

Ribera del Duero:
The Promised Land for Young and Old
Madrid Fusión Chose Change
The Global Plate:
Spanish Wines in Harlem
El Taburete: Daniel Olivella of B44
Postmark: Empordà-Costa Brava



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We join Chris Fleming on a visit to Ribera del Duero, curious to find out why this region has never ceased to catch critics' attention since it first stood out in the 1980s. Back from Madrid Fusión, Bruce Schoenfeld shares with us some key remarks about Spain's thrilling wine scene. Helio San Miguel's postcard tempts us to jump on a plane and discover first hand the allure of wine and food in the Costa Brava. Back in the United States, Lee Campbell guides us through the heritage of the foods of Harlem and exposes our senses to new pairings of local dishes with Spanish wines. In San Francisco, Jordan Mackay sits at the bar of B44 to discover a chef's passion for wine that dates back to childhood.



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RIBERA DEL DUERO

THE PROMISED LAND FOR YOUNG AND OLD



By Chris Fleming

In the mid-1980s, Robert Parker called the 1982 Pesquera “Spain’s Chateau Petrus,” setting off Ribera del Duero’s first explosion of recognition from Spanish winemakers and wine critics across the globe. The meteoric rise of the Ribera D.O. has been astonishing: from less than ten properties and a few cooperatives that produced a half-million bottles when the D.O. was established in 1982, there are now over two hundred properties producing 39 million bottles per year. Ribera del Duero has continued to generate intense interest by investors and wine property owners, and numerous new wineries have been built. In addition to high-end wines such as the crianza, reserva and gran reserva wines, established and new bodegas are producing many incredible value wines now available in the U.S. Made in a joven, young style, they provide the perfect opportunity to become acquainted with Ribera del Duero. Joven wines helped sales of Ribera D.O. wines climb considerably in 2005. If the current rapid growth of wines from Spain can be compared to a spectacular fireworks display, the region that continues to make the most beautiful bang is Ribera del Duero.

Located about a two-hour drive northwest of Madrid, Ribera is notably flat, characterized by dry earth, whose dominant colors are ochre brown, milk chocolate and saddle-leather tan. Aside from a rare cypress tree, there’s precious little green here and, driving by, you can smell the intense cooked syrup aromas of the *azucarera*, huge factories that process sugar beets. Occasional cereal crops are visible as you make your way north in a slow, gradual climb in altitude. At 700-1,000 meters elevation, most of Ribera’s vineyards are at the northern apex of a high plateau in Spain known as the *meseta* or ‘tabletop,’ where it meets the Duero River. For comparison, Rioja’s more rugged topography has gorgeous mountain vistas, yet most of

its vineyards lie between 400-600 meters elevation. Ribera is as long as Rioja, yet it contains only a third of its acreage. In Ribera, most wines are produced from the Tinto Fino grape, also known as Tinta del País, the local names for Tempranillo.

Ribera’s “golden triangle” is the famous stretch between Peñafiel to Quintanilla de Onésimo formed by the historic wine towns of Pesquera, Peñafiel and Valbuena. This area includes the wineries and vineyards of Vega Sicilia, Pesquera, Emilio Moro, Arzúaga, Alión, Hermanos Cuadrado-Finca Villacreces, Hacienda Monasterio, Emina and Matarromera. This area’s soils, mostly limestone and sand with little clay, yield aromatic, complex wines with bold fruit, minerals, sculpted acidity and sweet, round tannins. These are Ribera del Duero wines with the most finesse.

The honors given to the Pesquera wines of Alejandro Fernández in the 1980s prompted the first major reaction in the wine world to the Ribera region. Almost overnight, many wineries were built. Pesquera is a traditional-style wine: strong and brooding when young, with a tannic structure and acidity that ages wonderfully. A proud, forthright man, Alejandro gambled on the potential of his ability and Ribera’s vineyards when he bought Pesquera in 1972. Most old vineyards in the region were then being grubbed up to plant sugar beets. Today, Alejandro is an icon who makes distinctive wines of character and his life is the story of Spanish winemaking in the new millennium: a resounding success. From the basic Pesquera Tinto and Reserva to the Millennium and Gran Reserva Janus, these are serious, hearty Riberas.

Ribera’s oldest winery, Bodegas Vega Sicilia, released its first red wines in 1915, and the property and its wines have since become legendary in Spain, benchmarks for excellence. Unique among Ribera wines, Reserva Especial, Único and Valbuena 5°

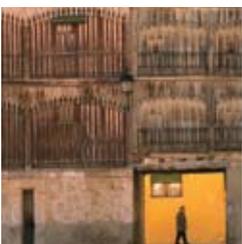


exhibit sophisticated elegance and harmony on the palate that is the bodega's signature. Aged in large American oak vats and barrels, Vega Sicilia wines are made in a traditional style that stresses balance and acidity, allowing them to age for decades. Until 1998, Mariano García was chief winemaker there, helping to shape the great vintages that Vega Sicilia lovers have enjoyed for nearly thirty years. Founded in 1992, Vega Sicilia's sister winery, Bodegas Alión, makes wines that are modern-styled with dense, structured fruit and ripe tannins. Produced in a new, cutting-edge winery, Alión wines sell at a mid-tier price. Aged for about 24 months in French barrique, they're designed for earlier drinking but can improve with aging.

Hacienda Monasterio, produced by Bodegas Monasterio, is a bold, spicy, balanced blend of Tinto Fino, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, Merlot and Petite Verdot, judiciously aged in oak. This wine has earned winemaker Peter Sisseck high praise. Monasterio's modern-style wines include a Crianza and Reserva with concentrated fruit, serious structure and ripe tannins that are made utilizing a blend similar to Vega Sicilia, but aged in French oak barrique for 18 months rather than large American oak casks for several years. They are remarkably high quality at a good price. Bodegas Monasterio gave the Bordeaux-trained Sisseck a feel for the best farming and winemaking methods to utilize with Ribera's Tinta del País.

In Ribera's Burgos province, the towns of Roa de Duero, La Horra, Anguix and Quintanamanvirgo define an area that typically produces brawny, modern-style Riberas aged in barrel. Recently, many excellent joven-style value wines have emerged. Joven wines exhibit fresh, clean aromas and crisp fruit on the palate due to brief aging either in wood or stainless steel tank, and they're perfect for casual tapas or bistro food. In this area, very reddish soils have lots of limestone, sand and large stones, especially near La Horra. Loads of volume, extract and distinctive personality characterize these wines, known for rough tannins. Wineries with vineyards in this area are Bodegas Aalto, Dominio de Pingus, Condado de Haza, Astrales, Alonso del Yerro, Hermanos Sastre-Viña Sastre and Anguix. West of Roa, Pedrosa de Duero has soils with slightly more clay, which yield wines with depth. Hermanos Pérez Pascuas and Pago de los Capellanes are here. Torremorón, Viña y Tía De Lozar, Pérez Pascuas Viña Pedrosa, Pago de los Capellanes Tinto Joven and Monte Negro Tinto Joven, Barrica, and Crianza are all modern-styled wines with bold fruit and a great price/value quality.

In the mid-1990s, there was once again a surge of praise and recognition for Ribera wines, inspired by the tremendous acclaim accorded by Robert Parker and other critics to Peter Sisseck's Pingus wine, which instantly became a cult wine, the most expensive from Spain. Pingus and Flor de Pingus represent modern-styled Riberas, aged in French oak, with tremendous depth, complex aromas, plush fruit on the palate and a long finish. While Pingus is a super cuvée, Flor provides a considerable value, especially the 2002 vintage, when Sisseck didn't produce Pingus and used all the fruit for the Flor de Pingus. Since 2000, the vineyards for Pingus near La Horra have been biodynamically farmed, making for truer vineyard expression and better wines.

Javier Zaccagnini is owner of Bodegas Aalto, Ribera's

ultimate boutique winery. From 1992-1998, Zaccagnini headed Ribera del Duero's Consejo Regulador, the governing body of the denomination, and he was successful in promoting the Ribera del Duero D.O. during its second explosion. When Mariano García left Vega Sicilia in 1998, the two men decided to collaborate on a new winery - Bodegas Aalto. Since their first vintage in 1999, the mid-tier Aalto and high-end Aalto P.S. (Pagos Seleccionados) have received rave reviews from American and Spanish wine critics. A modern-style Ribera aged in French oak, Aalto has brambly, dark berry aromas with cassis, leather and licorice notes, and expansive, deep fruit with ripe, sweet tannins on the palate. With more depth and complexity, the 2001 Aalto P.S. received 98 points from Robert Parker, among his highest ratings for a Ribera del Duero wine.

Another notable project in the area is Alejandro Fernández's Condado de Haza, which makes modern-styled wines. Since 1994, this bodega has made a basic Tinto, designed for early drinking, as well as the Alenza, which is meant for aging. Eduardo García and Telmo Rodríguez are young winemakers on the rise in this region. Los Astrales is a property and mid-tier wine with Eduardo as Technical Director. The high-end Matallana wine and Valderiz and Gazur, both value wines, are produced by Telmo Rodríguez and partner Pablo Eguzkiza, working directly with growers of vineyards that have been biodynamically farmed since 1998.

Due to the extreme quality of their vineyard sites, the potential of two previously underdeveloped areas is drawing a new generation of talented winemakers whose modern-styled wines are challenging Ribera's best at every price point. In north-central Ribera, four towns near Los Gumieles and Quintana del Pidio have soils with significant clay. Their wines have bold, spicy, Ribera fruit with depth and remarkably ripe, silky tannins. The properties here are Bodegas Conde, Uvaguilera, Prado Rey, Casajús and Arrocal. With similar soils, the second area is near the town of Atauta at Ribera's southeastern edge in Soria province. Domino de Atauta's wines, Conde Neo and Uvaguilera Palomero, have distinctively earthy aromas, dense black fruit, and a deeply mineral, roasted character on the palate.

During a visit to the region in 2004, lots of construction was apparent. Dominio de Pingus, Bodegas Alión, Bodegas Mauro and Bodegas Aalto had either just built new wineries or were in the process of construction. The physical expansion of many established bodegas and newly funded properties directly reflects the increasing global demand for Ribera's wines. Ribera del Duero's impressive growth in the 1980s and 1990s, and reputation for exceptional, super cuvée wines from Bodegas Aalto, Vega Sicilia, Dominio de Pingus and Pesquera, have helped the region gain global prominence. Its wines are now grouped with the best of Bordeaux, Burgundy, Barolo and Napa. As a result, Ribera del Duero is the first region to seriously challenge Rioja as the premier wine region in Spain. Today, Ribera's top winemakers produce affordable high-quality wines, and its value wines compete with those from Rioja, France, Italy and California, making Ribera wines a revelation for U.S. wine buyers and consumers. Perhaps these developments will soon spark a third explosion of recognition for the maturing region.



About the author:

Chris Fleming is a freelance wine writer and consultant. He has written about wine for The Robb Report. Previously, he was wine writer and consultant for PJ Wine, a NYC retailer known for their selection of hundreds of Spanish wines. He lives with his wife in Park Slope, Brooklyn, New York.

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