

a TIM ATKIN MW



SPECIAL REPORT

Rioja 2025 Special Report

BY TIM ATKIN MW

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Introduction

The singer songwriter Ian Dury once wrote a tune called Reasons to be Cheerful, Part Three. It's the kind of thing that wouldn't mean much to someone who doesn't speak English as a first language, and even then, it's full of slang, word play and in-jokes that might pass some Brits by. But you get the general message. Dury was trying to be optimistic.

I was thinking about Mr Dury as I sat down to write this introduction. Even people who love Rioja as much as I do would be forced to concede that the region is at a low ebb. Four out of the last five vintages have been difficult – with 2024 the smallest and wettest harvest since 2017 – the region is beset by internecine squabbling and certain styles of Rioja are regarded as unfashionable or just out of date.

Rioja should be in party mode right now. It's celebrating an important milestone in 2025, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the official creation of its Denominación de Origen, the oldest of its kind in Spain, no less. The party will still happen, of course, but it will take place against a background of gloom and pessimism. Rioja has been struggling with over-production and falling sales for some time. As a region, it's facing many challenges.

But that's only part of the story. There are several different Riojas, if you like. The mass market might be in decline, but the region's best wines are some of the best in the world. As I say at more length in this report, Rioja is making the most diverse set of wines in its history. There has never been a better time to buy Rioja. You will drink as well, and arguably better, here than in any other part of Spain. I've been visiting the region since 1988 and I am consistently cheered by the quality of what I taste, as well as the passion of the growers and winemakers behind the bottles. Rioja is increasingly demonstrating that it can compete with regions like Burgundy and Barolo at the top table.

On the day before this report was launched, I put on a tasting of exceptional wines in London for the second time. Fifty or more winemakers came from Rioja to pour their wines to consumers and members of the wine trade. There was a waiting list to buy tickets. The reaction to the tasting was unanimously positive. And sometimes one of surprise. People who think that Rioja is all about ready-to-drink, mass-market supermarket Crianzas, Reservas and Gran Reservas are blown away by the region's elite wines. Is there a wine area in the world that is capable of such diversity?

Sometimes it takes an outsider to see what is best about a region. I'm not only talking about myself here. I think it's significant that successful bodegas and winemakers from other parts of Spain have developed businesses in Rioja. The comparatively youthful projects of Bodegas Mauro (Baynos) and Pago de Carraovejas (Aurri), both leading names from Ribera del Duero, in Baños de Río Ebro and Leza, respectively, are good examples. They, too, recognise Rioja's untapped potential. Another new arrival is Elías López Montero from Bodegas Verum in La Mancha, who has just released his second vintage.

I wrote last year that 2021 is the best Rioja vintage since 2001 in my view and I haven't changed my mind after my latest visit. 2022 and 2023 were more difficult vintages, but very good winemakers know how to get the best out of their vineyards. The 129 wines that scored 95 points or more in this report are world-class. What's more, the list of top producers is growing every year.

Two brand new projects that impressed me deeply this year are Dimittis and Our Hands. Both will be in demand, I hope, and will continue to deliver outstanding quality over the years to come.

Rioja can sometimes appear stuck in its ways. But it's extremely dynamic right now, at least in terms of new associations. This year alone, I tasted with Menudas Bodegas de Rioja, a group of ten like-minded small wineries, and with the five-strong Cosecheros de Labastida association that has formed around Telmo Rodríguez, making wines from their own single parcels and adding value to their grapes. Existing groups that bring much-needed energy to the region are Rioja n' Roll and the more informal Martes of Wine.

Arguably more important is the Asociación Subsierra, that was launched in Vitoria last November. Led by president Juan Luis Cañas this is a collaboration of eight bodegas from the Sonsierra, seven of them in the Rioja Alavesa (Amaren, Artuke, Bodegas Tierra, Carlos Sánchez, Loli Casado, Ostatu and Tentenublo) and one in Rioja Alta (Teodore Ruiz Monge).

These are all very good to excellent producers who are committed to organic viticulture. Their aim is to create "a future with hope in Rioja", making sustainably produced wines that reflect their origins. I think Subsierra is an enormous force for good.

A lot of the best things in Rioja right now are happening at the margins, not at the level of the Consejo Regulador. Things like these different projects and associations. The region may be struggling with its generational shift – it's not alone in that – but I was again impressed by the number of young winemakers I met this year, many of whom have taken over from their parents at family-owned bodegas.

Rioja's problems are real enough, and they won't disappear in a hurry. But there are grounds for optimism about the future, too. Reasons to be cheerful, if you prefer.

*Tim Atkin MW
London, February 2025*

“ This historic Denominación's best wines continue to surpass themselves. ”



The 10 Things you need to know about Rioja



Rioja is Spain's most famous and, at its best, greatest wine region.

It is located in the northern part of the Iberian Peninsula, some 95 kilometres from Bilbao and 325 kilometres from Madrid. Sometimes described as the land of 1,000 wines – and that seems conservative to me – the DOCA (Denominación de Origen Calificada) is larger and considerably more diverse than many people, including its aficionados, appreciate.

To the north, Rioja is framed by the Sierra de Cantabria mountain range; this is sometimes sub-divided into three parts – the Sierra de Toloño, the central Sierra de Cantabria and the Sierra de Codés. To the west, sit the lower Montes Obarenes, bisected by the main road to Bilbao. Rioja's southern border is the higher, older and more imposing Sierra de la Demanda, which is part of the western section of the Sistema Ibérico that separates Spain's high central plateau, known as the Meseta, from the Ebro Valley.

Rioja is made up of seven river valleys (from west to east, these are the Oja, Tirón, Najerilla, Iregua, Leza, Cidacos and Alhama), which are all tributaries of the Ebro. This is the country's longest river, flowing south east for 910 kilometres from its source at Fontibre in the Cantabrian Mountains to its delta near Tarragona on the Mediterranean coast. The Ebro winds its way through the centre of the region – its two significant loops, or meandros, are called Tondón and Zaco – and is a key part of Rioja's history, identity and terroir. It is also, in some respects, a dividing line. Producers in the Sonsierra, on the north bank of the river, talk about “the other side” with a slight sense of superiority.

At the latest count, Rioja's active vineyards cover a total of 59,233 hectares, which is around 6.2% of the Spanish national total of 945,000 hectares. These are shared between 144 municipalities in four different political provinces: La Rioja, Álava, Navarra and a sliver

of Burgos, where there is but a single bodega, Hacienda El Ternero, with 120 hectares of vines, making it a part of Castilla y León. It is more common to divide plantings according to the area's three sub-regions rather than that quartet of provinces. These are the Rioja Alta ((25,430ha)), the Rioja Oriental (21,432ha) and the Rioja Alavesa (12,371ha).

These 144 villages and towns vary considerably in terms of size, fame and area under vine. Alfaro, the largest, has 4,297 hectares; Viguera, the smallest, has just 2.48 hectares. Other important centres of production are Aldeanueva (1,536ha), Ausejo (1,618ha), Azagra (1,499ha), Briones (1,382ha), Cenicero (2,060ha), Elciego (1,094ha), Fuenmayor (1,576ha), Huércanos (1,268ha), Laguardia (3,508ha), Lanciego (1,121ha), Logroño (1,148ha), Mendavia (1,739ha), Nájera (1,157ha), Oyón (1,308), San Asensio (1,957ha), San Vicente de la Sonsierra (1,872ha) and Viana (1,536ha).

After years of expansion, Rioja's area under vine has stabilised at around 66,500 hectares. This reflects poor sales on certain markets and high stock levels, not to mention the meagre returns on offer to many growers. The official 2024 figure was down by 5,689 hectares, following a drop of 1,876 hectares in 2023, although the size of the first number is largely explained by the decision of some growers to take a subsidy to do a green harvest, leaving their crop on the ground. There was also a degree of green harvesting in 2023. The vines are still there, in other words; they just aren't included in the statistics. So, if you add the unharvested vines (7,273ha) to the official figure, you end up with 66,506ha. For all that, Rioja seems to be coming to the realisation that it has to reduce its vineyard area. Before 2023, plantings had risen every year: by 144ha (2022), 382ha (2021), 544ha (2020), 725 ha (2019), 786 ha (2018), 1,566 ha (2017) and 749 ha (2016).

Indeed, part of Rioja's problem is that it has grown exponentially over the last 40 years, often in the wrong places with the wrong varieties. As recently as 1985, there were only 38,817 hectares under vine. Between 1996 and 2005, Rioja added 21,903 hectares in the space of a decade. This means that while the region has plenty of venerable parcels (13,741 hectares are more than 40 years' old and, according to Juan Carlos Sancha, some 300ha have passed their hundredth birthday), it also has a significant area of young vines, most of which is Tempranillo. As I argue elsewhere in this report, this is not necessarily a good thing.

In terms of its vineyard structure, Rioja resembles Champagne rather than Burgundy or Bordeaux, with way more grape growers than producers. There are currently 111,904 registered plots owned by 13,192 growers and vinified by 586 bodegas (of whom 450 or so are commercially active) and 28 co-operatives. Given the severity of the current crisis, the number of active wineries will almost certainly shrink over the next year, as will the number of growers. Rioja is consolidating.

Just under 85% of these plots are less than one hectare in size. Expansive, New World-style plantings are extremely rare in Rioja, with only 6.96% of Rioja's total area made up of vineyards covering more than five hectares. The importance of both large wineries and co-operatives to the economic well-being of a region that is so fragmented is hard to overstate, which is one of the reasons it's run the way it is. There are certainly a significant number of small bodegas in Rioja, particularly in the Rioja Alavesa, but the 26 largest producers account for 70.98% of sales, while the 290 smallest are responsible for only 13.53%. No wonder the big boys hold the whip hand in Rioja.



Terroir is increasingly important in Rioja. Now we need some proper soil maps.

One of the first things any new wine student learns about Rioja is that it is made up of three sub-regions: Rioja Alta, Rioja Alavesa and the rechristened Rioja Oriental. This division, based on political and physical boundaries rather than soils and geology, is totally inadequate when it comes to understanding the Denominacion de Origen's range of terroirs, which are every bit as complex

as those of Burgundy and Barolo, two regions with which Rioja should be compared. "Rioja has so many micro-climates," says the veteran winemaker Matías Calleja, now retired from Beronia. "It's really quite astounding." And with climate change, it is exploring new ones.

Since the DOCa (then just a Denominación de Origen) was founded in 1925, Rioja has mostly promoted a generic message, rather than talking about individual villages or vineyard sites, although this began to change with the release of the first Viñedos Singulares and Vinos de Municipio (now Vinos de Pueblo), or village wines, from the 2017 vintage onwards and has continued through the work of the Consejo Regulador-sponsored Rioja Wine Academy. But for most of the last century, Rioja has talked much more about barrels and bodegas than origin.

A greater emphasis on the region's best areas is long overdue. The majority of Rioja's most distinguished sites are located on clay/limestone soils to the north and west of the Ebro river in the Sonsierra, an area that includes the villages of Ábalos, Briñas, Elciego, Elvillar, Labastida, Laguardia, Lanciego, Samaniego, San Vicente de la Sonsierra, Villabuena and Villalba. This is what the legendary winemaker Jesús Madrazo calls "Rioja's Côte d'Or" and others refer to as the "VIP lounge". "We've been making wine from some of these places for 2,000 years," says Marcos Eguren. "There's a good reason for that."

Very good vineyards exist in other parts of Rioja, of course, and the picture is shifting because of global warming. The neighbouring single estates of Marqués de Murrieta and Marqués de Vargas aren't in the Sonsierra, nor are the vineyards of Albelda de Iregua, Badarán, Briones, Cárdenas, Clavijo, Cordovín, Cuzcurrita, the Moncalvillo, the Monte Yerga, Quel or Tudelilla, to name just a few excellent areas.

Rioja's vineyards vary massively in terms of aspect, altitude and especially soils and geology. And yet anyone who wants to find out more about these terroirs has nowhere to turn for detailed information. The Consejo Regulador has published a very basic map of the region's soils, dividing them into three basic types – chalky clay, ferrous clay and alluvial – but that's it for now. Wine lovers who are familiar with Sylvain Pitiot's Burgundy maps, or the work of

Alessandro Masnaghetti in Barolo would surely welcome something similar in Rioja.

As things stand, there is no detailed study of the region's terroirs. Or rather there is, but it hasn't been published. In 2000, the Consejo Regulador commissioned an expensive, in-depth study by Professor Vicente Sotés of the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, but the results (or rather their implications) were considered too controversial to be made public. Professor Sotés's work is first class – I've seen the map – but it's locked away in Logroño. It's a shame that Rioja hasn't published his work. The only map that is in the public domain is the one published by Manuel Ruíz Hernández in 1974. "We've been waiting for a detailed soil map for over 50 years," says Jesús Mendoza of Remírez de Ganuza. "That's too long."

Partly out of frustration with the absence of reliable information, but also out of a desire to learn, three young winemakers took things into their own hands in 2021 in an attempt to understand some of Rioja's best terroirs. Eduardo Eguren of Cuentaviñas, Diego Magaña and Carlos López de Lacalle of Artadi commissioned an initial, 160-page study of the Sonsierra from the Italian company Timesis, which also mapped the soils of Barolo. The Italians came three times to Rioja, dug 46 soil pits and delivered a macro overview of the area between Briñas and Elvillar. It cost the trio €15,000. "It's really interesting," says Eguren. "What we have already found is that there is way less clay on the north side of the Ebro River than on the south. And that's just the start."

The next phase, funded by Eguren alone, is a more detailed study of the 150-odd *parajes* (named vineyard parcels) of his native San Vicente de la Sonsierra, which he started in May 2023. Rioja could do something similar for all of its 144 municipalities. Eguren estimates that to do a first macro study of the entire region would cost around €200,000, which is a fraction of the Consejo Regulador's sizeable annual marketing and communications budget, currently €9.3m. It would surely be money well spent. "It's amazing how techniques have changed and how sophisticated soil studies have become," adds Eguren. "We don't just talk about clay, loam and limestone anymore, we talk about different types of each. The Sonsierra is very diverse, but most

of what we think we know about its terroirs is based on hearsay, tradition and popular science, not on proper data."

After exhaustive work, Eguren is set to publish the study of San Vicente's terroirs in December 2025. It should make interesting reading. The village has one of the most extensive and diverse vineyard areas in Rioja. "We've got 1,872 hectares," José Gil told me, "which isn't that much more than Barolo's 2,200 hectares, which are divided between eleven communes. San Vicente could have its own Denominación de Origen. It takes me 40 minutes in a tractor to drive between a vineyard in Peciña and one close to Briones. The high part, the middle part and the low part close to the river are very different."

Eduardo Eguren isn't the only person spending his own cash to better understand the vineyards of San Vicente de la Sonsierra. Remírez de Ganuza have been working with Agrolab Consultores to understand the differences between two of their best parcels, La Rad and Ologar. "The two vineyards are 300 metres apart, but they're completely different," says Jesús Mendoza. "We want to understand why."

Would it make sense to establish a Burgundian style system of Premiers and Grands Crus in Rioja? I certainly think so. "Rioja should focus on the Burgundy model," says Master of Wine Sam Harrop. "If it does, the potential is unlimited." The top Chilean winemaker Marcelo Retamal, who has projects in Jerez and the Sierra de Salamanca and has now turned his attention to Rioja, says that the region has "1,000 vineyards that could be the next Las Beatas. That's how good it is." Abel Mendoza agrees: "El Bardallo is one of the most famous vineyards in San Vicente de la Sonsierra, but we've got at least five more that are as good."

Some of these parcels are already well-known. Gonzalo Iturriaga of Benjamin de Rothschild & Vega Sicilia, says that San Vicente de la Sonsierra has "half a dozen Grands Crus: El Bardallo, El Bombón, La Canoca, La Concova, Sacramento and a bit of El Bosque". Others might add La Rad. Other villages would have their Grands Crus too – Las Beatas in Labastida, for instance, Viña Tondonia in Haro, La Loma in Briones, or El Pisón in Laguardia (currently made by Artadi, who left the Rioja DOCa in

frustration at its restrictive legislation). The process would generate controversy, but it would also create interest in Rioja's finest vineyards. That would surely be a good thing.

There is surely nothing wrong with identifying and promoting the best. Bordeaux doesn't pretend that Listrac is as good as Pauillac. Burgundy rates the Grands Crus of Gevrey-Chambertin above the village parcels on the other side of the Route Nationale 74. Why can't Rioja do something similar? As Víctor Urrutia of CVNE puts it, "part of Rioja's problem is that everything is sold as Rioja, and it's a very diverse region. Not everything is the same." Mayte Calvo of Bodegas Bilbaínas makes a very good, related point: "Increasingly, our consumers want to know about origin." Time in oak barrels is increasingly passé.

Many of them also want to know about the way that vineyards are farmed. There is growing interest in organics, biodynamics, sustainability and regenerative agriculture. A world of difference exists between machine-harvested, irrigated, chemically-treated vineyards destined for mass production and the best, often small parcels that are dry-farmed, hand-picked and use no fertilisers or systemic pesticides. This is part of a greater picture. Melanie Hickman of Etérea Kripan, whose vineyards, farmed by her husband David Sampedro, are some of the best in the region launched a new project last year with Life Terra to promote "positive change that emphasises regeneration, biodiversity, responsible land management and a transition to sustainable practices". It's definitely a step in the right direction and highly topical given the impact of climate change in Rioja.

Maybe Rioja should start by talking more about its villages, a process that has been made easier by the revised Vinos de Pueblo legislation. There are several top producers in Rioja who already source their grapes mostly or exclusively from one municipality, making it possible to understand the differences between them. Good examples are Javier Arizcuren in Quel, Carlos Fernández and Remelluri in Labastida, Miguel Merino Junior and Miguel Ángel de Gregorio in Briones, David Sampedro in Elvillar, Carlos San Pedro in Laguardia, José Gil, Teodoro Ruiz Monge and the Sonsierra co-operative in San Vicente de la Sonsierra, Viñedos El Paco in

Cárdenas, Martínez Alesanco in Badarán and Álvaro Palacios in Alfaro.

In the longer term, Rioja needs to understand its vineyards better and act on the information. It seems obvious to me that the more consumers know about the region's vineyards, villages and sub-zones, the more in demand its best wines will be. I wouldn't go as far as Raúl Tamayo of Nivarius and Proelio who thinks that "Rioja has to classify its terroirs or die", but I still think the situation is urgent. As Álvaro Loza puts, "if you're in the right terroir, the bodega doesn't make the wine; the vineyard does." It's time those vineyards spoke with a clear, confident, uncompromising voice.



Climate change – or indeed climate chaos - is one of Rioja's most urgent challenges.

"It always seems to be raining in September now," Iñigo Berzal of Dominio de Berzal told me during the unusually wet 2024 harvest. This isn't quite true – barely a drop fell in most of Rioja in 2022 and 2017 – but the weather is becoming increasingly unstable and problematic for grape growers and bodegas. Generally speaking, the climate is hotting up, but the seasons are more scrambled and unpredictable. "Easy years are a thing of the past," says Mónica Ochoa of Marqués de Teran. "Each vintage is an adventure," says María Barúa of LAN. "And, in the case of the last few harvests, one that is increasingly precarious."

"Every year we keep beating records," says Juan Carlos Sancha. "I don't know where it will end." One month, it's unparalleled rainfall, another it's record temperatures. The drier, hotter years, in particular, are more common these days, with temperatures over a previously very rare 40°C in summer. "They might be used to this kind of weather in Sevilla," Abel Mendoza commented, "we're not."

The winter is getting shorter and drier in Rioja, too, as October and November blend into what Spaniards call "invertoño", a mix between autumn and winter. "In the past, I always put the heating on during the harvest," says Berta Valgañón, "now I'm often working in the bodega in a pair of shorts and a t-shirt." The 2024 harvest was arguably the rule proving exception, but it still began with Tempranillo Blanco in Aldeanueva de Ebro on August 21th

– 11 days later than in 2023 - and was over by October 13th. Picking dates are much earlier than they used to be. “We used to harvest in the cool zones of the Sonsierra, like Rivas de Tereso, in November,” says Sandra Bravo of Sierra de Toloño. “Not now.”

The discussion about how Rioja deals with the effects of global warming has never been more urgent. The 2022 and 2023 growing seasons may have been extreme, even by Spanish standards, but they are part of a global trend. Cooler Atlantic vintages are not going to disappear altogether, the excellent 2021 and the very challenging 2024 being two of them, but they are becoming rarer. One recent study predicts that, at current rates of carbon emissions, Rioja’s average temperature between April and October could rise by as much as 1.1°C by 2050 and 1.49°C by 2070. “Thirty years ago,” comments Jorge Navascués of Contino, “the best years were the hottest ones; these days, it’s the opposite”.

One thing that works in Rioja’s favour is that it is large and climatically diverse. As such, it has more weapons at its disposal than many classic European regions. There are significant differences in rainfall, temperature, altitude, aspect and sunshine hours between its different sub-zones. You can leave Alfaro at the positively Mediterranean eastern end of the DOCa in sunglasses and shorts and arrive, a few hours later, in Salinillas de Buradón, its northern limit on the Atlantic-facing flank of the Sierra de Cantabria, wishing you’d packed your thermal underwear and a cagoule. The further west you move, the more average temperatures drop. Fonzaleche is 3°C cooler than Haro, which is 3°C cooler than Logroño, which is 3°C cooler than Aldeanueva.

For all that, the differences between the various areas of Rioja are way less marked than they were at the turn of the century, at least as far as growing grapes is concerned. Some of the places that were once considered marginal or impossible for grape growing – or, at best, suited to the production of pink *clarettes* - are coming in from the cold. “When I started making wine in 2016,” says Berta Valgañón, “people told me that I shouldn’t make red wines from the vineyards I have in Cellorigo, Fonzaleche and Villaseca, that the area was too cold for

anything but whites and rosés. But they were wrong.” In 2017, another very hot year, she was confident enough to plant Maturana Tinta.

Rioja has been hotting up since 2001, and arguably before that. There are cooler, more Atlantic-influenced exceptions, 2008, 2013, 2018, 2021 and 2024 being five of them, but in general growers are picking much earlier than they did in the 1980s, when some red grapes didn’t ripen at all.

A number of sub-zones have benefited from the warmer vintages. I’d highlight four important ones: the north-west corner of the DOCa (Baños de Rioja, Cellorigo, Cuzcurrita, Fonzaleche, Sajazarra and Salinillas de Buradón); the Alto Najerilla (Badarán, Baños de Río Tobía, Cañas, Cárdenas and Cordovín) in the southern part of the Rioja Alta close to the foothills of the Sistema Iberico mountain range; the area between Entrena and Albelda, which spans the southern border between the Rioja Alta and Rioja Oriental and includes Albelda de Iregua, Nalda, Sojuela and Sorzano; and, finally, the 600 metre-plus vineyards on the northern side of the River Ebro, especially in the Sonsierra villages of Ábalos, Labastida, Laguardia, Lanciego, Leza, Elvillar, Kripán, Peciña, Samaniego, San Vicente de la Sonsierra, Rivas de Tereso and Viñaspre.

Not so long ago, growing grapes in such areas could be a white-knuckle proposition. Professor Fernando Martínez de Toda of the University of Rioja can still remember the 1977 vintage. “It was incredibly cold in Badarán. We started picking on November 14th and I was still worried that my Garnacha wouldn’t achieve the 10% minimum alcohol level specified by the Consejo Regulador at the time. In the past, bodegas paid more for grapes with higher potential alcohol. Now they’re looking for ways to reduce it.”

Miguel Ángel Rodríguez of Vinícola Real tells a similar story. “In Cañas we used to struggle to get 10% potential alcohol, but now we’re picking at 14% alcohol with no botrytis. In the past, the weather used to turn in mid-September and it rained a lot in October, so you often had to harvest before you were ready. Now the autumns are generally much warmer. It’s a totally different proposition.”

It’s important not to overstate the pace

of climate change, but the evidence that it's happening is incontrovertible. Rioja is part of a national and indeed worldwide trend. The world has just experienced its hottest ever January in 2025. According to the Spanish weather agency Aemet, temperatures in Spain have increased by 1.3°C in the last 60 years. More worryingly, things seem to have accelerated. 2017, 2020, 2022 and 2023 were four of the hottest-ever growing seasons in Rioja. As Jesús Mendoza of Ramírez de Ganuza joked: "In a year like 2022, you could ripen Mazuelo on a north-facing site at 700 metres in Elvillar. Twenty years ago, we would pick Graciano at the start of November; now it's the middle of September."

So far, climate change has mostly been a boon for Rioja, notwithstanding the increasing violence of some weather events, which are almost certainly related to global warming. But in the future, rising temperatures may make it difficult to grow well-balanced grapes, especially Tempranillo, in the flatter, hotter areas of the Rioja Oriental, such as Aldeanueva, Alfaro and Calahorra, where irrigation is already widespread and may become a necessity, assuming there is enough water available. August harvests, often at night with machines, are increasingly common here.

Simón Arina Robles of Bodegas Baigorri is convinced that Rioja's future "will lie with vineyards at altitude, which is why we're buying parcels above 550 metres" and I think he's right as far as the best, terroir-focused wines are concerned. Places like Ábalos, Elvillar, Kripán, Rivas de Tereso and the higher parts of Labastida and Samaniego are increasingly in demand, as are land and vineyards in the Alto Najerilla and the north-western corner of the Rioja Alta close to the Montes Obarenes.

Roda, for one, has established 10 hectares of vineyards in Cellorigo on what used to be wheat fields, while Benjamín Romeo of Bodega Contador has been developing a six-hectare vineyard called Llano de la Madera at 720 metres in San Vicente de la Sonsierra. A man who has made his name with full-bodied Tempranillos is "increasingly interested in Garnacha, Graciano and Mazuelo". Even more extreme is Solana de Ramírez's La Venta vineyard of Sauvignon Blanc at 770 metres in Ábalos. "When we planted in 2015," says Javier Ramírez, "people said we were crazy. Now

everyone is moving towards the mountains."

Rioja's new frontier used to be Barón de Ley's La Carbonera estate at 870 metres in the Rioja Oriental, but David Sampedro of Bodegas Bhilar has gone higher still in Kripán, where he planted 3.4 hectares at 900 metres with Viura, Chardonnay, lavender and some experimental whites in 2024. "I'm trying to get authorisation to try lots of different varieties on with the help of the regional Basque government," he says, "things like Pinot Noir, Nebbiolo and Rufete Blanco. We have to think outside the box. We need altitude as well as latitude." "In 20 years' time," predicts Sampedro's wife Melanie Hickman, "everyone will be trying to buy land in places like Kripán."

As temperatures continue to rise, new areas outside the DOCa may have to be considered. Grañón, Manzanares de Rioja, Matute and Santo Domingo de la Calzada are all possibilities, as are sites in the Sierra de la Demanda. San Lorenzo, the highest point in the mountains at 2,271 metres, would be too cold, but villages such as Anguiano, San Román de Cameros and Torrecilla en Cameros all have potential. The problem with extending the DOCa's boundaries is partly political, as if villages in the province of Rioja are given the nod, you can be sure that others in Álava and Navarra will apply too.

Most of these areas have no vines, at least not yet, but one that does is Villaverde de Rioja in the foothills of the Sierra de San Lorenzo. From here, Richi Arambarri and Raúl Acha of Vintae have released two brilliant Vinos de España sparkling wines under the Pandemonium label, made with Viura and Garnacha planted ten years ago at 800 metres. "It's colder and drier than Champagne," says Arambarri. "The potential is mind-boggling."

Not everyone has access to fruit from higher and/or cooler areas, of course, so we'll have to see how Rioja overall copes with rising temperatures. What is undeniable is that the region is facing a challenging future. What's more, this has happened in a relatively short space of time. According to Paco Hurtado, the first time Marqués de Riscal made a wine with more than 12.5% alcohol was in 1964. Since the 1980s, general alcohol levels have been increasing by 0.5% per decade and reds with 14.5% are now commonplace.

Different ways of farming are one solution

to these challenges – there’s evidence that organic, biodynamic and regeneratively farmed vineyards cope better with drought and heat, as do old vines with more established root systems. “Old vine parcels performed much better in 2022 and 2023,” says Robert Frías of La Rioja Alta. These parcels are “very smart”, according to Víctor Ausejo, “they know how to look after themselves”. Some growers and viticulturists think this is an example of epigenetics; that old vines accumulate experience, as it were.

Other ways of mitigating the effects of climate change include bigger, more shaded canopies, earlier de-leafing for certain varieties, pruning later, switching to north/south row directions, wider spacing between plants, comparatively higher yields (within reason), cutting back roots to reduce vine vigour, using bush vines rather than trellises, choosing the right clones, as well as rootstocks such as 110 and 41B that delay ripening, earlier picking and shorter macerations. A number of bodegas, including CVNE, La Rioja Alta, Muga and Roda also transport their grapes to the bodega in refrigerated lorries at 4°C.

Fernando Martínez de Toda, Rioja’s leading academic viticulturist covered these things and more in a book published in 2019 entitled *Técnicas Vitícolas Frente al Cambio Climático*. His conclusion is, or rather was, comparatively upbeat. If a raft of different techniques is employed to delay budding, ripening and harvest, the resulting wines can potentially retain acidity and freshness, depending to a degree on the variety and where it is planted. “We can adapt to this new situation,” he wrote then. “We have experience of growing grapes in hot areas, and we have the time to combat the effects of climate change in our vineyards.” Six years later, let’s hope the estimable professor was right.



Vintage variation is part of Rioja’s appeal, but four of the last five harvests have been challenging.

The region has a deserved reputation for more or less consistent quality at all price levels, especially when it blends across its different sub-regions, but the differences between growing seasons can be dramatic. The last decade illustrates this perfectly, with substantive variations in picking dates, heat spikes, vineyard

diseases and rainfall. The best of these vintages deserves five stars; the worst one at a pinch, although the Consejo Regulador does its best to put a positive spin on all of them.

The size of the harvest fluctuates considerably. This is affected by what occurs during the growing season – frost in 2017, torrential rain in 2018, mildew in 2020, extreme heat in 2022 and heavy harvest rains in 2024 being five recent examples - but also by the maximum permitted yields, which change annually and are more often a response to the balance between supply and demand in the market place than a reflection of the quality of the vintage. Taken together, these factors explain the variation in yields over the last 15 years: 2010 (255 million litres), 2011 (267m), 2012 (245m), 2013 (253m), 2014 (295m), 2015 (298m), 2016 (317m), 2017 (250m), 2018 (336m), 2019 (270m), 2020 (268m), 2021 (281m), 2022 (285m), 2023 (259m) and 2024 (195m). 2024 is the smallest crop in 30 years.

Self-evidently, the vintage can have a marked effect on the style of the wines, especially if they come from single sites or villages where local conditions have a greater impact, most notably in the cooler parts of the Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa. Indeed, the desire to avoid these ups and downs is one reason why big brand owners (and some smaller ones) prefer pan-regional blends, minimising vintage variation by using fruit from the warmer Rioja Oriental where the conditions are generally warmer and the harvest earlier.

It’s not always wise to generalise about a region as large and diverse as Rioja, covering an area 120 kilometres long and 40 kilometres wide; conditions in, say, Álbalos and Alfaro are often very different, as the vegetation and landscape make all too clear. As Carlos Mazo of Vinos en Voz Baja puts it, “good years in the Rioja Oriental are those when there is a bit more rain, especially just before harvest, but that’s not the case in parts of the Rioja Alavesa and Rioja Alta.”

And then there’s the question of personal choice, not to mention good viticulture. For some, 2018 was cold, wet and over-cropped. For others, especially those who kept their yields down, it was an elegant vintage that, as Tom Puyaubert of Exopto says, “expressed individual terroirs beautifully”. 2019 was considered a

very good, structured vintage, but it wasn't to everyone's taste. Carlos San Pedro of Pujanza, who didn't make his top red, Cisma, says that he prefers the much trickier 2020. Despite its challenges – 47mm of rain fell in the high part of San Vicente de la Sonsierra on June 8th - Eduardo Eguren of Cuentaviñas calls 2020 a “great vintage” and he's not alone. Arturo de Miguel of Artuke, who produced a 100-point La Condenada in 2020, says that, because of mildew, “we had to work harder in the vineyard and that wasn't necessarily a bad thing in the end.”

Those caveats aside, it makes a degree of sense to divide Rioja vintages into two categories: Atlantic and Mediterranean. Indeed, these terms are often used as a form of shorthand by winemakers. The Atlantic group – which includes 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2018, 2021 and now 2024 – is generally cooler and wetter, while the Mediterranean one – 2001, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2022 and 2023 – is generally hotter and drier. I say generally, because it's possible for a year to be hot and rainy, like 2015 and 2020, or cool and comparatively dry, like 2016 and 2021.

One group is not necessarily better than the other, although the wettest vintages, such as 2013, 2014, 2018, 2020 and 2024, are often the most complicated because of disease pressure, dilution and sometimes late ripening. It also depends on when the rain falls. The problem with 2024 is that it was unusually wet in September and October. Of the 576mm that fell in Uruñuela during the growing season, nearly 200mm were in those two months. In fact, it was the rainiest September in years. The average rainfall in Uruñuela in September and October, a good barometer for the region as a whole, is normally 33mm and 32mm. In 2024, it had 94mm and 105mm, respectively. Winter rainfall, on the other hand, was scarce with just 92mm between November 2023 and January 2024. Compare that with the 2015 growing season, a year with 616mm overall, 17mm and 51mm pre and during harvest, and 237mm between November 2014 and January 2015.

The Consejo Regulador appears to have a slight preference for Mediterranean vintages – which account for four out of its last half dozen

five-star ratings – but it also singles out more Atlantic years such as 2004 and 2010. Agustín Santolaya of Roda thinks that “all great vintages in Rioja have less than 500mm of rain; the only exception is 2005, which had 550mm”, but I think it depends on the area, as well as on soil type, altitude and other factors, not least human ones. Top producers are good at dealing with what the weather throws at them, relishing the chance to make wines that reflect a given year, but also using green harvests, sorting tables and machines and a selection of the best tanks and barrels in the winery.

Which are the best vintages of the last decade or so? It depends who you ask. Rioja should arguably be discussed bodega by bodega, village by village, vineyard by vineyard. For all that, most winemakers agree on the excellence of 2010, 2015, 2019 and 2021 and on the less-than-optimum conditions of 2013, 2014, 2020, 2022, 2023 and 2024, but what about 2011, 2012, 2016, 2017 and 2018? Almost all have their supporters and critics, which is how it should be in such a large and diverse region.

The more I taste the 2021s, the more I like the vintage. In fact, you could justifiably argue that it is the finest Rioja vintage since 2001. It was “great, great, great” (Isaac Muga of Bodegas Muga), all about “purity, minerality and perfect maturity” (Marcos Eguren of Viñedos y Bodegas Sierra Cantabria), “beautifully balanced” (Jorge Navascués of Contino), “textbook” (Abel Mendoza), “superb for reds and whites” (Carlos Sánchez), “very easy to make” (Tom Puyaubert of Exopto); “one of Rioja's finest” (Carlos San Pedro) and “harmonious and perfumed” (Álvaro Palacios of Palacios Remondo).

The conditions in 2022, the most torrid vintage since 1915, were much more challenging, providing what the academic and grower Professor Fernando Martínez de Toda called a “view of the future” and the effect that climate change is already having on Rioja. Álvaro Palacios calls the heat “indomitable” and “uncompromising”. One of the saving graces of the vintage which left some moisture in the soils, was the winter rains of November and December 2021. But it was the three summer heatwaves in June, July and August that had the biggest influence on the style of the resulting wines. Some of the reds are a little firm because of low yields and thick skins, but Eduardo

Eguren of Cuentaviñas, who made some great reds, thinks that the “salinity” of limestone soils is more noticeable in dry years. Some of the best wines are indeed impressive. “People criticised the 2022s,” says Arturo de Miguel of Artuke, “but they have a nice profile.” Carlos López de Lacalle of Artadi says that hydric stress slowed down ripening in the vineyards, which was a good thing.

If recent years ending in a one – 2001, 2011 and 2021 – have all been excellent, those ending in a three – 2003, 2013 and 2023 – have been more problematic. La Rioja Alta didn’t make any Reservas or Gran Reservas in any of that trio of vintages because of excessive heat, heavy rain and then a combination of the two, respectively. Indeed, 2023 was one of Rioja’s most complicated recent vintages. “It rained when it wasn’t supposed to rain and was hot when it wasn’t supposed to be hot,” says Julio Sáenz.

Mercury levels were almost as high as they were in 2022. Successive summer heatwaves meant that the vines shut down to survive in some cases, according to Sandra Bravo of Sierra de Toloño, and some old parcels gave up the ghost for good. Juan Carlos Sancha made none of his single vineyard Garnachas in 2023. The result was a mixture of ripe, over-ripe and under-ripe grapes, sometimes in the same vineyard, with some bunches achieving 18% potential alcohol and others struggling to reach 12%.

Rain at the end of August and throughout September made things worse. Lots of vineyards were hit by botrytis; dilution was a problem for others; and vines weakened by the summer heat lost their leaves amidst the downpours, curtailing photosynthesis. And then at the end of the month, the heat returned. Unseasonably, pear trees were flowering in Aulsejo in October as the harvest ended, confirming the strangeness of the year. Sporadic July hail in parts of Rioja added to the general sense of gloom.

In other words, 2023 was a year of selection and remedial winemaking. Those who worked hardest in the vineyard and cellar, and were prepared to throw away grapes that didn’t make the cut, will produce drinkable wines and sometimes better than that. But 2023 is a vintage that no one in Rioja will remember with fondness. The Consejo Regulador’s four star

rating as a “very good” vintage is eccentric, to say the least.

And what of 2024? It was again problematic, mostly because of the rain in September and October that I’ve already mentioned; there was also precipitation in May and June and the risk of mildew. Isaac Muga told me that his Pellenc optical sorting machine broke down because of overwork. “In some vineyards, it was removing 50% of the grapes,” he says. Another problem was finding pickers, as lots of grapes were ready to harvest at the same time. Luis Valentín of Valenciso used two picking teams instead of one, and paid his workers a 50% bonus. “Time was of the absolute essence”, he says.

2024 was a very small vintage – the tiniest since 1994 – which was partly a hangover from the heat of 2022 and 2023. Botrytis was a problem in many vineyards, as was the cold September and October weather. Many vineyards were left unpicked; other growers had their grapes turned away at the cellar door by bodegas. “A lot of people were forced to pick grapes that weren’t physiologically ripe because of disease pressure,” says Juan Antonio Blanco of Sínodo, who describes the resulting wines as “lacking perfume and structure”. No wonder one local newspaper described it as an “annus horribilis”.

And yet for all that, 2024 got the thumbs up from top producers such as Etienne Cordonnier of Viñas Leizaola, Eduardo Eguren of Cuentaviñas, David Sampedro of Bodegas Bhilar, Julio Sáenz of La Rioja Alta and Carlos Fernández of Tierra. Gonzalo Iturriaga of Macán rates it alongside 2021 as “one of the two best vintages since 2015”. As ever, good farming and knowing when to pick were crucial, but it’s definitely true that growers, more than bodegas, were the bigger losers in 2024. What we know is that the vintage was historically small. A more considered judgment of its quality will have to wait until the wines are in bottle.



Tempranillo is Rioja’s marquee variety, but it has its drawbacks too. Does any grape have as many

synonyms? The second edition of *Variedades de Vid en España* lists 30 of them, with two more in Portugal. Tempranillo can be called anything from Aragón to Vid Aranda and is grown in 16 of the country’s 17 autonomous communities.

This most Spanish of grapes – 87% of the world’s plantings are here – is grown all over the country, from Rioja to Valdepeñas, Toro to the Penedès, frequently changing its name along the way.

Rioja and Tempranillo are joined at the hip. In percentage terms, the grape may be more dominant in Ribera del Duero, where it accounts for 96% of the region’s 26,647 hectares, but Rioja has a much larger area under vine at 52,147ha, representing nearly 80% of its plantings. It wasn’t always so influential, as we shall see, but it has become so in the last 30 years for a variety of reasons and that is not necessarily to Rioja’s benefit.

No one really knows when Tempranillo arrived in Rioja, or Spain for that matter. One theory, now disproven, was that the grape came from Burgundy and had a monastic connection. Instead, it may well be indigenous. In 2012, DNA testing confirmed that its parents were Albillo Mayor and the almost extinct Benedicto that you can still find in old vineyards in Rioja and Ribera del Duero. The latter is being revived by Luis Cañas and sister bodega Dominio de Cair and is an exceptional variety.

The earliest mention of Tempranillo in Rioja dates back to 1651 in Labastida, although in *El Libro de Alexandre*, an epic poem about Alexander the Great composed between 1178 and 1250, a group of varieties from central Spain called “las tempraniellas” is mentioned. In 1790, the agronomist Gabriel Alonso de Herrera detailed the characteristics of Aragonés (a near synonym for Portugal’s Aragonéz) in Castilla, Extremadura and Andalucía and claimed it was mentioned as such as early as 1513 in Spain. Was Tempranillo Aragonés? The name was also used to describe Garnacha, so we don’t know for certain. But it’s safe to say that Tempranillo has a long history in Rioja.

Tempranillo is clonally diverse. According to the Instituto Tecnológico Agrario de Castilla y León, there are three distinct populations, covering Rioja, Toro and, finally, Cigales and Ribera del Duero, with clear morphological differences between them. Officially recognised clones include seven each from Rioja and Ribera del Duero, six from Toro and five from ENTAV in France, but the total number of unofficial clones is far greater than that. Roda has 552 biotypes in its experimental nursery in Villalba, while Luis

Cañas has 140 in its Campo de Germoplasma in Leza, although these numbers include massal selections.

Such research is vital, identifying better clones and selections, especially ones that are more resistant to heat and drought. The region is overwhelmingly planted with just two clones, RJ-43 and RJ-51, with a fair amount of RJ-175 as well. All three were mainly planted for high production and alcohol rather than quality, most notably during the boom years of the 1990s and 2000s. “Rioja’s worst Tempranillo vineyards were planted then,” confirms Eduardo Hernáiz of Hermanos Hernáiz.

Massal selections, particularly those taken from old vineyards, are almost always superior.

Bryan MacRobert of MacRobert & Canals says that a lot of this genetic material arrived from Toro in the 1920s and 1930s. “These vines have a different leaf and produce grapes with a thicker skin. They were brought to Rioja because parts of Toro had no phylloxera. Those old selections of Tempranillo – Tinta de Toro, if you prefer – make a big difference. Rioja mechanised late, in the mid-1970s, and you can see the difference in terms of spacing between the vines and genetic material in parcels planted before that.” The problem, of course, is that these parcels and clones yield less. That’s also, incidentally, why a lot of Garnacha was pulled out or grafted over to Tempranillo.

Tempranillo has several defining characteristics, although this varies to a degree from clone to clone and from one massal selection to another when it comes to colour, extract, tannin, acidity, pH and potential alcohol levels. The most important of these, at least in the cooler parts of the Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa sub-regions, is that it buds and ripens early – “temprano” in Spanish – which is why it was so well-suited to the region when it was sometimes harvesting well into October. Climate change has shifted the dial, not only in the much hotter Rioja Oriental, but on some flatter and south-facing sites in the other two sub-regions. “Tempranillo will never be good in the Rioja Oriental,” says viticultural expert Pedro Balda, “but even in other parts of Rioja it needs the right site.”

Tempranillo is a famously protean grape. It performs well in a variety of styles, from young and juicy to profound and age-worthy.

The variety is popular with consumers, which explains why it's so widely planted in Spain and why it has steadily colonised Rioja in the last 50 years. The variety also combines appealingly with oak, be it from France, the United States, Eastern Europe or even Spain, although too much wood can occlude its personality. Badly used barrels, inner staves or oak chips don't do the variety any favours.

If Tempranillo has a weakness, it is the grape's comparatively low acidity. This can be a real drawback in hotter climates, where many bodegas have to add tartaric acid to their wines. The situation is particularly acute in young vineyards with high potassium levels, which can produce wines with a pH of 4.0. Peter Sisseck of Dominio de Pingus in Ribera del Duero says that, "Tempranillo absorbs more than twice as much potassium as Garnacha and that falls out of the wine as tartaric acid. You either work around that in the vineyard or you have to correct the wine in the bodega. Above 3.8pH, you also get microbiological instability." In the 1970s and 1980s, when Tempranillo from the cooler parts of the Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa sub-regions often struggled to reach 12%, many growers added potassium to their vineyards, as they were primarily paid by degree of alcohol; it's still there in some cases.

Climate change is making matters worse all over Spain, not just in Rioja. Old bush vines are generally better adapted to the warmer conditions, retaining higher levels of acidity in their grapes. But those on trellises – the sort of stuff grown on fertile soils close to the Ebro River and on the baking flatlands of the Rioja Oriental are increasingly struggling, particularly in Mediterranean vintages like 2022 and 2023. Earlier picking dates are part of the solution, but only if the grapes are physiologically ripe. It's an inconvenient truth that Rioja's signature grape is "the most sensitive to drought and high temperatures," according to Professor Fernando Martínez de Toda. That's why so many winemakers are increasingly forced to intervene in the winery.

Is Tempranillo losing some of its appeal? "I'm bored of it, to tell you the truth," Tom Puyaubert of Bodegas Exopto told me. "Climate change has made it much harder to produce good varietal examples. Jon Cañas of Luis Cañas agrees: "Blends are the future of Rioja." In one

sense, this is not a new idea. Old vineyards in Rioja – and the wines they produce – are nearly always field blends, planted with a cocktail of varieties. "They often have a bit of everything," says Juan Valdelana of Familia Valdelana. This was partly an insurance policy – "if one failed, its neighbours might not", according to Ignacio Gil of Bodegas Mitarte – but also for complexity. Rioja is so strongly associated with its signature grape that it's easy to overlook how quickly it has come to rule the DOCa. As recently as 1973, its vineyards contained 39% Garnacha, 31% Tempranillo and plenty of other things besides.

Should Rioja reconsider its list of authorised grapes and its overdependence on Tempranillo? As a matter of urgency, it could increase the permitted percentage of white grapes in red blends, as Ribera del Duero has done. This is currently restricted to just 5%, or 15% in the case of whole-bunch fermented, carbonic maceration styles. While it's at it, the Consejo Regulador should also overturn the rule against mixed plantations, which have been outlawed since 1976. Each variety has to have its own row, or rows. Strictly speaking, it's even illegal to harvest red and white grapes at the same time, although most cosecheros ignore what is a non-sensical piece of legislation. In the past, even the comparatively recent past, red wines often contained 30% or more of white grapes, added for acidity, perfume and complexity.

There's no denying that Tempranillo is one of Spain's greatest red grapes, nor that it's capable of extraordinary things in Rioja, where it accounts for a massive 79.48% of the area under vine. But its spread hasn't left much space for other grapes. Rioja is considerably more diverse than its great rival, Ribera del Duero, but Tempranillo is still too dominant. The remaining 20% are made up of Garnacha (6.65%), Graciano (2.24%), Mazuelo (1.68%), Maturana Tinta (0.46%) and "other reds" (0.15%), a category that includes Benedicto, Bobal, Cabernet Sauvignon, Granegro (Alicante Bouschet), Merlot, Monastel, Moristel and Tinto Velasco among others, nearly always planted as field-blend components in old vineyards and tolerated rather than authorised by the Consejo Regulador.

All of these varieties are better suited to a warming world than Tempranillo, especially in the hottest parts of the Rioja Oriental. "I'm not against Tempranillo," comments Álvaro Palacios

of Palacios Remondo, “but I’d rather see grapes in their historical environment. When I took over from my father, I grafted all the Tempranillo he’d planted over to Garnacha.” “Tempranillo doesn’t have freshness here,” says Javier Arizcuren, who grows Garnacha and Mazuelo instead.

One solution is to use better clones and selections of Tempranillo. Another part of the answer involves using more Garnacha, Graciano, Maturana Tinta and Mazuelo, as well as other, as yet unauthorised grapes, such as Benedicto, Bobal (Requenas), Cadrete, Castellana Blanca, Garró, Julén, Malpuesta, Mandón, Miguel de Arco, Morate and Tinta Velasco. Rubén Jiménez, director of viticulture at Amaren and Luis Cañas has been doing some fascinating work identifying these minority grapes in his company’s extensive vineyards. So far, he’s made wines from 56 of them, a remarkably diverse haul. His research has also thrown up some intriguing finds, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec and Verdejo in a parcel planted in Leza in 1912.

The best of these micro-vinifications is Benedicto, none other than the mother of Tempranillo. Jiménez started with 36 vines of the variety and is now up to 800. “It ripens a week after Tempranillo,” he says, “and it’s much fresher with a pH that’s 0.1 to 0.2 lower.” It also has a lot of personality – tangy, peppery and intense, with flavours that owe something to Mencía and Syrah. And it’s arguably the most historic Rioja grape of all.

Rioja should surely authorise some of these varieties, at least on an experimental basis, as a buffer against climate change, as well as to add diversity to its vineyards. A much quicker solution would be to increase the permitted percentage of white grapes in red blends. As things stand, many producers are forced to lie about what’s planted in their vineyards. “It’s crazy,” says Itu Ruiz of Bodegas Teodoro Ruiz Monge. “Our ancestors could barely read and write, but they knew what to plant and how to get the best out of their vineyards.”

Why not go back to the pre-1970 past? Some producers with old vines are already doing just that, disobeying the regulations in secret to make what one of them called “ancestral Riojas”. “What would you rather do?” one of them asked me. “Add 35% of white grapes or a whole lot of tartaric acid? It’s a no brainer.” It is indeed.



Rioja’s whites are increasingly exciting and diverse.

To most consumers, Rioja is red wine country. Given that red grapes account for nearly 91% of plantings and that white Riojas rarely feature on wine lists outside the region, this isn’t surprising. But the situation is changing. In a world that is drinking more whites and turning away from reds, Rioja is increasingly recognised as a source of excellent quality. Indeed, in a region that has lost ground with its reds, the whites provide a welcome source of optimism. Since 2017, sales have increased by 25%. What’s more, prices have risen by 41%, reaching an average of €4.32 per litre. So successful is the sector that there is talk of grafting red vines over to whites at a cost of €3,000 per hectare after subsidies.

These days, Rioja can more than compete with Cataluña, Galicia and Rueda, all of which are much better known for their *blancos*. The region’s stylistic diversity is unparalleled in Spain and possibly anywhere in the world, thanks to the Rioja’s array of terroirs, grape varieties and cellar techniques. The region’s top wines are as complex as the best white Burgundies, as long-lived as Mosel Rieslings, as individual as the wines of Friuli. And, for the most part, they are comparatively inexpensive. The £710 you’d pay to drink a bottle of López de Heredia’s super rare 2004 Viña Tondonia Blanco Gran Reserva is the exception to the rule, but even that looks like good value alongside, say, a bottle of Montrachet.

I’m convinced that Rioja’s whites are improving with every vintage. This year, 33 of my 129 wines of the year were blancos. The range of styles was unparalleled. Alongside a number of brilliant Viuras, there were blends of Viura and other grapes, including Calagraño, Chardonnay, Garnacha Blanca, Jaén, Malvasía Blanca, Maturana Blanca, Moscatel, Palomino, Rojal, Sauvignon and Turruntés/Albillo Mayor, a varietal Garnacha Blanca, a stand-alone Malvasía and a unique, nine-grape cuvée that includes almost everything except Viura. The spread of vintages, from 2012 to 2023, was also impressive.

The region’s vineyards currently contain 9.33% of white varieties, but that seems certain to increase given the market’s response. In order of importance, if not necessarily quality, they are Viura (6.12%), Tempranillo Blanco (1.2%),

Verdejo (0.46%), Sauvignon Blanc (0.42%), Garnacha Blanca (0.38%), Chardonnay (0.25%), Malvasía Blanca (0.2%), Maturana Blanca (0.12%), Turruntés (0.01%) and “other whites” (0.09%). These “other whites” are tolerated rather than encouraged and include varieties found in old vineyards, such as Calagraño, Jaén Blanco, Mazuelo Blanco, Moscatel de Alejandría, Palomino, Pavés and Rojal, as well as more international and more recently imported Gewürztraminer, Marsanne, Roussanne and Viognier. Plantings are nothing like as extensive as they were in 1985, when 23% of Rioja’s 38,817 hectares were white, but they are growing again.

Rioja’s whites changed for the better in the early 1970s when Enrique Forner of Marqués de Cáceres introduced temperature-controlled fermentation in stainless steel tanks to the region, making wines that were crisp, aromatic and fresh. Until then the preference in Rioja, and elsewhere in Spain, was for older whites, ideally with a degree of oxidation. Essentially, the more evolved and even oxidised a wine was, the “better” its quality. Forner launched a new style of Rioja, whose descendants are still successful today. I don’t have the figures, but most of the DOCa’s commercial whites are produced in this way. They are pleasant, fruity and easy to drink and these days they can be made from Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Verdejo as well as local grapes.

The best examples of the more traditional style, fermented and aged in (often American) oak barrels, were always spectacularly good and still are. But their number has dwindled. We are not quite in the last saloon, but we’re not too far away. You can count the number of leading exponents on the fingers of two hands: Bodegas de la Marquesa, Franco Españolas, Gregorio Martínez, Heredad de Baroja, López de Heredia and Marqués de Murrieta. I love these wines, but even I have to admit that they are niche products.

Between these two poles, there are lots of other possibilities. The catalyst for change was the decision to expand the list of authorised grapes in 2007 to include (mostly regrettably) Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Verdejo and (more excitingly) three rediscovered local specialities - Maturana Blanca, Tempranillo Blanco and Turruntés (Albillo Mayor). Whatever

you think of the imported grapes – does the world need another Sauvignon Blanc? – Rioja’s winemakers are not short of choice.

Viura is the most planted of them all and has seen a revival in its fortunes in recent years. Growers were forbidden to plant the grape between 1992 and 2012, but the ban was lifted following pressure from the co-operative sector. Viura can express lots of different styles as well as quality levels. “It can be the best or the worst,” comments Raúl Tamayo of Nivarius. Its fans would definitely argue that it’s capable of greatness, most notably from low-yielding old vines on clay and limestone soils. Even at its least interesting, Viura’s only sin is neutrality. And in Rioja, it has found its home-from-home.

Fantastic varietal examples are made by Abel Mendoza, Bodegas Valcuerna, Bodegas Valdemar, Castillo de Cuzcurrita, Carlos Sánchez, CVNE, Cupani, Finca Allende, Hacienda Grimón, Marqués de Murrieta, Nivarius, Pujanza, Remírez de Ganuza, Vinícola Real and Vivanco. Viura also combines well with other grapes. Look out for the Viura-led cuvées from Artuke, Bodegas Bhilar, Bodegas Mauro, Bodegas Tierra, Cosme Palacio, Cuentaviñas, Etérea Kripan, Finca Valpiedra, Gómez Cruzado, Hermanos Hernáiz, López de Heredia, Muga, Ostatu, Sierra de Toloño, Valenciso, Viñedos El Pacto and Vinícola Real, as well as the field blended Cerro La Isa Blanco from Juan Carlos Sancha and Nahikun from Sierra de Toloño.

There are a few blends that don’t include Viura, but they are more of a minority interest. The best example is Remelluri’s amazing, nine-variety assemblage. And then there are some exceptional varietal wines made from Garnacha Blanca (Abel Mendoza, Dominio de Berzal, Finca Allende and Víctor Ausejo), Malvasía Riojana (Bodegas Amaren, Bodegas Tierra and Exopto), Maturana Blanca (Juan Carlos Sancha, Nivarius and Viña Ijalba) and even Mazuelo Blanco (Bodegas Tierra).

It’s a shame that Tempranillo Blanco, which is far less exciting than Maturana Blanca, a fantastic grape that dates back to 1622 in Rioja, has been the new variety of choice. Yields, as ever, are the main reason for this. Almost all the plantings are on the very productive 110R rootstock for good reason. “Maturana Blanca gives you 6,000 kilos per hectare,” says Pedro Salguero of Viña Ijalba, “whereas Tempranillo

Blanco can easily get to 8,000.”

New vineyards at altitude – Nivarius’ Finca La Nevera plantings at 830 metres in Nalda and Barón de Ley’s Finca Carbonera at 875 metres are the highest so far – as well as areas in the southern and north-western zones of the Rioja Alta and the northern part of the Rioja Alavesa once considered marginal for consistent white wine production have brought more diversity to Rioja’s whites. So, too, has the use of skin contact, larger barrels, older wood, concrete eggs and even Caucasian oak. The result is an excitingly heterogenous array of wines. But for all their quality, they aren’t easy to sell at the same prices as the top reds.

Until the middle of the 20th century, more than a third of Rioja’s vineyards were white, partly because the climate was cooler then but also because many red wines were co-fermented with grapes like Viura and Malvasía Blanca. Those days are gone – Tempranillo’s rise and rise looks almost unstoppable - but growers and producers are taking Rioja’s whites to new levels. “In the past, they were regarded as a sub-product,” says Luis Valentín de Valenciso, “but now they are gaining the recognition they deserve.” David Sampedro of Bodegas Bhilar goes even further: “The potential of white wines in Rioja, especially in the Rioja Alavesa, is incredible.”

Another white wine category that deserves a mention is sparkling wines. There is a surprisingly long tradition of producing bubbly in Rioja. Bodegas Bilbaínas released Lumen for the first time in 1913, and is generally considered the region’s first producer of the style, but Rafa Vivanco says that French producers made sparkling before that in Haro in the late 19th century, where Charles Delouvin was the renowned cellar master at Savignon Frères et Cie. Long before that, the Spanish general Don Baldamero Espartero had made fizz with Rioja grapes as early as 1848, winning a silver medal for his wine in 1857 in Madrid.

It was not until 1977 that Muga followed Bilbaínas’ lead in the 20th century. Now the number of sparkling wine producers is growing with every vintage. Other noteworthy names include Bodegas Urbina, Bodegas Valdemar, JER, Medrano Irazu, Nivarius, Vivanco and Pandemonium, which is made just outside the borders of the DOCa in San Millán de la Cogolla.

It’s confusing that a lot of sparkling Rioja is still sold as Cava, a name that is mostly associated with Catalonia. There are 95 hectares classified as such that, at least for now, are excluded from the Rioja DOCa. Driven by Muga, there is a move to change this situation and promote Rioja Espumoso de Calidad Superior as a category in its own right. About time.



Rioja is making the best and most diverse red wines in its history.

This may sound like a bold statement, but it’s true. There have never been so many bodegas producing so many world-class wines in such a range of styles. “Ponme Otro Rioja” – serve me another Rioja – the advertising slogan adopted by the Consejo Regulador over the last couple of years is an attempt to cash in on this diversity. Consumers really are spoilt for choice.

Rioja’s problem is that not enough punters know this. Part of the reason for this, paradoxically, is the decent quality of its commercial, traditional style reds, many of which are sold at very affordable prices. These wines are what David Sampedro of Bodegas Bhilar calls “standard Rioja”. They don’t quicken the pulse, but nor will they have you looking for the nearest sink or spittoon. Given the on-going oversupply in the region, despite the very short 2024 vintage, the predominance of this style is unlikely to change in the near future. Taste a range of supermarket Riojas and they are generally drinkable at the very least, especially when you compare them with cheap Bordeaux. You could even argue that one of the region’s greatest challenges is that there is not enough of a quality divide between the basic stuff and mid-market reds. Why trade up, when the flavours of inexpensive Tempranillo aged in vanilla-scented American oak, or, even better, made in a juicy, carbonic maceration style with addition of some white grapes, are mostly pleasant to drink?

And yet it is worth treating yourself, at least in relative terms. Even Rioja’s finest wines are generally not that expensive. Of my 129 wines of the year, only 27 retail at €100 or above, compared with 55 that cost €50 or less. Burgundy and now Barolo lovers contemplate such prices with nostalgia, knowing that they have gone for ever. For the time being, top Rioja

remains one of the world's greatest bargains.

Not so long ago, almost every article you read about Rioja talked about the contrast between modern and traditional producers. The difference was not always as clear cut as people claimed. It was easy to name the extremes – La Rioja Alta, López de Heredia, Hermanos Peciña and Bodegas Urbina at the ultra-traditional end versus the likes of the Eguren brothers of Viñedos de Párganos, Viñedos de Sierra Cantabria and Señorío de San Vicente, Allende and Contador at the other end of the spectrum. But most wineries sat between the two poles and some, such as La Rioja Alta (with 890 and Torre de Oña) or Muga (with Prado Enea and Torre Muga), made both styles. Even the divide between French and American oak-aged wines was sometimes overstated. “After five years of use, they taste pretty similar,” according to Ángel Urbina of Bodegas Urbina.

Rioja really is the land of 1,000 wines, as the DOCa's marketing slogan would have it. Indeed, thanks to its mix of grape varieties, terroirs and micro-climates, it is also increasingly difficult to pigeon hole, especially at the top end. Taste a late-picked Garnacha from a high-altitude vineyard in Rivas de Tereso against a blockbuster Tempranillo from San Vicente de la Sonsierra, made ten minutes' drive away, and you could be tasting wines from totally different regions, not just varieties. “My aim, and that of many of my friends these days, is to move beyond stereotypical Rioja,” says Eduardo Eguren of Cuentaviñas.

There's a red Rioja to suit every palate, from juicy carbonic maceration quaffers to some of the longest-lived and most complex wines of all. That's what makes the place so fascinating. Its famous diversity is most apparent in its finest wines. A comparative tasting of the 21 reds that scored 97 points or more in this report would make the point with ringing clarity. There are old-vine field blends, one of which includes Cabernet Sauvignon, varietal expressions of Garnacha and Tempranillo, traditional age-worthy classics, single estate wines and new wave stunners. The vintages range from 2011 to 2023.

Such a line-up is both exciting and unprecedented in its variety and quality. And there's a common thread to all of these wines,

even the most obviously modern in style. That is balance. A lot of the reds that made Rioja famous in the 1990s and 2000s, often lauded by American critics, were bigger, bolder and more concentrated than the top wines of today. Taste some of those wines 30 years on and they have not aged particularly well as a rule. The Italian consultant Alberto Antonini, who works for Bodegas Proelio, says that, in its quest to make international style wines, “Rioja lost touch with its roots in some cases. You need to understand who you are and where you come from.”

Rioja continued to make its classic styles as well, of course, but they slipped below the radar to a certain extent. López de Heredia almost disappeared from the market, but determinedly stuck to its way of doing things, thank goodness. “We should never forget that we've been making light, elegant wines for 150 years in Rioja,” says Miguel Merino Junior, who sees the blockbuster reds of the 1990s as something of an aberration. You could argue that some of these ultra-modern, super-concentrated wines were expressions of terroir, but I think technique and oenology were more important. “They were often pretty macho,” comments Carlos Sánchez, “closer to ink than wine in some respects.”

The best Rioja reds today are a more faithful expression of place, what David González of Viña Salceda calls “more soil than fruit”, or oak for that matter. Sandra Bravo of Sierra de Toloño talks about “making the bodega invisible” in her wines and I know what she means. At the top end, Rioja is more focused on vineyards these days and less interested in the amount of time its reds spend in French or American oak. “To make wines like this,” Carlos Fernández of Bodegas Tierra once told me of his El Belisario red, “you need the right vineyard, not oenology. No vineyard, no wine.” Bryan MacRobert of MacRobert & Canals agrees: “The first step is always to understand your vineyards; then express them.”

I think it's significant that many of the best younger winemakers in Rioja spend more time in their vineyards than they do in their cellars. Moreover, most are eschewing new 225-litre oak in favour of foudres, larger barrels, older wood, concrete eggs, amphorae or plain stainless steel. Carlos López de Lacalle of Artadi currently uses equal parts French and Austrian wood on his reds, and is planning to switch entirely

to foudres from the latter country in future. “French oak adds sweetness, which we don’t really need anymore; Austrian oak adds acidity.”

López de Lacalle is not the only winemaker to embrace freshness, brightness and precision. Other top producers whose wines show all three are Carlos Sánchez, Miguel Merino, Carlos Mazo, José Gil, Sandra Bravo and Arturo de Miguel. “No one valued the sort of wines I’m making 15 years ago,” says Mazo. “But that’s changing.” Producing them is not always easy in a warming climate. Indeed, Arturo de Miguel of Artuke, describes it as “the biggest challenge facing all Spanish winemakers right now”. But overcoming the challenge is worth it. These are some of Spain’s greatest reds. “The wine that expresses place and ages best is a balanced wine,” says José Gil.

Also worth noting is the fact that many of the best bodegas have done away with the traditional categories of Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva, which indicate time spent in 225-litre barrels rather than origin. Instead, they favour the broader, less restrictive Genérico classification. For all that, it remains the case that Rioja has more barrels (1.31 million of them) than all the French regions put together. Make a generic red or white and you can ferment and age it in pretty much anything you choose. “Why should Rioja copy Bordeaux?” asks the Alberto Antonini. “Why can’t we choose the size of our barrels, the way people do in almost every other wine region.”

Why indeed? 225-litre barrels aren’t traditional and they aren’t necessarily best suited to many of the styles the region is now producing. The Consejo Regulador and the dominant Grupo Rioja within it still regard Gran Reserva Rioja as the peak of what Rioja produces – equating prolonged ageing with quality - but this is rarely true anymore. Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva wines have their fans, and can be wonderful, but Rioja is much more diverse than that. Terroir, not oak, should be the focus now.

In this year’s report, my wines of the year include 77 “generic” wines, compared with one Crianza, 15 Reservas and 16 Gran Reservas. (The remainder are made up of Vinos de España, all from Artadi that works outside the DOCa), Vinos de Pueblo and Viñedos Singulares.) No one would deny that the likes

of Contino, CVNE, La Rioja Alta, López de Heredia, Marqués de Cáceres, Marqués de Murrieta, Muga, Remírez de Ganuza, Remelluri, Urbina, Valenciso and Vinícola Real are impressive producers, but their more traditional wines are in the minority on my podium these days. I say traditional, but Óscar Alegre of Alegre & Valgañón says that the model that “uses Tempranillo to make Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva wines is only 50 years old. In some senses, it’s recent.”

Genérico wines are gaining in popularity, partly because Crianzas, Reservas and Gran Reservas have been devalued by too many cheap, poor quality examples in the market place, but also because assertively oaky wines are less fashionable among younger consumers these days. “They’re turning away from Crianzas and turning back to carbonic maceration reds,” says Iñigo Berzal of Dominio de Berzal.

Something that Álvaro Palacios told me about his wines a couple of years ago still resonates. “I sell a lot in Beaune,” he said. If Burgundians and Burgundy lovers are drinking the top Riojas, that’s a great compliment. Bodegas may make more noise releasing their wines through the Place de Bordeaux, where many top global brands are traded, but the link with Burgundy is more telling and, I think, apposite. “We are the natural substitute for Burgundy, offering wines that are cheaper and can be just as good,” adds Óscar Alegre. “We just need to get the best out of our vineyard parcels and express that in the bottle.”

Rioja was hugely influenced by the so-called Médoc style from Bordeaux in the 19th century and still prides itself on its ability to blend wines made with different grapes, parcels and sub-regions. But maybe a more valid comparison is with the Côte d’Or or Barolo. For many of the top bodegas these days, Burgundy and Piedmont, rather than the Gironde, are Rioja’s spiritual home.



The Viñedos Singulares category is still a work in progress. When

Rioja’s Consejo Regulador announced in June 2017 that it was introducing a new tier of Viñedos Singulares, the move was heralded as revolutionary. But in some respects, it was just an attempt to impose a legal framework on a

category that already existed, at least informally. Several top producers were illegally using the words “single vineyard”, “viñedos propios” or “vinos singulares” on their labels, as well as the names of individual parcels that aren’t, strictly speaking, brands and therefore fall foul of Rioja’s famously proscriptive rules.

Riojans have always acknowledged the primacy of certain plots, even when they blended them. López de Heredia’s Tondonia, Bosconia and Cubillo are three examples that date back to the 19th century, as is Marqués de Murrieta’s Castillo Ygay estate near Logroño. Indeed, one of the choicer ironies of the debate about the merits of single vineyards before the category was officially sanctioned in 2017 was that the beautiful San Asensio cellar of Luis Alberto Lecea, the genial ex-president of the Consejo, contained concrete tanks from the 1890s labelled with the names of different parcels: Campillo, Cofrades and Peña La Cueva.

Remelluri (1971) and Contino (1973) are often cited as Rioja’s first single estates, but vineyard-focused wines are part of a much older tradition. Professor Ludger Mees book, *El Médoc Alavés*, about a movement that imported personnel and know-how from Bordeaux in the 1860s in the wake of phylloxera’s arrival in the Gironde, makes it clear that the modernisers were keen to identify the best sites from which to source their wines. Telmo Rodríguez of Remelluri and Bodega Lanzaga argues that Rioja was already focused on “people, places and vineyards” when the French arrived. The Rioja Alavesa in particular was home to the so-called “cosecheros” (grower-producers) who made wines from their own grapes and sold them locally. Rodríguez says that in 1685, the village of Labastida alone had 243 cosecheros, 30 of whom were women. Wander around villages like Samaniego and San Asensio today and you can still see the remnants of abandoned underground cellars, complete with stone lagares for foot-treading.

Most Riojas, for all that, are made from a blend of plots and, in many cases, two or more of its sub-regions (Rioja Alta, Rioja Alavesa and Rioja Oriental), combined to produce a more consistent product by smoothing out what are often marked differences between so-called “Atlantic” and “Mediterranean” vintages. Volumes and economies of scale are important factors too. Commercial Rioja in particular

wouldn’t exist without the Rioja Oriental, where the climate is warmer and more reliable (if increasingly hot and dry), and yields are higher, thanks to irrigation, productive clones and mechanisation.

At the top end, too, there are some excellent wines that come from two or more vineyards, villages or sub-regions. Skilful blending, as well as prolonged ageing in oak barrels, have always been regarded as arts in Rioja, and rightly so. Producers such as Baigorri, CVNE, La Rioja Alta, López de Heredia, Exopto, Muga, Proelio, Ramón Bilbao and Roda relish the opportunity to use grapes from cooler as well as warmer zones to achieve harmony and a degree of consistency in their wines.

And yet for most of the very best Riojas, the trend is away from pan-regional blends towards individual villages and sites. Rioja is becoming more like Burgundy and Barolo and less like Bordeaux or Champagne. The following very good to outstanding producers all make at least one single vineyard or estate wine: Abel Mendoza, Alegre y Valgañón, Amaren, Amézola de la Mora, Arizcuren, Artadi, Artuke, Berta Valgañón, Bodega 202, Bodegas Bhilar, Bodega Lanzaga, Bodegas de la Marquesa, Bodegas Muro, Bodegas Palacio, Bodegas Proelio, Bodegas Valdemar, Bodegas y Viñedos Eguíluz, Carlos Sánchez, Castillo de Cuzcurrita, Conde de Valdemar, Cuentaviñas, Cupani, Dominio de Berzal, Etérea Kripan, Exopto, Finca Allende, Finca Valpiedra, Gil Berzal, Gómez Cruzado, Hermanos Hernáiz, Javier San Pedro Ortega, José Gil, Juan Carlos Sancha, La Lomba, Loli Casado, López de Heredia, Luis Cañas, MacRobert & Canals, Marqués de Murrieta, Marqués de Vargas, Martínez Lacuesta, Miguel Merino, Mitarte, Nivarius, Ostatu, Paco García, Palacios Remondo, Pujanza, Ramón Bilbao, Remelluri, Roda, Señorío de San Vicente, Sierra de Toloño, Sierra Cantabria, Sínodo, Sístole, Sonsierra, Tierra, Tobelos, Torre de Oña, Remírez de Ganuza, Ukan, Urbina, Valdemar, Víctor Ausejo, Viña del Lentisco, Viñas Leizaola, Viñedos El Pacto, Vinícola Real, Vinos en Voz Baja, Viñedos de Párganos and Ysios.

The creation of the Viñedos Singulares category was a recognition of this trend as well the way that the fine wine market is (mostly) moving towards brands with a greater sense of place. Overcoming a degree of local scepticism at

the start, it was commendably serious, at least at the start. The extensive dossier that still has to be submitted to the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture for approval is followed by two blind tastings by a panel of six experts at the Consejo Regulador. The latter process has been controversial, as we shall learn.

These “minor geographical units that can comprise a single or several cadastral plots” (to use the official description), must have yields that are 20% lower than the rest of the Denominación de Origen Calificada, be over 35 years’ old, use hand harvesting and have been owned or rented by the same bodega or co-operative for over a decade. Their number has been increasing with each year and currently stands at 162 recognised vineyards owned by 97 producers. Despite initial fears that Rioja would be overrun by undeserving Viñedos Singulares, this hasn’t happened. The area under vine stands at 265.93 hectares, up from 246.37 ha a year ago, equivalent to 0.44% of the total area under vine. Hardly a stampede.

The quality of the selected wines has been decent to excellent so far, with few disappointments. There are 15 Viñedos Singulares among my top wines this year; of the 49 I tasted for this report, 34 scored 93 points or more. And yet there are problems with the selection process, which is regarded as unnecessarily secretive by some critics. The expert tasting panel doesn’t include people who make Viñedos Singulares, for a start, who might be more supportive of the category. A bigger drawback is that, even if a *vineyard* is certified as a Viñedo Singular, the wine it produces has to be approved each year. To date, 110 wines have made the final cut, a figure that does not include repeat vintages of the same wine.

To the dismay of several producers, their wines have been accepted in one vintage and rejected in another, failing to reach the minimum score of 93. There is no appeal process. “They should classify the vineyard and be done with it,” says Adriana Laucirica of Tobelos, “otherwise it’s a commercial headache when your wine doesn’t pass. The market should decide if it’s up to scratch.” The figure is not published, but I’ve been told by a reliable source that nearly a third of the wines tasted at the Consejo Regulador are rejected. The pass rate is arguably too low for the category’s own good.

Price, too, has been a concern. The 49

Viñedos Singulares wines reviewed in this report sell for between €13 (2023 Mitarte Entrepeñas) and €450 (2023 Palacios Remondo Quiñón de Valmira), which is also confusing for consumers. I’m among Ignacio Gil of Bodegas Mitarte’s biggest fans, but €13 seems too cheap to me, no matter how much of a bargain the wine represents. Are these some of Rioja’s most exclusive wines, sourced from special vineyards, or are they not?

Even the greatest defender of the category would have to admit that most of Rioja’s best single parcel wines are not on the current list. Of the 72 bodegas I cited above, only 25 or so have made Viñedos Singulares. Some of the refuseniks feel that there are too many authorised wines. “How many expectational sites can you have?,” asks Arturo de Miguel of Artuke. Others argue that the selection criteria are wrong or just can’t face the paperwork.

But the biggest criticism remains the omission of established sites and the presence of bodegas that could not be described as part of Rioja’s elite. “There are wines on the list that shouldn’t really be there,” Andres Kubach MW of Bodega Bideona told me a year ago, “and another 100 that aren’t, but should be.” It’s hard to disagree with him, although his own business has had three more sites approved last year. Imagine a roll call of Burgundian Grands Crus that omitted La Tâche, Montrachet and Chambertin. Famous, world-class single vineyard wines like La Condénada, Contino, Viña Tondonia and Las Beatas are nowhere to be seen on the list and very unlikely to join. Telmo Rodríguez, owner of Las Beatas, describes the Viñedos Singulares as a “cadaver that was born dead”. Ouch.

The more worrying thing for the Consejo Regulador right now is that several of the bodegas that initially supported the initiative have decided to abandon it. The list includes Berta Valgañón, Hermanos Hernáiz, Javier San Pedro, Loli Casado, MacRobert & Canals, Tobelos, Urbina and, most damagingly of all, given the number of Viñedos Singulares it has registered, Luis Cañas. One member of this group accused the Consejo Regulador of deliberately sabotaging the category with ludicrous levels of bureaucracy, which seems a little far-fetched. Juan Luis Cañas is closer to the truth when he says that “putting Viñedo Singular

on our labels hasn't brought us any commercial advantage. We're going to replace that with Vino de Zona Rioja Alavesa instead. We will continue to farm these parcels in exactly the same way."

For all that, another nine new bodegas joined the list of Viñedos Singulares in 2024. So the category continues to appeal to some. And at least it's an attempt to talk about individual sites and promote their differences. For all the valid criticisms, that's a step in the right direction.



Crisis? What crisis? "The mood, as you know, ain't cheery." That was the response of Víctor Urrutia of CVNE to a question about the current situation in Rioja early this month. If anything, it's a massive and probably deliberate understatement, delivered with Urrutia's English-schooled wit. Travelling around the region last October, in the middle of a very small, challenging harvest of decidedly mixed quality, people said far worse to me. In nearly 40 years of writing about Rioja, I've never come across so many long faces. "I'm a natural optimist," Juan Carlos Sancha told me, "but Rioja is in dire straits."

Grape prices were low in 2024 – one very large bodega was offering €0.2 for botrytis-ravaged grapes that had been turned away at other wineries. But even healthy ones were sometimes hard to sell. The laws of supply and demand normally mean that, in vintages when the crop is small, prices increase, but not in 2024. "In frost-hit 2017, which was a bigger vintage than 2024, people were calling us incessantly to buy grapes," says Robert Monforte of the Bodega San Miguel co-operative in Ausejo. "There was a panic. This year, no one was interested." Many vineyards were left unpicked because of a lack of buyers or because growers didn't have enough money to treat them against botrytis.

The tiny 2024 crop, following a reduced harvest in 2023, has come at the right time in one sense. Rioja is still producing more wine than it can sell. A healthy ratio between stock and sales is 3.0, meaning that there is enough wine in tanks and barrels to supply the market for three years. At the end of 2023, the ratio stood at 3.77; now it is around 3.4. Still too high, but lower than it was a year ago, thanks to the distillation of 30m litres funded by the governments of La Rioja, Navarra and the Basque country. The

2024 vintage was hit by rain, but also used green harvesting earlier in the year to reduce volumes. It is not clear whether either of these measures – green harvesting and distillation – will be on offer again in 2025.

There is still too much Rioja in the system, especially red Rioja. Grape prices have hit subterranean levels, average bottle prices are subdued and sales are down in Spain, if slightly up, from a low base, overseas. Luis Valentín of Valenciso thinks we haven't hit the bottom of the barrel yet. "You watch, people will be selling wines at €1.20 a bottle this year." He may well be right. I saw Buy One Get One Free (BOGOF) offers when I was in Rioja last October.

Back in the good old days of 2017, Rioja sold 284 million litres of wine. The 2024 figure, unconfirmed at this report went to press, is likely to be around 240m litres, so in a normal vintage the area under vine is now too extensive for the market's needs. No wonder there is so much discussion in the region about following the lead of Bordeaux and pulling out swathes of vineyards.

Rioja has some things going in its favour, not least the quality of its best wines, but it is also a region with manifest problems. Some of them have been building for years, the result of bad decisions by all sorts of people, especially the region's executive, as well as an inability to think beyond the short or medium terms; others have been beyond its control (Covid-19, the economic downturn, the war in Ukraine, Brexit and changing consumer tastes). But not even its greatest supporter could argue that Rioja is in a good place right now. "We've been suffering from a form of cancer for too long," says Luis Rodríguez of Bodegas de Luis R. "We didn't remove it and now it's metastasised."

How bad is Rioja's predicament? Eduardo Hernáiz of Hermanos Hernáiz and the Asociación de Bodegas Familiares de Rioja thinks that Rioja is on the precipice of an "economic catastrophe". Vicente Cebrián of Marqués de Murrieta agrees that the 2024 harvest and what follows it in 2025 could prove to be "a tipping point", and not in a good way.

The biggest problem – one that partly stems from Rioja's struggles in the market place – resides in the vineyards. "The low price of grapes is unsustainable," adds Marqués de Murrieta's winemaker, María Vargas. "A lot of vineyards

will be abandoned or pulled out, especially lower-yielding older parcels, and we will suffer the consequences.” There’s a growing number of bodegas and co-operatives that are struggling, subsisting on savings, on dwindling lines of credit or by paying late or not at all, but it’s self-evident that producers can’t make wine without grapes. Many bodegas, especially smaller bodegas, have their own vineyards, of course, but most of the biggest ones – the very people who have a huge influence over the way the region is run – are net buyers of grapes and bulk wine.

Not all bodegas pay their growers badly. A number of them offer between €1 and €1.8 per kilo; Telmo Rodríguez told me that he can go as high as €4 per kilo for exceptional grapes from old vines. But these are the exceptions. Álvaro Loza calls €1.20 a “dignified price” to offer. “Looking after your growers is part of the economic sustainability of the region.” The average market price was around €0.65 per kilo in 2024, however, which barely covered the cost of production and was only just above what growers were paid to do a green harvest in May and leave their entire potential crop on the ground. One co-operative, which hadn’t paid its members for the 2023 harvest, offered them €0.30 in 2024.

Without an extensive network of growers, Rioja cannot continue to function as it does. Some critics in the region believe that driving people off the land, forcing them to abandon their vines or sell them at knock-down prices, is part of a deliberate strategy on the part of some of the largest bodegas. There has always been an uneasy relationship – and a degree of confrontation – between the two, but the current situation favours the volume producers more than growers. “The situation is crazy. It’s cheaper to buy grapes than farm them,” says Carlos Martínez Bujanda of Finca Valpiedra. “If you’re a big bodega that pays €0.4 per kilo and sells wine at €1.20 a bottle, you’re happy.” “There’s too much wine,” confirms Víctor Ausejo. “It’s a sellers’ market. As a grower, the only solution is to add value by making your own wine.”

To make things worse, the birth rate in Spain is at an all-time low – many people are more interested in pets than having kids – and even the growers who do have children don’t have a solid succession plan in many cases. The problem with low prices is that the next generation sees no

future in viticulture. “Young people are leaving the countryside and looking for work in towns and cities,” says Arturo de Miguel of Artuke. The wine business is increasingly unviable. Pedro Balda and Juan Carlos Sancha normally teach a Masters’ Degree in Viticulture and Oenology at the Universidad de Rioja. It’s a course that has a number of distinguished alumni, such as Javier Arizcuren and Miguel Merino. Normally there are 50 students in the classroom. This year, four signed up, and for the first time in 20 years, the course was cancelled.

Guzmán Zarrate, a grower who supplies the San Cebrín co-operative, admits that in the 1990s, he and his family made a good living. “When I was younger, I worked alongside my father and grandfather in our vineyards. You don’t see that any more. I’ve got 11 hectares and that’s not enough to pay me and my son, Pablo. He loves the countryside, but we can’t afford two salaries, so he had to get a job as a civil servant with the Tragsa Group.” Jesús Bauza, another grower, told me over a glass of wine at the Las Postas restaurant in Laguardia that Rioja is living through a form of “economic feudalism”. He’s close to giving up. “When I stop, that’s it. My kids don’t even know where my vineyards are.”

Is there a way out of this? I’ll suggest a few possible solutions in the next section, but it doesn’t help that there is an ongoing power struggle between the large, mostly-volume oriented producers and the small and some medium-sized bodegas who feel that the Consejo Regulador favours the interests of the big boys, most notably the dominant Grupo Rioja. On the 6th of September 2023, the Asociación de Bodegas Familiares de Rioja walked away from the decision making body of the region’s Regulatory Council, accusing the Grupo Rioja and its allies of pursuing a business model based on quantity rather than quality. Bodegas Familiares represents 80 of the region’s 450 active bodegas and had the votes of a further 136 before it left the Consejo. At one point, it looked as if ABRA, the Asociación de Bodegas de Rioja Alavesa, and its 70 members would also abandon the Consejo, but for now that has not happened. The Bodegas Familiares remain outside the tent and will not stand for election to the Consejo Regulador in 2025. At a time when Rioja should be working together to overcome a set of very real challenges, it is still divided.



Where next? This year, Rioja celebrates the 100th anniversary of the creation of its Denominación de Origen, the oldest and one of the most prestigious in Spain. Anyone who loves the region, its people and its best wines will, I am sure, be keen to join the festivities. I'll certainly be drinking more than my share of Rioja this year.

In some senses, 1925 is an arbitrary date. Rioja had taken measures to protect the quality and authenticity of its wines for at least a century before that, but this was mostly done at a local level sometimes by bodegas and more often by groups of growers. Rioja was legally recognised as a region of origin in 1920, according to Hubrecht Duijker's book *The Wines of Rioja*, followed by a more formal DO in 1925 and the creation of the Consejo Regulador in 1926. Interestingly, Duijker writes that the Consejo was "not very effective" in the early years of its existence, and nearly disappeared altogether. It was not until the Estatuto de la Viña came into effect in 1976 that it began to transform itself into the powerful – some might say too powerful – body that it is today.

Reading about the Consejo Regulador in Duijker's book, it seems considerably better run in the 1970s and 1980s than it is today, with better legislation to prevent the accumulation of power by one or more sectors of the region's wine industry. Its overriding role was one of supervision, of ensuring that growers and bodegas followed the rules set in 1970. Some of them look positively antiquated – red wines from the Rioja Alta sub-region had to have at least 10% alcohol – and others were already too proscriptive. Barrels "of the Bordeaux type", with a capacity of 225-litres, were obligatory, just as they still are today if you want to label your wine as a Crianza, Reserva or Gran Reserva.

As it celebrates the 100th anniversary of the founding of its Denominación de Origen, Rioja finds itself in a crisis that is largely self-made. I sometimes wonder what the people who created the DO in 1925 would have made of its development over the last 30 years. We have no way of knowing, but my guess is that they would criticise some of the decisions taken by the executive, particularly the unchecked expansion of vineyards in lesser quality, higher-yielding areas and the admission of certain international

white grapes. But I think they would have found some positive things too. Take the presence of certain Rioja wines on the Place de Bordeaux, where they are sold alongside some of the finest and most expensive wines in the world. Maybe they would also have been proud of the quality of the region's best reds and whites and the way many of them express individual sites and villages. The lustre of the best wines is coruscating.

So how should Rioja deal with its current malaise? The Greek word *krisis*, derived from the verb *krinō*, means to "distinguish, to choose or to decide". Moments of crisis can also be moments of change, of change for the better. Juan Carlos López de Lacalle of Artadi's decision to leave Rioja's Designation of Origin (DOCa) in 2015 prompted a change of tack in the region, with the introduction of village wines and *Viñedos Singulares*. As the historian Ludger Mees puts it: "The crises of the past also triggered innovation, modernisation and change and, eventually, led to the triumph of Rioja wine in the world and the generation of wealth for its people and their region."

What form should such changes take? And how radical should they be? More to the point, how can they happen without "spilling blood" in the words of outspoken local winemaker David Bastida Caro? (I think he was using a metaphor, but you never know.) People who are powerful rarely enjoy conceding power to others and that's the case with those in charge of the Consejo Regulador. But any meaningful change has to begin with an admission, not just within the Consejo Regulador, but in the region as a whole, that the status quo is a dead end, that the current model has failed.

Solving some of Rioja's problems will be painful. Others will be easier to fix. Outsiders who suggest solutions tend to be dismissed as "enemies of Rioja", as I know from personal experience, but here goes. These are 15 things that would improve the region. I've shared some of them before, but they are more relevant than ever today.

1. Resolve the current in-fighting in the region, especially between the Bodegas Familiares and the Consejo Regulador. Compromise. Listen to other points of view. Canvass all of the region's stakeholders.

Recognise that Rioja's problems are common problems. There are no enemies, just people who may disagree with you, possibly legitimately. Rioja is stronger together, particularly in times of crisis.

2. Once and for all, change the ludicrously unfair voting system within the General Assembly of the Organización Interprofesional del Vino de Rioja (OIVPR), so that it is truly democratic rather than based on volume, numbers of hectares and a co-efficient that doesn't reflect the true market price of Rioja's different wine categories. Right now, it's effectively a private club that serves the interests of the region's biggest wineries. Les Grands Chais de France doesn't run Bordeaux. Gallo doesn't run the California Wine Institute. Why is the Grupo Rioja and its allies allowed to run Rioja? Invite the Bodegas Familiares de Rioja, ABRA, ABC, ARAEX and all the various unions and growers' organisations to design and participate in a new, more equitable system, possibly with the help of a firm of management consultants.

3. Recognise that Rioja needs a new, younger leadership that is prepared to take difficult decisions, rather than leave it to bureaucrats and statisticians. Appoint people who love wine, not grey civil servants. More women on the team would be good.

4. Uproot 10,000 hectares of vines over the next three years, so that the region produces less wine. The Bodegas Familiares has suggested a vine-pull of 6,700 hectares, equivalent to around 10% of the area under vine, but Rioja should go further than this. The scheme should be voluntary, at least to start with, but supervised by an independent commission of agronomists and geologists. Growers with poor quality vineyards should be paid a small premium to remove them. Rioja needs to get rid of its worst parcels, not its best ones, even if the latter produce a smaller crop. Bad vineyards produce bad wines; alchemy does not happen in the bodega. Vineyards over 40 years' old should not be pulled out, unless they are of poor quality.

5. Good vineyards that are owned by older growers who have no children or

succession, and for which there are no willing purchasers, should be bought by a fund, possibly established with the help of the national or regional governments or the European Union, and distributed below market price to young growers and winemakers. Rioja needs future generations of both. Support them financially. The Consejo Regulador should also establish a series of bursaries to encourage growers and winemakers in their twenties to stay on the land and farm vineyards.

6. Until those 10,000 hectares have been removed, reduce permitted yields to 6,000 kilos per hectare or less, until the ratio of stock to sales is back under three, where it was in 2016. If necessary, apply for further emergency distillation measures to clear the region's cellars of excess wine. Otherwise, such wine will find its way onto the market, further depressing prices. The latest news from southeast Asia of a crime ring selling fake Rioja in Spain, China and Vietnam, with "an as-yet unnamed Rioja winery selling wine to the Chinese market without the necessary documentation" should give everyone pause for thought.

7. Rigorously taste cheap, large-volume wines just before they are released onto the market. At the moment, there is no such control. Rioja assesses prospective Viñedos Singulares with almost too much rigour at times, but not its bargain basement. Deny the worst of these the DOCa quality seal of approval. Remove them from the market. Speak to the bodegas that make them and explain why you are doing this. This sector accounts for around 20-30m of Rioja's 240m litres, but it does untold damage to its image.

8. Prevent bodegas, including distressed co-operatives, from selling wines below cost and fine them for doing so. Rioja should not be sold as part of a promotional deal by companies that produce other things, be it orange juice, olive oil, sangria or ham. There is no future for the region in the low-end, volume-driven game.

9. Crack down on fraudulent over-production, where people are juggling pieces of paper to over-crop certain vineyards,

while leaving others with lower yields unpicked. People caught trafficking wines from outside the DOCa should be prosecuted and banned from the region for good.

10. Investigate the use of resin and oak additives in Rioja wines. Again, prosecute miscreants, even if they are large bodegas with powerful allies.

11. Police the region, but do it equitably. Cheating is all too human, alas. “Echa la ley, hecha la trampa” as they say in Spanish – where there’s a law someone will break it – but apply the same rules to everyone. Distinguish between fraud and minor infringements of labelling protocols. The Consejo Regulador should focus on what matters. One family producer wasted €25k in 2018 on legal fees contesting just such an action. Saúl Gil Berzal has just left the DOCa over something similar.

12. Commission a detailed independent study of Rioja’s terroirs from a company like Timesis and establish a pyramid of quality along the same lines as Burgundy, identifying the best Grands and Premiers Crus, as well as the Village and Generic sites. Overall, Rioja should promote its best wines. Think top down, not bottom up. Organise tastings that showcase the region’s top wines. Just like the one I’ve done off my own bat in London over the last two years.

13. Make more of Rioja’s potential for tourism. The situation is much better than it was. It was good to see the World’s 50 Best Vineyards celebrated in Rioja last year and to see Marqués de Riscal awarded the number one slot in 2025. But give us more wine routes. Learn from the bodegas that understand oenotourism – Bohedal, Lecea, Valdelana, Vivanco – and make Rioja one of the most visited wine regions on the planet. Another Tuscany. While we’re at it, improve your social media. It’s mostly uninspiring, bland and boringly generic.

14. Expand Rioja’s list of authorised grapes to include historic varieties such as Benedicto, Bobal and Calagraño and, with climate change in mind, think seriously about the

future viability of Tempranillo in some areas of the DOCa. Fund the research of companies like Luis Cañas. Increase the permitted percentage of white grapes in red wines to 30%. Right now, the rules force people to lie about the reality of what is planted in historic vineyards. Rioja was never a monoculture. Encourage growers to plant things other than Tempranillo, with subsidies if necessary.

15. Change the rules about oak ageing, particularly the one that forbids the use of anything but 225-litre barrels for Crianzas, Reservas and Gran Reservas. Talk less about wood and Rioja’s enormous “parque de barricas” more about provenance and terroir. Recognise that the majority of the region’s best wines are “genéricos”. Producers appreciate the greater freedom. Talk about and celebrate Rioja’s diversity.

Will any of this happen? Who knows? It’s not as if most of my suggestions are new. And not much has happened so far. Maybe what Rioja needs right now is a bit more peaceful direct action, the like of which we saw after harvest last year, when growers took to the streets on tractors to protest their plight. Or maybe its best bodegas should put pressure on the Consejo Regulador to countenance change. The region should demand more from its politicians, leaders and functionaries. Until now, they have not come up with viable answers. No one in power is taking the decisions that could alleviate or resolve the crisis.

Rioja, says Bryan MacRobert, should aspire to be “the best, not the biggest”. Not tomorrow, or next year. Now. “We’ve seen this coming for a long time,” says Koldo Eguren of Ukan. “Now is the time to raise prices, to up our game, to change the image of Rioja. It won’t be easy, but there’s no time to waste.” Vicente Cebrián of Marqués de Murrieta, arguably Rioja’s most prestigious producer, says “that Rioja must focus on quality, quality, quality”. And I fully agree with him. “We should be making some of the best wines in Europe,” adds Eduardo Hernáiz of Hermanos Hernáiz. I think Rioja is already there. It just needs to believe in itself and deal decisively with its problems. 2025 is as good a year as any to do it.

The Podium

Winemaker of the Year Ana Barrón of Marqués de Vargas

Young Winemaker of the Year Carlos López de Lacalle of Artadi

Winemaking Legend Isacín Muga of Bodegas Muga

Co-operative of the Year Manuel Quintano Labastida

Grower of the Year Juan Antonio Blanco of Sínodo

Best Cellar Door Experience Bodegas Javier San Pedro Ortega

Overall Red Wines of the Year 2021 Artadi El Carretil and 2022 Cuentaviñas
El Tiznado

Overall White Wine of the Year 2017 Remírez de Ganuza Blanco Olagar
Gran Reserva

Overall Rosé of the Year 2013 Hacienda López de Haro Classica Rosado

Overall Sparkling Wine of the Year 2019 Bodegas Urbina Valle del Ángel Viñas
Viejas Brut

Overall Sweet Wine of the Year 2015 Vinícola Real 200 Monges
Vendimia de Invierno Esencia

Red Wine Discovery of the Year 2023 Our Hands by Jesús Mendoza

White Wine Discovery of the Year 2023 Hermanos Hernáiz Guardacumbres
Blanco

Rosé Discovery of the Year 2019 Bodegas Valcuerna Clarete Fino

Sparkling Wine Discovery of the Year 2020 Pandemonium Blanco de Blancas

Best Value Red of the Year 2023 Bodegas y Viñedos Eguíluz Joven

Best Value White of the Year 2023 Pago de Larrea Caecus Blanco Verderón
Fermentado en Barrica

Best Value Rosé of the Year 2023 San Cebrín De Boca en Boca Rosado

Best Value Sparkling Wine of the Year 2020 Vivanco Cuvée Inédita Extra Brut

Hall of Fame

WINEMAKER(S) OF THE YEAR

2015	Ábel Mendoza and Maite Fernández	2020	Benjamín Romeo
2017	María Vargas	2021	Mercedes López de Heredia
2018	Jorge Muga	2022	Álvaro Palacios
2019	Pablo Eguzkiza and Telmo Rodríguez	2023	Marcos Eguren
		2024	Jesús Mendoza
		2025	Ana Barrón

YOUNG WINEMAKER OF THE YEAR

2015	Roberto Oliván	2021	José Gil
2017	Arturo de Miguel	2022	Javier San Pedro
2018	Miguel Martínez	2023	Carlos Mazo
2019	Sandra Bravo	2024	Eduardo Eguren
2020	Roberto Vicente	2025	Carlos López de Lacalle

WINEMAKING LEGEND

2017	Paco Hurtado	2022	Basilio Izquierdo
2018	Jesús Madrazo	2023	Matías Calleja
2019	Pedro Urbina Senior	2024	Manuel Ruiz Hernández
2020	Felipe Nalda	2025	Isacín Muga
2021	Miguel Merino Senior		

CO-OPERATIVE OF THE YEAR

2019	Bodegas Sonsierra	2023	Bodegas Tarón
2020	Bodegas Covila	2024	Marqués de Reinosa
2021	Bodegas Sonsierra	2025	Manuel Quintano Labastida
2022	Bodegas Sonsierra		

GROWER OF THE YEAR

2019	Juan Carlos Sancha	2023	Ruben Jiménez
2020	David Sampedro	2024	Carmelo Espinosa Muga
2021	Carlos Fernández	2025	Juan Antonio Blanco
2022	Enrique Eguíluz		



Reds

GENÉRICO

- 2021 Abel Mendoza 52-60
- 2022 Artuke El Escolladero
- 2022 Artuke Finca de Los Locos
- 2022 Artuke La Condenada
- 2021 Benjamin de Rothschild & Vega Sicilia Macán
- 2021 Benjamin de Rothschild & Vega Sicilia Macán Clásico
- 2021 Bodega Lanzaga La Estrada
- 2022 Bodega Lanzaga Las Beatas
- 2022 Bodega Lanzaga Tabuérniga
- 2021 Bodegas Amaren El Cristo de Samaniego
- 2019 Bodegas de la Marquesa Nico by Valserrano
- 2022 Bodegas Exopto El Espinal
- 2022 Bodegas Mauro Baynos
- 2023 Bodegas y Viñedos Eguíluz Carrapeciña
- 2023 Carlos Sánchez Buradón Tinto Las Plegarias
- 2022 Carlos Sánchez La Bendecida
- 2021 Castillo de Cuzcurrita Tilo
- 2021 Contino Mazuelo Don Vicente
- 2022 Cuentaviñas Alomado
- 2022 Cuentaviñas CDVIN Garnacha
- 2022 Cuentaviñas El Tizado
- 2022 Cuentaviñas Los Yelsones
- 2022 Cuentaviñas Septeno
- 2021 CVNE Real de Asúa Carromaza
- 2020 Finca Allende Mingortiz
- 2022 Gómez Cruzado Pancrudo
- 2023 Hermanos Hernáiz Guardacumbres
- 2023 José Gil Camino de Ribas
- 2023 José Gil El Bardallo
- 2023 José Gil La Canoca
- 2023 Juan Carlos Sancha Peña El Gato Granito Garnacha
- 2022 Luis Cañas Finca Ribagaitas
- 2022 Miguel Merino La Ínsula
- 2022 Miguel Merino La Loma
- 2022 Miguel Merino La Quinta Cruz Mazuelo
- 2021 Muga Aro
- 2023 Our Hands by Jesús Mendoza
- 2020 Paco García El Cerro de San Miguel
- 2023 Palacios Remondo Valdelareina
- 2022 Pujanza Norte
- 2021 Ramón Bilbao Límite Sur
- 2020 Remelluri Gran Vino de Remelluri
- 2020 Remelluri Grandes Lindes de Remelluri Jesusa Areta San Vicente de la Sonsierra
- 2020 Remelluri Yjar
- 2022 Remírez de Ganuza UV

TIM ATKIN RIOJA 2025 SPECIAL REPORT

- 2021 Roda Cirsion
- 2021 Señorío de San Vicente
- 2021 Sierra Cantabria Mágico
- 2023 Sierra de Toloño La Dula Garnachas de Altura
- 2022 Sístole Maturana Tinta
- 2021 Torre de Oña Viñedos Artesanales El Camino
- 2022 Verum Ilusioverum CDVN Garnacha
- 2022 Verum Iterverum SVS Tempranillo
- 2019 Viña del Lentisco Villota Tinto Selección
- 2022 Viñas Leizaola El Sacramento
- 2022 Viñedos de Páganos La Nieta
- 2023 Viñedos El Pacto El Pacto de Cárdenas Ojo Gallo
- 2015 Vinícola Real 200 Monges Areté
- 2023 Vinos en Voz Baja Barrio Pastores
- 2023 Vinos en Voz Baja Nace La Sierra

GRAN RESERVA

- 2001 Bodegas Urbina Gran Reserva Especial
- 2007 Bodegas Urbina Gran Reserva Especial
- 2018 CVNE Imperial
- 2011 La Rioja Alta 890
- 2016 La Rioja Alta 904
- 2018 Marqués de Murrieta
- 2012 Marqués de Murrieta Castillo Ygay Gran Reserva Especial

RESERVA

- 2021 Contino
- 2020 CVNE Imperial
- 2013 López de Heredia Viña Tondonia Tinto
- 2020 Marqués de Cáceres Gaudium
- 2021 Marqués de Murrieta
- 2021 Marqués de Murrieta Dalmau
- 2017 Remírez de Ganuza
- 2017 Remírez de Ganuza Trasnocho
- 2020 Valenciso

VIÑEDO SINGULAR

- 2022 Arizcuren Barranco del Prado
- 2020 Bodegas Proelio La Canal del Rojo Garnacha
- 2021 Bodegas Tierra El Belisario
- 2019 Castillo de Cuzcurrita Cerrado del Castillo
- 2021 Marqués de Vargas Hacienda Pradolagar
- 2021 Marqués de Vargas Selección Privada
- 2020 Ostatu Gloria de Ostatu
- 2019 Ostatu Laderas de Ostatu
- 2023 Palacios Remondo Quiñón de Valmira

- 2022 Sínodo Los Tollos
- 2022 Sínodo Raposeras
- 2022 Viñedos El Pacto Finca Valdechuecas

VINO DE ESPAÑA

- 2022 Artadi El Carretil
- 2022 Artadi La Poza de Ballesteros
- 2022 Artadi San Lázaro
- 2022 Artadi Valdeginés
- 2022 Artadi Viña El Pisón

VINO DE PUEBLO

- 2021 Bodegas Tierra Fidel Tinto



Whites

CRIANZA

- 2017 López de Heredia Viña Gravonia

GENÉRICO

- 2023 Abel Mendoza 5V
- 2022 Artuke Trascuevas
- 2021 Bodegas Amaren 60 Malvasía
- 2022 Bodegas Mauro Baynos Blanco de Viura
- 2022 Carlos Sánchez 1er Los Montes Bellos del Buradón
- 2023 Carlos Sánchez Buradón Blanco Las Plegarias
- 2023 Hermanos Hernáiz Guardacumbres
- 2023 Pujanza Añadas Frías
- 2022 Remelluri Blanco
- 2021 Roda I Blanco
- 2023 Sierra de Toloño Nahikun
- 2023 Valenciso Blanco
- 2023 Víctor Ausejo Garnacha Blanca
- 2018 Viñedos El Pacto Jesús Acha

GRAN RESERVA

- 2018 CVNE Monopole Clásico
- 2013 Gregorio Martínez Blanco Selección
- 2020 Marqués de Murrieta Capellanía
- 2015 Martínez Lacuesta Colección Familia
- 2017 Remírez de Ganuza Blanco Olagar
- 2012 Vinícola Real 200 Monges
- 2007 Vinícola Real 200 Monges Selección Especial

RESERVA

- 2014 López de Heredia Viña Tondonia Blanco
- 2021 Muga Flor de Muga Blanco
- 2022 Remírez de Ganuza Blanco
- 2013 Vinícola Real 200 Monges
- 2013 Vinícola Real 200 Monges Selección Especial

VIÑEDO SINGULAR

- 2023 Bodegas Valdemar Conde Valdemar Finca Alto Cantabria Blanco
- 2023 Juan Carlos Sancha Cerro La Isa Blanco
- 2022 Nivarius Valdesabril



Rosé

GENÉRICO

- 2019 Bodegas Valcuerna Clarete Fino



Sparkling

VINO DE PUEBLO

- 2019 Bodegas Urbina Valle del Ángel Viñas Viejas



Sweet

GENÉRICO

- 2016 Vinícola Real 200 Monges Vendimia de Invierno
- 2015 Vinícola Real 200 Monges Vendimia de Invierno Esencia

GRAN RESERVA

- 2017 CVNE Corona

Tim's 2025 Rioja Classification

First Growths

Artadi	José Gil	Pujanza
Artuke	La Rioja Alta	Remelluri
Benjamin de Rothschild/ Vega Sicilia	López de Heredia	Remírez de Ganuza
Bodega Lanzaga	Marqués de Murrieta	Viñedos y Bodegas Sierra Cantabria
Carlos Sánchez	Marqués de Vargas	Vinícola Real
Castillo de Cuzcurrita	Miguel Merino	
Contino	Muga	
	Palacios Remondo	

Second Growths

Abel Mendoza	Finca Allende	Tierra/Creaciones Exeo
Arizcuren	Gómez Cruzado	Valenciso
Bodegas Amaren/Luis	Hermanos Hernáiz	Viñas Leizaola
Cañas	Juan Carlos Sancha	Viñedos El Pacto/ Pandemonium
Bodegas Mauro	Ostatu	Vinos en Voz Baja
Bodegas Proelio/Nivarius	Roda	
Cuentaviñas	Sierra de Toloño	
Exopto	Sínodo	

Third Growths

Alegre y Valgañón	Bodegas Valdemar	Torre de Oña
Baigorri	CVNE	Ukan
Basilio Izquierdo	Finca Valpiedra	Urbina
Beronia	Hermanos Peciña	Verum
Bodegas Bhilar/ Etérea Kripan	MacRobert & Canals	Victor Ausejo
Bodegas de la Marquesa	Marqués de Cáceres	Villota
	Ramón Bilbao/Lalomba	Viña Real

Fourth Growths

Altos de Rioja	Cupani	Monge-Garbati
Berta Valgañón	Dominio de Berzal	Sonsierra
Bideona	Gil Berzal	Teodoro Ruiz Monge
Bilbaínas	Javier San Pedro Ortega	Tobelos
Bodegas Valcuerna	LAN	Viña Ijalba
Bodegas y Viñedos Eguíluz	Loli Casado	Vivanco
Cosme Palacio	Mitarte	

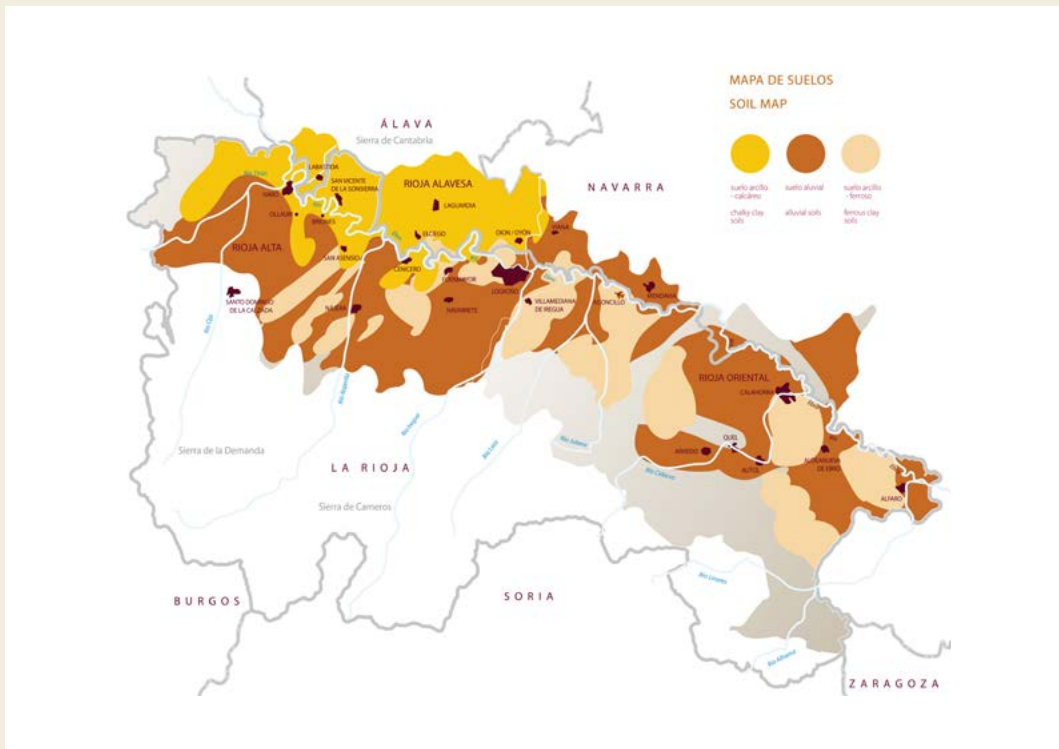
Fifth Growths

Alonso & Pedrajo	Gregorio Martínez	Medrano Irazu
Amézola de la Mora	Hacienda Grimón	Paco García
Bodegas De Luis R	Jade Gross	Sístole
Bodegas Muro	José Basoco Basoco	Valdelana
Bodegas Tarón	Marqués de Terán	Viticultores de Lapuebla
Diego Magaña	Martínez Alesanco	Ysios
Finca de los Arandinos	Martínez Lacuesta	

Crus Bourgeois

Aiurri	Dominio de Nobleza	Murua
Altanza	Dominio del Cárabo	Navarrsotillo
Altos de Lapuebla	Elena Corzana	Nunc Dimittis
Álvaro Loza	Eguren Ugarte	Ojuel
Área Pequeña	El Hombre Orquesta	Olarra
Bárbara Palacios	El Otero Aimarez	Ondarre
Bello Berganzo	Ezki Wines	Ortega Ezquerro
Bodega Reta	Familia Martínez Elorza	Óscar Pérez Nanclares
Bodegas Bagordi	Familia Monje Amestoy	Our Hands
Bodegas Corral	Faustino Rivero	Pago de Larrea
Bodegas Escudero	Fernández de Piérola	Pastor Díaz
Bodegas Forcada	Fernández Eguíluz	Pedro Balda
Bodegas FyA	Finca Vistahermosa	Perica
Bodegas Gama	Fincas de Azabache	Quiroga de Pablo
Bodegas Gómez de Segura	Franco Españolas	Ramírez de la Piscina
Bodegas Launa	Glera Wines	Residence Wines
Bodegas Lozano	Hacienda El Ternero	Rioja Vega
Bodegas Mazuela	Heredad de Baroja	Rolland & Galaretta
Bodegas Orube	Heredad Martínez	Romántica Compañía de Vinos
Bodegas Pérez Maestresala	Hermanos Fernández	Ruiz de Viñaspre
Bodegas Tihom	Hermanos Frías del Val	San Cibrín
Bodegas Voelos	Ilurce	San Martín de Ábalos
Burgo Viejo	Jaime Ruiz	Sasikume
Casa La Rad	Jairo Morga	Señorío de Líbano
Castillo de Mendoza	La Bodeguita Escondida	Solana de Ramírez
Clos Ibai	La Carbonera	Solar de Samaniego
Compañía de Vinos	Larraz Caudum	Tronado Wines
Heraclio	Las Orcas	Viña Bujanda
Cornelio Dinastía	Leza García	Viña Salceda
Cosecheros de Labastida	López de Haro	Vinícola Lapuebla de Labarca
Diez del Corral	Manael	Vinos Pinedo
Diez-Caballero	Manuel Quintano	Zinio
Domaine Canadell-Sánchez	Marqués del Atrio	
Domeco de Jarauta	Mendieta Osaba	
	Montecillo	

Soils of Rioja



A Note on *Tastings, Scores, and Classifications*

This report is based on an extensive three-week tour of Rioja in October 2025. In the company of Marisa Velilla, I visited more wineries and vineyards than ever, deepening my knowledge of the region and its producers. It was a pleasure to be back, even during what everyone agrees was a very challenging vintage.

All of the wines I tasted were assessed sighted, many of them with the winemaker in attendance. The information they provide helps me to write better tasting notes. Needless to say, such information does not influence my scores. I've been doing this for long enough to make up my own mind.

Although what follows is my take on this year's tastings, I draw on a much longer acquaintance with Rioja and its wines. I first visited the DOCa back in 1988 and have returned

on countless occasions. Rioja has a special place in my heart and I was delighted to be made a member of the Cofradía del Vin de Rioja and be recognised for my "Outstanding Contribution" to the region in the Rioja Recognises Awards in 2015, as well as to receive the prestigious Premio Memorial Víctor de la Serna from the Real Academia de Gastronomía for my work in helping to promote Spanish wine in 2016. I have been a Caballero del Vino since 2007.

No individual can taste every wine from Rioja's 500-odd producers, but I have again sampled almost all of the region's top wines and a broad selection of what the region has to offer. I don't live in the area, but I think I know Rioja as well as any non-Spanish wine writer. Covering the DOCa remains a labour of love.

My 2025 Classification

This is my tenth deliberately controversial attempt to classify Rioja's best producers. This is very loosely based on the 1855 Bordeaux Classification, with five different bands of 20 wines each (First, Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth growths) and a group of 100 Crus Bourgeois. As there is every year, there has been a considerable degree of movement within the classification, as well as a number of new entries. That's part of the fun of doing it on an annual basis. New or returning to the line-up of classed growths this year are Aiurri, Bideona, Bodegas Tarón, Bodegas Valcuerna, Bodegas y Viñedos Eguíluz, Diego Magaña, Jade Gross, Paco García, Valdelana, Viticultores de Lapuebla and Ysios. Huge congratulations in particular to Artadi and José Gil, who have joined my First Growth for the first time.

I am sometimes asked how I construct this classification. The answer is that it's not scientific, or intended to be. I don't add up the scores from each producer and divide them by the number of wines to arrive at an average. I

look at track records – where one exists – but also focus on what I have tasted for each report. Other factors are important, too: has there been a change of winemaker, how did the winery deal with the vintage conditions and, finally, does it perform well on a consistent basis?

One unwritten rule is that I generally don't classify a producer as more than a Cru Bourgeois in its first vintage, or, to be more precise, the first vintage that I have tasted. This applies to Nunc Dimittis and Our Hands, both of which have the potential to rise in the 2025 classification.

Unlike the 1855 Classification, quality is the only criterion I use, although some of my top wines are certainly expensive, too. These are my favourite producers, chosen on the basis of tasting and, in most cases, one or more visits to their bodegas. I hope that the selection, which includes a mixture of producers (modern, traditional, large, small, recent and well-established), will again stimulate debate and encourage people to try the best wines that Rioja has to offer.

Updated Star Ratings

of Recent Vintages

YEAR	OFFICIAL RATING	TIM'S RATING
2023	★★★★★	★★★★★
2022	★★★★★	★★★★★
2021	★★★★★	★★★★★
2020	★★★★★	★★★★★
2019	★★★★★	★★★★★
2018	★★★★★	★★★★★
2017	★★★★★	★★★★★
2016	★★★★★	★★★★★
2015	★★★★★	★★★★★
2014	★★★★★	★★★★★
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2002	★★★★★	★★★★★
2001	★★★★★	★★★★★
2000	★★★★★	★★★★★
1999	★★★★★	★★★★★
1998	★★★★★	★★★★★
1997	★★★★★	★★★★★
1996	★★★★★	★★★★★
1995	★★★★★	★★★★★
1994	★★★★★	★★★★★

TIM ATKIN RIOJA 2025 SPECIAL REPORT

I've tried to keep this report to readable proportions, but, once again, my enthusiasm for Rioja and its wines got the better of me. This document runs to more than 70,000 words and it could have been even longer.

Rather than provide a tasting note for the 1,058 wine I tasted, I have focused on the 868 brands that scored 90 points or more. To put my scores in context, I regard 85-89 points as being the equivalent of a bronze medal, 90-94 a silver and 95+ a gold. Of the 1,058 wines I tasted this year, 129 scored 95 points or more, one more than in last year's report.

My notes are divided into reds, whites, rosés, sparkling and sweet wines in descending order of scores. For each wine, I've suggested a drinking window and tried to give an impression of its aromas and flavours in a short tasting note, as well as some information about its origin.



Wine name

Region (Alcohol level)

A short tasting note

Drinking window





Winemakers of Rioja



Clockwise from top left: Ana Martínez Bujanda, Carmen Pérez, The Martínez Lacuesta team, Clara Canals, Juan Carlos Sancha, Carlos Sánchez, Elias López Montero

TIM ATKIN RIOJA 2025 SPECIAL REPORT



Clockwise from top left: Alberto Ortiz, José Agustín Marauri and Miguel Eguren, Susana Fernández, Rodolfo Bastida, Carmen Enciso and Luis Valentín, Juan Jesús, Isidoro and Juan Valdelana, Catalin Grad

TIM ATKIN RIOJA 2025 SPECIAL REPORT



Clockwise from top left: Carmelo Cámara and Felipe Tubía, Eduardo Hernández and Óscar Salazar, Javier Cereceda, Israel Eguíluz, David Sampedro and Melanic Hickman, Jesús Madrazo, Eduardo Monge, Eduardo Eguren

TIM ATKIN RIOJA 2025 SPECIAL REPORT



Clockwise from top left: Juan Luis Cañas, Juan Bautista, Gonzalo, Mariasun and Iñigo Sáenz de Samaniego, Julio Sáenz, David Jiménez, Pilar Salazar, Crístofer Ruiz, Luis Rodríguez

TIM ATKIN RIOJA 2025 SPECIAL REPORT



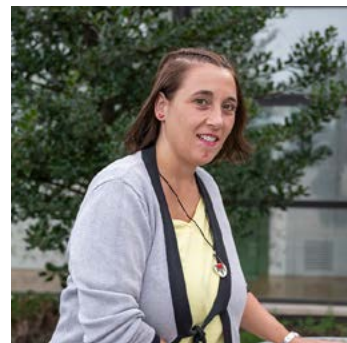
Clockwise from top left: Jade Gross, Alberto Pedrajo and Javier Alonso, Isaac Muga, Pedro Pablo Amurrio, Jon Cañas and Juan Luis Cañas, José Basoco, The Muga team, Álvaro Loza

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Clockwise from top left: Diego Magaña, Co-operative winemakers and growers, Loli Casado and Jesús Astorga, Teresa Martínez and Neza Skrt, Julián Palacios, Koldo Eguren, David Bastida

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Clockwise from top left: Adriana Laucirica, María Larrea, Jesús Mendoza, Cristina and María Amézola, Aleceia Bermejo, María and Juan Pablo de Simón, Tom Puyaubert, Matías Calleja

TIM ATKIN RIOJA 2025 SPECIAL REPORT



Clockwise from top left: Amaia Amestoy, Fidel and Carlos Fernández, Pablo Eguzkiza and Telmo Rodríguez, Itu Ruiz Bañares and Álvaro García Ruiz, Rosana Lisa, María José López de Heredia, Jackson Nagorcka Brooke and Gonzalo Entrecanales

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Clockwise from top left: Etienne Cordonnier, Basilio Izquierdo, Jairo Morga, Óscar Pérez and Jaime Ruiz, Rafa Vivanco, Mayte Calvo, Ricardo Cantera, Carlos Mazo

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Clockwise from top left: María Vargas, Antonio Orte, José Gil and Vicky Fernández, Miguel Ángel and Sílvia Rodríguez, The Urbina family, Richi Arrambari and Raúl Acha

TIM ATKIN RIOJA 2025 SPECIAL REPORT



Clockwise from top left: María Barúa, Pedro Salguero, The Piñedo family, Enrique and Miguel Eguíluz, Maite Fernández and Abel Mendoza, Miguel Merino, Monica Ochoa

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Clockwise from top left: Tao Platón, The Nivarius and Proelio team, The Macán team, Vicente Cebrián, Alejandro López and María Jesús Sáez, Bryan MacRobert, Esperanza Tómas

TIM ATKIN RIOJA 2025 SPECIAL REPORT



Clockwise from top left: Miguel Ángel de Gregorio, Ana Barrón and Xavier Ausás, The Gil Berzal family, Rafael García, The Torrechilla family, Víctor Ausejo

TIM ATKIN RIOJA 2025 SPECIAL REPORT



Clockwise from top left: Sandra Bravo, Arturo de Miguel, Ana Martín, Óscar Alegre and Eva Valgañón, Carlos López de Lacalle, Javier Arizcuren, Javier San Pedro, Rafa Usoz (centre)

TIM ATKIN RIOJA 2025 SPECIAL REPORT



Clockwise from top left: Berta Valgañón, Carlos San Pedro and Carlos San Pedro Junior, The Berzal brothers, David González and Ricardo Martínez, Bárbara Palacios, Ignacio Gil

Recommended Restaurants, Bars, Wine Shops and Places to Stay

PLACES TO EAT

Aitor Esnal (Logroño)
C/Sagasta, 13
Tel: 941 24 12 83

Ajo Negro Restaurante (Logroño)
www.restauranteajonegro.com
Tel: 941 54 51 41

Alameda Restaurante (Fuenmayor)
www.restaurantealameda.com
Tel: 941 45 00 44

Almacen Salinas Restaurante (Salinas de Añana)
www.almazensalinas.com
Tel: 628 17 50 79

Allegar (Briones)
www.santamariabriones.com/gastronomia/restaurante-allegar/
Tel: 941 991 599

Amelibia Restaurante (Laguardia)
www.restauranteamelibia.com
Tel: 945 62 12 07

ARREA! Restaurante Kanpezu (Álava)
www.arrea.eus

Asador Alai, (Labastida)
Tel: 945 33 13 59

Asador Aker (Cuzcurrita de Río Tirón)
www.asadoraker.com
aritz@asadoraker.com

Asador El Tahití (Logroño)
www.asadoreltahiti.com
Tel: 941 22 33 09

Bar Sebas (Logroño)
Tel: 680 683 501

Bar y Restaurante Los Cucharones (Pradillo)
www.loscucharones.com
Tel: 626 87 66 79

Beethoven II (Haro)
www.beethovenharo.com
Tel: 941 31 11 81

Cafetería Bar Tizona (Logroño)
www.cafeteriabartizona.blogspot.com
Tel: 941 124 274

Cachetero (Logroño)
www.cachetero.com
Tel: 941 228 463

Carbonera Taberna (Logroño)
Tel: 941 70 01 25

Casa Ríos (Logroño)
www.restaurantecasarios.es
941 50 20 86

Casa Toni (San Vicente de la Sonsierra)
www.casatoni.es
Tel: 941334001

Chef Nino (Calahorra)
www.chefnino.com
Tel: 941 13 31 04

Coliceo 29 (Calahorra)
www.coliceo29.com
Tel: 941 12 98 10

De Vinos & Rosas (Ábalos)
www.devinos&rosas.com
Tel: 679 251 870

El Canalla (Logroño)
Tel: 627 404 723

El Paseo Gastrobar (San Vicente de la Sonsierra)
www.elpaseogastrobar.com
Tel: 941 334 011

El Portal del Echaurren (Ezcaray)
www.echaurren.com
Tel: 941 35 40 47

El Puntido
www.sierracantabria.com
Tel: 945 661 661

El Quizal (Autol)
www.elquizal.com
Tel: 941 390 086

El Rincón de Alberto (Logroño)
Tel: 666 910 907

El Rincón de Buradón Salinillas de Buradón (Álava)

www.salinillasdeburadon.org/rincon-de-buradon

Tel: 945 38 69 79

Enascuas (Logroño)

www.enascuas97.com

Tel: 941 24 68 67

Guardaviñas Wine Bistró (Logroño)

www.guardavinhas.com

Tel: 941 123 192

Héctor Oribe (Párganos)

www.hectororibe.es

Tel: 945 600 715

Heladería della Sera Helado Natural (Logroño)

www.obradorgrate.com

Tel: 941 222 111

Hospedería de Los Parajes (Laguardia)

www.hospederiadelosparajes.com

Tel: 945 621 130

Hotel Viura (Villabuena de Álava)

www.hotelviura.com

Tel: 945 60 90 00

Ikaro (Logroño)

www.restauranteikaro.com

Tel: 941 571 614

Iruña (Logroño)

www.restauranteiruna.com

Tel: 941 502 044

Jamonero Pata Negra (Logroño)

Tel: 941 21 36 45

Juan Carlos Ferrando (Logroño)

www.juancarlosferrando.com

Tel: 941 214 795

La Anjana (Logroño)

www.laanjana.es

Tel: 613 042 504

La Bodega de Rivas (Rivas de Tereso)

www.labodegaderivas.es

Tel: 941 33 43 29

La Chispa Adecuada (Logroño)

www.lachispaadecuada.es

Tel: 941 03 05 01

La Cocina de Ramón (Logroño)

<http://lacocinaderamon.es>

Tel: 941 289 808

La Galería (Logroño)

www.restaurantelagaleria.com

Tel: 941 20 73 66

Lumbre Restaurante, (Casalarreina)

www.lumbrerestaurante.com

Tel: 941 32 41 22

La Merced (Logroño)

www.restaurantelamerced.com

Tel: 941 214 700

La Tavina (Logroño)

www.latavina.com

Tel: 941 10 23 00

La Vieja Bodega (Casalarreina)

www.viejabodega.com

Tel: 941 32 42 54

Los Berones Restaurante, (Haro)

www.losberones.com

Tel: 941 64 02 64

Los Caballeros Restaurante (Sto. Domingo de La Calzada)

www.restauranteloscaballeros.com

Tel: 941 342 789

Los Calaos de Briones (Briones)

www.loscalaosdebriones.com

Tel: 941 32 21 31

Los Caños Restaurante (Haro)

www.loscaños.es

Tel: 941 31 10 01

Marqués de Riscal (Elciego)

www.restaurantemarquesderiscal.com

Tel: 945 180 888

Mesón Charro (Logroño)

www.charro1521.com

Tel: 941 20 27 04

Mesón Egües (Logroño)

www.mesonegues.com

Tel: 941 228 603

Mesón Jabugo (Logroño)

www.mesonjabugo.es

Tel: 941 511 460

Morro Tango Restaurante (Alfaro)

www.morrotango.com

Tel: 941 18 15 33

Nublo Restaurante (Haro)

www.nublorestaurant.com

Tel: 636 72 58 50

Roots (Logroño)

Tel: 620 12 87 47

Sabores restaurante

www.restaurante-sabores.com

Tel: 941 01 61 54

Svgar (Laguardia)
www.restaurantesugar.com
Tel: 647 254 673

Taberna Herrerías (Logroño)
www.tabernaherrerias.es
Tel: 941 24 10 01

Tastavin (Logroño)
www.tastavin.es
Tel: 609787036

Terete (Haro)
<http://terete.es>
Tel: 941 28 98 08

Tondeluna (Logroño)
www.tondeluna.com
Tel: 941 236 425

Torres GastroBar (Logroño)
Tel: 941 231 283

Umm No Solo Tapas
www.restauranteumm.com
Tel: 941 047 612

Venta Moncalvillo (Daroca de Rioja)
www.ventamoncalvillo.com
Tel: 941 44 48 32

Wine Fandango (Logroño)
www.winefandango.com
Tel: 941 243 910

PLACES TO STAY

Aúrea Palacio de Correos, Logroño
Tel: 941 61 87 32

Finca de los Arandinos (Navarrete)
www.fincadelosarandinos.com
Tel: 941 44 61 26

FYA, Navarrete
www.bodegasfya.com
Tel: 941 56 05 60

Hotel Arrope (Haro)
www.hotelarrope.es
Tel: 941 304 025

Hospedería de Los Parajes (Laguardia)
www.hospederiadelosparajes.com
Tel: 945 62 11 30

Hotel Boutique Posada de Sajazarra
www.posadadesajazarra.com
Tel: 626 08 35 96

Hotel Los Agustinos (Haro)
www.eurostarshotels.com/eurostars-los-agustinos.html
Tel: 941 31 13 08

Hotel Palacios (Alfaro)
www.palacioshotel.com
Tel: 941 18 01 00

Hotel Santa María de Briones (Briones)
www.santamariabriones.com
Tel: 941 991 599

Hotel Villa de Ábalos (Ábalos)
www.hotelvilladeabalos.com
Tel: 941 33 43 02

Hotel Viura (Villabuena de Álava)
www.hotelviura.com
Tel: 945 60 90 00

Kandela Etxea Casa Rural (Lapuebla de Labarca)
www.kandelaetxea.com
Tel: 667 614 459

La Casa Cosme Palacio (Laguardia)
www.lacasacosmepalacio.com
Tel: 673 10 57 62

La Macana (San Vicente de la Sonsierra)
www.vtsanvicente.com
Tel: 628 72 87 28

Palacio Tondón (Briñas)
www.palaciotondon.com
Tel: 941 69 01 00

Señorío de Briñas Hospedería (Briñas)
www.hospederiadebrinas.com
Tel: 941 30 42 24

Villas Finca La Emperatriz Baños de Rioja (La Rioja)
www.hermanoshernaiz.com/villas
Tel: 941 30 01 05

WINE SHOPS

Baco Vinos y Experiencias
www.bacoenoteca.es
Tel: 619 845 036

Ninfeo del Vino (Alfaro)
www.ninfeodelvino.com
Tel: 941 18 33 22

Vinoteca Fuertes Gourmet (Calahorra)
www.fuertesgourmet.com
Tel: 941 131 114

Vinoteca La Rica (Logroño)
www.latiendadelarica.com
Tel: 941 22 53 62

Vinoteca Larria (Logroño)
www.larria.es
Tel: 676650942

Vinoteca The One Wine (Laguardia)
www.theonewine.com
Tel: 945 715 011

Vinoteca Viura Negra (Logroño)
www.viuranegra.com
Tel: 941 21 63 27

Vinum Vita (Haro)
Tel: 677517665



Further Reading

- 100 Figuras Históricas del Vino Español (edited)* by Andrés Proensa (Vadevino Editorial, 2018)
Análisis de un sector: Rioja 4.0 by Emilio Barco Royo (Gobierno de la Rioja, 2018)
Certezas y Fantasías en La Historia del Rioja by Emilio Barco (Self-published, 2021)
El Medoc Alavés: La Revolución del Vino de Rioja by Ludger Mees (La Fabrica, 2018)
El Rioja a la luz de un archivo familiar by Luis Vicente Elías Pastor, Emilio Barco Royo, Salvador Velilla Córdoba, Constantino Gil Soto (Marqués de Vargas, 2021)
Felix María Sánchez Samaniego, Un Vasco del Siglo XVIII by Salvador Velilla (1991, Editorial Txertoa)
La Vid y los Vinos Españoles by Miguel Comenge (CD Form, 2007)
Los Nuevos Viñadores by Luis Gutiérrez (Planeta Gastro, 2017)
Rioja Alavesa by Javier Palacios (Hordago, 1978)
Rioja Alavesa en la Encrucijada by Miguel Larreina González (self-published)
Rioja: Vinos Silenciosos by Antonio Remesal Villar and Alberto Gil (Los Aciertos, 2019)
Técnicas Vitícolas Frente Al Cambio Climático by Fernando Martínez de Toda (Ediciones Mundi-Prensa, 2019)
The Basque History of the World by Mark Kurlansky (Vintage Books)
The Finest Wines of Rioja by Jesús Barquín, Luis Gutiérrez and Víctor de la Serna (Fine Wine Editions, 2011)
The History of Rioja Wine: Tradition and Invention by Ludger Mees (Routledge, 2023)
The Wines of Rioja by John Radford (Mitchell Beazley, 2004)
The Wines of Rioja by Hubrecht Duijker (Mitchell Beazley, 1985)
Una Historia Social del Vino: Rioja, Navarra, Cataluña 1860-1940 by Ludger Mees, Klaus-Jürgen Nagel and Hans-Jürgen Puhle (Tecnos, 2019)
Variedades minoritarias de Vid en La Rioja by Pedro Balda (Gobierno de la Rioja, 2017)
Variedades de Vid en España, 2ª Edición (Tempos Vega Sicilia)

I also recommend the website of the Consejo Regulador for statistics: <https://www.riojawine.com/en/home-en/>
And for Spanish speakers, the local newspaper, La Rioja, has many insights about the region: www.larioja.com

This report was researched without the financial assistance of Consejo Regulador for the first time. Instead, my tour of the region was funded by the bodegas, who paid to enter their wines for tasting. I'd like to thank everyone who understood my desire to speak my mind and to be free of any form of official control. Consummate professionals Iñigo Tapiador and Pablo Franco provided information and statistics about the region, despite my decision not to work with the Consejo Regulador.

ABRA, ARAEX, the Asociación de Bodegas Familiares de Rioja, FECOAR and the Grupo Rioja all organised tastings with their members for me.

Alberto Gil, Rioja's best-informed local journalist, was again kind enough to share his knowledge. All wine regions need straight-shooters like Alberto to chronicle what's happening on the ground.

My biggest thank you of all, however, goes to Marisa Velilla, who once again drove me for over 3,000 kilometres around Rioja, organised all of my visits and kept my spirits up. I couldn't ask for a better right hand woman or representative in Rioja. Marisa also updated the annual list of restaurants, hotels and tapas bars.

Lastly, I would like to thank all the producers who submitted samples and, in many cases, talked to me in person, sharing their hopes, fears, opinions, disappointments, insights and dreams with me. Gracias!

**For wine reviews, articles and more special reports go to:
www.timatkin.com**

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and Instagram @timatkinmw**

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Layout and design by Elise Castrodale**