



In the spring of 1991, I started managing the first wine shop where I worked after college, The Wine Merchant of Altamonte Springs. The previous manager focused the inventory on French and German wines and I was eager to put my own spin on the selection, as the store badly needed a new direction. I decided, somewhat arbitrarily, that we would focus on Spanish wines under my leadership and quickly ordered up several cases of samples from our distributors. To work through them quickly, I threw a party and invited several friends to my apartment, where I had prepared some Spanish themed food too.

Although my friends were delighted at the prospect of drinking dozens of bottles of wine, it became apparent very quickly that the quality was not up to the standards of the French wines I was selling. The whites were oxidized and dull; the reds were either thin and simple, or over-oaked and showed the flaws of old, poorly maintained barrels. At that point I all but dropped Spanish wines from the inventory and focused more attention on the rapidly improving wines of California.

I did not think again of Spain for serious wine until the fall of 1996, by which time I was running my own store. During a tasting with the then up-and-coming Spanish importer Jorge Ordóñez, he revealed the beginning of what are now the modern Spanish wines. The whites were aromatic, crisp and fresh while the reds were ripe, concentrated and balanced with the perfect amount of oak. For a brief time in the early and mid-1990s there was backlash from traditional producers who resisted modernization and the style of these wines, but it was hard for them to argue the product of the modernists was not more sellable. Now twenty years later, virtually every producer in Spain who makes wine for export follows the same modern practices in the vineyard and the cellar.

My selections for this month both come the same winery, the Compañía Vinícola del Norte del España, or CVNE for short. I consider them an “enlightened traditionalist” meaning they still make their wines to be classic representations of Rioja, but utilizing modern equipment and vineyard management. These selections are also perfect for the lighter fare needed to endure the remaining months of summer.

2016 CVNE Rioja Blanco “Monopole” (\$16)

For many years I considered CVNE a relic of the past in Rioja, a brand to admire for what they did, but not for what they were doing. That all changed in 2013, when the Wine Spectator declared their 2004 Imperial Gran Reserva the #1 wine in the world. While I put little stock in this list, regarding it a reward for big advertising budgets, their acknowledgment did pique my interest. Shortly after the holidays in 2014, I tasted the current offerings and it became apparent that things had changed at this winery.

CVNE was founded in 1879 by two brothers in the city of Haro, Spain, the capital of the Rioja wine region. Today, the group is still controlled by descendants of the original founders, but has grown to four separate wineries. The family believes that to achieve the highest quality, it is best to process the grapes as close to the source as possible. This is why each of these wines is made at a different winery, close to the vineyards where the grapes are grown.

For the first selection, their white wine, you are receiving a very special bottle. In 1915, Monopole was the first white wine brand registered in Spain. At that time, the winery cask-aged the wine, which was really the only option, and blended it with a small amount of fino sherry from Jerez. In the 1980s, they changed to a modern style that is this sheer beauty.

Unlike many wineries in Rioja that produce white wine as an afterthought to their red, this is a stand alone winery making only this and two other versions of Blanco. It is produced from Viura, the work-horse white grape of northern Spain. Although the vines are not particularly old, they extract a great deal of minerality from the limestone rich sandy/gravel of the region. This is apparent the moment you pull the cork.

I often describe Rioja Blanco as Spain's answer to Pinot Grigio. The comparison still holds, but only to the \$20+ versions we find in the Alto Adige or Collio Orientalli. When you pull the cork and pour a glass, allow it to warm up for a couple of minutes before you give it a swirl. There is airy quality of lime and grapefruit peels that pop out of the glass, then richer notes of raw almonds and white chocolate bring up the rear. In the mouth it has the yin and yang sense of bright, lively fruit followed by superb concentration and a fine coating of chalk at the finish. Try this wine with garlic shrimp or bay scallops, tossed with the same garlic butter and served over a plate of angel hair, or any other simple fish preparation.

2014 CVNE Rioja Crianza “Vina Real” (\$16)

Like the Monopole, Vina Real is produced in one of the four separate wineries of CVNE. Also like Monopole, Vina Real is one of the oldest examples of it's kind, Rioja Crianza, with the first bottlings in the 1920s. For this wine, all of the grapes come from their vineyards in the Rioja sub-zone of Alavesa, which are near the Camino Real. The name Vina Real pays homage to the importance of their location near the pilgrim's trail.

Driving through Rioja Alavesa, it is hard to miss the CVNE winery. It sits majestically on a ridge of the Sierra Cantabria mountains overlooking the sea of vines below. The vineyards are very high elevation, over 3000 feet,

and the cooler climate allows for a very slow ripening of the grapes. Soils in Alavesa are primarily limestone and clay, which also impart a delicate minerality to the wine as well.

The winemaking at the Vina Real winery is designed to accentuate the delicacy and finesse the grapes bring to the wine. All of the fruit is hand-harvested and destemmed before going into stainless steel fermentors. The fermentation lasts for ten to twelve days, at which point the wine is racked to a combination of French and American oak barrels, where it is aged for thirteen to fourteen months. Just before bottling the final blend is made, with the 2014 being a combination of 90% Tempranillo and the remaining components being Garnacha, Graciano and Mazuela.

When you open this wine, try to decant it and wait half an hour before serving. If you do, you will be rewarded with a bright nose of tart cherry and fresh raspberry, sage, porcini mushroom and gorgeous leathery notes (like a new pair of shoes). The 2014 is darker than the two previous bottlings, and because of this also shows very nice concentration on the palate, with ripe fruit balanced with soft tannins and a lively sense of acidity. Drink this wine with a slow roasted piece of pork belly, with a little soy ginger glaze, or stuffed pork chops with pecans, dried figs and cornbread. Due to its elegance, this wine also works great with chicken and turkey dishes, where it does not overwhelm the subtle flavors like in the chicken with chorizo and potatoes.

Garlic Shrimp

I try not to repeat recipes in the Explorer Club but occasionally I find one that works so well with a wine that it bears a second look. This is an updated version of a classic Spanish tapas dish, that uses garlic prepared three ways to create layers of flavor. While it may appear to be a lot of garlic, do not be afraid, the results are much milder than you would expect and it works really well with the CVNE Monopole or other crisp, dry whites.

14 medium garlic cloves, peeled
1 pound large shrimp, peeled, deveined, and tails removed
8 tablespoons olive oil
1/2 teaspoon table salt
1 bay leaf
1 (2-inch) piece mild dried chile, such as New Mexico, roughly broken, seeds included
1 1/2 teaspoons sherry vinegar
1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley leaves

1. Mince 2 garlic cloves with chef's knife or garlic press. Toss minced garlic with shrimp, 2 tablespoons olive oil, and salt in medium bowl. Let shrimp marinate at room temperature for 30 minutes

2. Meanwhile, using flat side of chef's knife, smash 4 garlic cloves. Heat smashed garlic with remaining 6 tablespoons olive oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-low heat, stirring occasionally, until garlic is light golden brown, 4 to 7 minutes. Remove pan from heat and allow oil to cool to room temperature. Using slotted spoon, remove smashed garlic from skillet and discard.

3. Thinly slice remaining 8 cloves garlic. Return skillet to low heat and add sliced garlic, bay leaf, and chile. Cook, stirring occasionally, until garlic is tender but not browned, 4 to 7 minutes. (If garlic has not begun to sizzle after 3 minutes, increase heat to medium-low). Increase heat to medium-low; add shrimp with marinade to pan in single layer. Cook shrimp, undisturbed, until oil starts to gently bubble, about 2 minutes.

Using tongs, flip shrimp and continue to cook until almost cooked through, about 2 minutes longer. Increase heat to high and add sherry vinegar and parsley. Cook, stirring constantly, until shrimp are cooked through and oil is bubbling vigorously, 15 to 20 seconds. Serve immediately.

Chicken with Chorizo and Potatoes

Contrary to popular belief, I do cook "normal" food too. Here is a fantastic recipe for mid-week, when two hours of chopping, slicing, braising and searing are not an option. This dish works very nicely with the Rioja but equally well with other Spanish reds and Cotes du Rhone.

8 (5- to 7-ounce) bone in chicken thighs
Salt and pepper
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra for drizzling
1 1/2 pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, unpeeled, cut into 1/2-inch chunks
4 ounces chorizo sausage, halved lengthwise and sliced thin crosswise
8 ounces (8 cups) baby spinach
Smoked paprika

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Pat chicken dry with paper towels; season with salt and pepper. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add chicken, skin side down, and cook until well browned, about 7 minutes. Transfer chicken, skin side up, to rimmed baking sheet and roast until meat registers 175 degrees, about 15 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, add potatoes to now-empty skillet and cook, covered, over medium heat until lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Add chorizo and cook, uncovered, until potatoes are tender, about 5 minutes longer. Add spinach and cook until just wilted and

liquid has evaporated, about 2 minutes. Serve chicken with potato mixture, sprinkled with paprika.