

# *New World Wines*

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## *Newsletter*

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August is a month for dreaming. With the weather too hot to import wines and with most people in Europe on holiday, my thoughts are turning to the autumn. An early September trip to Napa and Sonoma will be followed by the arrival of lots of new wines in late September. After that a series of tastings are planned at the warehouse, details of which will be circulated in due course.

This summer's buying trip took me to the Rioja region of Spain and to Bordeaux (of which more in a future newsletter). Spanish wine has, in spite of increasingly good reviews in the wine press, been out of favour over the past decade. Grape varieties outside the mainstream (principally Tempranillo) and vast volumes of what was generally perceived as cheap wine did not encourage customers to search out the top names. Ironically many of the best wineries in Spain have not changed the way they have made wine over the years but are starting to find a wider audience, in part because of the publicity generated by a number of "new" names (and several established ones) prepared to experiment with new methods of making wine.

Several of the top bodegas in Rioja are clustered in a small area on the outskirts of the town of Haro. My first visit was to Bodegas Roda which is about as "new wave" as you will find in Rioja, if not Spain.

### **Bodegas Roda**

The Rotllant–Daurella family started the winery about ten years ago and they have spared no expense to produce a top flight wine, Roda I, and in special years a cuvee called Cirsion. I met with Esperanza Tomas, the head of Research, who took me on a tour of their vineyards in the area, all planted at between 450 metres and 550 metres above sea level. The different altitude allows for a progressive maturity while different soils and microclimates increase complexity. The vines in their vineyards and vineyards from which they purchase grapes are all over 30 years old. They use no pesticides. High planting densities and generally poor soil forces the vines to struggle. Irrigation is permitted until the end of July but not thereafter. Harvesting is all by hand.

In the winery homage to tradition is continued with the use of wooden fermentation tanks made from French oak (most in Rioja are made from American or Spanish oak). The

grapes are 100% destemmed and there is a cold soak before fermentation to increase the flavours.

After fermentation the juice is placed in small French oak barrels one third of which are new, one third one year old and one third two years old.

Fining with egg whites takes place prior to bottling but, of course, there is no filtration. Roda I is made from 100% Tempranillo, while Roda II, the second wine contains about 20% Garnacha along with Tempranillo.

### **Tasting notes**

#### Roda I 1997

1997 was not a great vintage in Rioja. The wine showed good colour with soft floral notes and a slightly herbaceous finish. Some red fruits and decent structure but less rich than in the top years. Good but not great.

#### **Roda I 1998**

100% Tempranillo. Lots of fruit, some tannin but soft and round. Deep colour. Floral nose. Very good.

#### **Roda II 1998**

17% Garnacha, small amount of Graciano with remainder Tempranillo. Good colour with peppery nose (influence of the Garnacha). Very much Rhone in style with red and black fruits. Balanced and smooth.

I carry Roda I from 1996 priced at \$41 a bottle.

#### What the critics say

Roda I 1996 - Wine Spectator (15/12/2000)

*“Game and mineral notes are strong in their rich red but are balanced by a core of ripe fruit and smoky toasty oak. An assertive style that will have its partisans. Drink now through 2005.” 89 points.*

### **Bodegas Muga**

The Muga family have been in the business for over 100 years. Cellars were constructed in 1968 and the winery has gone from strength to strength ever since. The vineyards are located in Rioja Alta and are, like most of the rest of the region, head pruned. The wine is fermented in 225 litre oak tanks prior to being transferred to small French and American oak barrels. The wines remain in barrel for 24 months (Crianza) or 36 months (Gran Reserva) followed by a further period of 7 months bottle aging (Crianza) or 36 months (Gran Reserva) prior to their release. Not great for the cash flow, especially as there is no en primeur market for Spanish wine. What it does mean, however, is that on release you get a wine that is generally ready to drink.

Muga, although what one would describe as traditional, also make a more “modern” style of wine called Torre Muga. The usual grape varieties are used but less barrel aging, the ripest fruit and perhaps slightly more extraction result in a wine which Parker calls the Chateau Lafite of Rioja. Although superb in its own right after my tasting I couldn’t help but be drawn back to the “traditional” wines with their soft floral bouquet and round food friendly style.

At Muga I met with Jesus Viguera Gomez who took me on a tour of the winery. Not a steel tank in sight, they made all their own barrels in-house.

### *Tasting notes*

#### ***Muga White 2000***

A blend of 90% Viura and 10% Malvasia the juice is fermented in oak before being bottled. Oak nuances were present but balanced. The wine was quite creamy with hints of peach and apricot. Good acidity. I thought this was well made and very good value.

#### ***Crianza 1997***

Good colour with a lovely nose of red and black fruits. Touch of oak. Good flavours with medium body. 70% Tempranillo, 20% Garnacha and 10% Graciano. All the grapes for the best vineyards went into this cuvee since no Gran Reserva was made in 1997.

#### ***Reserva Especial 1995***

Sweet nose of black fruits. Slightly gamey nose but well balanced. Long finish. Very classic. Just what one would expect good Rioja to be like.

#### ***Prado Enea Gran Reserva 1991***

Sweet nose. Complex. Fruit followed by softer layer of oak. Lovely long finish. Beautiful wine.

#### ***Prado Enea Gran Reserva 1994***

A beautiful wine, lovely sweet texture, soft and drinkable now.

All of these wines are very food friendly.

#### ***Torre Muga 1996***

Slightly gamey nose with some alcohol present on the nose subduing the fruit. A brighter bolder style than the Gran Reserva. The first vintage was released in 1991 and it is made only in the good years.

Prices for those top Spanish wines, especially Muga, are cheap based on their quality and drinkability. I urge customers to try these wines, prices for which have actually decreased over the past five years due to the strength of the dollar while quality has continued to improve. Excellent vintages like 1991, 1994, 1995 and 1996 are now coming on stream.

## *Reviews*

### ***Prado Enea Gran Reserva 1991***

Wine Spectator 15/12/1999 “This generous, traditional red is rich with alluring aromas and flavours of plum, cola, spice and chocolate. Has a plump texture backed by firm tannin, and remains lively through the long finish.” 89 points.

Parker “After spending nearly four years in oak the 1991 Prado Enea Gran Reserva exhibits a dark ruby colour, as well as superb aromatics of jammy red fruits intertwined with minerals, herbs, oak and spice. Expressive, with expansive flavours this quintessential classical old style fully mature Rioja still possess copious quantities of fruit. The sweetness on the attack and long finish suggest it should keep for 7-10 years.” 94 points.

### ***Torre Muga 1996***

Wine Spectator 30/11/2000. “Rich yet lively this full throttle red from Spain is bursting with ripe fruit and tasty oak flavours, yet retains a juicy acidity that keeps it balanced and refreshing to drink. It’s concentrated yet graceful, with loads of potential.” 92 points.

Although the wines of Rioja are discussed here we also have available the wines from Alejandro Fernandez (Pesquera) and Vega Sicilia from Ribera del Duero as well as others (see price list for details).

## *Wine and Tourism*

Rioja is not particularly geared up for wine tourism. Several of the larger bodegas, including Muga, do tours and there is a very fine wine museum in Haro, the Museo del Vino de la Rioja, which is well worth a visit.

The real draw is the countryside (referred to as the Tuscany of Spain) and the many beautiful villages in the hilly area. Of particular note was Laguardia, a beautiful fortified town some 40 kilometres from Haro. I would also recommend a visit to the Monasteries of Suso and Yuso in or near San Millan de la Cogolla, on the pilgrims way to Santiago and about 30 kilometres from Haro.

## *Recommended Hotels and Restaurants*

I stayed at the Hotel Los Augustinos in Haro which was very comfortable (US\$80 a night double).

Next time I will probably stay in Laguardia and the hotel Posada Mayor de Migueloa in the city and the Antigua Bodega de Don Cosme Palacio (a converted winery) nearby were recommended.

Another alternative would be the Hosteria del Monasterio de San Millan where one part of the Yuso monastery has been converted into a luxury hotel (US\$100 a night double)

Restaurants do not generally open until after 10 pm (although the Tapas bars and pizzerias often open around 8 pm). Wine people I spoke to recommended Casa Ton in San Vicente, Iturbe in LaBastida (also a pretty town) and in Echaurren in Ezcavay (perhaps the best in the region). In Haro try La Terete and in Laguardia, Marixa.

***John M. Sharpe***

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