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RIOJA

CATCHING UP WITH THE DYNAMIC SPANISH REGION

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TASTING REPORT | RIOJA

Tracking the Evolution of Spain's Iconic Region and Its Wines

By Alison Napjus

The wines show a special, fruit character typical to the fresher, new style of Rioja.

When it comes to Spanish wines, no region enjoys greater name recognition in the United States than Rioja. Its bottles dominate store shelves and restaurant lists, a staple among American wine lovers. In fact, Rioja is the only Spanish wine type consistently ranked among the country's top imported wines, standing shoulder to shoulder with the likes of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc and Italian Chianti.

This popularity is no accident. Rioja's success has long been built on dependable quality from trusted winery names, and at volumes that make broad availability possible. For consumers, especially those venturing outside their usual preferences, this reliability is a major draw. The wines span a remarkable range—from approachable, everyday reds to rare, collectible bottles that can fetch over \$1,000.



A REGION BALANCING TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION

Yet, consistency often comes at a cost. While innovation is alive in Rioja's vineyards and cellars, the push to maintain stylistic uniformity can sometimes stifle experimentation. Critics argue that the region risks becoming more of a brand than a living, breathing wine landscape shaped by its varied soils, passionate people, and unique places.

Over the last two decades, however, the global wine scene—and Rioja with it—has shifted. A new energy has emerged in the region, led by producers looking to reconnect with terroir and to express it in new, often more site-specific ways.

A major milestone came in 2017, when new regulations allowed wines to be labeled with recognized vineyard names—**viñedo singular**—finally giving producers an official framework to highlight single-site expressions. Among the most significant of these is **Quiñón de Valmira**, a bottling from Álvaro Palacios, one of Spain's most visionary winemakers.

RATING RED WINE VINTAGES IN RIOJA

2021 97 | Drink or hold

Warm, dry summer and cool, clear conditions at harvest yielded harmonious wines with depth of flavor, polished tannins and a sense of finesse

2020 93 | Drink or hold

A hot year with a reduced crop; excellent conditions during harvest, with elegant wines with good tension and restraint

2019 92 | Drink or hold

Stable conditions led to focused wines with aging potential

2018 89 | Drink

Cooler weather produced fresher wines; some inconsistencies

2017 87 | Drink or hold

A difficult growing season led to inconsistent wines

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended.

Drinkability: "NYR" means most of the wines of the vintage are yet to be released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the age-worthy wines have yet to fully mature.



“ He saw Valmira.

A SINGULAR VISION: ÁLVARO PALACIOS AND VALMIRA

The **2022 Quiñón de Valmira Viñedo Singular** (96, \$550) is a striking example of the region's evolving identity. Made entirely from Garnacha, the wine hails from a 7.4-acre vineyard near the Palacios Remondo winery in Alfaro, in the Rioja Oriental subzone. Its purity and seamless integration stand as testament to years of meticulous work.

Palacios, famed for his pioneering efforts in Priorat, took over the family's Rioja estate in 2000 following the death of his father. He brought with him a philosophy rooted in site-specific winemaking. As Isabel Palacios Osua, the winery's export director, explains, "Álvaro was working very hard to find an icon wine from Rioja." His goal was nothing less than to create a counterpart to his celebrated L'Ermita from Priorat.

His daughter Lola Palacios, who joined the winery after studies in California and France, recalls: "He saw Valmira. And he has this superpower to see the quality of the wines by looking at the vineyard." After more than a decade of fermenting the Valmira fruit separately, the first bottling came in 2014, with the inaugural commercial release following in 2015. Before that, the fruit was blended into the estate's **Propiedad** label (2021: 94, \$55).



THE 2021 VINTAGE: A DEFINING MOMENT

A standout chapter in Rioja's story is being written with the **2021 vintage**, a year that winemakers describe as transformative. After a hot, dry 2020, the region saw much-needed replenishment during the winter, when snowstorms—including the infamous Filomena—blanketed vineyards with up to 10 feet of snow.

Spring began favorably, but late May and early June brought heavy rain during flowering, increasing mildew risks. Summer turned dry once more, and by late September, rains returned, reviving fears of rot. Despite the challenges, the results were exceptional.

"It's the kind of vintage that all of us want, every year," says Lola Palacios. Winemaker Sáenz agrees: "2021 is a turning point in the history of Rioja. The wines show a special fruit character typical to the fresher, new style of Rioja."

Already, many 2021 wines have garnered top scores, and the vintage promises continued excellence in both current releases and future, longer-aged bottlings. With pricing largely stable, the vintage also offers outstanding value.

Alison Napjus' Top Recommended Wines From Rioja

More than 300 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at [WineSpectator.com/RiojaAlpha053125](https://www.winespectator.com/RiojaAlpha053125). WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

WINE	SCORE	PRICE	WINE	SCORE	PRICE
BODEGAS MUGA Rioja Aro 2021 Rich, enticing core of blackberry coulis and plum sauce, mouthwatering acidity and muscular tannins. Tempranillo and Graciano.	96	\$450	BODEGAS MUGA Rioja Prado Enea Gran Reserva 2016 Powerful but poised, with dense tannins around focused baked black plum, green olive, fig cake and ground coffee. Tempranillo blend.	94	\$110
VIÑEDOS DE PÁGANOS Rioja La Nleta 2021 This gorgeous red delivers a tapestry of cherry preserves, blackberry paste, tangerine peel, tar, black licorice, tobacco and chai spices.	96	\$275	LA GRANJA NUESTRA SEÑORA DE REMELLURI Rioja Gran Reserva 2015 Leads with elegant baked cherry and currant fruit, revealing layers of sweet tobacco, mocha and loamy earth. Tempranillo blend.	94	\$140
ÁLVARO PALACIOS Rioja Oriental Quiñón de Valmira Viñedo Singular 2022 Enticing and elegant, with pureed raspberry and strawberry, plus a pronounced mineral presence. Focused and fragrant.	96	\$550	MARQUÉS DE RISCAL Rioja Frank Gehry Selection 2019 Shows concentration and subtle power, with a beam of black currant alongside fresh, loamy earth, dried mint, olive and dark chocolate.	94	\$668
BODEGAS SIERRA CANTABRIA Rioja Amancio 2021 Classy, broad-shouldered and statuesque, fleshed out by blackberry coulis and crushed mulberry fruit with dark chocolate accents.	96	\$180	SEÑORIO DE SAN VICENTE Rioja 2021 Muscular, revealing a concentrated range of ripe black currant and black cherry fruit, with a fleshy hint of green olive.	94	\$85
BODEGA LANZAGA Rioja Las Beatas 2021 Poised and perfumed, with lovely rosemary and blood orange peel accenting the concentrated blackberry, plum skin, tar and black olive.	95	\$375	BODEGAS FAUSTINO Rioja Gran Faustino I Gran Reserva 2004 Aging gracefully, with remarkable vibrancy and focus to creamy baked cherry and sweet tobacco flavors. Tempranillo blend.	93	\$100
BODEGAS MARQUÉS DE MURRIETA Rioja Castillo Ygay Gran Reserva Especial 2012 Sophisticated, with plum compote, raspberry fruit and espresso notes balancing generosity with finesse. Tempranillo and Mazuelo.	95	\$280	BODEGAS LAN Rioja Edición Limitada 2022 Fresh and focused, with ripe cherry and currant fruit flavors meshed with dense, fine-grained tannins. Tempranillo blend.	93	\$60
VIÑEDOS DE PÁGANOS Rioja El Puntido 2021 Offers a rich profile of blackberry paste, plum sauce and black licorice, with nutmeg, graphite and dried thyme notes.	95	\$70	DIEGO MAGAÑA TEJERO Rioja Anza Carramonte 2022 Stylish, with chalky underlying tannins and flavors of black raspberry paste, pomegranate puree and black olive.	93	\$75
LA RIOJA ALTA Rioja 890 Gran Reserva 2010 Aging gracefully, integrating tobacco and loamy earth with sculpted tannins. Enticing through the plush finish.	95	\$275	BODEGA ABEL MENDOZA Graciano-Garnacha Rioja Grano a Grano 2020 Bright acidity enlivens a dark core of blackberry paste, mountain herbs and black olive in this integrated red. Graciano and Garnacha.	93	\$100
BODEGAS SIERRA CANTABRIA Rioja Finca El Bosque 2021 Rich and expressive with steeped black cherry, raspberry ganache, oolong tea and mineral flavors. Sculpted by dense, fine-grained tannins.	95	\$190	BODEGAS MARQUÉS DE MURRIETA Rioja White Capellania 2019 This intriguing white broadens to reveal layers of toasted almond, honey, tangerine peel, baked pear, dried mint and beeswax.	93	\$120
BODEGAS SIERRA CANTABRIA Rioja Mágico 2021 Refined tannins offer a taut frame for currant, mandarin orange peel, rooibos tea, loam and dark chocolate. Tempranillo blend.	95	\$1,000	LA GRANJA NUESTRA SEÑORA DE REMELLURI Rioja White Alavesa 2021 Lovely, layered white with a rapierlike spine of acidity enmeshed with creamy patisserie pear, green fig and persimmon fruit flavors.	93	\$140
BODEGAS Y VIÑEDOS ARTUKE Rioja Paraje El Meadero El Escolladero 2022 Seamlessly knits supple tannins and blood orange peel acidity with an enticing range of ripe blackberry and black cherry fruit.	94	\$80	BODEGAS RODA Rioja Roda I Reserva 2019 Long, supple and harmonious, with ripe black cherry and currant laced with cocoa powder and dried thyme. Tempranillo blend.	93	\$78
VIÑEDOS DEL CONTINO Rioja Viña del Olivo 2021 Rich, with tobacco and ground coffee aromas and black cherry coulis, loamy earth and cocoa powder on the silky palate. Tempranillo blend.	94	\$163	VIGNERONS DE LA SONSIERRA Rioja Jose Gil Paraje La Canoca 2022 Fragrant herbs and spices are layered with baked mulberry and cherry fruit in this concentrated red with muscular, fine-grained tannins.	93	\$74
CUENTAVIÑAS Rioja Los Yelones 2021 Seamless, with raspberry ganache, warm cherry and fresh earth. Glides effortlessly across the palate, revealing depth and focus.	94	\$300	VIÑEDOS DEL CONTINO Rioja White San Gregorio 2021 A sleek, graceful white, with well-honed acidity defining a rich range of quince paste and dried apricot flavors.	92	\$54
CVNE Rioja Imperial Gran Reserva 2018 Harmonious, with lush mulberry and cherry fruit nicely trimmed by plum skin acidity and fine, sinewy tannins. Tempranillo blend.	94	\$100	BODEGA ABEL MENDOZA Rioja White 5V 2021 Refreshing acidity and flavors of dried pear, almond skin and mountain herbs, plus a racy streak of salinity. Shows focus and length.	92	\$65
R. LÓPEZ DE HEREDIA Viña Tondonia Rioja White Viña Gravonia Crianza 2015 A traditional white, with dried white cherry, Marcona almond, baked pineapple, vanilla, fern and lemon thyme notes. Long and distinctive.	94	\$49	BODEGAS MIGUEL MERINO Rioja White 2022 Vibrant, with lip-smacking acidity and layers of poached apricot, tangerine peel, Marcona almond and vanilla. Viura and Garnacha Blanca.	92	\$45

Alison Napjus' Recommended Value Wines From Rioja

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WINE	SCORE	PRICE	WINE	SCORE	PRICE
BODEGAS PALACIOS REMONDO Rioja Oriental Viñas Viejas de la Propiedad 2021 Silky, with pinpoint balance and harmony to boysenberry, baked cherry, dried lavender and star anise notes. Supple, fine tannins.	94	\$55	VIÑA DEL LENTISCO Rioja Alavesa Villota Selvanevada 2022 Pleasingly plump chopped black plum and raspberry flavors are reined in by sinewy, fine-grained tannins. Tempranillo blend.	91	\$25
LA GRANJA NUESTRA SEÑORA DE REMELLURI Rioja Reserva 2016 Bright and buoyant, with macerated blackberry and black plum skin flavors and fragrant leather and dried flowers. Tempranillo blend.	93	\$56	BODEGAS REMÍREZ DE GANUZA Rioja Fincas de Ganuza Reserva 2016 A fragrant, focused red, offering a pure, juicy beam of dried raspberry and cranberry fruit. Creamy, spiced finish.	91	\$40
BODEGAS SIERRA CANTABRIA Rioja Gran Reserva 2016 Lovely, with weight and concentration to the creamed black cherry, plum skin, mineral and lavender notes. Tempranillo and Graciano.	93	\$50	LA RIOJA ALTA Rioja Viña Alberdi Reserva 2020 Hints of tobacco, smoke and vanilla are a fragrant thread winding through the baked cherry and raspberry fruit.	91	\$25
BODEGAS BHILAR Rioja White Bhilar 2022 This silky white offers flavors of raw almond, mandarin orange peel and dried white cherry. Viura and Grenache Blanc.	92	\$21	BODEGAS VALDEMAR Rioja Conde Valdemar Reserva 2018 Plush, with saturated cherry and boysenberry fruit flavors accented by vanilla, licorice, iron and cured tobacco notes. Tempranillo blend.	91	\$30
MARQUÉS DE CÁCERES Rioja Gran Reserva 2016 Warm spice and licorice notes lace chopped cherry, green olive, sweet tobacco and vanilla flavors. Tempranillo blend.	92	\$40	BODEGAS BERONIA Rioja Crianza 2021 Well-balanced, with a dark, mineral base underscoring crushed mulberry and blackberry fruit. Tempranillo blend.	90	\$15
BODEGAS FAUSTINO Rioja I Gran Reserva 2016 Leans to tradition without forsaking concentration or fruit. Fragrant with tobacco, vanilla and milled white pepper. Tempranillo blend.	92	\$37	BODEGAS IZADI Rioja Reserva 2021 A sleek, savory style, with firm tannins and a sanguine underpinning of iron and loamy earth, plus a touch of black licorice.	90	\$20
BODEGAS LAN Rioja Gran Reserva 2017 Aromatic, with star anise, dried thyme and mocha winding through a core of ripe black cherry and boysenberry. Tempranillo and Graciano.	92	\$28	BARON DE LEY Rioja Reserva 2020 Fresh and elegant, with a lively mix of wild cherry, pomegranate puree, rose hip and red licorice flavors. Tempranillo blend.	90	\$23
BODEGAS HERMANOS PECIÑA Rioja Señorío de P. Peciña Reserva 2016 Fresh and harmonious, with enticing, savory underpinnings of leather, sweet smoke and eucalyptus. Tempranillo blend.	92	\$35	BODEGA SIERRA DE TOLOÑO Rioja White 2023 Vivid and appealing. Crackles with lively acidity and flavors of yellow peach, passion fruit and smoked almond.	90	\$21
BODEGAS RAMÍREZ Rioja Ramírez de la Piscina Selección Reserva 2020 Reveals fragrant dried flowers, eucalyptus, star anise and mocha, with flavors of plumped cherry and baked plum.	92	\$40	BODEGA SIERRA DE TOLOÑO Tempranillo Rioja 2022 Balanced, offering supple tannins enmeshed with a lively range of brambly blackberry and mulberry fruit flavors. Spiced finish.	90	\$21
BODEGAS TOBÍA Rioja Selección de Autor 2019 Plush and aromatic, with generous ripe black currant, dried thyme, cocoa powder and mineral notes. Tempranillo blend.	92	\$30	BODEGA ABEL MENDOZA Rioja White Jarrarte 2022 Lively guava and pineapple fruit flavors underscored by a savory thread of dried sage and smoke. Bright and creamy. Viura blend.	89	\$20
BODEGAS ARTEVINO Rioja Orben 2021 Hints of black licorice, violet and tobacco offer a fragrant overtone for this structured red. Well-spiced finish.	91	\$45	BODEGAS OLARRA Rioja Cerro Añon Crianza 2021 Balanced and well-knit, layering fine tannins with creamed black cherry and plum sauce notes. Tempranillo blend.	89	\$18
BODEGAS Y VIÑEDOS ARTUKE Rioja Pies Rotos 2022 Enticing, with appealing aromas and flavors of black raspberry coulis, warm fig, violet and mountain herbs. Tempranillo and Graciano.	91	\$23	BODEGAS ONTAÑON Viura Rioja 2021 A creamy, leesy mix of poached peach, almond pastry, lemon curd and thyme with a tang of salty minerality.	89	\$20
BODEGAS RAMÓN BILBAO Rioja Gran Reserva 2016 Fresh and fluid, this well-spiced red shows flavors of pureed mulberry, black olive, game, vanilla, toast and singed alder.	91	\$37	BODEGAS MONTECILLO Rioja Crianza 2020 Easy-drinking, with light tannins and a well-spiced mix of ripe cherry and plum fruit accented by licorice. Tempranillo and Garnacha.	88	\$14
CVNE Rioja Cune Reserva 2020 Integrates creamy tannins and orange peel acidity with baked cherry, fig cake, dried thyme and warm brown bread. Tempranillo blend.	91	\$29	BODEGAS MUGA Rioja Rosado 2023 This pale pink rosé is fresh and appealing, with delicate hints of ground ginger and white blossoms. Garnacha blend.	88	\$18
BODEGAS LAN Rioja Reserva 2019 Ripe black cherry and black plum fruit are laced with lavish hints of vanilla, tar and cedar. Tempranillo blend.	91	\$22	BODEGAS HERMANOS PECIÑA Rioja White Señorío de P. Peciña 2021 A salty white, with snappy acidity. Hints of cinnamon, anise and rosemary lace flavors of persimmon, dried white cherry and vanilla wafer.	88	\$18
			EL COTO DE RIOJA Rioja White 2024 A snappy, easy-drinking white, offering star fruit and peach skin flavors, with lemon thyme, floral and vanilla hints. Viura blend.	86	\$12