

# THE GLASSHOUSE

## WINE APPRECIATION SOCIETY

### MODULE 16

#### SPAIN

MUCH MUCH MORE THEN RIOJA, CAVA AND SHERRY



Spain remains an enigma to most British wine consumers. Despite Spain being this country's most popular holiday and retirement destination our knowledge of the extent and breadth of their wine industry is sketchy. Everyone knows and sometimes drinks Rioja, Sherry and Cava but the story of the Spanish wine industry is almost as remarkable and varied as it is large!!!



Some commentators believe that Spain is the most exciting wine country in the world at the moment, producing some of the most accomplished wines at a fraction of the price of similar quality wines from France and Italy. Much of this is very very recent, it does not take long to realise what Spanish wine producers have had to deal with in the past 100 years.

Spanish wine production is enormous – the country has the largest area under wine cultivation in the world and is consistently the third largest wine producer.

There is a huge diversity of style in modern Spain and very strong regional identities and differences add to a fascinating scope for new discovery. Spain is almost like a new experimental wine laboratory with innovation, great marketing and presentational skill and a new confidence that sits alongside the increasing international recognition of Spanish cuisine.

#### Geography and Climate

Vines are cultivated throughout the Iberian Peninsular – which Spain dominates - and the principal feature of which is that most of the land mass rises steeply from the coastal areas reaching a maximum altitude of 3,500 meters in the Sierra Nevada in the south. Many of Spain's vineyards are at 650 metres or higher.



A glance at the map in the Appendix suggests just how much climactic diversity there is in a country that has so many wine regions. From the very wet and cool north west to the baked dry central plains and hotter and virtually North African south. The altitude of the bulk of the vineyards manage to produce grapes with good levels of colour and acidity because night time temperatures are relatively low and grapes do not ripen until the end of a prolonged growing season. Until very recently irrigation was not allowed in Spain – and generally there is not enough rainfall in the country – so vines are planted much further apart than is seen in virtually any other wine region in the world and this results in much lower yields but in grapes that are packed with flavour.

Four of Iberia's five major rivers (Duero, Tajo, Guadiana and Guadalquivir) drain westwards into the Atlantic with the Ebro flowing south east to the Mediterranean through Rioja. Other rivers are seasonal and many dry up completely in the summer months. (Everyone must have seen the 'Torrentes' - looking very dry and sad in the summer months)



Great mountain ranges divide Spain into distinct natural regions: The north coast from Galicia to the Pyrenees is relatively cool and humid with few extremes. A western spur of The Pyrenees, The Cantabrian Cordillera which rise to over 2,600 metres, protects the main body of Spain from this north westerly Atlantic wetness. Rioja is protected from the Bay of Biscay – so that whereas on the Basque coast the average annual rainfall is 1,500 mm – at Haro in the heart of wine making Rioja the rainfall falls to only 450mm.

On the central plain winters are long and cold and the summers – sometimes very brief – are blisteringly hot. The usual description of the weather in Madrid is '11 months of winter and one month of hell'.

South and east of the central plateau the climate becomes more influenced by the proximity to the Mediterranean. The hottest part of Spain is the broad Guadalquivir valley where summer temperatures reach 45° C.

## History and Background

Pre and post the European Union – has made all the difference

Grapes have been grown in Spain since before 3000BC! From 1250AD records have shown that wine was being shipped from Bilbao to England. They were popular because unlike the wines from Germany and France they were high in alcohol and therefore kept better than their northern European counterparts. Following the discovery of the new world and the unification of Spain as a single Christian country in 1492 – wine increased in importance in terms of both exports and volume. With Spain being at War with England for much of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain had to find new markets. Spanish monarchs tried, and failed, to prevent the production of wine in their South American colonies in order to maintain the export market from the homeland.



The reputation of Spanish wine and the Spanish wine industry was that it was chaotic and that wine was made in 'an unscientific and careless manner'. **Sherry** was the dominant product for almost two centuries and an important part of early English taste until it was banned by Elizabeth I. Originally an English corruption of the word Jerez – and was once a term used to describe all fortified white wine. In the 1990s sherry traders succeeded in limiting the term to mean those styles of wine produced within the Jerez area. Sherry has suffered a dramatic fall in popularity as the broader Spanish wine trade has grown. Sherry is a specialism all of its own and we will leave that to another time.

As so often is the case - a disaster or two causes change. In Spain's case it was 'powdery mildew' in the 1850s, phyloxera in the 1890s and then 50 years of social and economic turbulence. From the 1950s Spain became the source of cheap bulk wines, mainly produced by co-operatives, for blending elsewhere – often France. There was a sherry boom in the 1960s and then the international discovery of Rioja. Following the death of Franco in 1975 and the subsequent joining of the EU the rise of a more affluent middle class seeking better quality wines, and the availability of EU funding for depressed areas such as Galicia and La Mancha – the Spanish wine industry started upon a new revolution.



From the 1990s private estates supplanted co-operatives, flying wine makers arrived in their legion, international grape varieties were planted and modern irrigation techniques arrived (irrigation was only legalised in 1994). The new found private interest – often from well established old families – has brought about some of the most advanced techniques in the world. The Spanish wine producers have embraced state of the art production with fabulous contemporary design. The 'Guggenheim of Somontano' being a case in point – as illustrated above..

## **Wine Varieties and Wine making**

The Spanish claim to have over 600 different grape varieties but 80% or more of the vineyards in the country are planted with no more than 20 of them. The drought resistant white Airen is planted throughout central Spain representing more than 25% of total land planted. Macabeo is widely planted in Rioja and Catalunya and is the base wine for Cava, which is mainly produced in the north eastern part of Spain. Two white wine varieties that are growing in popularity and recognition are Albarino from Galicia and Verdeja in Rueda. Tempranillo and Garnacha are the two red powerhouses.

Wine making has been transformed in recent years. Stainless steel fermentation, once unheard of, is now commonplace and most bodegas also have temperature control for fermentation. These technical improvements have transformed Spanish wine away from the bulk blending to wines of great fruit and crispness.

It is a feature of the Spanish wine industry that producers tend to own very little of their own feedstock and even in Rioja producers are dependent on many wine growers. From the early days of the American colonies Spanish wine makers have used American oak barrels. The use of wooden barrels as vessels for fermentation and storage dates back many centuries but in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the French introduced 225 litre barrique to Rioja and its use has subsequently spread across the country. But American oak predominates – being cheaper and also imparting a stronger flavour to the wine. Tempranillo in particular seems to produce wine that responds to maturation in new oak. Spanish oak aged reds are referred to as Crianza, Reserva or Gran Reserva and historically denoted greater quality and aging. This is now changing however as modern tastes are seeking greater fruit flavours than the ubiquity of vanilla.

## The Wine Regions

### Rioja

#### The former powerhouse now seeking a new identity

Still the leading wine region producing predominantly red wines, but some would say now in search of a new identity.

Named after the river (rio) Oja – a tributary of the Ebro and lying in the autonomous region of La Rioja in the north east of Spain. For centuries isolated from the rest of Spain, Rioja came to prominence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when phylloxera had destroyed the French wine industry in Bordeaux. But it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s and following the completion of a motorway to Bilbao that the region's production moved forward.



Rioja's geographic location means it has an enviable position relative to some of the other regions in Spain. It is not drenched from Atlantic rainfall in Galicia and is also protected from the searing heat of the central regions.

In Rioja there are more than 20,000 growers, who have no wine making facilities. They sell their grapes to co-operatives but increasingly to independent wineries or Bodegas – of which there are now more than 500. Grape prices in Rioja have always been the highest in Spain.

There are 7 grape varieties allowed in Rioja – four reds and three whites. The most widely planted is Tempranillo, a dark almost black grape. Garnacha (the same as Grenache in France) is blended with Tempranillo to give the wine greater body. Cabernet Sauvignon has been allowed since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and Carignina – here known as Mazuelo. The principal white grape is Malvasia followed by Macabeo with Chardonnay permitted following the phylloxera outbreak in 1901.

Rioja had a boom in the 1970s and 1980s but adopted a marketing approach of more expensive wines for less quality, which not surprisingly led to its fashion fading. And once the world moves on and discovers other wines it can be very difficult to win back these former markets, particularly when other Spanish regions have been so innovative.

### Galicia

#### The region of Spain's fine white wine production



Another historically isolated part of Spain and only really developed following accession to the EU in 1986 and the subsequent inflow of funding. However wines have been grown and exported from this region since 14<sup>th</sup> century. The wettest part of Spain –with 1500mm / 50 inches of rain each year. But this is complemented with over 2,00 hours of sunshine and vines flourish in these humid conditions and the yields achieved here are the highest in the whole of Spain. The Albarino grape here has become a very popular light wine in recent years and shares a similarity with Vinho Verde in its close neighbour Portugal.

This region encompasses the regions of Rias Baixas, Ribeiro, Ribeira Sacra, Monterrel and Valdeorras.

## Ribera del Duero

### The new red wine capital of Spain

This region, a barren plateau between Valladolid and Aranda is the self styled roast lamb capital of Spain. It is upstream from the Portuguese Douro, famous for Port, and has become the most prized red wine producing region in recent years. Whilst Port has been famous for three centuries wine from this region has really only grown in recognition since the 1980s. Vineyards here are at an average of 650 metres and this means that the grape ripening process sometimes extends until November producing highly coloured and full flavoured grapes. ~Most grapes are Tempranillo.



## North East Spain

There are at least seven sub regions in this generic wine growing area, we will cover just two of them.

### Penedes



The most important wine producing area of Catalunya and famous for **Cava**, the sparkling wine of Spain. Cava is made in the traditional method of maturing in the bottle. Cava was established on a commercial scale by the founder of the Cordoniu in 1880 –and has a similar inspiration as the founders of Prosecco in Italy. It now makes roughly 150 m bottles of cava each year ( about half the level of Champagne) and so successful has it been that the two larger houses of Cordoniu and Freixenet have made so much money they have even able to afford to build their own wineries in California.

Cava was traditionally made mainly with the local grape, Macabeo giving it a very Catalan taste with an aggressive froth, rustic flavour and quite sweet. More recently Chardonnay and Pinot Noir have been added making the wine more akin to its international rivals but perhaps slightly less the Catalunan flavour of old. (I personally say this is no bad thing – I remember unbelievable headaches on early trips to Spain)

### Priorat

Some believe this to be the most exciting wine area in Spain. The French equivalent of this area and style of wine is in Banyuls just over the border in France. Growing on very steep terraces ancient vines of Garnacha and Carignena (Grenache and Carignan in Banyuls) produce tiny quantities of superconcentrated, tannic and sometimes over alcoholic wines. More recently a new wave of producers are adding Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot – as our tasting wine tonight has – and this is leading to a more refined, and very expensive, new wave of wines.



The other principal regions in the north east are: Navarre, Somontano, Conca de Barbera, Coster del Segre.

## The Rest of Spain

This is a vast area including La Mancha around Madrid, The Mediterranean coast lands and the Balearic islands. The majority of Spain's vineyards actually lie on the table land around Madrid especially on the plains of La Mancha –from where the bulk of the basic Vino da Mesa and the ingredients for the Brandy de Jerez are produced

## Sherry

We cannot discuss Spain and not talk about Sherry – albeit very briefly.

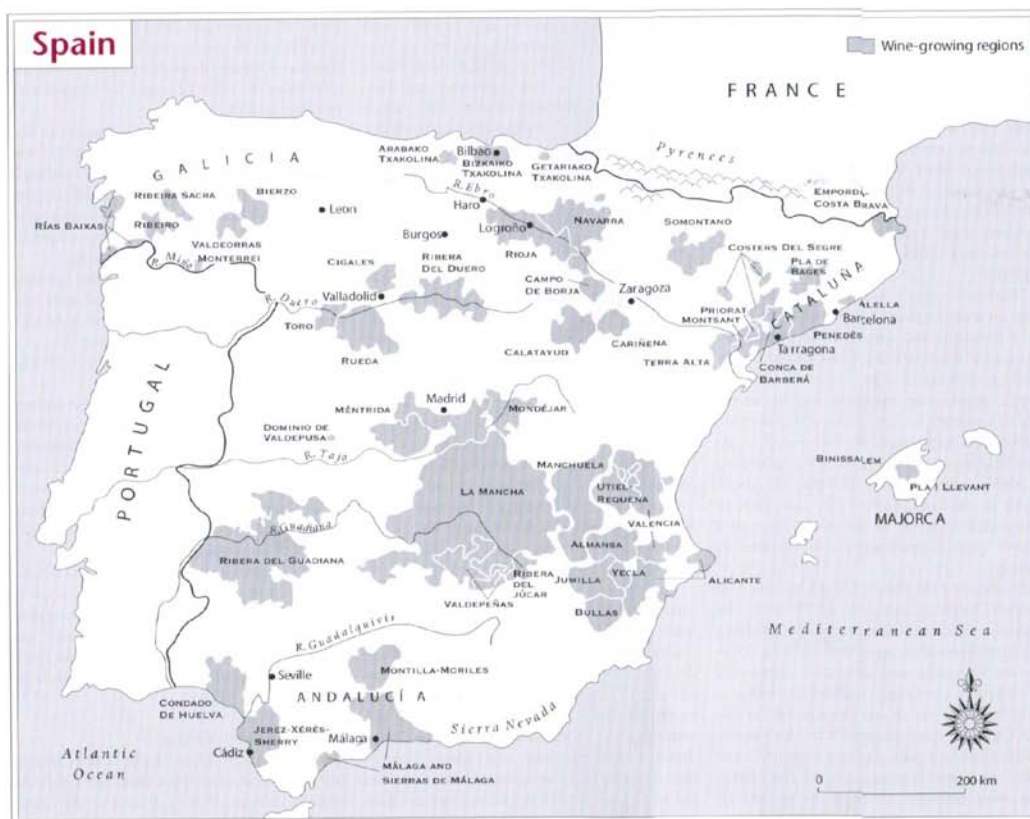


Jancis Robinson – a huge fan of this wine has written that this is 'the world's most neglected wine treasure'. She adds..... 'So fine, varied and noble a wine is sherry – and so intriguingly complicated is it to make – that replicating sherry, just like imitating a top quality champagne, is a common daydream for many of the more talented wine makers in the world'.

We could dedicate a whole evening to sherry in its own right. Needless to say sherry is beginning to attract a new consumer, often those who have been inspired by modern Spanish cuisine. Sherry is trying to grow out of the stale bottle of EMVA Cream brought out only when Gran came round.

Jerez is the oldest wine producing town in Spain. The history of sherry would fill a major volume all of its own.

Perhaps we should make sherry a special evening for the GHWAS.



## The wines we will be drinking tonight

The wines we are tasting tonight are a fantastic representation of Spain's wine regions.

### **Bodegas Pinord Seleccion Brut Cava, NV**

From a family business founded over 150 years ago. Through the generations the family has gained a reputation for improving the quality of their wines with each harvest. This Cava is made in the traditional way with secondary fermentation in the bottle.

### **Javier Sanz, Rey Santo, Rueda 2010**

A family vineyard of 104 hectares and a modern winery in the heart of Rueda. The grapes are harvested at night to preserve their freshness. An example of a modern wine from a modern family owned and managed business.

### **Bodegas Lagar d'Albarino, 2009**

From Rias Baixas on the extreme north eastern corner of Spain overlooking the Atlantic. This is the top level wine from the Pintos family, the only owners of this estate since its establishment. The family only grow and make Albarino! The grapes are handpicked and meticulously managed.

### **Ondarre Reserva Rioja, 2005**

From one of the most technically advanced bodegas in Rioja, this purpose built winery produces one of the new generations of well made, and well priced, riojas. We have been selling this wine for years and years....

### **Monte Hermsos, Joven, 2009**

From Ribera del Duero in the north central region of Spain and founded in 1966 this family owned state has been producing fabulous wines for almost 50m years.

### **Solar de Urbezo, Vina Urbezo Tinto,2009**

From the high plains near to Zaragoza the Gracia family have been making wine in this region for generations. The Vina Urbezo has been shortlisted for the best Joven – 'young' wines for the last 8 successive years. the vineyard is planted with Tempranillo, Garnacha,Carinena,Cabernet and Merlot.

### **Bodegas Estefan, Tilenus Roble, Rueda, 2006**

From the cool north west of Spain the vineyards here are very very old – 70 to 100 years and are grown on very steep, slate soil at altitudes of 700 metres. These are quite different to traditional Spanish wines.

### **Bodegas Pinord, Balcons Priorat, 2005**

In the hills immediately above Barcelona this is one of the most prized wine regions in Spain. Made from 35% Garnacha, 30% Merlot, 19% Cabernet and 16% Carignena. This beautifully made wine undergoes fermentation and maceration for a month and then aged for 14 months in French oak barrels –then left to mature in the bottle.