Tim's Wine Market

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So far in 2026, the features have focused on three wines from the same origin. We began the year by highlighting three wines from the Southern Rhône Valley of France. In the spring, we explored three Italian wines from the exceptional 2021 vintage. Last quarter, we examined three wines from Bordeaux. To wrap up this year, we will travel to Spain, the last of the three major European wine countries, to explore its three most important wine regions.

Between France, Italy, and Spain, we sell significantly more wine from the first two, but in 2026, the Iberian Peninsula has gained substantial ground. It seems that nearly all our customers traveled to either Spain or Portugal this summer, often visiting both. This has cast a spotlight on the wines of both countries, with a planned focus on Portugal next year. Travelers returning from Spain frequently request wines from the best-known estates of Rioja and Ribera del Duero. Sadly, these tend to be well-established brands that represent the more commercial side of traditional Spanish wines. However, there is an entire renaissance underway in Spain, with young winemakers pursuing terroir-driven wines that contrast sharply with the process-driven styles of the past thirty years. This quarter, we will examine three wines produced by some of the most interesting and significant producers in each region, each taking a distinctly French approach that emphasizes terroir over process.

2023 Pares Balta Priorat Gratavinum 2πR - $69

The Priorat region of Spain, located in Catalonia, boasts a rich history of winemaking dating back to the 12th century. Originally cultivated by Carthusian monks who established vineyards and a monastery, the region produced wine for local use and trade. The wines of Priorat gained significant recognition during the late 19th century, largely due to the region's proximity to Barcelona. However, by the mid-20th century, the area faced a decline, as many vineyards were abandoned due to the steep slopes that made it nearly impossible to use tractors and other time-saving equipment. A revival in the 1980s began, driven by a new generation of winemakers like Rene Barbier, Alvaro Palacios, and Daphne Glorian, who reintroduced traditional techniques alongside modern innovations.

Despite its relatively short modern existence, Priorat was designated a Denominación de Origen Calificada (DOCa) in 2000, the highest classification for Spanish wines. Central to these wines is the famed llicorella soil, a grey/brown slate unique to Priorat and a few surrounding DOs. This poor soil has low water-holding capacity but is rich in minerals, favoring grapes like Garnacha and Carignan that thrive in warm, dry climates. In the 1980s, producers began to incorporate Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon, which have adapted well. Our selection, from the esteemed Pares Balta winery in the nearby Penedes region, utilizes all four varieties in a wine named after the geometric formula for a circle, signifying its perfectly round character.

The Pares Baltà winery is one of the oldest in the Penedès region, with its first vineyard established in 1790. From the outset, this family planned for the estate to endure for generations. The grandfather of the current generation, Joan Cusiné Hill, was born in 1917 and had a family already growing grapes for the local cooperative. He dreamed of making wine under their own label and built their first cellar. He even had the foresight to buy land once considered inhospitable to grapevines due to saline soil. By planting pine trees to absorb sodium, he later harvested them to fund the planting of more vineyards. Today, that area is regarded as prime vineyard land.

Joan Cusiné Hill worked well into his 80s, overseeing the vineyards until he passed the torch to his son, Joan Cusiné Cusiné, in the 1980s. This Joan oversaw the creation of their most popular wine, Blanc de Pacs, a dry table wine that remains their best-selling non-sparkling wine today. During this period, the winery transitioned to organic and later biodynamic certification. Today, Joan's sons, Joan and Josep, run the winery, with substantial contributions from their wives, Marta and Maria Elena. They have gone beyond organic farming to implement low-intervention practices in the winery, including producing many cuvées with no added sulfur. They typically produce over 50 wines each year, including selections from their outpost in Priorat.

As with all Pares Balta wines, this wine is produced from vineyards farmed using biodynamic practices, hand harvesting, and minimal cellar intervention. This cuvée blends the typical varieties Garnacha and Carignan with Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. The grapes were harvested together, destemmed, and allowed to soak at cool temperatures for seven days before fermentation. Following this, the juice was warmed, and fermentation began with ambient yeasts. After 16 days, the wine was racked into various aging vessels: 60% in new, second, and third-year French and Hungarian oak barrels of 400 liters; 20% in clay amphoras; and 20% in large oak demijohns. Aging lasted from 10 to 12 months, depending on the vessel.

When you open this wine, don't expect the bombastic examples of Priorat that are so common among many producers. The Cusiné family prefers to let the terroir of their vineyards speak for itself. Decant for half an hour and serve at cellar temperature. The nose delivers a charming bouquet of fresh blueberries, black raspberries, dried cranberries, violets, and a graphite-like dusting from the llicorella soil. I chose this example because the first sip reveals a beautiful gush of fruit that is simultaneously round and soft, with lovely tension. Drink from 2026 through 2033, and serve with Asian-spiced pork belly or soy-glazed tuna steaks.

Marta Maté Ribera del Duero 2022 - $55

I often find tasting wines from the Ribera del Duero region of Spain to be taxing. Many producers in the region remain fixed in the Robert Parker era, where only size and oak matter. However, like in other great regions of Spain, a new generation is eager to craft wines that reflect the character of their terroir. Our feature from Bodega Marta Maté exemplifies the evolution occurring in this remarkable region.

Although winemaking in Ribera del Duero dates back to the Roman era, the official Denominación de Origen (DO) was not established until 1982. The area included within the DO encompasses the vast valley shaped by the Duero River, which originates in northwest Spain near the Pico de Urbión. The Duero is the longest river on the Iberian Peninsula, traveling 557 miles through Spain and Portugal before reaching the Atlantic Ocean. On the Portuguese side, it is known as the Douro River, where fortified Port wines are produced.

What makes the wines of Ribera del Duero distinctive is rooted in its soils, primarily composed of layers of sand and limestone. This reflects the fact that the area was once the bottom of a vast prehistoric sea, much like much of Western Europe. The region also lies on the vast meseta of northern Spain, with elevations ranging from 2,100 to 3,500 feet above sea level. At these elevations, the climate is considered continental, with cold winters, a cool spring, and hot, dry summers. There are also significant diurnal temperature swings during the growing season, with very little rain. All these factors contribute to why the area is known for its dark, powerful red wines.

For our featured selection, we chose one of the magnificent bottlings from Bodegas Marta Maté. This winery was established in 2008 by two friends, Marta Castillo and Manuel del Rincón, who were well-respected viticultural consultants in the Ribera del Duero. They purchased an old-vine vineyard in Gumiel de Mercado and initially produced wine from parcels sold to larger wineries. In 2008, they were joined by César Maté and decided to vinify a small amount of their grapes for a cuvée they called Primordial, producing 3,000 bottles. The wine received rave reviews, sparking their search for a home to build their brand. In 2013, they found a suitable location in Tubilla del Lago, Burgos, where they bought buildings and another vineyard. Today, they craft a fantastic range of Ribera del Duero wines from both sites, guided by three principles: old vines, high elevation, and minimal intervention.

For their flagship bottling, the team utilizes over 100 different micro-plots within their vineyards, where vine ages range from 80 to over 100 years. In Ribera del Duero, the majority of grapes are machine-harvested, but Marta Maté only hand-harvests, gently collecting the clusters in small picking baskets. After destemming, the grapes are hand-sorted and placed in concrete tanks for fermentation with native yeasts. The wine is then moved to 2,300-liter French oak casks for 14 months, followed by an additional six months in concrete.

When serving, decant for half an hour and chill to cellar temperature (55 degrees). At first swirl, the nose reveals rich aromas of baked black cherries and blackberries, dried figs, dried orange peel, pencil shavings, and a hint of black licorice. Over the course of the evening, the fruit components meld, and the minerality rises, offering fantastic dimension to the

wine. While enjoyable now, this wine will age beautifully for another 4-5 years. Serve with a standing rib roast or herb-crusted rack of lamb.

La Antigua Clasico Rioja Reserva 2015 - $45

All three wines in this offering differ from the norm for their respective regions, but none more than this one. I also feel a personal attachment to this vineyard, having walked it with winemaker Alberto Orte during my first trip to Spain in 2007. At that time, however, Alberto was merely the importer of the wine, which was being made by a now-defunct group of young, renegade winemakers. Unbeknownst to me, Alberto was studying winemaking and assumed the contract for the vineyard when the other group disbanded. Today, Alberto is well-known in Spain for rescuing many old vineyards thought to be obsolete, producing some of the country's most compelling bottles; this wine is a testament to his passion and brilliance.

What sets this wine apart first and foremost is the location of the vineyard, high in the Sierra de la Demanda mountains, which form the northwestern border of the Rioja region. Situated well above 2,000 feet, the temperatures are quite cool, which slows ripening. Additionally, the vineyard is oriented to the north, further decreasing direct sunlight on the vines. This vineyard, planted in the 1940s, produces only a handful of grape clusters, an exceptionally small crop by modern standards. All of this pushes the harvest into early November, one of the latest in the northern hemisphere.

Despite the unique attributes of this vineyard, perhaps the most interesting aspect is the varietal makeup: 60% Garnacha, 30% Tempranillo, and 10% Graciano. While this blend is not unusual for producers in the Rioja Oriental sub-zone in the southeast, it is rare to find in the Rioja Alta area where this vineyard is located. The soil here is primarily limestone sands mixed with red mica, contributing a freshness to the final wine.

Unlike the other two wines in this selection, which utilize a progressive oak regimen, Alberto reaches for the playbook of his elders. This wine is aged for 72 months in 60% French and 40% American oak barrels; it could qualify for Gran Reserva status except that it does not meet the minimum requirement of two years for bottle aging. The only reason it doesn't is that Alberto did not want to pay the higher taxes charged for Gran Reserva bottlings.

When you open this wine, decant it and chill to cellar temperature. The result is a wine that immediately reveals its Rioja heritage on the nose, yet the palate diverges from the norm. The bouquet showcases layers of caramel, dried cherry, dried red plum, toasted walnuts, tamarind, claro cigar, and hints of balsamic syrup. On the palate, there is ample fruit to balance the prominent oak, with surprisingly good tension for a wine of this age. I enjoyed this bottle over the course of an evening, and it evolved beautifully, with the oak mellowing and the fruit melding into an almost compote-like mélange. Drink from 2026 to 2030, and serve with slow-braised beef short ribs or duck confit.