



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

I received great response to the three Northern Rhone selections from last quarter, both to the theme and the wines. Although it was not intentional, this quarter we will be taking a deeper look into Rioja, with three selections from the region that showcase the different styles and grapes used to make the wines. I find that more than any other of the classic wine regions of Europe, it is impossible to define one style or winery as typical of this region. After visiting several estates in September, 2023, I formulated a great set of wines to show the modern and classic sides of this region, with a special twist for the third selection.

## **Arizcuren Rioja Solo Garnacha 2020 - \$59**

Javier Arizcuren was very unhappy. We were standing in his premier vineyard, located in the remote Sierra de Yerga mountains of southern Rioja, and as we walked among the vines, we kept finding clusters of unpicked grapes. To understand his frustration you should know that the vines were planted by his grandfather and at roughly 90 years old, each only produces the equivalent of a half of a bottle of wine. He pointed out that the clusters he carried in his hands would be enough to fill a bottle, and since he only produces a few thousand bottles of this wine it easy to understand his frustration. Back at his tasting room in Quel we watched someone get an ear full, after that he seemed pretty happy.

The tasting with Javier was initially pretty funny, as nine of us crammed around a small, round dinner table where we spread out notebooks, and in my case, a laptop. Arizcuren started by showing us an arial map of his vineyards taken in 1956, contrasted with one taken recently. In the older map there were vineyards rolling down the mountain, broken by areas of heavy woods. In the modern picture it was apparent that most of the vineyards are now fallow. Coincidentally, earlier in our trip we tasted with Juan Carlos Sancha, a winemaker and professor at the University of Madrid, who pointed out that in 1912 there were 44 official varieties used in Rioja. Today, there are only 7 varieties and 3 of them represent 97% of the total red wine production. The point both men made was that as Rioja has grown in prestige, they have lost some of the individuality that made the region famous in the first place. The tasting would prove how.

All of Javier's wines are produced from vineyards in the region that used to be called Rioja Baja, but a few years ago they rebranded as Rioja Oriental, denoting that they are the eastern most sub-zone. The reputation of this area was one of primarily bulk wines, often produced with high percentages of Garnacha blended with the more commercially appealing Tempranillo. Funnily enough, when we were walking along his Garnacha vines in the Sierra de Yerga, we skipped right over his Tempranillo vines, still covered with grapes, because he sells them off and the buyer had not picked them yet.

Some of you may be surprised this is a Rioja that is entirely Garnacha, from those old vines from the Sierra de Yerga. Javier destemmed the grapes then fermented in stainless steel. Once dry, the wine is moved to 400 and 500 liter French oak casks where it undergoes malolactic conversion and aging for 12 months.

Decant this wine for up to an hour and then prepare for a mind bend. The nose of muddled strawberries, raspberry jam, candied orange peel, jasmine, dried black figs, herbs de Provence and iodine might lead you to the Southern Rhone of France. Then on the palate this wine shows the difference with a tighter focus and despite the 15% alcohol it seems less heavy. There are still fairly obvious tannins so you will want to hold this one back, best for drinking 2024-2029.

## **Artuke Rioja Paso las Mañas 2021 - \$55**

Of the wineries we visited, I was most excited for our trip to Artuke. Arturo and Keke de Miguel are 4th generation farmers who began working with their father, Roberto. Roberto was the first in his family to begin bottling their wines instead of selling them in bulk to the big houses in Haro. Arturo joined him first in 2003, followed by Keke in 2010.

At first, the boys chased the modern style of winemaking popular a decade ago, with extended macerations and 200% new oak. This was a trend a decade ago, fueled by Aussie winemakers, where post fermentation the wine undergoes malolactic conversion in a new barrel, the is aged in a different new barrel, further enhancing the oak taste. Those wines were

predictably dense and oaky, but lacked any real Rioja character. As Arturo tells it, their father allowed them their folly, and while the wines were popular, both brothers found them undrinkable after a few years. Eventually, they returned to the more classic methods of fermentation and aging, focusing instead on better farming and expressions of each site in their wines. Paso las Mañas is one of their highest elevation sites and while it is currently not their oldest, or most acclaimed, the brothers feel it is eventually going to be their best.

The Paso las Mañas vineyard is a single vineyard wine, called a *Vinedos Singulares*, from the village of Samaniego, in the heart of the Rioja Alavesa sub-region. At 2100 feet above sea level this is their highest elevation site, a windswept plateau with gravel soils over clay with a commanding view of the Ebro River far below. Their grandfather purchased this site in 1950 with most of his neighbors telling him he was crazy because it is too high to ripen fruit. In fact, Arturo makes a wine called Paso de los Locos from the vineyard below this, and the name of that wine actually means “terrace of the crazy.” The vines in Paso las Mañas were planted in 1980 so they are not the oldest but the brothers feel this will ultimately be their best wine. Due to the elevation this vineyard is only planted to Tempranillo as Graciano and Manzuela, two of their grandfather’s favorites for blending, would never ripen at this elevation. The wine is fermented in large oak foudres and 500 liter French oak barrels, with roughly 15% new.

Arturo and Keke explain that their goal is to apply Burgundian logic to their single vineyard bottlings. While not yet a “grand cru” in their mind, and we have those too if you are interested, they consider this a premier cru. With a goal of allowing the character of the site to shine through this wine displays a gorgeous nose of cherry confiture, red licorice, caramel, bay leaf, rose petals and wet sea shells. On the palate there is an initial pop of fruit but then the tannins are much bigger and more assertive than the nose indicates, with a chalky, fine finish. Drink 2025-2030.

### **Miguel Merino Rioja Reserva 2018 - \$59**

As you can tell with my selections, there is an immense reverence for the work of the previous generations in Rioja. At Miguel Merino he goes even farther, producing *Vinedos Singulares* as well as classical aged Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva styles. Miguel Merino Sr. began the wine business as an export broker but always dreamed of owning his own small winery. In 1994 he produced his first vintage from vineyards and small winery he purchased in the town of Briones, in the heart of the Rioja Alta sub-zone. Miguel Jr., along with his wife Erika, joined the mission in 2017. Today, they run this garage winery crafting superb examples of both modern and classic Rioja.

The town of Briones is a picturesque village between the regional capital, Logrono, and the spiritual center, the town of Haro. We stayed in Briones, in a the Hotel Tondonia, which coincidentally looks across the river at the famed Vina Tondonia that is owned by Lopez de Heredia. Some of you may remember the 2005 vintage of Tondonia was a Euro Reserve feature in November, 2018. The Merino family farm about 30 acres all around the village of Briones. divided into 24 different parcels. Their oldest vineyards were planted in the late 19th century and the youngest in 2001.

For this wine the grapes are used from two vineyards that were planted in the 1950’s and 1960’s. The vineyard faces north, which prior to climate change was a less desired location. Now it allows the vines to ripen the grapes without being exposed to the harshest mid-day sun. 96% of the composition is Tempranillo and the remainder is Graciano. Graciano was a very popular grape variety before the civil war, but it is very finicky, with a very small window to harvest. It can add great color, fruit intensity and tension to Tempranillo, but is not really economically viable to use as the majority because it is so difficult to farm. For the Reserve this the grapes are destemmed and the fermentation takes place in small oak casks. Once dry the wine is racked to barrels that are composed of French oak staves and American oak heads. The wine is aged for 24 months in those barrels, then an additional 3 years in bottle before release. Miguel produced 8,200 bottles of this wine in 2018.

When you serve this wine make sure to decant for up to an hour before serving. The nose is a more classic expression of Rioja than the other selections, with warm notes of caramel, toasted coconut, vanilla bean, dried cherry, raspberry fruit leather and bay leaf. On the palate it shows terrific fruit intensity with obvious wood tannins that are obvious but nicely integrated. This wine is a fantastic example that offers both richness and oak, so drink 2024-2033.