

- WILL LYONS ON WINE
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Spain's Second Act

- By WILL LYONS



- **Article**



A friend from Chicago recently wrote saying her husband had just returned home with a \$10 bottle of wine. It's from Priorat, an isolated area in Spain's northeast with which, I presumed from the tone of her inquiry, she's pretty unfamiliar. My friend was concerned: "How low should my expectations be?" On second thought, though, she did recognize the region, which raised new concerns, as the wines are known for being both rare and expensive. In the end, everything turned out fine; it wasn't particularly rare or expensive, but the wine didn't exactly disappoint either and, by all accounts, was well worth the money.

Thirty years ago, such an exchange would have been unimaginable. Back then, Priorat was a virtual unknown on the wine map. Today, it is one of the country's most exciting wine regions. In many ways, it illustrates what has been happening more broadly in Spain. The country, which has been producing wine for more than a 1,000 years, is busy reinventing itself.

Drinking Now

Rueda

Belondrade y Lurton

Valladolid, Spain

Vintage: 2008

Alcohol: 13.5%

Price: About €32 or £28

Spain has built a reputation on exporting good value, easy-to-drink red wines, but it's worth remembering that the country produces some exceptional white wines as well. This is a case in point. I recently had the chance to taste through a range of back vintages from Belondrade y Lurton and was impressed. Made from 100% Verdejo, the wine is inspired by the dry whites produced in Bordeaux's Graves region and display an elegant, slightly honeyed, spicy character, with a thrilling, but balanced acidity. While they are by no means inexpensive, these are seriously fine wines.

In the past, understanding Spanish wine was relatively straightforward. In Catalonia, there is Cava, the sparkling wine made from the grape varieties Paradella, Macabeo and Xarel-lo. In the south is sherry—not the sickly, sweet cream sherry long popular with the British market, but the dry, tangy, slightly nutty-flavored wine produced in Jerez. Sandwiched between are the regions that produce Rioja's soft, oaky red wines and, further north, Navarra's juicy, vibrant reds. On top of this is perhaps the world's most famous winemaking family—the Torres, whose easy-drinking wines from Penedès, near Barcelona, are enjoyed around the globe.

But there is so much more to Spanish wines now than there was not just 30, but even 10 years ago. Good husbandry in the vineyards has been matched with improvements such as stainless-steel vats and temperature-controlled fermentation. The latter is crucial in modern winemaking and explains much of the

improvement in all of the world's wines in the last three decades. (In short, if grapes are fermented at a temperature too high, the wine loses some of its flavor compounds and can result in the liquid suffering from volatile acidity. In extreme circumstances, the yeast will die off and the fermentation may even stop.) Married to these advances has been a desire from a new generation of winemakers to make internationally recognized wines. This has brought a fresh confidence, which in Rioja can be best seen in the influx of outstanding architecture the bodegas (the Spanish term for winery) have commissioned. Perhaps the most famous example is at Marqués de Riscal, where they persuaded Frank Gehry to design a hotel, covered in pink titanium and fly-away panels of stainless-steel.

What, in many ways, has made all of this possible is the country's unique geography. For while it experiences very hot summers and very cold winters, much of its vineyards are planted at altitudes higher than in neighboring France, which is important in producing wines that possess freshness and acidity.

In Priorat, the vineyards are planted in a soil made up of dark brown slate and quartzite. Known locally as llicorella, its poor quality is suited to vine growing, as the vines' roots have to reach deep down into the soil to find water. As a result, the crop is small but concentrated, and the grapes produce a wine with a mineral quality. The region demonstrates neatly what has occurred in Spain's lesser-known wine regions, such as Cigales and Toro.

Ten years ago, nobody really thought about their wines, but now merchants are hankering after their reds. These are based on Garnacha (Grenache) and Cariñena (Carignan), two grape varieties that are planted widely in the southwest of France. The wines are characterized by up-front, opulent, ripe-berry aromatics and a minerality on the palate. Mas Martinet is one winery to look out for, with a Grenache that on the nose is rich, with ripe, dark cherry and jammy notes. Alvaro Palacios, Casa Gran del Siurana, Vall-Llach and Mas Doix are also highly rated.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703933404576170490753998196.html?KEYWORDS=Rueda+Belondrade+y+Lurton+2008>