

## TASTING HIGHLIGHTS

# Rioja's Past, Present and Future

Explore the region's aging traditions and a new wave of vineyard-driven winemaking with 10 great values up to 92 points



Aging wine in oak barrels, like those seen here at Bodegas Muga, has been a Rioja tradition since the mid-19th century. (Pepe Franco)

**By Alison Napjus**

■ Jun 15, 2026

*Tasting Highlights' wine reviews are fresh out of the tasting room, offering a sneak peek of our editors' most recent ratings—including scores and full tasting notes—to WineSpectator.com members.*

The Tempranillo-based wines of Rioja offer solid value and the chance to explore a region that embraces both traditional aging techniques and new winemaking approaches. Half of the wines featured below are labeled Rioja reserva, a designation indicating wines aged for a minimum of three years, including at least one year in oak. Reservas sit between crianzas (aged at least two years) and gran reservas (aged at least five years). Together, these three historic aging categories have long defined Rioja.

This approach to aging dates back to the 19th century and was heavily influenced by two Spanish noblemen who spent time in Bordeaux. Inspired by French winemaking techniques, Luciano de Murrieta García Lemoine, the Marqués de Murrieta, returned to Spain and produced Rioja's first oak-aged wine in 1852 using imported Bordeaux casks. A decade later, in 1862, Guillermo Hurtado de Amézaga, the future Marqués de Riscal, followed with his own oak-aged red.

The style gained widespread momentum a few years later when the devastating phylloxera epidemic crippled French vineyards. Desperate for inventory, Bordeaux merchants turned to Rioja and created a booming export market for Spanish producers. To meet demand and reduce costs, local winemakers began importing American oak and constructing their own barrels rather than purchasing expensive French

casks. Although the aging classifications recognized today were not formally codified until the 1970s, the foundations of Rioja's traditional style were well-established in the late 1800s. Even after French demand waned, Rioja's commitment to patient oak aging endured.

## **Rioja in the Modern Era**

Today, these age-designated wines remain a hallmark of the region. Because many traditional bodegas blend fruit from multiple vineyard sites, they are able to produce these wines in substantial quantities, ensuring broad availability on store shelves. In addition, producers often strive to maintain a consistent house style from vintage to vintage. That consistency makes it easier for consumers to know what to expect from their favorite labels.

Over the past few decades, however, a growing number of Rioja winemakers have sought to highlight specific vineyard sites and local *terroirs*. While many of the region's largest bodegas supplement estate-grown fruit with purchased grapes, a new generation of small growers focuses on wines made exclusively from vineyards they own and farm. These bottlings often forgo the *crianza*, *reserva* and *gran reserva* designations altogether.

In 2017, Rioja regulations introduced officially recognized village designations that producers could include on their labels. One example is Bodegas Artevino's Rioja Orben Viñedo en Laguardia, which indicates that the wine is made entirely from grapes grown around the village of Laguardia.

Yet many wines from the region's small growers offer few clues to their exact origins. Winemaker Sandra Bravo, for instance, sources all the fruit for her pure and fragrant Bodega Sierra de Toloño Tempranillo Rioja 2023 from 25 acres of vineyards surrounding the village of Rivas de Tereso, yet the wine's label makes no mention of that specific provenance.

## **What to Expect in the Glass**

Regardless of grape sourcing, a good Rioja is often a crowd-pleaser. The best examples are typically medium-bodied and well-balanced, energized by bright acidity and framed by supple tannins. They offer signature flavors of red and black cherry and berry fruit, accented by savory notes of tobacco, spice, orange peel and earthy undertones.

Versatile and food-friendly, Rioja is equally enjoyable on its own or alongside a meal. Many bottles can also benefit from additional cellar aging. I especially enjoy

Rioja with grilled meats, from chicken and pork to lamb chops.

## Ten Top Values From Rioja



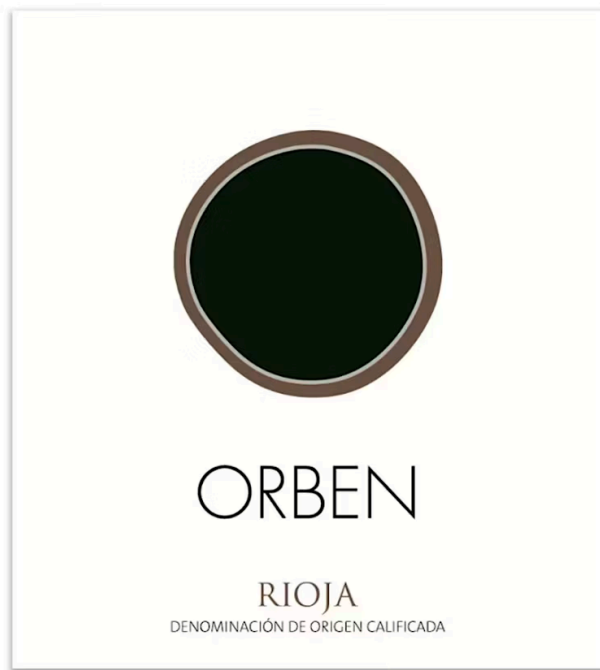
### BARON DE LEY

Rioja Finca Monasterio 2022

Score: 92 | \$40

**WS review:** This is richly aromatic, with coffee, vanilla and smoke accenting the crushed mulberry, plum sauce, black tea leaf and gravel notes. Firmed by fine-grained tannins, this shows good structure and length through the chewy, spiced finish. Best from 2027 through 2040. 14,000 cases made, 300 cases imported.  
—*Alison Napjus*

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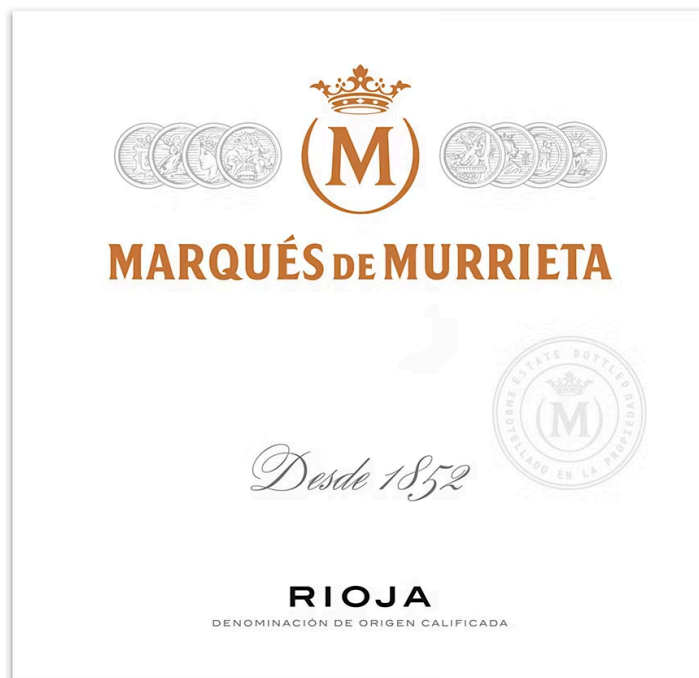
## BODEGAS ARTEVINO

Rioja Orben Viñedo en Laguardia 2023

Score: 92 | \$40

**WS review:** A well-tailored red, with a core of fine, sculpted tannins enmeshed with a generous range of creamed black cherry, plum sauce, espresso crema, mineral and cured tobacco notes. Fresh, fluid and appealing while expanding nicely through the lingering, spiced finish. Drink now through 2036. 2,000 cases made, 500 cases imported.—A.N.

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## BODEGAS MARQUÉS DE MURRIETA

Rioja Reserva 2022

Score: 92 | \$36

**WS review:** A finely balanced red, refreshing and focused. Sculpted, chalky-edged tannins provide a firm structure that's nicely meshed with flavors of pureed mulberry, macerated black cherry, mineral iron and graphite. A savory push of herbed olive shows on the finish. Tempranillo, Graciano, Mazuelo and Garnacha. Drink now through 2037. 8,682 cases imported.—A.N.

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## BODEGAS MIGUEL MERINO

Rioja Alta Vitola Reserva 2020

Score: 92 | \$45

**WS review:** A zesty skein of milled pepper and anise winds through a dark core of wild cherry, strawberry, medicinal herb, loamy earth and iron notes in this bright, focused red, with a sanguine edge. Refined tannins firm the lightly chewy finish. Tempranillo and Graciano. Drink now through 2036. 1,400 cases made, 200 cases imported.—*A.N.*

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## BODEGAS MUGA

Rioja Reserva 2022

Score: 92 | \$41

**WS review:** A sleek red, with flavors of black cherry and cured tobacco, plus accents of anise, smoked paprika and espresso, all trimmed nicely by refined, chalky tannins. This is enjoyable today but shows the stuffing for cellaring. Tempranillo and Garnacha. Drink now through 2040. 82,000 cases made, 15,000 cases imported.—A.N.

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# BODEGA SIERRA DE TOLONO

Tempranillo Rioja 2023

Score: 91 | \$23

**WS review:** Ripe and juicy mulberry and black raspberry fruit flavors are laced with hints of dried lavender and thyme, while light, chalky tannins provide textural definition. This is pure and fragrant, with a minerally underpinning and fresh focus through the spiced finish. Drink now through 2033. 2,500 cases made, 500 cases imported.—A.N.

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## BODEGAS RODA

Rioja Sela 2023

Score: 91 | \$40

**WS review:** This is tightly meshed up front, with sculpted tannins aligned with flavors of creamed cherry, mulberry, mocha, licorice root and sweet tobacco. The profile expands nicely on the palate, supported by midpalate density and a fleshier texture through the finish. Drink now through 2033. 8,000 cases made, 500 cases imported.—*A.N.*

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## BARON DE LEY

Rioja Reserva 2021

Score: 90 | \$24

**WS review:** A juicy red that layers a core of ripe cherry and plum fruit with light, taut tannins and an aromatic range of black tea leaf, dried mint, loamy earth, zesty milled pepper and anise. Tempranillo, Graciano and Maturana Tinta. Drink now through 2031. 250,000 cases made, 6,000 cases imported.—A.N.

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## BODEGA ABEL MENDOZA

Rioja Jarrarte Carbonic Maceration 2021

Score: 90 | \$20

**WS review:** A refreshing, balanced red, with a core of glazed strawberry and peach skin flavors layered with light, chalky tannins and savory accents of dried thyme, tar and paprika. Drink now. 2,600 cases made, 24 cases imported.—*A.N.*

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## EL COTO DE RIOJA

Rioja Coto de Imaz Reserva 2020

Score: 90 | \$23

**WS review:** A lively, balanced red, with flavors of cherry coulis, plum sauce, mountain herbs, iron and cocoa powder fleshing out fine-grained, taut tannins. Mineral and spice notes play on the chewy finish. Drink now through 2036. 100,000 cases made, 4,000 cases imported.—A.N.