

Jim Hiller's Wine Club

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A Spanish Revolution

Spain used to be known mostly for bargain wines. As recently as 2001, the Wine Club paired Spanish reds with German whites because there were not enough quality Spanish whites on the market and we titled that release "European Bargains." But during the last few years the Spanish wine industry has changed rapidly and dramatically. Wine makers have made significant investments in improved vineyard practices, new winemaking technology, and modern bodegas. Spanish wines are now gaining worldwide recognition for their quality and value and for this issue we had a more than ample stock of white and red candidates from which to choose our selections for the Wine Club.

In vineyard practices, Spain officially legalized the use of irrigation in 1996 and drip irrigation has become a widespread practice among many growers. Winemakers have increased their involvement with vineyard management as co-ops have given way to estates. Spanish winemakers have aggressively adopted modern winemaking techniques, including the use of stainless steel fermenting tanks and cool temperature fermentation. And there have been dramatic changes in the traditional practice of aging. Many winemakers are aging their wines for shorter periods of time, and shifting from American oak – which typically imparts a very robust oak flavor – to the more subtle influences of French oak.

All Spanish wine is classified into one of four categories. The two lowest categories are considered "Table Wine." These categories are the least restrictive in terms of winegrowing and winemaking practices. The two highest categories are considered "Quality Wine Produced in a Specific Region." These categories are more restrictive and, in theory, produce

higher quality wines. However, because the higher tiers are so restrictive, some innovative winemakers are producing high quality (and high priced!) wines outside of these categories.

The two lowest categories of wine are: *Vino de la mesa* or table wine and *Vino de la tierra* or wine of the land. The two higher categories are *Denominación de Origen (DO)* and *Denominación de Origen Calificada (DOCa)*. The DO and DOCa designations indicate precise geographic limits and specific growing and winemaking practices such as: grape varieties that may be grown in the area, maximum yield, minimum alcohol content, aging requirements, *et cetera*. Currently there are more than 50 DOs and just two DOCas (Rioja and Priorat). However, many exciting innovations are taking place outside of these official *denominaciones*.

Spanish Grapes

Tempranillo is the backbone for many of Spain's best red wines. In Spanish, the word *temprano* means early. And the Tempranillo grape does ripen early – about two weeks ahead of the Garnacha grapes that are often blended with it to make the famous red wines of the Rioja region. The grapes are thick-skinned and produce deep-colored, long-lasting wines. But, unlike many other red wines, Tempranillo is not particularly high in alcohol.

Garnacha is the Spanish name for the grape that is known in France as Grenache. The most widely planted red varietal in Spain, Garnacha is grown primarily in the regions of the north and the east. The most distinctive and most expensive wine based on Garnacha comes from a handful of regions in Catalunya that are just west of Barcelona. These grapes from old Garnacha vines are blended with Merlot, Cabernet, or

Syrach to produce rich, concentrated wines that have developed cult followings.

Monastrell is the Spanish name for the grape that is known in France as Mourvèdre. Monastrell buds and ripens extremely late, so it needs to grow in a warm climate such as the Valencia and Levant regions of south-central Spain. The variety is characterized by small, sweet, thick-skinned berries. It produces wine that is high in alcohol and tannin, with a flavor that is sometimes described as “gamey” or “animal.” The wine ages well as long as it avoids oxidation.

Airén The most widely planted varietal in the world, it’s used mostly for blending with other grapes and is a major component of Spanish brandy.

Macabeo, also known as Viura, is widely planted in the Rioja and Catalunya regions of northern Spain. Like Airén, it’s used often for blending, with strong reds and with other whites. It has a vaguely floral character and relatively low acidity. If the grapes are picked early, the acidity increases but the floral quality is less pronounced. Macabeo is one of three varieties that is used in the traditional Cava.

Albariño is one of the few Spanish grapes that is actually produced and labeled as a varietal wine. Grown primarily in the Rias Baixas region in northwestern Spain, the grape has a distinctive aromatic and peachy quality. The grape’s thick skin helps to withstand the very humid climate in the Rias Baixas.

Verdejo Grown in the Duero River Valley, this grape produces outstanding wines with a good balance of fruitiness and acidity and distinctive aromas of laurel. It ages well in oak.

Malvasía was once widely cultivated in the Rioja region, it has been replaced almost entirely by Macabeo

Atlantic Ocean with a climate much wetter and colder than the rest of Spain. The Albarino grape, however, flourishes here, trained to grow on high trellises called pergolas in order to maximize air flow and minimize the risk of molds and rot. The Burgans is fermented and aged in stainless steel with light lees stirring, not finished and bottled till the spring after the harvest. Although it is often likened to Viognier because of its complex floral and spice notes, Albarino is thought to be genetically related to Riesling and it often exhibits the unctuous mouth-feel and the delicate apricot aromas and flavors that Riesling can also show. A great match with any seafood, Albarino is especially good paired with shellfish.

2005 Bodegas Nekeas Vega Sindoa Chardonnay Navarra

Bodegas Nekeas is one of the northernmost vineyards on the Iberian peninsula where cultivation of the grapes is only possible thanks to the presence of the Sierra Perdón, which provides a mountainous barrier protecting the Nekeas Valley from the cold winds of the Pyrenees. The climate is also moderated by the influence of the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Mediterranean to the east, whose breezes flows up the Ebro River Valley. Fermented in French oak barrels, left on the lees for 6 to 8 months and undergoing complete malolactic fermentation, the Vega Sindoa is 100% chardonnay in a very California/New World style. a light golden color, good underlying natural acidity, plenty of tropical fruit, honeysuckle, ripe apples, and a hint of background vanilla.

2005 Esperanza Verdejo Rueda

The Rueda D.O. region is gaining an international reputation for its fresh and fruity white wines of excellent quality and attractive pricing. The region is situated on a high plateau of the Duero basin (the Duero, flowing west through Portugal is called the Duoro, and is where all fine Port comes from). Verdejo is the star of Rueda, but Viura, Sauvignon Blanc and Palomino are also grown and often blended in the white wines. Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Garnacha are grown, but the reds have not matched the

quality of the whites. Esperanza is made from 100% Verdejo grapes coming from, on average, 50 year-old vines. The layered bouquet offers rich, intense aromas of pineapple, grapefruit and anise seed. Crisp tropical fruit and citrus flavors on the palate are followed by a long, pure aftertaste. An excellent pairing for seafood, pasta, poultry, or soft cheeses.

2005 Artadi Orobio Rioja

Perhaps the most celebrated and tradition-bound of Spain’s many wine regions, the wines of Rioja are often the most stunning of this amazing country. Located north of Madrid, Rioja has been producing wine for centuries in compliance with winemaking quality standards imposed by government fiat. However, many wineries are shirking the “old” system of classification for a more progressive system that favors earlier release of wines (cf. the “super Tuscan” winemakers of Italy who similarly felt constricted by the restrictions of their D.O.C. system).The Artadi estate was created in 1985 by one of these young Turks seeking to make wines of greater extraction and intensity with less American oak influence. The Orobio is 100% Viura, cold fermented in stainless steel tanks only a few months before release. Clean and fresh with a delicate citrus and floral bouquet, it’s an excellent aperitif and a fine match for fish or lightly sauced veal or chicken dishes.

2005 Ipsum Rueda

Here’s another lovely Rueda white, a blend of Verdejo and Viura with a light golden color and fresh perfumed aromas of lemon, minerals, honeysuckle and jasmine. It is juicy and exuberant in the mouth, with grapefruit, lime and mineral flavors of noteworthy intensity. The juicy, intense and long finish shows a persistent mineral quality.

2005 Las Brisas Rueda

The Verdejo grapes in the Las Brisas come from ungrafted, pre-Phylloxera vines with an average age of 90 years with many over 100. Blended with Viura and Sauvignon Blanc, the wine has subtle honeysuckle, citrus, white grapefruit and lemon aromas that develop into clean flavors on the palate. In the mouth, the

Tasting Notes

Taster’s Table Whites

2005 Burgans Albarino Rias Baixas Rias-Baixas lies in Spain’s northwest corner in the region of Galicia near the

wine has a focused character with considerable acidity to give the flavors a lift before a long, soft finish. This wine is a dream match with sautéed chicken with tarragon, white, flaky fish, or raw and steamed shellfish. There's also enough going on here for you to enjoy it chilled by itself.

Taster's Table Reds

2004 Finca de Luzon Altos Jumilla

"The seriously endowed 2004 Altos de Luzon is a blend of 50% old vine Mourvedre (52 years) and equal parts Cabernet Sauvignon and Tempranillo, aged 12 months in a combination of French and American oak. A dense ruby/purple color is followed by beautiful aromas of smoky licorice, black currants, cherries, and earth. Offering wonderful ripeness, an alluring texture, sweet tannin, and adequate acidity, it certainly over-delivers for its price." *The Wine Advocate*

2004 Dominio de Eguren Codice Tinto Castilla

The Dominio de Eguren winery makes excellent value wines including Protocolo and Códice, which is officially designated a Vino de la Tierra de Castilla (VT Castilla) wine, sourced from vineyards near the town of Cuenca outside the La Mancha DO. Castilla's continental climate is quite dry and there's a wide day/night temperature variation, which greatly assists the development of aromatics in the ripe grapes. The Códice Tinto has spiced black cherry and black tea aromas. There is beautifully ripe, chewy fruit on the palate. The tannins are substantial but soft, enhancing the wine's long finish. Pair this with meats, stews and other dishes that can stand up to a bold red.

2003 Marques de Caceres Crianza Rioja

A great example of traditional Rioja Crianza, which must be aged for at least 12 months in oak and at least 12 months in bottle before release, the 2003 Caceres is a blend of 85% Tempranillo and 15% equal parts of Garnacha and Graciano grown during the hottest summer Europe endured in decades. Fewer grapes survived the scorching heat, but those

that did made intensely concentrated wines because of higher skin to juice ratios. This shows a bright ruby color with clean red fruit aromas and flavors and a touch of vanilla in the bouquet and on the finish. Medium to full-bodied in the mouth with well-integrated, silky tannins, the wine finishes delicately with good length.

2005 Pinol Ludovicus Terra Alta

Some of the most exciting and innovative wines from Spain are coming from the area southwest of Barcelona, along the Mediterranean coast, in Catalunya, specifically from the Penedes, Priorat, Montsant, and Terra Alta D.O.s. Long the dominant grape variety in the area, old vine Garnacha is still the backbone of the new wave wines of the region, but it is increasingly blended with classic vinifera varieties. The Ludovicus is composed of 35% Garnacha, 30% Tempranillo, 25% Syrah, and 10% Cabernet Sauvignon. Tank-fermented and aged just three months in American and French oak barrels, it is bottled unfiltered and unfiltered. It shows a deep ruby/purple color along with a gorgeous nose of cassis, licorice, and pepper. Richly fruity, spicy, opulent, and pure, it is a perfect example of the "New World" style of Spanish wines.

2004 Pinol Portal Terra Alta

Another Terra Alta blend in the new style but aged 12 months in oak, the Portal is equal parts Cabernet Sauvignon, Garnacha, Merlot, Tempranillo, and Syrah. Elegant and intense on the nose, it shows ripe fruit aromas recalling peach, plum, and apricot, with balsamic, smoke and spicy tones.

2004 Bodega Vinedos de Aldeanueva Cortijo III Rioja

From grapes grown in the Rioja Baja, the "lower" part of the region, Cortijo III is a beauty of a wine at an extraordinary price. In relation to the Rioja Alto, the Rioja Baja is warmer, dryer, and at lower altitude. These factors make for a shorter grape ripening period and produce wines with lower tannins, balancing acidity, deep purple color, and silky-soft texture. "In fact, I cannot think of another Rioja at this price level that offers this much

character and fruit." 87 points. *The Wine Advocate*

Collector's Club Whites

2005 Les Brugueres Blanco Priorat

Priorat lies in the rugged hills of northeastern Spain in Spanish Catalonia, not far from Barcelona. Although the region has been producing grapes for centuries, it did not gain international fame as a world-class winemaking region until the 1990's. It is now considered one of the best terroirs in the world for the production of wines based primarily on Garnacha. Perhaps the most delicious and unusual single varietal white wine we've ever picked for the Wine Club, Les Brugueres is made entirely from white Grenache grapes from hundred year old vines. The extremely low yields from these vines and night time harvesting keep good acidity in the grapes which are then allowed to ferment with natural yeasts in stainless steel tanks. The key to the poise and balance of the wine is allowing the white Grenache to rest on its fine lees during the cold winter, a technique that helps to impart a lovely creaminess to the wine.

2005 Lagare de Cervera Albarino Rias Baixas

In the glass, this wine appears quite brilliant, of a greenish yellow color with flecks of gold. The strongly aromatic nose shows both floral and stone fruit scents that are characteristic of Albarino (many liken the aroma to very ripe peaches or apricots.) On the palate, the first impression is of fresh, bright fruit, then the full and smooth body becomes apparent. Fine Albarino has an almost unctuous viscosity, enveloping and persistent, that coats the mouth without being at all cloying. We paired this with a seared yellow fin tuna steak served with wasabi and were delighted to find that the wine easily stood up to the pungent wasabi and the meaty texture of the fish. Few wines could.

2004 Clos Nelin Blanco Priorat

This wine is made with 50% Garnacha Blanca, 30% Viognier, and very interestingly, 20% Pinot Noir. Deep yellow in color and intensely concentrated in the bouquet, the exotic

nose of the Clos Nelin is full of tropical fruit, sweet spice, and vanilla. Supple on the palate, with ripe fruit flavors and good texture, the wine balances aromatic intensity with acidity. René Barbier, one of the founders of the Priorat revolution, creates his powerful wines at the estate of Clos Mogador located in Gratallops, in the heart of the Priorat hills.

2005 Torres Vina Esmeralda Catalunya

The grapes for this delicious wine are an unusual mix of 85% Moscatel, from which come the 'grapey', orangey flavors, and 15% Gewurztraminer, which provides the rose petal, floral, and spicy aromas. Gewurztraminer is rare in Spain. The first vines were imported in the 1970s by Miguel Torres, now head of the famous Torres family winery and vineyards near Barcelona. To keep fresh acidity and flavor in the grapes, he grows them in high, cool vineyards in the Penedes hills. This exceptionally delicate and strikingly fragrant wine is excellent with shellfish (an avocado and shellfish salad, perhaps), as well as with fish, fresh melon with cured Spanish ham, pâtés, or poultry.

2004 Granbazan Amber Albarino Rias Baixas

"We were blown away when tasting this stunning Albarino! Considered by many to be Spain's premier quality white wine, Granbazan not only introduced the first Albarino to the American market, but has taken the varietal to the pinnacle of distinction. Made from 100% free-run juice, the wine's intense floral aromas are perfectly complimented by crisp minerality and a balanced, tropical fruit background. If you're looking for a fresh, expressive white wine with sharp acidity and a wonderfully persistent finish, then this is the wine for you!" *Wine and Spirits* 92 Points.

2005 La Mirada al Sur Albarino Rias Baixas

This Albarino shows pale straw yellow color with brilliant green tones. Fresh and clean apple and pear aromas are highlighted by citrus, floral and herbal notes. There is a lovely balance between the fruit and the acidity, giving the wine a mouth-filling presence on the palate. The

finish is long and refreshing. If you're not in the mood for seafood, this would also shine as an accompaniment to spicy Asian fare.

Collector's Club Reds

2000 Castillo Las Gravas Jumilla

Las Gravas means "the gravel" and this wine comes from vineyards located in the foothills of the Sierra Del Molar mountains, where an incredible amount of gravel and stones cover the mostly chalky soil. The layer of gravel is between 12 to 18 inches thick, preventing the evaporation of the scant rainfall that does occur and trapping the precious ground water that seeps down from the mountains, thus enabling the vines to survive in the hot, dry weather conditions of Jumilla. "Ripe, fresh flavors of blackberry and blueberry are framed by toasty vanilla oak notes. Has grip and balance, with firm tannins and lively acidity." 90 Points. *The Wine Spectator*

2001 Bodegas Borsao Reserva Campo de Borja

The Borsao Reserva is a blend of 50% Garnacha, 25% Tempranillo, and 25% Cabernet Sauvignon, each fermented separately in stainless steel tanks and later aged in French oak barrels for at least 14 months. Once bottled, it is further aged for about 24 months before release. Red-colored with ruby tones, it is powerful in the nose with a nice combination of spicy and balsamic tones, which together with the oak aromas provide good complexity. In the mouth it is rich in tannins, fleshy, and flavorful, with breadth and elegance in its aftertaste.

2005 Tres Picos Campo de Borja

A consistent favorite for several vintages, Tres Picos Borsao shows how deep and sweet Spanish old vine Garnacha can be (the grapes come from vineyards that are between 35 and 40 years old.) The Campo de Borja DO is southeast of Rioja Baja, in the Ebro River basin. The wine is cherry red in color with a hint of purple tones. In the nose, there is a boundless bouquet of mature red fruits with traces of flowers. In the mouth, it is rich and well-structured, simultaneously conveying flavors of blackberries,

strawberries and tones of leather, vanilla, and plums. Perfectly combined with sweet and pleasant tannins, it finishes long, silky and balanced

2003 Font de la Figuera Priorat

Font de la Figuera, the second label from Clos Figueras, is a blend of Grenache, Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Mourvedre. A joint venture between Christopher Cannan of Europvin and Rene Barbier of Clos Mogador, this stunning wine clearly shows why Priorat wines are so highly regarded. "Ripe, spicy flavors of dried cherries, raisins and licorice mingle with wild herbs and tobacco in this expressive red. It tastes of dry mountain heat, with firm tannins and plenty of alcohol." 88 points. *The Wine Spectator*.

2001 Laurona Montsant

Laurona is another joint venture between Christopher Cannan and René Barbier. It was the first winery in the region dedicated to the production of high quality wines from the superbly situated vineyards that surround the now famous Priorat appellation. The potential here was recognized shortly afterwards with the creation of a new DO: Montsant, covering the villages around Falset at the foot of the Montsant mountain. The wine shows remarkable depth and smoothness. At the same time, Laurona has wonderful lively fruit and rich spicy flavors that linger on a long, soft finish. Garnacha, Merlot, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon.

1999 Conde de Valdemar Reserva Rioja

The composition of this traditional Reserva from Rioja is 82% Tempranillo and 18% Mazuelo. It shows an intense ruby red color, very brilliant and lively. Clean, powerful and complex to the nose, this supple red offers mature flavors of dried cherry, raisin, spice and cedar, with just enough tannin for grip. Aged 26 months in oak casks, it shows a nice balance of fruity aromas and the spicy tones of its wood aging.