



Wine Architecture of The New

# RIOJA



## THE NEW RIOJA

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Every year in La Rioja, from mid- to late April, a subtle announcement of spring is 'budbreak,' when the dark, twisted trunks of grapevines that hang low to the ground begin to show tiny fingers of green, as if peeking out. La Rioja's landscape is visually reborn in the following weeks, as these slowly become, first canes, and then bunches of grapes, which will grow into maturity. A quick tour through La Rioja will reveal a similar visual evolution currently underway from old winery architecture to new. For visitors that drive to La Rioja, a visual cue of the region's place in history is the droves of faithful walking along the Camino de Santiago, the pilgrimage route that lines the road heading to Santiago de Compostela.

Just minutes from historic Laguardia in Rioja Alavesa, numerous cutting-edge wineries have been recently completed or are under construction. Both traditional and modern bodegas have completed 'statement' or 'icon' wineries meant to enhance the image of the properties, and wineries with architecture and

design that function to help make better wines; some newer wineries integrate both aspects. La Rioja is now at the forefront of winery architecture, and this is promoting dramatic growth of the region.

### Medieval La Rioja in Laguardia

The wine region of Rioja is composed of three subregions whose geography centers on the Ebro, a river which traverses the region from roughly west to east. To the north of the Ebro is Rioja Alavesa, containing Laguardia, Elciego, Oyón and Labastida, towns that date back to medieval times and prominent in the region's history of wine.

Laguardia is a picturesque piece of history, a fortified town situated strategically on top of a promontory at the foot of the expansive, brooding Sierra de Cantabria mountains which rise majestically behind it. With its 12th-century Romanesque architecture evident in the city's thick fortress walls, ancient churches and narrow, stone-lined streets punctuated by small *plazas* or squares, Laguardia has a pair of towers that mark the physical extent of the town. At one end of Laguardia is the charming church, the Iglesia de Santa Maria de los Reyes, with architecture that dates from the 14th-century. It has a remarkably crafted entryway, a polychrome tympanum, which depicts naturalistic, intricately sculpted representations of the twelve apostles. No vehicles are permitted inside Laguardia, and walking around the town's small *calles*

or streets it is easy to imagine a slower, more contemplative pace of life during the age of Cervantes.

A walk wraps the northern end of the perimeter walls, providing panoramic vistas of the surrounding land with vineyards to the west and north, and visible is the daring shape of Bodegas Ysios, designed by Santiago Calatrava, whose gravity-fed winery clad in wood and aluminum has an undulating form that settles into the landscape. Named for the Egyptian goddess of wine, this 80,000 square foot winery is at once an icon and a serene symbol of harmony among the surrounding vineyards which extend to the Sierra de Cantabria looming in the distance.

The somewhat unusual building is a tasting room and wine shop for visitors, and it has been built in the shape of a modern wine decanter. Inside this structure is the winery's decoratively carved mahogany and oak display stand for the 1910 Brussels World Fair, a beautiful object designed with Art Nouveau influences. The old display was discovered in a storeroom, and since it was too large to be reassembled inside the winery's existing buildings, the new tasting room was designed to house it. It is therefore a clever reference to the bodega's old methods being contained by the new, a description that can be viewed to be the core of this winery's business.

There is a marked contrast between Zaha Hadid's new addition and the late 19th

century winery buildings that would look right at home in America's Old West, yet there is also harmony between the two aesthetics, almost as if the eldest member of a group of venerable wineries has entered into a conversation begun by its youngest.

When it was established in 1987, Bodegas RODA was a controversial property, but it has quickly gained a position in the vanguard of excellence in modern Spanish winemaking. The cutting-edge winery designed by architect Pere Llimona was completed in 2001 in the middle of Haro's historic 'Barrio de la Estación,' a nexus of venerable 19th-century bodegas like CVNE, La Rioja Alta, R. López de Heredia and Muga.

Located at the top of the hill in this district, the sleek lines of the RODA property occupy a conspicuous place of prominence at the north end of Haro, and everyone who enters the town by car sees this property and its dramatic site. If James Bond owned a winery, it would look like this. The aesthetics of the winery are a stark contrast to the older, surrounding wineries, but this visual is now common throughout Rioja, where new growth has sprung up among the old, like the process of spring, a cycle of renewal and revitalization.

RODA is built upon a 19th-century cellar, and its three separate rooms for barrel and bottle aging rooms utilize much of the original cellar, which was excavated to a depth of 40 feet inside rock terraces of the Ebro River, and it has the constant, beneficial temperature and humidity

conditions that subterranean cellars enjoy. The design of the RODA winery boasts many innovative features to aid the winemaking process. A unique radiant floor in its barrel aging room helps induce malolactic fermentations by keeping French oak barrels at 68°F without air movement. Once malolactic fermentations have completed, a large window in the winery's north façade slides open to let in the winter air in December, January and February, naturally reducing the temperature to 105°F for stabilization.

## Functional Designs

At CVNE, winery architecture has seen an evolution as the winemakers have made steady refinements in design to help

### THE LARGE, ROUND CEDAR-CLAD VIÑA REAL BODEGA RESEMBLES A HUGE OAK FERMENTATION VAT

the flow of the winemaking process. In 1989, CVNE's El Pilar winery in Haro used a revolutionary design utilizing small stainless steel tanks called *autoevacuaciones*, which are elevated by a crane and emptied on top of fermentation tanks by gravity. This design eliminated the use of pumps and hoses during vinification, and was copied by wineries around the world. The concept of tailoring the winery to the vineyards was further refined in the Contino winery in Laserna. Head

winemaker Jesús Madrazo explains, "our Contino winery was designed for our vineyards. We have 153 acres and 32 small tanks... in each one of the tanks we can put a maximum 3.7 to 5 acres of fruit per tank, which allows me to separate the different parcels... We separate the four different red grapes (Tempranillo, Mazuelo, Graciano and Garnacha), which are never blended before one year, and we separate different quality levels from each parcel."

The enormous potential of contemporary winery architecture reaches its pinnacle at CVNE's Viña Real winery, which released its first vintage in 2002 and was officially opened in 2004. The 172,200 square feet building is sited on top of a hill in Laguardia next to the road to Logroño. Designed by French architect Philippe Mazieres, who has built many cutting-edge wineries in Bordeaux, the winery seems to have derived its form from its function. The large, round



building is clad in red cedar from Canada, a striking image

of a huge oak fermentation vat. Trucks arrive at the winery's highest level, and unload grapes for sorting and selection. The fruit is then placed into a small mobile steel tank that is moved by crane, which deposits it into one of 71 fermentation vats. As at the other CVNE wineries, parcel lots are kept separate throughout the winemaking process to afford the winemaker maximum flexibility and control.

The lower level contains two huge barrel storage areas that have been carved out of the mountain and which maintain perfect conditions for aging the young wines. Every aspect of the winery's design stresses the gentlest handling of the grapes.

Looking up at the crane which hangs from an enormous, vaulted ceiling, this winery seems like a breathtaking, modern cathedral devoted to the process of winemaking.

## Fortress Winery in San Vicente

In 1995, Benjamin Romeo bought an old 14th Century barrel cellar under the fortress of San Vicente de la Sonsierra. It is a romantic building, but usable work space is at a premium. Blessed by both exceptional vineyards, some of which are among the best in Rioja Alavesa, and a perfect 100-point score for 2004 Contador from the U.S. wine magazine, *The Wine Advocate*, it would seem as though this small 'boutique'



winery which only makes a few thousand bottles per year, has everything. Not so. Benjamin's assistant winemaker, Ivan Vega Alberdi, explains, "we cannot work well [in the old cellar]. Every time we want to do something we are moving barrels, sometimes it takes most of the week..."

It will be good to have the new winery, we will have space, and we will be able to get work done." A modern, gravity-fed winery is currently under construction for Benjamin Romeo, and is well worth the visit, as is the 'fortress winery'.

## A Gehry Impressive Building

The most stunning example of a signature winery is the City of Wine (Ciudad del Vino), a daring complex at Marqués de Riscal, designed by world renowned architect Frank

Gehry. Anticipating a future trend of Rioja developing into a wine tourism destination, the building includes luxury accommodations by Starwood. Just as the creatively sweeping curves of Gehry's 21st Century building sit astride Marqués de Riscal's bottle cellars that date from the mid-19th-century, this visual blend of 'new' with 'old' is a symbol for Rioja's current growth and evolution as a winemaking region.

With the monumental Sierra de Cantabria a fitting backdrop, Gehry's building seems extreme, brash and somehow fitting.

Whether Rioja's newest wineries are bold architectural statements, state-of-the-art winemaking facilities, or both, the buildings are icons that are attracting interest in the region from the rest of the world. The aesthetic may be either restrained or flamboyant, but much of Rioja's winery architecture reflects evolutionary improvements in winemaking brought to the 21st-century from older times. Rioja's winery architecture reflects a creative spring now in full bloom across the region. It is the newest fruit from one of the world's great wine regions.

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## Classicism and Modernity in Haro

The largest subregion, Rioja Alta, to the south and west of the Ebro, contains La Rioja's capital city of Logroño, Haro, San Vicente de la Sonsierra, Fuenmayor and Cenicero, towns with an important history to the wine trade of Rioja. Haro, home to a wealth of top-end wineries, is an especially interesting treat for wine and architecture buffs. First stop is centenarian *bodega* López de Heredia, Rioja's most traditional winery, which houses a creation by Pritzker prize winner Zaha Hadid.











