

TEMPRANILLO

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Spain's signature variety offers a breadth of expressions from across the country.

BY MICHAEL SCHACHNER
PHOTOS BY MEG BAGGOTT

The opinionated owner of Finca Allende, Miguel Angel de Gregorio, didn't hesitate when asked recently where his home turf of Rioja, Spain, ranks among Old World wine regions: "Rioja belongs in the top five."

"There's Bordeaux, Burgundy and Alsace in France, Piedmont in Italy and Rioja. But Rioja is a land of 1,000 wines," he said. "There is no such thing as typical Rioja, except that it must be made entirely or largely from Tempranillo."

Indeed, Tempranillo is the grape that fuels the Rioja *Denominación de Origen Calificada* (DOCa), Spain's most historic and lauded wine region. It accounts for 88% of red grapes, and about three-quarters of all grapes grown in the appellation.

While a number of Rioja reds are varietal Tempranillo, many of the region's showcase wines adhere to traditional recipes and include small percentages of Garnacha (Grenache), Graciano and Mazuelo (Carignan).



It can be light and easy, lush and deep, or elegant and ageworthy, proving de Gregorio right that the region's Tempranillo-based wines vary in style.

But that being said, Rioja doesn't have a monopoly on the grape within Spain.

A few hours southwest, Tempranillo is also king in the Duero River Valley that's home to the *Denominacións de Origen* (DOs) of Ribera del Duero and Toro. There, the weather is more extreme than in Rioja, the elevation much higher than it appears, and wines are made entirely from Tempranillo, often referred to locally as Tinto Fino or Tinta de Toro.

These wines are generally dark, potent and tannic, sometimes even fierce. To put it in boxing terms, if the best Tempranillos from Rioja are finely tuned middleweights, those from Ribera del Duero and Toro are punch-packing heavyweights.

And that's the thing—there's a Tempranillo for every taste. You just need to know where to look.

The Early Bird

Tempranillo draws its name from the Spanish word *temprano*, which means early. While not exactly an early ripener in the global sense, it matures faster on the vine than most other red grape varieties, like the aforementioned Garnacha, Graciano and Mazuelo.

The variety particularly excels in the north of Spain, where temperatures are fairly moderate, rivers flow in multiple directions and high elevations help keep the nights cool.

In Rioja, for example, the best Tempranillo vineyards are found in the Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa subzones, where soils are rich in limestone deposits and generally exceed 1,500 feet above sea level. The Sierra de Cantabria mountain range to the north and Sierra de la Demanda subrange to the south of the Ebro River create an ideal, valley-like atmosphere to cultivate top wine grapes.

While no one knows for sure how long Tempranillo has existed in Spain, the general

The French taught Riojano winemakers how to grow better grapes and age wine properly in oak barrels, often for years prior to bottling.



Recent Tempranillo Vintages in Spain

2017

A difficult year. Devastating April frosts in Rioja and the Duero Valley resulted in a massive reduction in yields. A dry, hot summer caused what did survive to be intense and tannic.

2016

An excellent vintage throughout Spain. Dry, sunny weather through harvest yielded outstanding raw materials.

2015

Very warm weather in Rioja and the Duero Valley resulted in superripe, fleshy wines. Not a classic vintage for long-term aging.

2014

Not a disaster, but not great. Rain and cool weather at harvest resulted in uneven ripeness and inconsistent quality across the country. Rot and mildew were also issues.

2013

Unusually cold and rainy conditions produced austere, acidic wines in both Rioja and the Duero Valley.

2012

A very good to excellent warm year that resulted in full-bodied wines. Top Rioja Reservas and Gran Reservas are showing well.

2011

An excellent vintage. Top Rioja Gran Reservas will reward long-term cellaring. Ribera del Duero and Toro wines are more intense than usual.

2010

A cool, dry, extended growing season resulted in wines with less overt ripeness, higher acidity and unlimited aging potential.

Spanish Tempranillos to Buy Now

97 CVNE 2011 Imperial Gran Reserva (Rioja). Aromas of spiced plum, black olive, fig, tobacco and cassis come together like a puzzle. The palate shows near-perfect balance and tastes of ripe plum, berry fruits and earthy spice. Smooth and elegant on the finish. Drink through 2035. Arano LLC. **Editors' Choice.** abv: 14% **Price: \$88**

94 Casa Primicia 2012 Viña Diezmo GR Gran Reserva (Rioja). Aromas of baked black fruits and cocoa launch this wine. Concentrated on the palate, it deals plum and berry flavors that are backed by wood spice and cinnamon notes. A stout finish holds onto its fruit. Drink through 2035. W. Direct. **Editors' Choice.** abv: 14.5% **Price: \$44**

94 Contino 2015 Reserva (Rioja). Rich, malty aromas are supported by cocoa, mocha and berry scents. This has a jammy palate and a ripe flavor profile. Depth and balance drive the finish. Drink through 2040. Arano LLC. **Editors' Choice.** abv: 13.5% **Price: \$45**

93 12 Linajes 2014 Reserva (Ribera del Duero). Subtle yet ripe blackberry and tobacco aromas are chocolaty. The wine tastes of blackberry, black cherry and baking spices, while a finish with notes of lemony oak, vanilla and tobacco is rock-solid and on point. Drink through 2028. USA Wine West. **Editors' Choice.** abv: 14.5% **Price: \$35**

93 Bodegas Franco-Españolas 2011 Royal Reserva (Rioja). Aromas of dried plum and cherry are aided by wood spice and vanilla notes. This is lively but balanced on the palate. Plum, berry and spice flavors shout Rioja all the way, while this runs steady across an unwavering finish. Drink through 2028. W. Direct. abv: 14% **Price: \$34**

93 Bodegas Riojanas 2011 Monte Real Gran Reserva (Rioja). Blackberry, prune, raisin, leather and tar aromas are full, but refined. This feels tight and exhibits finely focused flavors of blackberry, vanilla and coffee. On the finish, complex notes of tobacco and marzipan stand out. Drink through 2030. Bodegas Riojanas. **Cellar Selection.** abv: 14% **Price: \$47**

93 Bodegas Tobía 2015 Alma Tobía Tinto de Autor (Rioja). Savory oak aromas are matched by dark berry, toast and chocolaty scents. A full-bodied palate offers just enough give and tastes of blackberry, savory oak and vanilla. A long finish continues a theme of balanced ripeness. Drink through 2040. Tri-Vin Imports. **Editors' Choice.** abv: 14.5% **Price: \$75**

93 García Figuero 2016 Crianza 12 (Ribera del Duero). Smoky blackberry and cassis aromas are concentrated and ripe. Typical of the region, this feels full and flush, with hard tannins. Blackberry, coffee and chocolate flavors soften on the finish. Drink through 2030. Quintessential Wines. abv: 14.6% **Price: \$32**

93 Marqués de Cáceres 2011 Gran Reserva (Rioja). Smooth, steady aromas of dark fruits, turned earth and oak grain are on the money. This feels pure and tight, with clarity and structure. Flavors of dried plum, cherry, raspberry, spice and cocoa finish with elegance. Drink through 2040. Vineyard Brands. **Editors' Choice.** abv: 14% **Price: \$40**

93 Marqués de Murrieta 2012 Finca Ygay Gran Reserva Limited Edition (Rioja). Initial oaky aromas settle on road-tar blackness. A lush palate is braced by acidity and tastes of plum, cassis, tobacco and brown sugar. A long finish features mocha, chocolate and spice notes. This will be best from 2022–2028. Maisons Marques & Domaines USA. **Cellar Selection.** abv: 14% **Price: \$57**

93 Numanthia 2014 Numanthia (Toro). Black cherry, chocolate and marzipan aromas announce a ripe wine. This tastes of savory black fruits and chocolate, while an unyielding finish focuses on blackberry and coffee richness framed by lasting tannins. Drink through 2032. Moët Hennessy USA. abv: 15% **Price: \$60**

91 San Román 2016 Prima (Toro). Black-fruit aromas include a note of prune. Typical of wines from San Román, this is tannic, but within reason. Savory oak pushes a bacon flavor onto blackberry fruit, while this is meaty and spicy on the finish. Drink through 2026. Grapes of Spain. abv: 14.5% **Price: \$25**



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belief is that the grape's history in Iberia extends to the time of the Phoenicians.

It was during the 1800s, however, that the variety came to the fore in Rioja. During the worst of Europe's phylloxera plague, many Bordeaux winemakers crossed the Pyrenees mountains to make wine in Spain, which had not yet been hit by the destructive vine louse.

The French taught Riojano winemakers how to grow better grapes and age wine properly in oak barrels, often for years prior to bottling. It was these new techniques that would eventually lead to Rioja's now-familiar aging-based classifications: Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva.

From that watershed era arose wineries including Marqués de Riscal, Marqués de Murrieta, Compañía Vinícola del Norte de España (CVNE), La Rioja Alta, Bodegas Franco-Españolas and Bodegas Riojanas. Today, all make some of the world's greatest wines.

These wines represent a quintessential Rioja style: refined wines of elegance, always based on Tempranillo. They also boast a healthy but integrated mix of spicy berry and plum aromas and flavors, bracing acidity, oak framing and the ability to improve for many years after bottling.

Brawn Over Finesse

The Duero River begins in the province of Soria in north-central Spain. It flows westward into Portugal before it joins with the Atlantic Ocean near the city of Oporto. Along the way, it provides the Ribera del Duero and Toro regions with vital water to nurture Tempranillo.

Wines from these regions are usually muscular and extracted, with the potential for high alcohol and powerful tannins. They're intense creations with a lot of color, fruit, oak and raw power.

In eastern Ribera del Duero, near the town of Aranda del Duero, elevations can exceed 3,000 feet above sea level, while Tempranillo thrives above 2,000 feet in the heart of the region just to the east of Valladolid. In Toro, to the west of Valladolid, vineyards sit just below that threshold.

These heights translate into extreme growing conditions highlighted by long winters and short, hot summers—additional factors that contribute to the final intensity of the wines.

If you subscribe to the "go big or go home" mantra, the wines of Toro and Ribera del Duero are definitely for you.