



There are many things I love about the Explorers Club, but the one I am most thankful for is the size of membership. At almost 600 members, it gives me the buying power to bring you some wines that are unique and entering their mature drinking phase. This month, I found two stunning wines from Spain, both from the 2011 vintage, that are not only excellent examples of their type but also beginning to show the complex patina of age.

2011 Vinos de Arganza Bierzo Roble (\$15)

Although not as well known as Rioja, Priorat, or Ribera del Duero, the region of Bierzo has one of the oldest winemaking traditions on the Iberian peninsula. This region lies in the northwest corner of Spain, technically in Galicia, but considerably inland of the coast. If looking at a map, it is a small growing area that sits directly north of the northeast corner of Portugal. As part of Galicia, the region is blessed with ample rainfall but also enjoys the warmth of nearby Castilla y Leon too. It is for this reason that Mencia is the dominant grape variety, instead of Albarino, which grows in the cooler, coastal areas.

The grape vine was first cultivated here by the Phoenicians, who recognized the potential of the region more than 3,500 years ago. In Roman times the wines of Bierzo, then known as Bergidum, were highly sought after, and the region even earned mention in Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*. The region continued to thrive through the Moor occupation, before finally fading in the late 19th century as phylloxera ravaged the vineyards. With the introduction of modern rootstocks, Bierzo plantings began to rise again, and it finally achieved DO status with the Spanish government in 1989.

Unlike much of northern Spain, which relies on the Tempranillo grape for most of their production, in Bierzo the grape of choice is Mencia. For many years this grape was thought to be Cabernet Franc, but DNA testing has proven that wrong, but it is the same as the Portuguese variety Jaen de Dão. It is easy to see the comparison to Cabernet Franc, as the color of the wines is relatively light, there is somewhat obvious tannins and they exhibit a faint verdant note in the nose. The best examples are produced, and here is a shock, from the old vines, on the steep slopes above the region's many rivers. In these areas the soils are ancient schist, which also contributes a small amount of minerality to the wines.

Vinos de Arganza is a family business bought in 1997 by wine industry veteran Víctor Robla and his wife Ángeles Varela, whose grandmother Sara Álvarez de Toledo, was part of an important noble family and vineyard owners in Bierzo since the XV century. For this bottling, the grapes are hand-harvested, fermented in stainless steel and aged for four months in a combination of French and American oak barrels, all of which have been used many times. Their goal is to enhance the texture of the wines with a short stay in oak, but not so much as to greatly influence the flavor.

When you open this wine you will definitely want to decant it for half an hour before serving. Once you do, the nose offers a pretty exotic combination of red currants, blackberries, rose petal perfume, cocoa nibs, and toffee. In the mouth, it is surprisingly bright and highly acidic to start, then the fruit plumps out briefly before modest tannins frame the finish. I find that this wine works really well with grilled salmon or trout, or if you want to try your hand at paella, make one that is heavier on chicken and sausage than shellfish.

2011 Resalte Ribera del Duero Crianza "Lecco" (\$18)

Traveling by car from Bierzo to Ribera del Duero, you drive almost three hours southeast, climbing 2,000 feet, onto the plateau that dominates most of central Spain. During the drive, I did not notice the change of elevation so much as the look of the landscape. The steep green hillsides of Galicia give way to the dry, flat expanse created by the mighty Duero river. Reaching the wine region of Ribera del Duero from this direction you drive through the very modern city of Valladolid and head due east. After a few minutes the Castilla de Peñafiel comes into view, looming like a sentinel over the vineyards of the western Ribera del Duero wine region.

Unlike the Bierzo region, which is relatively compact and only 3,000 acres of vines, the Ribera del Duero stretches for over a hundred miles to the east, and is covered by almost 50,000 acres of vineyards. The dominant grape of the region is Tempranillo, also referred to as Tinta Fina or Tinta del Pais. While most wines bottled under the Ribera del Duero are pure Tempranillo, the *Denominación de Origen* does allow for the limited use of other grapes, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah.

Like the Bierzo region, winemaking in Ribera del Duero is eons old. Most of the modern traditions of viticulture began in the dark ages, when the Benedictine monks arrived from the Abbey de Cluny in Burgundy, France. For almost 800 years, the producers of this region produced wine for their local market, particularly Valladolid. It was not until the late 1920s that wines made in the Ribera del Duero began to be recognized in other wine parts of Spain. Sadly, the Spanish Civil War slowed the progress of the region and it was not until 1982 that it achieved *Denominacion de Origen* status.

Since this is a relatively young region with regards to international commerce, there is a mix of very old vineyards as well as newer plantings of young wineries. The Peñafiel area looks a lot like Napa Valley, with younger, trellised vineyards lining the main road, N-122. Resalte is located in this area, which is home to most of the regions most famous wineries, such as Vega Sicilia and Pesquera. This part of the Ribera del Duero is known for clay and sand soils lying on top of deep beds of limestone. This is very old limestone, created during the Miocene period, 23 million to 7 million years ago. During

that time, these soils were ancient sea bottom, lifted by the plate tectonics that created the plateau on which most of Spain rests. It is the limestone soils that give the wines freshness, despite growing in a very warm, dry climate.

Having started in 2000, Resalte is a very modern winery. It was the first in Spain to be completely gravity flow, meaning they do not use pumps to move grapes, juice, or wine between processes. When the grapes arrive at the crush pad, they are destemmed then sorted to remove any remaining bits of stems, as well as imperfect grapes. They are then placed into a 3,000 kilogram tank, called an *ovi*, that is filled with dry ice to prevent oxidation and the juice from fermenting too early. Once the tank is filled, it is moved via a crane to the fermentor and the grapes are dumped. Once fermentation is done, the wine is moved to a combination of 70% French and 30% American oak barrels to age for fourteen months.

When you open this wine, please decant it for half an hour to an hour before serving. After this, it reveals an oozing, rich nose of blackberry pie filling, mocha, vanilla, peppermint, and roasted pecans. On the palate it is moderately deep, with the rich fruit framed with slightly obvious tannins, which fade into the finish. This is a powerful wine that is great with steaks and roasts, as well as good quality Manchego cheese.

Mushrooms Sautéed in Sherry

One of the top Spanish Tapas bars in the US is Curate, located in Asheville, North Carolina. Chef Katie Button and her husband Felix, who both worked for Ferran Adrià at el Bulli, create an incredibly authentic experience that I strongly recommend. Both of these recipes are from Katie's cookbook, **Curate - Authentic Spanish Food from an American Kitchen** and will work nicely with both wines.

1 oz dried porcini mushrooms
1 lb fresh mixed mushrooms, such as oysters, shiitakes and creminis, divided
8 tbsp oil, divided
3 tbsp minced shallot
6 thyme springs
1/2 cup dry sherry
1 tsp kosher salt

Bring the dried porcini and 1 cup of water to a boil in small saucepan. Reduce the heat to low and simmer for 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and strain through a fine-mesh sieve, pressing on the solids to extract as much liquid as possible. Discard the solids.

Clean the mixed mushrooms with a dry paper towel, do not rinse with water. Trim into 1 inch pieces.

Heat 2 tbsp of oil in a large skillet over high heat until very hot.

Add one-quarter of the mushrooms in a single layer and cook, turning every once in a while until seared to a nice deep golden brown. Transfer to a bowl. Repeat with the remaining mushrooms in three batches, replenishing the skillet with 2 tbsp of oil for each batch.

Reduce the heat to medium-high and return all the mushrooms to the skillet. Add the shallot and thyme and cook until the shallot has softened, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the mushroom stock and salt, bring to a simmer, and cook until almost all the liquid has evaporated, stirring often, about 2 minutes. It is important that you reduce the stock until it is almost dry, but not so far that the skillet starts to burn. Add the sherry, reduce again until almost dry, about 3 minutes. Transfer to a dish and serve hot.

Lamb Chops with Black Olive and Rosemary Crumble

1/4 cup minced, pitted Kalamata olives
3 tbsp plus 1/2 tsp extra virgin olive oil, divided
1/4 cup panko bread crumbs
2 tsp minced garlic
8 - 1 inch thick single rib, lamb chops
Kosher salt and fresh ground pepper
2 tsp finely chopped rosemary leaves
Zest of 1/2 orange

If the olives are wet, scatter them between paper towels and press gently to remove excess moisture. Heat 2 tbsp oil in a large skillet over medium heat until hot. Add the olives and cook, stirring often, until crisp but not burnt, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the panko and cook, stirring until golden brown, about 1 minute. Push the olives and crumbs to one side of the pan and add 1/2 tsp oil and garlic to the other side. Cook, stirring until fragrant, about 15 seconds, then stir into the crumb mixture. Remove from the heat.

Sprinkle the chops on all sides with 1 1/2 tsp of salt, then season with pepper. Heat the remaining 1 tbsp oil in a very large skillet over high heat until very hot. Add 4 chops and cook, turning once, until nicely browned, about 3 minutes per side. Turn each chop on its top side to sear the fat for 1 minute. Transfer to serving plates. Repeat with the remaining chops.

Let the chops rest for a few minutes until you stir the rosemary and orange zest into the crumb mixture. Sprinkle the crumble mixture on top and serve immediately.