

WINE News

*Classics and New Discoveries from the
Exciting Landscape of Spain*



APRIL 3, 2023 FEATURES

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The Spanish Wine Renaissance Is Here

By Kirk Walker, Spain and Portugal Buyer



We are very lucky, even spoiled, by the access that we have to all the best wines in the world at K&L. And Spain is currently one of the most exciting wine regions to explore. I know I may be biased as K&L's official champion for this region—but even an objective bystander would be hardpressed to disagree.

Over the last two decades, the Spanish wine world has been rediscovering itself.

Critic James Suckling called the Spanish wine scene at a "crossroads," saying that "some of the old-recipe producers are being left behind as a

newer breed of winemakers turn to more authentic, unique offerings, often through much simpler winemaking. The result has been a wave of lighter, more transparent offerings—but by no means simple or diluted—that take it to the next level in terroir transparency, resulting in some of the greatest wines we have seen come out of the country... Spain stands atop the world of premium wine with a laser focus on drinkability and gastronomic consonance."

In these pages we highlight some of our favorite producers who are showing the incredible possibilities of Spanish terroir. Whether you're looking to savor something sip by sip, stick a bottle in your cellar for 10 years, or enjoy big gulps alongside burgers and friends, Spain has it! Start your journey with the classic and the avant-garde Riojas below.



2014 La Rioja Alta "Viña Arana" Gran Reserva Rioja
\$41.99 96JS 96DC 94TA

La Rioja Alta is one of the most esteemed producers of traditionally styled Rioja. This could be their least well-known bottling, but is a hidden gem. The Ardanza and the 904 are collectors' and drinkers' favorites, but this "entry level" Gran Reserva flies under the radar. With three years of oak aging and a minimum of three years in bottle before release, this is everything that a Gran Reserva should be: bright, layered, earthy, and refined. It is mostly Tempranillo with a little

Graciano. Deep and complex, this is drinking fantastically, and it will continue to do so for another decade plus.



2020 (Laventura) "Pacelas Antiguas - Cuatro Corros" Rioja
\$34.99 95WA 94TA

This is the future of Rioja. MacRoberts y Canals is best known at K&L for their Laventura wines. They are one of my very favorite producers. I love how all of their wines taste, and each also presents an opportunity to learn about Rioja. There

is a movement in Rioja where producers are creating single-vineyard wines from very old and small vineyards. Unlike traditional Riojas, the inspiration is often Burgundy or Barolo; they are made to express the terroir. This wine reflects the limestone-rich terroir of Villabuena in Rioja Alavesa. This is unlike any other Rioja we have: it is 50/50 red/white varietal mix! Pale colored red, with terrific intensity. The palate is generous, with very bright and pure red fruit tones. Great structure, with a lively core of acid and a penetrating minerality. The finish is very long with lingering red fruit and stony earthiness. Delicious now, and it will also age incredibly. I cannot wait to see where this wine will go.



El Campillo Vineyard is one of the Martínez Alesanco family's gorgeous estate vineyards.

Taking a Different Look at Rioja: Pedro Martínez Alesanco

There are two main geographic features that define Rioja: the Sierra Cantabria Mountains to the north and the Ebro River, which runs through the heart of it. Rioja is in the northernmost part of the Ebro River Valley. What is almost never mentioned is the other mountain range that forms the other border to the valley, the Sierra de la Demanda. These are the higher, cooler mountains that protect the valley from the harsh climate that Central Spain experiences.

It is at the base of these mountains that Pedro Martínez Alesanco is located, around the village of Badarán. Here the climate is cooler, and the soil is more volcanic. It is here where the best rosados (rosés) have historically been made, thanks to a large planting of the rosé-friendly Garnacha grape as well as an inclination toward freshness and acidity from the cool climes. Now, as the climate grows warmer throughout Spain, more producers have been seeking out vineyards in this cool part of Rioja.

The Martínez Alesanco families have been here for generations. Recently, with the construction of new facilities and a renewed focus on their vineyards, the winery has upped their game even more. K&L has been importing their entry-level wines for a decade, but their increasing quality has made it impossible for us to pass up their other offerings.



2019 Pedro Martínez Alesanco Garnacha Rioja \$34.99 94TA Sourced from a vineyard that was planted in 1905! What a treasure this is! Pure Rioja, pure mountain Garnacha. In a country that has many famous Garnacha-based appellations, this stands in a class by itself. It has concentration, surprising weight, texture, and freshness. It has bold ripe fruit: dark cherry notes accented by dark berries. The aromatics jump out of the glass, but you never call it fruity. The tannins are fine and polished but present, this is not a juicy wine; this is solid, it speaks of elevation and age. There is a fine subtle earthiness and persistent minerality. It is great, and you cannot really say it is like any other wine, which makes it greater, at least in my book. It is persistent, pure, and long.

2014 Pedro Martínez Alesanco Gran Reserva Rioja \$27.99 92TA This is a Gran Reserva that stands out from all others on our shelves for many reasons, but one of the most striking is the varietal composition: 50/50 Tempranillo and Garnacha. The closest thing to this is the **2015 La Rioja Alta "Viña Ardanza" Reserva Rioja \$38.99 96JS 94RP 94VN**, and, while there are quite a few similarities, the Martínez Alesanco is notable for its freshness. That is thanks to the Garnacha!



At almost 9 years old the fruit still pops, showing the luscious dark aromas that are textbook for the region. The fruit is framed by aromatic oak with spicy balsam notes. The Tempranillo drives the structure as does the long aging, but, with 50% of this wine being Garnacha, there are smoother tannins and a softer touch. The flavors on the palate start with pure dark cherry fruit that deepens with time in the glass. Beneath the fruit are subtle spice and chocolate tones. The finish is long and clean, with a touch of earthiness. This is built like an old-school Gran Reserva but it has none of that old school funkiness.



2021 Pedro Martínez Alesanco Tempranillo Rioja \$11.99 100% Tempranillo. Vibrantly colored and aromatic, this is not an oaky Rioja—this is all fruit. Vinified to minimize tannins, this is one Rioja that does not require a meal to enjoy. Dark cherries, with just a hint of dusty earthiness and a floral lift. The palate is rounded, the fruit is charming, there is a touch of complexity and a dry finish. A delightful everyday red.

2021 Pedro Martínez Alesanco Rosado Rioja \$11.99 White and red grapes are co-fermented to create elegant aromas of citrus and berries with more mouthfeel and intensity than your average rosé. Medium-light bodied with cherries, strawberries, citrus zest, and minerals on the palate. It has weight, intensity, and a good finish. Easy to understand why there was a festival dedicated to this style of wine.



Rioja's Rising Star Miguel Merino

Bodega Miguel Merino is one of the brightest rising stars in Rioja.

It was founded in the village of Briones in the mid 1990s. Miguel Merino Sr., who had spent two decades working in the Rioja export business, followed his dream of establishing his own winery in the village where he thought that the best Riojas came from. Located in the sub-appellation of Rioja Alta, their estate is on the southern side of the Ebro River, not too far from Haro and San Vicente de la Sonsierra. It is a village that has some of the most exciting soils of the region: gravelly alluvial, poor limestone, and some very sandy sites.

Bodega Miguel Merino is a small family operation that has managed to make a large reputation in a region that is dominated by large projects. Miguel Merino Jr. joined the winery full time in 2017. With his more active role in the family business things started to change subtly—and not so subtly. They have cleaned up their viticultural practices—they stopped using herbicides and are in the process of converting to organic farming. During his tenure, the family's winemaking has slowly shifted toward a more subtle style. We see the best expressions in the single-vineyard wines and their blanco.

These are extremely exciting wines; they offer some of the best representations of traditional wines as well as showing us what the future holds. We are immensely proud to offer them to our customers.



2016 Miguel Merino Reserva Rioja \$29.99 93WA 93TA

This is a Reserva to rival all other Reservas on our shelves from even the most famous producers. Sourced from vineyards that are over 50 years old, it is a blend of mostly Tempranillo with a little Graciano. It was aged for 19 months in used American oak. Full bodied, structured, and elegant. With layers of ripe fruit, spice, leather, and earth. This Reserva has a little more to the fruit, and

a touch less oak, it is a wine with an easy approachability that will elevate any occasion.

2015 Miguel Merino Gran Reserva Rioja \$34.99 92TA

91WA Miguel Merino Sr. was old-school Rioja. Before he started this project it was his job to bring the wines of Rioja to the world, and, to him, the Gran Reservas were the flagships of the region. For the longest time, this was the flagship of the winery. It is a classic Gran Reserva with a twist: all French oak instead of American.

Structured and intense, this is a Rioja with poise. It has all the classic leather, tobacco, and spice tones but more refined. The tannins, while present, are softer and polished. This finish is long with the fruit and spice lingering over an earthy minerality. Old-school Rioja that has kept up with the times.



2019 Miguel Merino "Viñas Jóvenes" Crianza Rioja

\$19.99 92TA This is their entry-level wine, made with fruit from some of their youngest vineyards. A blend of mostly Tempranillo with a little Garnacha and Graciano. It spent 12 months in used barrels, with the staves of American oak and the heads from French oak. This is



First and second generations toast harvest at Bodega Miguel Merino: from left to right, Miguel Jr., his wife Erica, and Miguel Sr., who sadly passed away in 2021 after a long illness.

modern Crianza where the fruit is the star of the wine, not the oak. The nose has lots of mixed berries that are backed with hints of spice. The palate is medium-to-full-bodied and dominated by the fruit. It is fresh with noticeable but polished tannins. The earth and spice that speak to Rioja are here but more subtle. Delicious and understated, an exceptional wine for any occasion.



2019 Miguel Merino "Quinta Cruz" Mazuelo Rioja

\$29.99 96TA 94WA Mazuelo is the Rioja name for Carignan. The Miguel Merino bottling has had a small cult following here at K&L since we first started bringing it in. Over the last several vintages the quality of the wine has improved tremendously. It has a brightness and a purity that softens the structure and the intensity that the varietal is known for. Dark berries, spice, and flowers

play on the nose. The use of French oak has softened and rounded the palate as well as adding notes of chocolate and spice. This finishes long and concentrated with berries and spice.

2020 Miguel Merino "Blanco" Rioja \$54.99 94WA

94TA This is old-vine Viura from the La Loma vineyard, coming from the parts of the vineyard that have the most limestone. This is a great white wine, a wine that can comfortably be compared to some of the finest white wines from anywhere in the world, but the easiest comparison would be to white Burgundy. Fermented and aged in 500L French oak. It has the cool reserve of the best wines from the Côte-d'Or, but it is more expressive. Viura has a wider range of fruit tones than Chardonnay. The aromatics and flavors are dominated by citrus and stone fruits: grapefruit, lemon, apples, and pears but with tangerine and peach notes that give it a little more exotic tone. The palate is silky and supple with the French oak softening the vibrant acidity. It finishes long and fresh with a persistent minerality.



Ribera del Duero Royalty: the Historic PradoRey Estate

Ribera del Duero is one of the most important wine growing regions in Spain. Located in the heart of Castilla y León, this is a region that is defined by its climate: extremely hot in the summer, very cold in the winter. Only the Duero River and its elevation act as a buffer to the continental climate. The wines from the region are bold and intense—how could they not be? It is a relatively new appellation—formed in the early 1980s not long after the end of the Franco regime—though wines have been made there for as long as people can remember.

It was the remarkable and continued success of the Vega Sicilia estate that brought more winemaking interest to this region, which lies not too far north from Madrid. Many entrepreneurs were inspired not only by what Vega Sicilia was doing, but by the styles of wines that were being made in Bordeaux and Napa Valley. The new garde did not intend to merely mimic Rioja; they aimed to create a new red wine for the new era of Spain. Ribera wines were an immediate success in Spain and around the world. They are big, bold, and intense; you can see how they were inspired by Cabernet. It is the leathery, earthy spiciness that lets you know that these are Spanish, not to mention the of American oak and the structure of Tempranillo.

It is here where the story of PradoRey begins in the late 80s with the purchase of a 3000-hectare estate that was once owned by Queen Isabella—yes that Queen Isabella, wife of Ferdinand and mother of Catherine of Aragon! It became a destination for three centuries' worth of royalty who were looking for a place to escape life at court. The entire property is historic so only a small portion could be planted to vines, meaning production is still relatively small.

Thirty years later, with around 500 hectares under vine, the project has started to refocus. Thanks to the size and proximity to the Duero River and their own century-old hydroelectric dam and their own solar farm, they are 100% sustainable. They produce all their own fertilizers and are converting to organic practices. Each one of their wines is made from their own grapes. This is an estate with a deep history that produces traditional wines but with modern sensibilities.



2018 Prado Rey "Valdabayegua" Crianza Ribera del Duero \$19.99 This is classic Ribera del Duero. If you have never had a wine from this region before, this is the one to try and to compare all future bottles against. Valdabayegua is the name of the vineyard in the northwestern corner of the estate, where the fruit for this wine is grown. It is high in elevation at 2400 ft. The soil is sandy with limestone. The blend for this wine is mostly Tempranillo with less than 5% Merlot and Cabernet. It is aged for twelve months in French oak.

A full-bodied and hearty red, though not rustic. The aromatics are dominated with cherries and dark berries, and it is framed with oak spice and hints of tobacco and flowers. It is mouth-filling, with dark fruit that is accented by herbs, spice, and oak. It is intense, but it never loses its sense of place. The core of the wine is pure fruited. It finishes with that dusty mineral earthiness that only comes from Ribera del



PradoRey is located in historic Ventosilla, a large 3000 hectare estate purchased by Queen Isabella in 1503.

Duero. It is very reasonably priced for what it is: a great every day dinner red, when you are serving something that is a little hearty.



2020 Prado Rey Blanco Castilla y León \$14.99 This is a wine that was inspired by Rueda, which was the original source for this wine. When Prado Rey moved to an entirely estate-grown system, they could no longer source from Rueda but maintained the crisp, easy-drinking vibe of the wine. This is Verdejo with an addition of 10% from the local Ribera del Duero white variety called Albarin. It's fermented in concrete and stainless steel, then aged for a brief period in concrete and oak barrels. There is a little more going on here

than you'd find in a comparably priced Rueda. The nose is exotic; the palate is medium-light bodied and crisp; the fruit is framed with a hint of soft oak. Clean, refreshing, and very easy to drink.

2020 Prado Rey "Origen" Roble Ribera del Duero \$14.99 This is super friendly, fresh, and juicy, and will be your weeknight burger's new bff. The wine comprises mostly Tempranillo with about 1 percent of Cabernet and Merlot in the blend. It spends a short amount of time in oak to round out the tannins and then is further aged in clay amphorae to retain the purity of fruit. The ripe cherry notes just sing.



2017 Prado Rey "Elite" Ribera del Duero \$42.99 WS92 This 100% Tempranillo is the flagship wine of the estate, and one of the benchmarks of the appellation. It shows the perfect balance of savory and sweet aromatics that good Ribera del Duero can achieve. You'll be greeted by luxurious notes of deep, rich blue and blackberry fruit underlined by inky minerality. The tannins are well integrated and the finish is succulent and lifted. This is just one entirely enjoyable glass of wine! All fruit comes from the Hoyo

Dornajo vineyard and is manually harvested.

Discover the Diversity of Navarra

For me one of the most exciting things about Spain is this endless possibility for discovery—there always seems to be a new wine or food or even region to find. Navarra is one such wine region that is in the process of being "rediscovered" by oenophiles. Not that Navarra was ever lost, per se—it is a particularly important region both historically and agriculturally, but it has not been acclaimed for its wine as some of the other recently rediscovered regions like Priorat or Bierzo. Nor is it as recognized as its neighbor, Rioja, whose fame has long overshadowed the wines of Navarra. They have been making wine in Navarra just as long as in Rioja, but the modern industry has focused on quantity. But times are changing! It's an especially exciting moment for the region, where older estates are changing their direction toward increased quality and new upstart winemakers are lighting everyone up with energy and talent.

Tucked between the Pyrenees mountains and the Ebro Valley, Navarra's major city is Pamplona, which is notorious for the festival of San Fermín and the running of the bulls. It is also crossed by the famous Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route. The region's predominant cultural identity is Basque, but there is incredible diversity in both the population and terroir. Here, we spotlight a few fantastic producers who exemplify this diversity: Artazu, a project of Rioja's Bodegas y Viñedos Artadi, makes wine in a cooler Atlantic subregion. Azul y Garanza makes its wine just outside of the only desert in Europe. And Bodegas Magaña makes wine just outside of Rioja Oriental.

If you're looking to dive into Navarra, start with these wines!



2018 Bodegas Magaña "Barón de Magaña" Navarra \$17.99 92WA Magaña is located in the Southernmost corner of Navarra, between Rioja and the Campo de Borja region, on some of the best real estate for Garnacha. It is here where they believe that Garnacha came from originally. Magaña is an estate with an unusual position in the region, it is best known for its Bordeaux blends. In the 70s, while traveling in Bordeaux, Juan Magaña became inspired. He returned

to his family's estate and proceeded to plant 80% of it to Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. This was a bold step, like the pioneers in Tuscany. But this is Navarra, not the romantic Tuscan coast, so their trajectories were not the same...

What we have here with this wine is 65% Merlot, 15% Cabernet Sauvignon, and the remainder being Tempranillo, Syrah, and Malbec. It is aged for two years in used French and American oak. With the limestone-rich soils of this region, this wine reads like a Spanish St-Emilion. This wine starts off Spanish; bright, linear, and spicy. With a little



time in the glass (or better yet, decant for 30 minutes), this wine opens up. The fruit tones start to darken; the palate expands and takes on weight. It feels remarkably similar to a Bordeaux but finishes with a spicy mineral twist that lets you know it is Spanish. An unexpected, delicious discovery.



2018 Artazu "Pasos de San Martín" Navarra \$26.99 95JS 93WA Artazu is the Navarra project of the family that makes Artadi wines from the Alavesa subregion in Rioja. While the Artadi project is Tempranillo based, Artazu is Garnacha based. Located in the northwestern region of Navarra, the Atlantic Ocean really influences the style of wines here. Artazu makes some of the absolute best wines from the entire region. They view this project through a Burgundy-like lens,

i.e., this is a "village" wine, an expression of the terroir around San Martín de Unx. Sourced from a vineyard with over-40-year-old bush-trained vines that are farmed organically. It is fermented with native yeasted and then aged in large French oak for a year. This is an intense and vibrant Garnacha. The clay limestone soils bring brightness to the fruit and give the wine a mineral drive. The tannins are elegant. There is surprising concentration and complex fruit, herbal, and spice tones. This is a wine that makes you do a double take; it is an exceptional wine that demands more attention despite how easy it is to drink. I have no doubt it will inspire more curiosity about the potential of Navarra terroir.

2020 Bodegas Azul y Garanza "Naturaleza Salvaje" Garnacha Navarra \$29.99

This is a project that is based on vineyards on the outskirts of the Las Bardenas Reales, the desert nature park. The fruit for this wine is grown on old-vine Garnacha that had been abandoned and growing wild (Salvaje). They have just been incorporated into the landscape. I love these recovery stories of vineyards from all over the world! This is a fresh and wild expression of Garnacha: vibrant berries with spice and lots of herbal intrigue. It undergoes a relatively quick fermentation and a short aging in concrete and used oak. This is a very "Rhône" expression of the variety except there is an underlying mineral note that speaks to Spain more so than France.



Navarra is a land of extremes: from Atlantic Pyrenees mountains to desert nature parks.

Sparkling Wines from Catalonia Are Redefining the Category

I love sparkling wines. Champagne was one of my first wine obsessions. I have also always been attracted to wines with minerality, especially whites, so it is no surprise to me that I have been reaching for the sparkling wines from Spain, especially those from Catalonia. There are incredible sparkling wines made all over Spain, but if there is a Spanish region that nods to Champagne, it is Catalonia. Cava is the name and the brand that is most associated with these wines, though it is a name that several producers are currently trying to gain distance from. Best known as a low-price high-volume wine around the world, but the term "Cava" doesn't accurately capture the incredible quality the best producers are now generating. (E.g., if you are making wines that you feel are of the same caliber as the best from Champagne, you might consider using "Cava" to be a branding issue.)

To avoid this in the past, people have labeled their wines as from Penedès, which is the larger appellation around the heart of the historic Cava region. But any style of wine can carry the Penedès appellation, so it does not have the same cachet as, for instance, Champagne. About a decade ago a new appellation was created called "Conca del Riu Anoia" after a river valley in the Penedès where the first Cavas were produced. Only sparkling wines can carry that appellation.

Several years ago, another new classification was created to address the problem: Corpinnat. This is a next-level appellation: The grapes can only be sourced from a designated region in the Penedès, must be farmed organically, and 90% must be indigenous. Wines must be aged for a strict minimum time and cannot be made at the winery. There are other requirements, but the most striking requirement of all is that all wines must be verified and audited by a certified third party. No other bubble appellation in the world goes to those lengths to certify quality.

That is a bunch of interesting facts, and I know I wander a little, so I want to get back to basics. These wines are mostly made from the historic grapes of the region. No other sparkling wine in the world is made with these grapes. I love this: they are only trying to be themselves! There are producers who use Champagne varietals, but they are usually in small percentages.

The soil here has a high amount of calcium carbonate, contributing to a very distinct minerality in the wines, which also show a little more fruit and a unique range of flavors. Xarel-lo, Macabeo, and

Parellada have their own personalities they express differently in local terroirs. The wines all exceed the minimum aging standards for Champagne. They are all dry, falling at or below Brut level of dryness. These offer extreme value relative to comparable quality wines, even more so the more you spend. Catalonia Sparkling wine will never be Champagne—and it does not want to be.

Mas Codina Cava Brut Reserva Penedès \$13.99

2020 Raventós i Blanc "Blanc de Blancs" Brut Conca del Riu Anoia \$21.99 92WA

2020 Raventós i Blanc "de Nit" Rosé Conca del Riu Anoia \$23.99

2019 Raventós i Blanc "de la Finca - Vinya dels Fòssils" Gran Reserva Conca del Riu Anoia \$37.99

2017 Recaredo "Intens" Rosat Brut Nature Corpinnat \$39.99

2015 Recaredo "Serral del Vell" Gran Reserva Brut Nature Corpinnat \$64.99 94DC

2017 Recaredo "Terrers" Brut Nature Corpinnat \$39.99

2019 Can Descregut "Brut Nature" Corpinnat \$19.99



Portrait of Penedès, the northeastern region that is changing the game for sparkling wine in Spain.

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