

The Wines of Spain

June 2009

It has often been said that Spain is a land of contrasts...a place of sun and shadow. Long ago, the Spanish said that a monkey could swing through the trees from the rock of Gibraltar to the Pyrenees without ever having to touch the ground.

Today, it is a different landscape in Spain. The majority of Spain is void of both grass and forest. Olive trees, orange groves, grape vines and twisted cypress trees pepper the sun-baked earth. Wild herbs grow on the hill-sides. The Spanish countryside is desolate yet fruitful... truly a land of contrasts.

Spain is the country with the most land under vine in the world (about half again as much as both France and Italy). Because of little rainfall and very poor soils, they are the world's thirds most important producer in terms of volume. Spain has always been proud of its national traditions, and its wineries have staunchly resisted the international style of oaky Chardonnays and tannic Cabernets. This Mediterranean country's top wines continue to be made with native grape varieties in traditional styles.

The majority of the grape growers are small farmers who grow grapes literally as "a hobby" or "cash crop". Forty-five percent of the harvest is crushed in cooperative wineries that sell the wine directly to bodegas (local wine shops) where you can still go today with the container of your choice and "fill'er up" direct from the tap of the cask. They reward exploration by adventurous wine drinkers.



Uriondo Txakoli (cha-koe-lee) , 2006, Basque, Spain \$13 CHILL ME!!!

Only a few hundred acres of the Ondarrabi Zuri & Mune Mahatsa grapes that make this wine exist in this northeastern region of Spain along the border with France. The vineyards are located at rocky, high elevations in a region that gets considerable rainfall, so this is not the ideal place to grow grapes. But thankfully, diehard growers press on. Most of the Txakoli that is bottled is consumed in seafood restaurants in the Basque region. Luckily, we were able to find this gem. It is absolutely perfect with briny seafood; grilled shrimp, broiled scallops with lemon butter or steamed clams.

Castello de Medino Verdejo, 2007, Rueda, Spain \$12 CHILL ME !!!

Verdejo is such a slam dunk for spring and summer. It has beautiful orange blossom, lemon zest and honeysuckle in a zesty, fresh, elegant style. It works amazingly well with salads and briny seafood or on its own while hanging out in the backyard.

Cote de Hayas Tinto, 2006, Campo de Borja, Spain \$10

A delicious, easy to understand blend of Garnacha, Tempranillo, Syrah & Cabernet Sauvignon. Ripe cherry and raspberry fruit, a touch of spice and clean acidity makes this a perfect wine for enjoying on its own or with tuna on the grill.

Bodegas Ateca “Garnacha de Fuego”, 2007, Calatayud, Spain \$11

A “Best Value” designation in the Wine Spectator, they said, “Ripe raspberry, creamy vanilla and spicy licorice mingle in this exuberant red, which is alluring, plush but tender, structured more by acidity than tannins.” 89 points ! Don’t miss it !!

Conde de Valdemar “Reserva”, 1999, Rioja, Spain \$26

Here is the first of two very different expressions of Tempranillo. The first one is made in the old world, elegant style of Rioja, these wines are all about texture and finesse. Made from Tempranillo with a touch of Mazuelo and aged 6 years before being released, the “Reserva” is supple with notes of spicy, toasty oak and candied cherry and cedar.

Juan Rojo Tempranillo, 2004, Toro, Spain \$22

91 points from Robert Parker's Wine Advocate: "The 2004 Juan Rojo was aged for 8 months in French and American oak. Opaque purple-colored, the nose exhibits lots of spice, mineral, scorched earth, and blackberry. This leads to a full-bodied, structured wine with layers of fruit, intense flavors, and 4-6 years of aging potential. This well-made Toro will be at its best from 2014-2029. Bodegas Matarredonda, with 60 acres of Tempranillo vines, was founded in 2000 by Alfonso Sanz Rojo. The Juan Rojo uses Tempranillo from 80+-year-old vines."