013 (88, \$16) is a blend of Premsal and Callet, made in a somewhat oxidized style, yet still lively and focused.

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BONUS VIDEOS: Hear from some of the leaders in Spain: Álvaro Palacios on heading to Bierzo to make Mencía; José Moro on Ribera del Duero's Tinto Fino grape; and Contino winemaker Jesús Madrazo on the difference between Rioja's traditional and modern styles. Watch them at www.winespectator.com/101516.

Under its new Finça Wölffer label, Long Island, N.Y.-based Wölffer Estate has successfully debuted a wine from Mallorca called Brau. The 2011 (90, \$35) is a Bordeaux blend atypically dominated by Petit Verdot, showing tangy dried cherry, anise and smoke notes.

Fine Sherry remains underappreciated. In this year's tastings, Bodegas Hidalgo La Gitana, famed for its light, dry Manzanilla (89, \$25), scored big with richer, more complex bottlings. The Oloroso Faraon 30 Years (93, \$115/500ml) is beautifully distinctive, nervy and almost bitter, while the Pedro Ximénez Triana 30 Years (93, \$288/500ml) is dark and heady, with honey, prune and caraway flavors.

Even with all this bounty on offer, there's better yet to come. The vintages most widely available right now were all more or less difficult—2011 was too dry, 2012 was too hot, and 2013 and 2014 were too wet. Although all four vintages yielded successful wines, the 2015 vintage promises higher quality across the board.

As in many Old World countries, the culture of wine sustains and shapes Spanish life. Engaging with the country as a whole—its gastronomy, its history, its traditions—helps us to understand its wines and deepen our appreciation of them.

In 1978, I was an aspiring novelist living in Granada, in Andalucía. My restricted budget limited my diet to a few delicious staples: Manchego cheese; garlic sausage; dates and oranges; crusty bread. And to accompany them, I often chose a red wine from Rioja that was sold in every corner store: Paternina Banda Azul.

Back then, Riojas rarely displayed vintages. Instead, they were labeled “3rd año” or “5th año,” to indicate how long they had been aged before release. I could buy “3rd año” Banda Azul for a couple of dollars, and I can still taste the wine: tart cherries, fresh herbs, a touch of smoky spice, all kept lively by juicy acidity.

I was reminded of those happy days when I discovered a Paternina Banda Azul in one of my blind tastings. It's a wine that still represents a brand more than a specific *terroir*, but in a step toward transparency, the bodega now labels it with vintages and official designations. The bottling I tasted was a 2013 *crianza*. At \$15, it's still affordable, and I rated it 89 points, describing it as savory, firm and energetic. Perfect with Manchego, a hearty taste of Spain.

Executive editor Thomas Matthews is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Spain.



A new crop of bodegas are revitalizing wine production on the Mediterranean island of Mallorca, focusing on old vineyards, indigenous grape varieties and biodynamic farming.

Rating Red Wine Vintages in Spain

Priorat

2013	89-92	Despite a cool, rainy growing season, reds are fresh and focused	NYR
2012	91	A very hot, dry growing season produced concentrated reds	Drink or hold
2011	89	Hot and dry; rich wines, but some are clumsy	Drink or hold
2010	94	Fresh, focused reds that are improving with time	Drink or hold
2009	90	Quite rich, but balanced, ripe and racy	Drink or hold
2008	87	Sleek, with red fruit flavors and supple tannins	Drink
2007	89	Supple wines, with red fruit and herbal notes	Drink
2006	90	Bright and lively, with good focus and some depth	Drink
2005	93	Balanced and expressive, with red fruit and spice flavors	Drink or hold

Ribera del Duero

2013	84-87	A cool, wet growing season led to light wines	NYR
2012	91	Drought year produced concentrated reds; some clumsy	Drink or hold
2011	91	Hot and dry; powerful wines with good balance	Hold
2010	94	Ripe and balanced, fresh and firm	Drink or hold
2009	91	Ripe wines, with moderate structures, fresh acidity	Drink or hold
2008	87	Balanced, polished wines, with bright fruit and fresh acidity	Drink
2007	86	Cool season gave fresh wines, tender and expressive	Drink
2006	88	Firm, with ripe fruit and good balance	Drink or hold
2005	95	Assertive wines with chewy tannins; the best have great depth	Drink or hold

Rioja

2013	82-85	A cool, wet growing season; many wines green, diluted	NYR
2012	88	Drought reduced yields; powerful wines, but some are clumsy	Drink or hold
2011	89	Hot, sunny growing season; wines ripe, not always balanced	Drink or hold
2010	94	Ripe, balanced wines, fresh and focused	Drink or hold
2009	91	Hot and dry season; solid wines with ripe fruit	Drink or hold
2008	88	Balanced wines, focused and expressive, with bright acidity	Drink
2007	84	Cool growing season; many light wines	Drink
2006	82	Fresh, supple wines, with crisp flavors	Drink
2005	93	Lively, balanced and graceful; firm yet expressive	Drink or hold

A score range indicates preliminary analysis based on barrel samples and/or a limited sampling; many wines of the vintage not yet reviewed.

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended

Drinkability: "NYR" means most of the wines of the vintage are yet to be released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature.