

THE RED GRAPES AND WINES OF SPAIN

In the United States, the grape most often encountered is **TEMPRANILLO**, the dominant grape of **RIOJA** wines. (Tempranillo is widely-planted in Argentina, but not many other places in the world.) Rioja is a province in Spain up toward the French border (the border is the Pyrenees Mountains, remember?) and almost midway across Spain. The wine region of the same name is smaller than the province, but pretty large. Wines bearing the Rioja appellation are now often 100% Tempranillo, but traditionally Garnacha (Grenache), Mazuelo and Graciano are blended in to add fruit appeal. It is also the dominant grape of the **RIBERA DEL DEURO** appellation, a region also in Northern Spain but not as far north and further west than Rioja. In Ribera del Deuro, the Tempranillo grape is called Tinto Fino. In the **TORO** region, the name used is Tinto de Toro. Tempranillo comes from *temprano*, meaning “early,” as the grape matures earlier than Grenache, the traditional blending partner. Tempranillo alone has little inherent flavor, but has the other successful wine grape qualities in abundance (bouquet, acidity, aging potential). Therefore, it is matured in oak and blended with more flavorful grapes. As Tom Stevenson says in his *Sotheby's Wine Encyclopedia*, (4th Ed.) “[T]here is precious little left in most Rioja once you take away the oak.” Rioja has been producing wine since at least 100 B.C.E. The greatest wines of Rioja come from its sub-region Rioja Alta. Navarra adjoins Rioja, and also produces very nice wines, but generally not as fine as those of Rioja. The producers of Rioja include *Finca Allende***, *Baron de Ley****, *Marques de Caceres**, *Contino***, *Masques de Riscal ****, *Bodegas Muga****, *Bodegas Palacio Remondo****, *Lopez de Heredia***. Wines of a single producer often are bottled in all three “grades” of Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva.

The second red grape of Spain is **GARNACHA** (GRENACHE in other parts of the world, especially Chateauneuf du Pape in Southern Rhone, France and in McLaren Vale, South Australia, plus California and South Africa). In addition to its long time use as about 15% of a Rioja wine, it is the predominant grape in many Spanish wines, but particularly those of the **PRIORAT** appellation. Garnacha also shows up in many wines of **RIBERA DEL DUERO, CAMPO DE BORJA, MONSTANT, AND TORO**. Its wines are rich, warm and alcoholic, but low in acid, pigment and tannin. While the grape is probably indigenous to Spain, it may have come from Sardinia (now of Italy, which Spain controlled around the end of the Middle Ages and beginning of the Renaissance) where it is still grown and called Cannonau. From Campo de Borja there is *Pagos del Moncayo*** and *Alto Moncayo****, from Monstant *Acustic**** Auditor and Spectacle****, and from Priorat *Alvaro Palacios****** L'Ermita, *Cal Pla****, and *Vall Llach****.

Unlike the Tempranillo based wines of Rioja, which are capable of being very good to excellent, a near handful of the Spanish Grenache based wines are truly outstanding, easily on rank with the super-second of Bordeaux year end and year out. (To get a bead on what I like, always important when you follow a wine writer, you should know that the Piedmont Barolos and Barbarescos, made of the Nibbiolo grape, are overall my favorite wines, but second place is filled by the wines of Chatauneuf-du-Pape (both Syrah and Grenache), McLaren Vale (Grenache and Syrah), and Priorat/Monstant (Grenache and Carrignan). Third are those of Burgundy, made of Pinot Noir – but for the quality these are expensive compared to the others I mention, say, \$50-100 versus \$150-250 per bottle.)

Other widely-produced or otherwise important Spanish red grapes include **CARRIGNAN** (Carinena), **CABERNET SAUVIGNON**, **MERLOT**, **MENCIA** and **SYRAH**.

Note that all wines named Sherry are from the Southern Spanish coast area around **JEREZ**, that Spain produces much of the world's very good and excellent sparkling wine in **CAVA**, and that it produces some very good (but rarely outstanding) still white wines.

I suggest you purchase the following Spanish red wines in Houston. **Houston Wine Merchant**: 2005 Bodegas las Astrales Ribera del Duero, \$52.99; 2001 Marqués de Cáceres Rioja Gran Reserva \$38.99; 2004 Finca La Planeta Priorat \$62.99; **Spec's** 2001 Faustino V Reserva Rioja \$18.65; 2004 Montecillo Gran Reserva Rioja \$26.75; 1991 La Lopez de Heredia Vina Bosconia (or Tondonia) Rioja \$90.07; 2004 Clos Martinet Bru Priorat \$31.47; 2004 Vall Llach Priorat \$79.35; **Catalan**, 2005 Bodegas Muga Reserva Rioja, \$33; 2004 Clos Martinet Priorat \$ 90; 2005 Bodegas Pintia Toro \$85.

Sterling Minor is a Certified Specialist of Wine, Houston business attorney, and wine consultant. Visit him at www.sterlingwineconsultant.com
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