



*THE*  
*NEW WINES OF*  
*SPAIN*  
TONY LORD

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CHRISTOPHER HELM  
London

THE WINE APPRECIATION GUILD  
San Francisco

© 1988 Tony Lord  
Christopher Helm (Publishers) Ltd, Imperial House,  
21–25 North Street, Bromley, Kent BR1 1SD

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Lord, Tony  
The new wines of Spain.  
1. Wine and wine making—Spain  
I. Title  
641.2'2'0946 TP559S8

ISBN 0-7470-2002-7

Published in the United States by:  
THE WINE APPRECIATION GUILD  
155 Connecticut St.  
San Francisco, CA 94107

ISBN 0-932664-59-8

Library of Congress No. 88-50080

*Typeset by Cotswold Typesetting Ltd, Gloucester*  
*Printed and bound by Butler and Tanner Ltd, Frome, Somerset, England*

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## *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

*To Hazel and Wendy, two lovely ladies*

The author would like to thank all the members of the Spanish wine industry who took the time and trouble to discuss their wines and their country. Particular thanks to Jeremy Watson, David Balls and Maria José Taylor of Wines From Spain, and Graham Hines and Bryan Buckingham of the Sherry Institute, who provided the photographs and much information for the book, and made the many enjoyable trips to Spain possible.





# *INTRODUCTION*



Spain is a remarkably sophisticated country, despite the efforts of some of its citizens to have us believe otherwise. The elegance and charm of Madrid or Barcelona are a far cry from the hideous vulgarity of the modern package holiday resorts, which apart from the sun have little or nothing to do with the real Spain.

It could hardly be otherwise. Long before the great cities and cultures of northern Europe came into being, Spain was a centre of civilisation in western Europe through the learned influence of the Moors. And after their departure, Spain remained a great and powerful kingdom, one of the greatest in the world. It produced El Greco, Goya and Velazquez, men like Pizarro and Cortez who conquered half the Americas, and, as one of the country's greatest admirers in modern times, Sacheverell Sitwell, wrote, the greatest builders since the Romans. 'The Spanish cathedrals, and not only Toledo, Seville, Burgos, Compostella, but a host of lesser ones, are unparalleled, not for the stone vessels alone, but for the extraordinary nature and richness of their contents', he added.

Part of the Spanish culture, one of its civilising influences, has always been wine, and today Spain's 1.6 million hectares of vines represent 16 per cent of the world's total.

Grape vines came to Spanish shores with the wandering Phoenicians and Greeks, and even during the centuries of Moorish occupation, the art of viticulture flourished. Even the Islamic conquerors found ways around their own laws to enjoy Spanish wine.

Sadly though, the Spanish viticulturalists—of the twentieth century, if you could call them that, almost destroyed this proud and ancient heritage, a history of making wines that won high praise from those who travelled the land in earlier times. Spain became equated, and almost shackled, with an image of a country dedicated to the art of making rough red wine to be consumed by the colourful peasant at the rate of a litre a day, and by the less colourful tourist looking for a cheap holiday in the sun.

The Rioja went quietly on its way, making sophisticated red wines and some superb whites, for the handful of Spanish *aficionados* who knew about them, while the Jerezanos quietly plied their historic trade in fine sherries. Elsewhere it was a land of vinous chaos. Millions upon millions of litres of rough red wine and unpalatable, often oxidised, white wine flooded into the local bars, or were shipped to other countries where the poor but thirsty generation of the Swinging Sixties were discovering the taste of wine, unfortunately from the bottom up. Little wonder that the major wine buyers of the day saw Spain only as a source of cheap plonk.

For a handful of younger winemakers, the new crusaders, it was not good enough. Past history and present research showed there was absolutely no reason why the climate and soils of Spain could not yield noble wines, and grafting modern winemaking techniques onto their native land, they set about doing so.

Most likely their efforts would have gone largely unrecognised. Their wines would have remained idle curiosities, to be remarked upon and written about, though not truly representative of Spain. But a more persuasive force was at work—the consumer.

Spain has a recent history of producing wine in excess of its own needs, yet the younger generation of the country, the more cosmopolitan citizens of the big cities, were not in the market for cheap wine. If they were going to drink Spanish wine, it had to be good wine. The rough red of their fathers did not suit their palates or their image. Father may still drink it, and in many rural parts of the country still does, but they would not.

Other countries would not take it either. Some had their own wine lakes, in others the new wine drinker was growing too sophisticated in taste to absorb the Spanish lake.

To survive, the Spanish winemaking industry had to change. And change it did. Into the industry came the dual catalysts of modern winemaking and modern marketing. They swept aside the old notion that all a winery had to do was make wine, then foist it on a captive audience.

The Spanish wine industry today is one largely dominated by the co-operatives, and they, by and large, have been forced to alter their thinking, both by the market and by the government, which has been one of the most progressive in western Europe, pushing its wine industry into the modern world through a system of tight restrictions and controls, and enlightened support of those seeking to go forward. Some co-operatives are now even competing on equal terms with the private producers, but it is those producers who have done most to enliven and advance Spanish viticulture and oenology.

It is private money that has led the latter-day Renaissance, even in the most unlikely areas such as the dust bowl of La Mancha, home of the Spanish wine lake. When the private producer shows that an area can yield good wines that will sell at a premium price, the co-operative grower might just get the message that if he adapts, he could make more money for himself. If he doesn't he could be out of business.

Such private producers are dotted here, there and everywhere in Spain. Twenty years ago, few of them existed. Their colleagues owe them a great debt of gratitude, for they have provoked international interest in Spanish wines, and a revival of domestic pride in them, that has saved the industry from the vinous scrap heap.

Some have gone in one direction, basing their hopes for the future on the introduction of noble varieties from other countries. A handful are making varietal wines from these grapes, wines that have excited several leading American palates. But the more sensible are using them to enhance wines made from native Spanish varieties, to give those wines an added dimension, rather than compete with similar wines from other countries that have been making them far longer.

Other producers have gone in a different direction, back to their roots. They are concentrating on how to get the very best out of what they already have, how modern ways can help them improve the wines of their forefathers.

These progressive producers have been successful in both directions, and Spain can now be proud that it has wines that can stand up and be counted while remaining distinctively Spanish. The New World countries, led by Australia, California and New Zealand, are showing that the Old World has no stranglehold on the production of fine wines, and are pressing hard on the heels of the wine world's leader, France. So it is in Spain's best interests to remain Spain, and let the individualistic flavours of its own wines

find their own appreciative audience in a world where imitation rather than individualism is narrowing the consumer's choice of wine flavours.

Spain's recent entry into the European Economic Community will help its wine industry. Not only will it give Spain better access to those non-wine-producing members of the community, but it is already bringing agricultural aid funds into the country to help those wineries ready and willing to try to lift their wine quality higher, while curbing and restricting those that will not.

Spain still produces a lot of indifferent wine. But then so does France, Germany, Italy and California, to name but a few. The old image of the colourful peasant grower, with his black beret and three-day, non-designer stubble, is fading fast.

The Spanish themselves, a proud race and intensely insular in both senses of the word, which is to their credit, will not be drinking the wines of France or Italy since EEC entry. They will stay with the wines of Spain. They have such a marvellous gastronomic tradition, with some of the best restaurants in the world serving some of the simplest, most distinctive yet pleasurable foods. It is only fitting that in the new wave wines of Spain they have wines to complement their own, home-grown culinary art once again.



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## CHAPTER 1

# *The Wine Laws*

At various times throughout the history of the Spanish wine industry, laws have been passed and decrees proclaimed to protect its better wines, usually to counter unscrupulous wine traders adulterating those wines with cheaper imports to make a fast peseta. For example in 1102, after pleas from its producers, King Sancho of Navarra gave protection to the wines of the Rioja, and through the centuries similar protection was given to wines from other regions.

However, the modern Spanish wine laws did not really have their birth until around the beginning of the century when it became apparent that Spain would have to look after the reputation of its better wines not only within Spain, but also in its export markets.

Guidelines for countries introducing an appellation system had already been drawn up at a series of international conferences, and the Spanish authorities used these guidelines to draw up its system of *Denominaciones de Origen* for those areas producing 'wine or spirits of wine with an established name and corresponding repute'. It was decided that each denomination would be administered by a local Consejo Regulador, comprised of local experts who would draw up their own rules and regulations based on their local knowledge and experience, though within an overall framework of international acceptability.

The first Consejo was created for the Rioja region in 1926, to be followed by Jerez in 1933, Malaga in 1937, Montilla in 1944, and right up to the newest denomination, that for Toro, which came into being in June 1987, a pace behind other new denominaciones like Somontano and Terra Alta. Spain now has 30 denominaciones, including the provisional one for Cava wines, the only one not to be geographically based.

Each denomination has its rules laid down in a Reglamento, and there are stiff penalties for any producer found going against its rules. Watching over the whole system is the Madrid-based Instituto Nacional de Denominaciones de Origen [INDO].

Each Reglamento may vary slightly to take into account local conditions, but basically it will cover the following areas: where vines may be planted, which vines may be planted, how many vines can be planted per hectare, how they should be trained and pruned, and rules covering unhealthy grapes.

Maximum yields per hectare are laid down, and in the winery there are rules governing the use of standard additives such as sulphur dioxide, used to prevent oxidation. Minimum periods for ageing quality wines are laid down, as are regulations covering what a producer can and cannot say on his label.

Wines labelled this and that, particularly those destined for export, must pass through a series of taste and chemical analysis checks in the laboratories of the respective Consejos to be issued with the Consejo seal of authenticity. Each Consejo has developed its own distinctive seal, and each seal is numbered, so if there are any complaints the Consejo can trace its origins right back to the vineyard where it was born. For example, if a customer complained that a wine purporting to be a Rioja gran reserva, which should have spent two years at least in oak, showed absolutely no oaky flavours, its history can be traced to verify its authenticity by obtaining the number on the seal of guarantee.

In general, the Consejo system works pretty well. Some of the lesser known ones could improve their regulation a little, and stop letting through wines that really do not typify what the area is producing. But it is hard to tell a local winemaker who may be a friend, or even a relative, that he is making poor wine and is not going to get the seal of authenticity and be allowed to call his wine Rioja or sherry. It would destroy his livelihood. But then this doesn't happen in Spain alone.

The Spanish system also works well because it has an inbuilt flexibility. So for example in the Penedes or Navarra the Reglamento has been amended to allow the planting of

imported noble grape varieties like Chardonnay or Cabernet Sauvignon, once trials have shown that the use of these varieties can enhance the quality of the wine of the region. The producers in Spain enjoy more freedom than their Italian counterparts. Some of the greatest wines of Italy have to call themselves table wine, the lowest possible indication of quality, simply because they are made from grape varieties not permitted under local rules, and those rules are inflexible.

Equally it is hoped the Spanish authorities will not succumb to another Italian malaise. Already there are two or three Spanish denominaciones that produce so little bottled wine that they really should not have been accorded the honour. And there are other Spanish regions jockeying for denomination.

The Italian system of appellation has been virtually destroyed as a credible system by the authorities bending to political pressure to grant appellation to almost any area where votes will be lost if they don't. The Spanish must not let themselves suffer the same fate.

No appellation system is perfect, but the Spanish system is reasonably well run, and the industry has not been beset by the recent wine scandals that rocked Italy and Austria, and even led to prosecutions in Germany, where the authorities are meticulous.

So that sticker on the back of the best bottles of Spanish wine means the consumer is getting what he pays for.



## CHAPTER 2



# *Rioja*

If one approaches the Rioja region from the west, from Bilbao, the old road twists and turns up the valley of the Iregua. This is Basque country, a land of high, forested mountains and meadows, split by narrow gorges carved by rivers feeding on the melting snows of the high Pyrenees.

The old road eventually reaches the Puerto de Piqueras, some 1700 metres above sea level, then begins the descent, alongside the rushing Ebro river, into the mountain-ringed valley that is the easterly part of the Rioja.

If one comes from the opposite direction, from Barcelona, the country is dramatically different. Semi-arid with dark red-brown soils, bare earth to which stunted bushes cling, including wild thyme, providing meagre fodder for scrawny sheep, this part of the Rioja has been carved by wind erosion into a series of mesas and small valleys of quite desolate appearance.

Together these dissimilar stretches of Spain make up the delimited Rioja region, home of the country's flagship red wines.

The western part of the Rioja, at least, was a wine growing area long before its conquest by the Romans, and there is evidence that they increased its production. With the Moorish conquest of 711 AD, winemaking ceased until the reconquest by the Catholic kings.

In the Mediaeval period, the old pilgrim trail to Santiago de Compostella wound through the western Rioja, and pilgrims must have welcomed the sight of such monasteries as Santo Domingo de la Calzada, now a government-owned Parador hotel, after a hard trek across the mountains. They helped spread the reputation of Rioja wines, though at that time the region was producing far more white wine than red. The change was to come later, in the 1800s.

France, or Bordeaux to be precise, exerted a seminal influence on the modern development of the Rioja, on three separate occasions. When oidium, a leaf mould, severely damaged the Bordeaux vineyards in the 1850s, with a consequent loss of production, the Bordeaux negociants turned to the Rioja for strong red wines to bolster their skinny clarets.

The same negociants, and this time the vineyard owners as well, turned to the Rioja when the far more serious phylloxera louse, a bug that attacks and kills the vine roots, destroyed thousands upon thousands of hectares of the Bordeaux vineyards from the 1870s onwards. Many of them moved, lock, stock and barrel to the Rioja, to begin again.

Much has been made of the French influence on the Rioja and the way its wines are made, dating from this period, particularly on vinification techniques and the use of barrels to mature the wine. However, I am pretty certain these changes would have come anyway. The French presence merely forced the issue.

Many of the Bordelais returned home when it was discovered their old vineyards could be protected from phylloxera by grafting the vines onto resistant American rootstocks, and others left when they found the louse had followed them to the Rioja to repeat its destructive work between 1900 and 1905. However, a good few remained, helping to shape the way Rioja wines were made, until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War made it unwise for them to stay. This, and the two World Wars, severely disrupted the trade in Rioja wines, and it is fair to say that the Rioja fell back into virtual anonymity.

Again it was what happened in Bordeaux that changed the life of the Riojans yet once more. Fuelled by a wave of speculative interest in clarets, largely emanating from the United States, opening prices for the 1970 clarets surged ahead to new highs. The upward spiral continued with the 1971 vintage, then reached ridiculous levels for the inferior 1972 vintage. As a result the traditional buyers, particularly the British, found themselves financially frozen out of the claret market. They could not, or