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The Wine Most Welcome at Any Holiday Gathering

Reliably drinkable, well aged before release and a good match with a wide range of foods, Rioja makes a pleasing addition to most any festive event. So why aren't more wine drinkers wise to it?



ILLUSTRATION: OLGA ALEKSANDROVA



By *Lettie Teague* [Follow](#)

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There is a famous wine region whose wines I've largely overlooked lately. My cellar is proof: I have exactly four bottles of Rioja to my name.

The wines of Rioja, Spain, are reliable, reasonably priced and only released when they're ready to drink. So why haven't I given them greater attention? Maybe it's actually because Rioja wines are so predictable. Or maybe it's a matter of pairing. Traditionally aged in American oak, Rioja is marked by a distinct vanilla note I have, in the past, found hard to match with a wide range of dishes. When I undertook my recent Rioja re-exploration,

however, I was pleasantly surprised by what I found: delicious wines at great prices and some good matches with food.

I wondered if other wine drinkers are overlooking Rioja. Brian Gelb, vice president, wine, of Total Wine & More, reported that Rioja sales at the chain's 220-plus stores have been flat for a couple of years compared to sales of wines from, say, Italy's Tuscany and Piedmont. Gelb, himself a Rioja fan, noted the excellent price-quality ratio and the fact that the wines are ready to drink on release, "such a selling point for people who like Old World wines but aren't prepared to cellar a bottle of Bordeaux for 10 to 15 years."

Still, they aren't buying Riojas like they're buying Bordeaux at the 14 restaurants overseen by Josh Nadel, beverage director for the New York-based NoHo Hospitality Group. Nadel has fewer than a dozen Rioja wines spread across all his lists. "I feel like Rioja has been overtaken by other emerging categories," he said.

Retailer Gerald Weisl, proprietor of Weimax Wines & Spirits in Burlingame, Calif., advises red-wine drinkers looking for a refuge from high-price California Cabernets and Pinot Noirs to take another look at Rioja. "You can buy 2023 and 2022 California Pinots and Cabernets with \$40-150 price tags. Alternatively, good Riojas from traditional, 'old-school' Rioja bodegas have price tags of \$15 to \$50," Weisl said. Tempranillo, Rioja's chief grape, "can produce wines along the lines of Cabernets and Merlots," he added.

A few of the wines in my tasting had a vinous muscle and overt fruit that did seem more West Coast than northern Spain. They weren't my ideal of Rioja, a wine aged long enough to be wonderfully drinkable upon release.



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Indeed, the region's wines are classified according to how long they've been aged, just as other great wines of the world are classified by vineyard (as in Burgundy) or ranked by estate (as in Bordeaux). For red Riojas, the youngest, simply labeled Rioja, may be aged only a few months before release. These are also the cheapest. I found a few for as little as \$5 a bottle. The next-youngest, labeled Crianza, are aged at least two years in barrel and bottle, while Reserva wines are aged at least three years in barrel and bottle and frequently much longer; Gran Reserva wines, aged at least five years in barrel and bottle, are also often aged even further. The last are presumably a producer's very best wines, though there is no official requirement for a Gran Reserva aside from age.

Most of the Rioja wines I purchased were red. All were designated Crianza, Reserva or Gran Reserva, and priced from \$12 to \$44 a bottle. I did find a few white Riojas, though none of them rewarded the search. Two were decidedly neutral, almost flavorless; one bore an uncanny resemblance to canned pineapple juice.

The lone rosé in my tasting, the light, bright, floral 2023 Bodegas Muga Rosado (\$13), has long been a favorite, and the Prado Enea Gran Reserva Rioja, Muga's flagship wine, was already in my cellar. So I was rather disappointed by the 2019 Bodegas Muga Selección Especial Reserva

Rioja (\$40), in which new French oak dominated the fruit in a manner that seemed decidedly un-Rioja-like.

The earthy, beguiling 2016 R. López de Heredia Viña Cubillo Crianza Rioja (\$25) was its polar opposite, captivating aromatically and versatile when it came to food—a Rioja to pair with anything from fish to meat.

There is no Rioja winery more traditional than R. López de Heredia, and no producers more dedicated to keeping the flame of tradition alight than its sibling proprietors, María José, Mercedes and Julio César López de Heredia. Their wines are not only famous but famously long-lived, and aged much longer than most Riojas. The winery's Crianza could even be classified as a Gran Reserva under current law. But as María José wrote in an email, "We follow the old rules and we are not interested in changing them. Others change, we don't."

The rest of the reds I tasted were a mix of traditional and modern styles, and serious and less-serious wines. The fun, fleshy, ripe 2020 Bodegas LAN Crianza (\$12) was definitely in the latter category, with lots of bright, red, juicy fruit and not much complexity. The 2020 CVNE Crianza Rioja (\$15), meanwhile—from one of Rioja's most highly regarded estates—was more complex and structured, but it needed more time in the bottle to show its best.

The 2017 CVNE Cune Gran Reserva Rioja (\$36) was much more accessible—soft, and perfumed, a nuanced, elegant wine. I wondered at the decision to make a Gran Reserva in a vintage as difficult as 2017 was, but CVNE chief winemaker Maria Larrea explained that the location of the estate's vineyards proved an asset: "A large part of the oldest vineyards are in the shelter of the Sierra de Cantabria and Montes Obarenes, which acted as a protective barrier against the frost."

Two traditionally styled Riojas proved particularly good—and good bargains, too. The elegant 2019 Marqués de Riscal Reserva Rioja (\$15) was a lithe and elegant wine aged in American oak at Rioja's oldest bodega. Also aged in American oak, in this case for 24 months, the 2019 Marqués de Murrieta Reserva Rioja (\$24), from another historic estate, was impressive, lush and elegant, marked by supple tannins and lively acidity—textbook well-made Rioja.

After reporting this column I promptly doubled my Rioja holdings, and I soon will be buying more. Sometimes predictability can be good.

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