



This month we will return to the country of Spain to explore wines that represent their two most important grape varieties, Garnacha (Grenache) and Tempranillo. While these are not the two most planted grapes in the country, they are those with the most appeal for export-quality wines. I also selected the wines to represent a well-established growing region as well as one from an up-and-coming area, to show you the dynamic range of wines from this country.

2016 Ricardo Dumas Ribera del Duero (\$16)

There are two significant wine regions of Spain that rely on the Tempranillo grape, Rioja and Ribera del Duero. To generalize they are very different wines, with those of Rioja typically being medium bodied and very elegant. By comparison, the wines of Ribera del Duero are typically darker, heavier and slightly more rustic. This example, from the winery Bodegas Virgen de la Asunción, is a great introduction to the category and shows the amazing value they offer.

As wine regions go, the Ribera del Duero is quite large. It stretches roughly seventy miles, from the city of Valladolid at the western point, to the town of Soria to the east. Vineyards stretch out as much as thirty miles on either side of the river, especially in the eastern regions of the appellation. It is worth noting that this is the same river that runs through Portugal, where it is called the Duero, and is home to the Port wine industry.

There is archeological evidence that wine has been made in the Ribera del Duero for over two-thousand years. Benedictine monks from the French town of Cluny established a monastery in the region in the twelfth century, and maintained vineyards until the Spanish revolution. After the revolution the region continued to produce wine, but as with most of the country, production was dominated by large cooperative wineries. Then in 1982 the region received designation as a Denominación de Origen (D.O.), the equivalent of the French appellation status. At that point the region experienced an explosion of new wineries, as producers pulled away from the cooperatives and also established new vineyards.

The Bodegas Virgen de la Asunción was established in 1957, and is located in La Horra, Burgos, at the eastern edge of the DO. This area is known as "Triangulo de Oro" or "Gold Triangle" due to the outstanding conditions for growing grape vines. The area sits between 2400 and 3100 feet above sea level, with soils that are a mix of rock and clay. I spent two days in this region in 2007 and what struck me was the speed of the growing season. In early May the vines were just beginning to show signs of growth, called bud break. Harvest occurs in mid-September, which means that the growing season is around one hundred and twenty days. During this time the summer temperatures are quite hot and there is little rain. Thanks to the high clay content the vines rarely struggle, so the quality of grapes is very consistent from vintage to vintage.

To make the Ricardo Dumas bottling, the winery uses a block of vines that average forty years of age, and all of the grapes are hand harvested. Fermentation is done in temperature controlled stainless steel tanks to preserve the freshness and fruit aromas. After fermentation is complete, they leave the wine on the skins for fifteen days to extract additional color and tannin. Then the wine is aged for six months in a mix of 80% American Oak and 20% French Oak.

When you are ready to open this wine, I strongly suggest decanting it for a half-hour before serving. I often find young Ribera del Duero to be slightly reductive, or "tanky." This means the wine binds to the sulfur dioxide, but is quickly remedied with a little oxygen. With a little air the wine quickly reveals a brooding combination of blueberry and blackberry preserves, black licorice, bay leaf and toasted walnuts. Texturally it offers a moderate concentration of fruit, with medium tannins and low acidity. This is an extremely versatile wine which can be served with any grilled red meat, sausages or the meatballs with saffron sauce.

2014 Stylo Garnacha Old Vine (\$17)

If one category from Spain has exploded in the past decade, it is the emergence of Garnacha from many of the wine regions in the north-east corner of the country. We consistently find good examples, at bargain prices, from up-and-coming areas such as Montsant, Campo de Borja and the origin of this wine, Calatayud, just to name a few.

The region of Calatayud lies within the province of Zaragoza, in the region of Aragon. This area lies in the Ebro River valley, which also forms the Rioja and Campo de Borja regions to its north. Like the Ribera del Duero, the elevation is quite high, at between 1500-2400 feet above sea level, and the soils are also alluvial; a mix of clay, sand and well worn stones. In fact, many of the vineyard areas are covered with so much gravel and round stones that they are often compared to those of Chateaufort-du-Pape in France. It is no coincidence that the dominant grape of that region is Garnacha, which is the Spanish synonym of Grenache. In fact, ampelographical evidence points to the Aragon region as the likely origin of the Grenache vine. It was likely spread to other holdings of the crown of Aragon, which in the sixteenth century included parts of the Roussillon and Sardinia, today within the boundaries of France.

The main reason this variety is popular in places like Calatayud and Chateaufort-du-Pape is because the variety thrives in hot, dry conditions. In most places it is trained as a "bush vine" meaning no trellising, so the umbrella of leaves created by the vine protects the grape clusters below from extreme heat and sun. Ripeness is enhanced as the rocks in the soil absorb heat from the sun during the day and radiate it back to the vine at night. This is one reason why the wines produced from Grenache/Garnacha do not tend to be deeply colored but are almost always full bodied.

The Stylo bottling I have selected for you this month is a private bottling for importer Dan Kravitz, and his company, Hand Picked Selections. Dan works with Maria Isabel and Javier Cubero to produce this wine from vineyards they farm

that are at least fifty years old. They are forth generation grape growers working in the small town of Godojos, on 148 acres originally established by their grandfather Augustin in 1881.

To make the wine, the grapes are hand harvested and fermented with wild yeasts. After the alcoholic fermentation is complete the wine is left on the skins for ten days before racking to older, French oak barrels. It is aged for four months in wood then moved to stainless steel tanks for another eight months before bottling. Their goal is to give the wine a little time in wood to round the tannins, but preserve the fresh fruit character of the Garnacha.

When you are ready to serve this wine, give it a splash in the decanter for fifteen to twenty minutes before serving. The nose is an explosive combination of cooked cherries, blackberry jam, graphite pencil, cocoa powder and red licorice. On the palate this wine has a deep core of deep fruit, framed by soft but obvious tannins and low acidity. Drink this wine over the next two to three years with fajitas, pulled pork or this killer recipe for slow cooker pork loin.

Cocktail Meatballs in Tomato-Saffron Sauce

Meatballs

2 slices high-quality white sandwich bread, torn into small pieces
1/3 cup whole milk
8 ounces 85 percent lean ground beef
8 ounces ground pork
1/2 ounce Manchego cheese or Parmesan cheese, grated (about 1/4 cup)
2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley leaves
1 large egg yolk
1 medium garlic clove, minced or pressed through a garlic press (about 1 teaspoon)
3/4 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon ground black pepper
2 tablespoons olive oil

Sauce

1 small onion, minced
1 small tomato, cored, seeded, and chopped medium
1 cup low-sodium chicken broth
1/2 cup dry white wine
2 bay leaves

Picada

1 tablespoon minced fresh parsley leaves
1 tablespoon finely chopped almonds
2 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through a garlic press (about 2 teaspoons)
1/4 teaspoon saffron threads, crumbled
1/4 teaspoon paprika

This recipe works well with any medium bodied, dry red wine, such as the Ribera del Duero feature this month. This one can also be used as a main course if you choose to serve over rice, or alongside roasted potatoes.

1. For the meatballs: In a large bowl, mash the bread and milk together to form a smooth paste. Add the ground meats, Manchego, parsley, yolk, garlic, salt, and pepper to the mashed bread and mix until uniform. Shape the mixture into 1/2-inch-round meatballs (1 teaspoon per meatball; you should have 35 to 40 meatballs).

2. Heat the oil in a 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add half of the meatballs and brown on all sides, about 10 minutes, reducing the heat if the oil begins to smoke. Transfer the meatballs to a paper towel-lined plate and repeat with the remaining meatballs. Discard all but 1 tablespoon of the oil left in the skillet.

3. For the sauce: Add the onion to the oil left in the skillet and cook over medium heat, scraping up any browned bits, until very soft and lightly browned, 6 to 9 minutes. Stir in the tomato and cook for 1 minute. Stir in the broth, wine, and bay leaves, then carefully return the meatballs to the skillet. Cover and simmer until the meatballs are just cooked through, 5 to 10 minutes.

4. For the Picada: While the meatballs cook, prepare the picada by mashing together the parsley, almonds, garlic, saffron, paprika, 1/8 teaspoon salt, and a pinch pepper. When the meatballs are cooked, remove and discard the bay leaves. Stir the picada into the sauce and season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer the meatballs and sauce to a serving dish and serve immediately.

Slow Cooker Pork Loin with Warm Chickpea Salad

This is an easy, make ahead dinner with an exotic flavor combination. Serve with the Garnacha, or any medium bodied, low tannin red wine.

1. Pat roast dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Brown roast well on all sides, 7 to 10 minutes; transfer to plate. Add garlic, coriander, cumin, and cloves to now-empty skillet and cook over medium heat until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Slowly whisk in broth, scraping up any browned bits; transfer to slow cooker.

2. Stir chickpeas into slow cooker. Nestle roast fat side up into slow cooker. Cover and cook until pork registers 140 degrees, 2 to 3 hours on low.

3. Transfer roast to carving board, tent loosely with aluminum foil, and let rest for 15 minutes. Stir apricots, red peppers, shallot, and vinegar into chickpea mixture and let sit until heated through, about 5 minutes. Stir in mint and season with salt and pepper to taste. Slice pork 1/4 inch thick and serve.

3 pound boneless pork loin roast, fat trimmed to 1/8 inch
2 teaspoons canola oil
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 teaspoon ground coriander
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
1/4 teaspoon ground cloves
1/2 cup chicken broth
42 ounces chickpeas canned, rinsed (3 cans)
1/2 cup dried apricots, chopped
1/2 cup jarred roasted red pepper, rinsed, patted dry, and chopped
1 shallot, sliced thin
1 tablespoon white wine vinegar
1/4 cup chopped fresh mint