

Bacchus Country

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We travel just a short way from where we were two weeks ago to an area called Ribera del Duero. Close to Rioja, but separated from Rioja by some flat terrain and the Duero River, Ribera del Duero is a Spanish DENOMINACION de ORIGEN (DO) located in the autonomous community of Castile y Leon. The most famous vineyards in the area surround Penafiel and Roa de Duero to the west where the regional regulatory council or the REGULADOR (remember him from two weeks ago?) for the denominacion is based. Ribera del Duero is also home to the world-famous and highly-prized Vega Sicilia and Tinto Pesquera wines. These wines introduce us to wines made from 100% Tempranillo Grapes.

Wine has been produced in this region for over 2000 years. What evidence do we have of this? Some fact; some legend. There is, however, one fact that is very concrete. A concrete statue of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine, was unearthed. Bacchus was given a bath, tested for age and found to be almost 2000 years old. However, viticulture as we know it today was probably brought to the region by the Benedictine monks from Cluny in the Burgundy region of France in the twelfth century. Suffice it to say, wine was produced in Ribera del Duero for the next 600 years for local consumption only. This all changed in the 1860's when the renowned bodega Vega Sicilia was established. Vega Sicilia operated almost alone until the 1970's, when bodega Pesquera was established by Alejandro Fernandez. Bodega Pesquera produced red wines made from 100% Tempranillo. These wines were full-bodied, concentrated and fruit-driven, more so than their neighbors to the north in Rioja. Pesquera was well received in Spain and in export markets, thus putting Ribera del Duero on the world market. One important result was that the Denominacion de Origen (D.O.) of Ribera del Duero was established by an organization of wine producers and growers who were determined to promote the quality of their wines and enforce regulatory standards. Evidently the hard work was worth it as the Ribera del Duero region was elevated to Denominacion de Origen Calificada (DOC) in 2008.

Wines produced in the Ribera del Duero DO are sourced almost exclusively from red grapes. The grapes are properly called Tempranillo and are referred to locally as tinto fino. (I will

mention the white grape later. It's important.) The climate of Ribera del Duero is one of extremes. The summers are blistering hot and the winters can be severe; often below zero. Despite these extremes, the vines and the fruit survive quite well. This is evidenced by the heavy textured, bolder and full flavored wines produced therefrom. After the harvest, the wines are stored much the same way as in Rioja – for long periods of time in used barrels. The result is wine with flavors that are subtle. The wines also carry the same quality names as Rioja, i.e., Crianza, Reserva, and Gran Reserva.

When pairing wines from Ribera del Duero with food, think of Roast Lamb, simple lettuce and tomato salads and cheese. Availability of these wines in the Lowcountry is good; they should be in stock at most retailers. When comparing Ribera del Duero to Rioja, expect a wine that is not better, but unique. Over the centuries, the grapes have adapted themselves to extreme temperatures. The blending of the wine includes a very small amount of white wine, which has been added from a grape called Abillo. Blending a tiny amount of white grapes in with the red has been traditional in Europe for centuries and is still done today. The reason for this white grape is that Abillo adds a pleasant aroma. Over 100 years of experimentation and processing and blending has brought to the forefront wines that have full flavors of licorice, mocha, dark berry, and plum.

WINESPEAK. What is a CLONE? (This term is important.) In this case, a clone is a plant produced by grafting or cutting so that it retains the identical genetic characteristics of the host. Each grape variety has many different sub varieties, or clones (much the same way as roses do). For example, there are dozens of clones of Pinot Noir or Cabernet, each excelling in a specific characteristic or resistance to disease. Cloning goes on behind the scenes and all throughout the year.

Next stop: Provence.

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