



Tim's Wine Market

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“The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain” is a tongue twister that will no doubt be familiar to amateur meteorologists and My Fair Lady fans alike. However, the actual location of said plain is the autonomous region of Castilla y Leon, home to some of Spain’s oldest cities and more UNESCO world heritage sites than any other region in Europe. It is also home to an extreme continental climate, with cold, humid winters and hot, dry summers, that has lent itself to viticulture since the days of the Phoenicians. This month, we will examine two growing regions that lie along the path of the Duero River, the part of the plain most likely to see that aforementioned rain, and examine the history and terroir of each.

Ipsum Verdejo 2019 - \$18

Until recently, there was a very valid reason Spain was mostly known for its red wines. Despite wine production that predates the Roman occupation of the Iberian Peninsula, it was not until after the Second World War that technology was developed to control fermentation temperature. This means that most white wines produced in Spain’s warm climate were either highly oxidative and/or fortified. While this is nothing new, most white wines of antiquity were dessert wines, it was not until the 1980s that Spanish white wine as we recognize it would take to the global stage! Several growing regions now planted to white varieties have more than made up for lost time, however, and Rueda is certainly one of them.

The wines of Rueda were historically oxidized and fortified, as mentioned above, and during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella the area enjoyed tremendous prestige. However, there is no record of what varieties were planted there during this time. After phylloxera made its way to Spain, the damaged vineyards were hastily replanted with Palomino Fino, and bulk wine production became the norm. However, in the 1970s, the Verdejo grape was re-introduced to the region by the winemaking team of Marques de Riscal, who theorized that the heirloom variety (once cultivated by the Moors) would perform well in the arid climate of Verdejo. Thanks to a few mavericks, the region became known for its white wines yet again.

The “Ipsum” Verdejo comes to us from Pablo Villar, another maverick, whose philosophy is to produce the most precise, terroir-driven examples of Verdejo using minimal intervention. Pablo sources his fruit from the northwestern corner of Rueda, where vineyards are typically planted at higher elevation and the soils contain significantly more river stones. These two qualities contribute additional acidity and minerality to the finished wine, while the increased elevation results in cooler nights which prolong the growing season. As in most of the DOs of Castilla y Leon, the climate is continental, although the erratic rainfall can hamper vine growth. A higher concentration of stones in the soil provides better drainage, ensuring a stable harvest.

When you open this wine, serving it well-chilled (about 45-50 degrees) will bring out its inherent minerality. On the palate, the Ipsum Verdejo delivers notes of green apple peel, lime zest, white flowers, wet stones, and lemongrass. Drink now through 2023 with soft cheeses or seafood tapas such as grilled shrimp and ceviche.

Torremorón Ribera del Duero 2018 - \$17

Heading east along the banks of the Duero, the days grow warmer and the elevation creeps steadily upward. Spanning a 71-mile stretch of the river, the historic region of Ribera del Duero is one of Spain’s greatest terroirs for the production of Tempranillo, known locally as Tinta del Pais. Since the Middle Ages, the region’s climate and vast array of soil types (over 32, in fact) have drawn winemakers to the region and, like Rueda, the resulting wines enjoyed an immense popularity with the Spanish nobility. Outside of Spain, however, the wines were all but unknown apart from producer Vega-Sicilia, who blended Tempranillo with red Bordeaux varieties. But the 1970s would prove fruitful for Ribera del Duero, much as they were in Rueda.

It was then that single-varietal Tempranillo enjoyed a renaissance of both quality and quantity, spurred on by growers who rejected the bulk wine culture of the region. These single estate bottlings drew the attention of the Spanish wine industry, and in 1982 this loosely organized brotherhood of winemakers would receive DO status and all the prestige that came with it. Spurred on by this initial success, the region’s winemakers would go on to replant abandoned vineyards,

invest in modern viticultural technology, and perhaps most vitally encourage their neighbors to do the same. Today, there are over 250 independent wineries in Ribera del Duero, up from only 8 in 1980!

One such producer is Torremorón, located in the hamlet of Quintanamanvirgo in the northern portion of Ribera del Duero. To say it is a small town would be an understatement. At last census, the town had fewer than 90 inhabitants, and this winery employed most of them. As you might imagine, an isolated northern town like this has plenty of ancient vines from which to source fruit, and in fact the vast majority of their Tempranillo bush-vines are over 100 years old. Winemaker Fernando de la Cal seeks to preserve the varietal characteristics of these ancient vines and, in doing so, opts not to use any oak or over-extraction in the winery. What follows is a unique take on Tempranillo, emphasizing the “freshness” of the variety.

When you open this wine, you will want to serve it just slightly chilled, around cellar temperature of 60-65 degrees. In addition, I strongly suggest decanting for up to half an hour. This wine displays the primary fruit characteristics of a Tempranillo free from oak, with notes of fresh wild blackberry, blackcurrant, plum leaf, cassis, and black pepper. Drink now through 2025 with marinated pork skewers, chicken tacos, or thin-sliced Jamon Iberico.

Albóndigas (Spanish Meatballs)

Coming from an Italian family meatballs are part of my DNA. My fraternal grandmother made the best ever, a point I will gladly fight over with anyone who disagrees. She made two types, the classic orbs cooked in red sauce until perfectly tender, and some that looked more like mini-hamburgers, which she breaded and fried in a skillet. These were often on the table for nibbling while we waited for dinner to be served. The Spanish have a similar example, as part of any great tapas spread, that includes an almond sauce called picada. This recipe works with both wines this month and is a fantastic dish to add to your repertoire, working as an appetizer or entry when served with rice or noodles.

Picada

¼ cup slivered almonds

**1 slice hearty white sandwich bread
torn into 1-inch pieces**

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

3 tablespoons minced fresh parsley

2 garlic cloves, minced

Meatballs

**1 slice hearty white sandwich bread
torn into 1-inch pieces**

1 large egg

2 tablespoons water

2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley, divided

2 garlic cloves, minced

1 teaspoon table salt

½ teaspoon pepper

1 pound ground pork

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

½ cup finely chopped onion

½ teaspoon paprika

1 cup chicken broth

½ cup dry white wine

¼ teaspoon saffron threads, crumbled

1 teaspoon sherry vinegar

For the **picada**: Process almonds in food processor until finely ground, about 20 seconds. Add bread and process until bread is finely ground, about 15 seconds. Transfer almond-bread mixture to 12-inch nonstick skillet. Add oil and cook over medium heat, stirring often, until mixture is golden brown, 3 to 5 minutes. Transfer to bowl. Stir in parsley and garlic and set aside. Wipe skillet clean with paper towels.

For the **meatballs**: Process bread in now-empty processor until finely ground, about 15 seconds. Add egg, water, 1 tablespoon parsley, garlic, salt, and pepper and process until smooth paste forms, about 20 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as necessary. Add pork and pulse until combined, about 5 pulses.

Remove processor blade. Using your moistened hands, form generous 1 tablespoon pork mixture into 1-inch round meatball and transfer to plate; repeat with remaining pork mixture to form about 24 meatballs.

Heat oil in now-empty skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, 4 to 6 minutes. Add paprika and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add broth and wine and bring to simmer. Stir in saffron. Add meatballs and adjust heat to maintain simmer. Cover and cook until meatballs register 160 degrees, 6 to 8 minutes, flipping meatballs once.

Stir in picada and continue to cook, uncovered, until sauce has thickened slightly, 1 to 2 minutes longer. Off heat, stir in vinegar. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to platter, sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon parsley, and serve.