

The changing conception of quality in Spain – a radical and controversial overhaul

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The notion of wine quality has gone through more ups-and-downs in Spain over the past century than in other European producing nations, and the result has been predictably uneven: some better wines but also much confusion in the 1990s. In constant flux, Spain has acted, for better or worse, as the Old World's New World.

Contrary to common belief, the classic style of Rioja's red wines was not a key to the Spanish conception of quality wines until relatively recently – well into the 20th century. The revolution attached to the introduction of small Bordeaux-type barriques and Bordeaux winemaking techniques is much older, since it occurred around 1860, but for decades Rioja wines were not well-known in Madrid, Barcelona and points south – only around the northern cities of Logroño and Bilbao. Until they became 'the' national benchmark for quality, there were two ideas about good wine in Spain: one was the unique, unchallenged fortified wines of Jerez; the other was the strong, alcohol-laden, often somewhat oxidized Mediterranean reds that had been famed since the Middle Ages – often as parts of blends in northern Europe – and came from such regions as Priorat or Alicante. (No white, apart from sherries, has played any major role in dictating quality standards in a country with few areas that are amenable to quality whites.)

Rioja's triumph came at the expense of those warm reds. It also created a single ideal for quality reds in Spain, one that would become mired in time as Rioja did not evolve as Bordeaux did after 1860. Wars, economic depression and even regulations that favoured the creation of huge wineries (by demanding a large minimum number of barriques for a 'bodega' to be allowed to export wine) were instrumental in this arrested progress. Rioja wine was a light red, very briefly fermented (and most often racked from vat before the completion of alcoholic fermentation), then aged for many years – often, for as long as the wine wasn't sold – in used American oak barrels that would lend it some typical vanilla and coconut aromas, and often some mustiness. At any rate, fruit or concentration were not considered as great prerequisites for quality. But the top cuvées from top 'bodegas', with ripe fruit from old, low-yielding vines, would attain great charm and personality in combining the aromas of long aging with a solid fruit base that even marginal maceration would not deny.

So was born the Rioja style that conquered many palates in the world after 1970 with its originality – and low prices. This style would be impeached and overhauled – sometimes abusively and imprudently so – after 1990, but it brought to the fore one key element in the later concept of quality in Spain: the tempranillo grape variety. This is important because tempranillo, in 30 years, has invaded Spain as cabernet sauvignon has invaded the rest of the world, but it remains largely a Spanish specialty. This native red grape used to be a minor presence but has expanded so fast that it now occupies a larger global land surface than chardonnay – about 135,000 hectares (332,000 acres), most of it in its home country. It currently ranks seventh or eighth in

the unofficial world league of most commonly grown grape varieties – remarkable for a grape that is seldom seen in other parts of the world.

Tempranillo has always been the grape that forms the backbone of red Rioja. However, as late as the 1970s, respected international wine authorities were – erroneously – referring to garnacha as Rioja's most important variety. (Garnacha, also of Spanish origin, is much better known internationally by its French name, grenache, due to its role in the wines of the southern Rhone.)

Now everything is changing, and what we are seeing in tempranillo is a grape that, like chardonnay, has a chameleon-like quality that allows it to adapt and transform itself according to growing location and vinification. The fast-ripening tempranillo (the name means “the little early one”) can make lovely nouveau-style reds, fruit-laden, modern-style blockbusters and graceful old Reservas, in which the oak is easily integrated. The minor role that fruit used to play in traditional Rioja makes characterizing the aroma and flavour profile of this small-berried grape a tricky business. British wine writer Oz Clarke points to the “spicy, tobaccoey flavours of tempranillo,” while Spain's José Peñin stresses the “intensely fruity” character of the wine, as well as its aging potential, “due to the fact that it does not oxidize easily.”

The man who expanded tempranillo's horizons in the 1980s and put it on the international map is a former machine-tool builder, Alejandro Fernández. His dense Tinto Pesquera, packed with Morello cherry and spice flavours, attracted worldwide attention – not only to the tempranillo grape but also to the then-little-known region of Ribera del Duero. “Why would I want to use cabernet sauvignon?” Fernández likes to ask. “I already have the world's best red variety.”

Although long-planted in many Spanish regions, called by various names and often used as a blending grape, tempranillo was always most at home in Rioja (where it now occupies about 33,000 hectares, or 82,500 acres). However, a much-debated Rioja-Ribera rivalry highlighted tempranillo's many merits, and most growers started to go after it. Despite regulatory obstacles, the replanting of vineyards with tempranillo gathered pace throughout Spain in the 1990s; large new plantings can be found in more than a dozen appellations, mainly in eastern and central Spain, where previously it did not exist or played only a minor role.

This galloping success is due to the fact that tempranillo assures fine quality for both mass-produced and elite wines. The variety's one weakness – low acidity – led to blending in Rioja, but in Ribera, where the more extreme continental climate gives tempranillo added depth, purely varietal wines were more frequent. However, today, in both regions, and now throughout Spain, varietal wines and blends are both frequently found.

It is interesting that Fernández, the man who led to the thorough overhaul of the ideas on how to vinify and age tempranillo, came from outside Rioja. It's just as meaningful that of the three other winemakers who changed the face of Spanish wine over the last three decades of the 20th century, two came from outside Rioja – Carlos Falcó of Toledo and Miguel Torres of Penedès – and the third, Álvaro Palacios, while the scion of an old Rioja family, had to leave the region because traditions and regulations were too stifling

for his ideas, and start anew in one of those forgotten Mediterranean areas, Priorat, to resuscitate a different Spanish approach to quality wines.

Significantly, these four men, who can be considered as the most influential wine-related figures of the 20th century in their country, are all still active in 2000. Before them, there was one large void in leadership.

Although Spain is one of the world's leading wine-producing countries, it has long lacked any truly colourful, influential, not to mention dominating, industry figures. Just 25 years ago, the only personalities with a meaningful international presence were sherry patriarchs like Mauricio González and J. Ignacio Domecq – better known to the London wine trade than in Spain. Otherwise, obscure managers and even more obscure winemakers controlled a routine-ridden, unglamorous industry that lacked ambition. The sea change in Spanish winemaking that has taken place since then could not have happened without public figures who could act as spearheads or catalysts for the movement. Local Mondavis, Gajas or Rollands were needed.

The return to powerful, expressive reds made from fully ripe, well-macerated grapes was pioneered in Ribera del Duero, with tempranillo, by Fernández, and in Toledo, with Bordeaux varieties, by the innovative Falcó, the Marqués de Griñón, while Torres would work on many different fronts in and around Penedès. But it was Palacios and friends who re-launched the native Mediterranean varieties with ideas that paralleled those of the other three.

So, in most unexpected fashion, the under-appreciated – and, often, frankly despised – Mediterranean region is awakening from its centuries-long slumber, reviving an old and long-forgotten reputation dating back to the days of the Roman empire. The area produces warm, fruity, wild herb-infused wines that are quite different from those made in Rioja or Ribera. Definitely Mediterranean. Spain's Rhone, Provence and Languedoc-Roussillon, if you will.

It took a bunch of underfunded but overmotivated persons to revive the tiniest and most forgotten wine-producing area in this part of the country, Priorat, and to launch the whole renewal. The region, about 100 miles southwest of Barcelona, had the makings of a quality region: the unique soil – deep, pure slate forming precipitous slopes – and the old garnacha (grenache) and cariñena (carignan) vines with painfully low yields were there.

But, in this baking-hot, hilly area, the old-fashioned winemaking methods only produced heavy, oxidized ‘rancio’ (fortified) wines that no modern consumer could appreciate. So the more northerly Penedès, with its international grape varieties and its shiny high-tech wineries, was the great vinous hope of Catalonia until the late 1990s. Today, of course, Priorat produces much sought-after cult wines. The five pioneers added sound winemaking techniques and a dollop of French cultivars (cabernet sauvignon, syrah and merlot) to make more complex and age-worthy blends, retaining the amazing depth and the mineral and balsamic qualities provided by the land. These pioneers, and their wines, soon convinced all the sceptics and are now internationally famous. They are Álvaro Palacios (L'Ermita, Finca Dofi), René Barbier (Clos Mogador), Daphne Glorian (Clos Erasmus), Josep-Lluís Pérez (Clos Martinet) and Carles Pastrana (Clos de l'Obac).

A second wave of wineries has now come along to supply more distinguished bottles from Priorat. But that's not the end of the story. The revival now reaches from the eastern Pyrenees, on the French border, to deepest south eastern Spain, and even out to the Balearic Islands.

What Priorat didn't have was much space for vineyards – only some 2,000 acres are under vines now, after a decade of active replanting. On the other hand, what it did have were several eager neighbours: wine-producing regions up and down the Mediterranean coast and on the coastal mountain ranges. They lacked the distinctive Priorat slate soil, but they had the climate, the native grape varieties and the old vines. Not to mention the local vinegrowers' intense desire to jump on Priorat's bandwagon – and to attain some of Priorat's new-found affluence.

Several Priorat winemakers have indeed been instrumental in aiding their neighbors' takeoff. The father-and-daughter team of oenologists, Josep-Lluís and Sara Pérez, is now particularly active throughout eastern Spain and in the Balearics. They spread the good word of careful vineyard management and clean, non-interventionist vinification. Not surprisingly, these recipes are yielding remarkable results in several regions. In the end, the movement had to reach back into Rioja, whose own wines had been increasingly decried as bland and impersonal. Some innovative producers began changing things and developing much lusher wines. Were they the answer? Nowhere as in Rioja did the dangers of overreaching and losing identity become as evident: replacing old American oak with new French oak (often not the best oak around) and macerating for much longer periods fruit that often did not deserve such attention became the buzzword for the 'new' Rioja. This was often a betrayal of a well known and well-liked, although perhaps not wildly exciting style, while introducing elements (alcohol, colour, oakiness, often vegetal greenness) that were not always desirable. The old image of Rioja was transformed into a modern caricature.

This was by no means general – such producers as Contino, Artadi, Finca Allende, Finca Valpiedra, Roda, Muga or the Marqués de Vargas introduced modern, expressive but truly Riojan wines. But many large commercial wineries and co-ops fell into the trap.

Similar developments elsewhere in Spain, particularly in Ribera del Duero, soon made it apparent that exaggerations and misconceptions were bedeviling the process of change. One of the key points was that winemaking had often been stressed over all other considerations, whereas the ever lower quality of vineyards – young vines, huge yields - had been overlooked.

After 1995, the credo that fine wine has to be made in the vineyard again, not only in the vat, became much more pervasive. So the idea of quality shifted again. But this new step was made more difficult to undertake by the very structure of the Spanish bodega: very few of them own or even control the majority of the vineyards from which they source their grapes. The industrial, 'négociant'-type structure that had always considered the vineyard as an alien problem became an obstacle to the correction of recent mistakes.

Modern techniques with a clear conception of what was best in traditions and with a much better control of the grape supply: after the 'revelations' and excesses of the late 20th century, this new realization portends new changes in Spain. But such changes will only be apparent to all when the structure of the industry changes itself in Spain. Many more vineyard-orientated estates of much smaller size will be needed for a truly qualitative, deeply-rooted revolution to take hold in Spain. Until then, better cellar techniques will have to make do for a largely cosmetic change.