



Rioja vineyards.

¡Viva Rioja!

Spain's Rioja region boasts architectural tours de force and luxe lodgings. Its true calling card, however, is supple, well-priced, ready-to-drink red wines.

by Chris Fleming

SPAINISEVERYWHERETHESEDDAYS. Earlier this year, Spaniard Rafael Nadal won Wimbledon and the French Open. In November, the country won its third Davis Cup since 2000. The likes of Penélope Cruz, Javier Bardem, and Pedro Almodóvar continue to rock the entertainment industry, and the new PBS series *Spain... On the Road Again* features Mario Batali and Gwyneth Paltrow eating and drinking their way through the country.

On the food front, Spain has been a major influence in recent years, especially its “micro gastronomy,” exemplified by chefs Ferran Adrià and Francis Paniego. In 2006 the pair led seminars in New York, at which top American chefs Thomas Keller and Wylie Dufresne were seen scribbling notes.

Rioja, in northeast Spain, remains Spain's premier wine region. As actor Antonio Banderas once said, “When the world speaks of Spanish wine, the word used is ‘Rioja.’” In the US, Rioja was the official wine of last year's Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week, and *Wine Enthusiast* named Rioja “Wine Region of the Year” for 2007.

At prices ranging from very affordable (\$7–\$12 a bottle) to mid-tier (\$20–\$50) to high-end (\$60 and up), Rioja wines are an exceptional value. Rioja's main grape for red wines, Tempranillo, derives its name from the Spanish word *temprano*, meaning early, for its tendency to ripen ahead of schedule. When grown in one of Rioja's three subregions, each with distinct climatic influences and soil types, Tempranillo has an ideal home,

similar to Pinot Noir in Burgundy, and a similar capacity for transmitting subtle differences in terroir.

Rioja's governing body has aging requirements for all wines labeled as such, which is a rarity. Simple Denominación de Origen Calificada (DOC) Riojas, often termed *joven*, or young, wines, are easy-drinking “everyday” wines, as are Crianzas, which must be aged at least 24 months, 12 in barrel. Reservas are referred to as “Sunday wines,” appropriate for a weekend dinner with family or friends.

These must be aged a minimum of 12 months in barrel, 24 in bottle. Gran Reservas are special-occasion wines and must spend 24 months in barrel and 36 months in bottle before release.

For consumers, this means that unlike most Burgundies, Bordeaux, and California Cabernets, which must be aged to be fully enjoyed—Rioja wines are sold ready to drink. Compare a 1996 Rioja Gran Reserva to a 1996 Burgundy Cru or Grand Cru,

or to a *cru* Barolo. The experience of drinking these fine, mature wines is quite similar, yet the Rioja is sold for a fraction of the price of the others. The style ranges from very traditional, classical wines to ultramodern, super cuvées, with most Riojas falling somewhere in between.

Winemakers in the region often call Rioja “the land of a thousand wines.” And like all things Spain, Rioja wines are happening, and they're a fun, stimulating way to learn about this very special region. **G**

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