



Tim's Wine Market

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This month's Explorer Club provides a chance to look at two of Spain's great Tempranillo regions side by side: Ribera del Duero and Rioja.

On paper, they have plenty in common. Tempranillo dominates in both regions, both have long traditions of aging wine in oak, and both can produce wines capable of developing beautifully in the bottle. However, when you put them side by side, the differences become apparent.

Ribera del Duero sits on a high, exposed plateau with hot, dry summers, intense sunshine, and dramatic swings between daytime and nighttime temperatures. The result is generally a more muscular version of Tempranillo: darker fruit, more concentration, and firmer tannins.

Rioja, particularly when we're talking about traditionally aged Reserva and Gran Reserva, tends to showcase another side of the grape. Here, the fruit is less about sheer power and more about texture, savory complexity, and flavors that develop through years of aging in barrel and bottle. So, this month, we're giving you both.

Pradorey Ribera del Duero Finca Valdelyegua Crianza 2022 | \$22

You could call Pradorey the Downton Abbey of Ribera del Duero. The wine comes from Real Sitio de Ventosilla, a vast historic estate whose story dates back to 1503, when Queen Isabella I of Castile purchased the property from the Count of Ribadeo. It remained tied to the Spanish crown and nobility for centuries. A palace was built there around 1600 to accommodate King Philip III during his visits, and playwright Lope de Vega even performed for the king in its gardens. Today, the estate still covers roughly 7,400 acres.

The modern chapter began in 1989, when agricultural engineer Javier Cremades de Adaro purchased the property and began planting vineyards. Today, there are about 1,285 acres of vines divided among ten individual vineyard sites, each differentiated by soil, elevation, and exposure. The estate also remains a working agricultural property, continuing a tradition that stretches back centuries.

And that brings us to Valdelyegua. Rather than pulling grapes from throughout the estate, this Crianza comes specifically from the Valdelyegua vineyard, whose name roughly translates to the old "valley of the mares." The vines sit between 790 and 820 meters in elevation on soils composed of sand, clay, and limestone. The blend is 98% Tempranillo and 2% Merlot, harvested by hand and fermented spontaneously with native yeasts. The wine spends 12 months in second and third-use barrels, roughly two-thirds French oak and one-third American. That's enough time to soften Ribera's natural power and add complexity without burying the fruit underneath new wood.

This is the more muscular of your two wines this month. Look for ripe blackberry and dark forest fruit alongside black licorice, pepper, coffee, saddle leather, and a touch of toffee from the oak. There's real weight and presence on the palate, with firm, chalky tannins that provide the wine with structure and suggest that there's plenty of life ahead of it. This is the bottle I'd reach for with grilled lamb chops, a thick steak off the grill, or a slow-cooked beef stew. We recommend opening it up about thirty minutes before consumption to let the dark fruit open up.

Bodega Silvo Rioja Gran Reserva 2018 | \$29

Marques del Silvo's estate vineyards lie along the Ebro River at elevations ranging from 560 to 700 meters, with clay-limestone soils and a climate influenced by both the Mediterranean and more continental conditions coming from the Iberian mountains. Some of the estate's vineyards are over 70 years old, planted primarily with Tempranillo, Garnacha, and Graciano.

If the Pradorey shows what Tempranillo can do with altitude, sunshine, and concentration, the Marques del Silvo illustrates what happens when you give the grapes more of what Ribera lacks: time.

Gran Reserva is the old-school style of Rioja. For the 2018 Gran Reserva, Tempranillo and Garnacha are aged for at least 30 months in a combination of French and American oak barrels, followed by another 24 months in the bottle before release. That's more than four years of deliberate aging before the wine is expected to display its full potential.

And this is where comparing the two bottles becomes interesting. The Pradorey is about power becoming polished, while the Marqués del Silvo is about time creating complexity. The fruit moves toward blackberry, while licorice, savory herbs, and vanilla emerge around it. The tannins are softer and silkier, and at 13.5% alcohol, the 2018 has noticeably less weight than the Ribera.

This is a wine to spend some time with. Pour a glass, leave the bottle on the table, and observe what happens over dinner. Enjoy it alongside roast lamb, beef tenderloin, mushroom risotto, or even a good piece of Manchego after dinner. If you have the opportunity, open these two on the same night. It'll be a fun trip through two classic Spanish wine regions, showcasing what they do best.

Lamb Chops with Garlic Butter

I often say that God put ducks on Earth to eat with the red wines of Burgundy, and lambs for Bordeaux. The same holds true for lamb and wines made with Tempranillo. If you subscribe to the philosophy of "eat what they raise in the region," then lamb is also the perfect selection. This recipe is very easy to make, with two simple caveats: Use a heavy cast iron pan, if possible, to get the best sear on the meat. Additionally, do not crowd the pan so that they sear instead of braise. This version makes a meal for two and is easy to scale up if you have a larger crowd.

8 lamb loin chops

Salt and black pepper

3 tablespoons butter

3 cloves garlic minced

1 teaspoon fresh thyme chopped

Remove loin chops from the fridge 20-30 minutes before cooking. Place them on a paper towel-lined cutting board and pat them dry with paper towels. Season well with salt and pepper.

Heat a dry 12-inch skillet preferably cast iron, over a medium high heat. In the skillet, place the chops narrow fat side down. You probably will need to use tongs to keep them balanced and to press the chops down so that the fat renders and turns crisp and brown. It's about 5 minutes.

Once the fat has melted into the pan, lay the chops flat on one of their sides. Cook for another 3 minutes, until browned, then turn and cook on the other side.

Turn the heat to medium-low. Using a spoon, pour off most of the lamb fat. Then add 2 tablespoons of butter (or ghee if you prefer), garlic and thyme. Stir well until the butter is foaming, and spoon the butter over the lamb for a minute or so. Cook the chops until they reach an internal temperature of 145°F.

Place lamb chops in a serving dish and pour butter sauce on top. Enjoy!