



## Spain is IT in 2006

By Leslie Sbrocco

Forget those over-achieving New Year's resolutions and focus on one you can actually fulfill: buying more Spanish wine in 2006.

I've journeyed repeatedly to Spain over the past several years and each time I return bursting with excitement. This place is hot. If you haven't discovered the amazing wines from the anchor of the Iberian Peninsula, get revved up and ready.

Even though Spain's wine history is rich and dates back more than three thousand years, not too long ago drinking Spanish wine meant downing dried-out red from Rioja or sipping cheap Sherry. That was about it. Wine was made the same way for centuries to appeal to locals whose tastes leaned towards tired and oxidized.

Fortunately, those days are gone. Nearly four decades ago, winemaking pioneers such as Miguel Torres, Alejandro Fernandez and René Barbier began challenging traditional methods to create modern style wines that respected their heritage yet appealed to an international palate. Now, another generation of stars like Telmo Rodriguez, Alvaro Palacios and Peter Sisseck craft innovative Spanish "cult" wines that have aficionados flocking to buy them at near Screaming Eagle pace.

The recent buzz on Spain has come from places such as Jumilla and Yecla where bargain bottles abound. Tried some yet? How about supple Tempranillo-based reds of Ribera del Duero or sexy, modern-style Riojas hitting the market? Put wines from these regions on your shopping list along with what I think are three of the hottest spots in Spain.

### TORO

In Spanish, toro means bull and these are big, bold reds worthy of a bull. The region--actually named after a town perched above the nearby Duero River--is home to some of the oldest grape vines in the world because sandy soil prevented phylloxera, a vine disease, from devastating the area.



Though other varieties such as Garnacha are planted, the celebrated grape of the region is Tinta de Toro. A local name for Spain's trademark red variety Tempranillo, Tinta de Toro has adapted over time to the harsh conditions of Toro. A high-altitude plateau with low rainfall and extreme temperature swings, Toro's continental climate produces grapes with power and concentration. (I'm sure it's due to the hearty quality of Toro reds that Christopher Columbus reputedly took some to sip on his sea-faring voyages of discovery.)

More and more producers are revitalizing this historic wine region located in north central Spain. Some of the best to watch for include: **Bodega Numanthia, Bodega Mauro, Dos Victorias, and Dehesa Gago from Telmo Rodriguez.**

### BIERZO

If there is one region that industry insiders are murmuring about, this is it. Bierzo is situated in the mountainous region of north western Spain between the high plateau of Toro and the lush, green coastline of western Spain. With its patchwork of small vineyards on steep tree-shrouded slopes, it's reminiscent of a rustic version of Piedmont, the great northern Italian wine region.

To understand Bierzo is to understand its central location on the Camino de Santiago (road to Santiago). Over centuries pilgrims would come from across Europe to pay homage to the burial site of Saint James at the cathedral in the coastal city of Santiago de Compostela. Though vines were certainly planted during Roman inhabitation, the



influence of these pilgrims during medieval times contributed to the area's diverse culture and layered wine history.

The primary red grape in Bierzo is one most have never heard much less tasted: Mencía. It was long thought to be related to Cabernet Franc, a French variety brought along on pilgrims' travels. Similarities do exist with Cabernet Franc's telltale floral aromas and mineral notes, but wines made from Mencía are also reminiscent of a silky Pinot Noir.

Though a bit harder to locate than other Spanish wines, you should be seeing more on the market in 2006. Producers to watch for include: **Pittacum, Bodegas Estefania/Tilenus, and Dominio de Tares.**

## RIAS BAIXAS

Spain isn't only for red wine lovers. Fans of racy whites can get excited about one of my favorites, Albariño-based wines from Rias Baixas (pronounced ree-AHSH buy-SHUS). The zone of Rias Baixas is located across the border from Portugal along the Atlantic coastline of Spain. The broader region is



Galicia with its own language--Gallego--and it's a world away from what most people imagine as Spain. Lush, green mountains are a backdrop for sandy beaches and dramatic rias (fjords) rising from the sea. Though the area dates back to Celtic times, the white wine revolution started here only in the past several decades. It's in full swing and the result is some very exciting wines.

The star white grape in Rias Baixas is Albariño. Though other white grapes such as Treixadura may be part of a blend, the buzz is all about Albariño's citrusy freshness wrapped around a strong backbone of acidity. Rumor has it that Albariño is related to Riesling brought over centuries ago by German monks on a pilgrimage, although locals insist it's native to the area.

If you're putting any kind of fish dishes on the table from crab to salmon, these aromatic, intensely crisp whites are a near perfect match. Restaurants may be the best place to try wines from Rias Baixas as they are darlings of the

young sommelier set. But, retailers are catching on and offering a smattering of generally affordable examples. Producers to watch for include: **Condes de Albarei, Vionta, Fillaboa, Lusco, Pazo de Barrantes, and Morgadio.**

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