

SPANISH WINE ON A PUSH BIKE

BY MICHAEL LOTH

If you want to party in Spain, go in the first half of September – it's fiesta time. Every village & city seems to have its turn. But if you want to get some sleep, make sure your accommodation is not next to those rock bands that start playing in the town square at midnight and go to 4am. And if you are doing a wine trip on a push bike, like us, you will definitely need all the sleep you can get.

What a great way to see and feel the wine country of Spain - on a guided bike ride through Rioja, Reuda & Ribera del Duero, outside Madrid. But you wouldn't want to do it this way in Priorat or Penedes, outside Barcelona, for reasons that will be obvious as you read on. Drive yourself here.

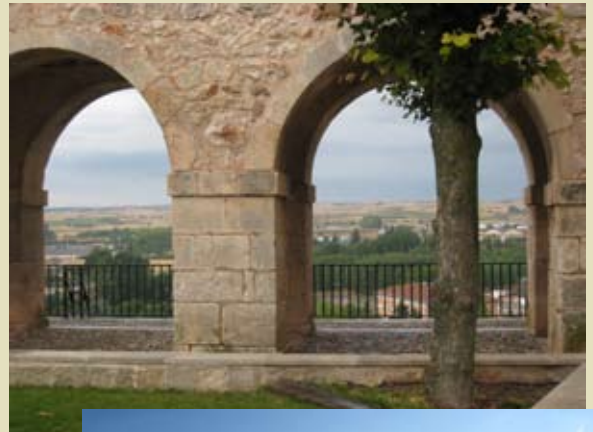
WINE BY BIKE - RIOJA, REUDA & RIBERA DEL DUERO

If you are reasonably healthy I can totally recommend a bike trip – ours was organised by the American based Du Vine, but using local Spanish guides. It may initially seem expensive at about \$AUD 3000 per person, but you do not have to put your hand in your pocket for anything over the 6 days. That's good value in a ever-more expensive Europe!

The biking guides, Pablo & Marcus ("Richard Gere") looked after everything, watching us on the road and organising all our meals and drinks. And with Europe driving on the "wrong side" of the road, it is a good thing for guys like us who kept looking the wrong way for oncoming traffic. All you have left to do is push yourself up those long slow hills.

Our lunch on day 2 at Remelluri Vineyard in Rioja set the tone for the week – local, homely & tasty food and wine. Interestingly, the lunch wine was their Rioja "reserva" (minimum 1 year in oak & 2 years in bottle); and was much preferred by the biking winos to the more expensive and theoretically better "grande reserva" (2 years in oak & 3 years in bottle).

One local practice you need to adjust to is the Spanish eating hours, especially outside major cities. Don't expect to eat lunch before 2.30pm nor dinner before 9pm. And there is the siesta between about 2pm & 4.30pm. Don't know how they get to bed after a late meal or how they get enough sleep, but it works somehow.



HERE ARE A FEW PERSONAL VIEWS ABOUT THESE MORE NORTHERN SPANISH WINES:



- The younger and lower oaked “Crianza” and the “Reserva” tempranillo-based wines tasted from many producers had better structure (tannins, acid etc) and balance than their more icon & oaky “Grande Reserva” wines. This theme repeated regularly throughout our 2 weeks in Spain. It may not hold true for the producers at the top of their game currently; but it suggests to me there are some producers in Rioja selling average but expensive wine. Maybe they need the money to maintain their rather grand bodegas (winery and cellar door)?

- I was surprised that many bodegas are very large in Rioja. Their numbered bottles in the reserva & grande reserva ranges often exceeded 300,000 bottles, and in one case 900,000+ - that’s massive for one wine in any-one’s language. There were the good ones as always, but a few I tried were pretty average, dulled from over-oaking, oxidative handling or just average winemaking / winegrowing practices. I guess that’s why you trust your retailer to know what they sell!

- I really enjoyed the Ribera del Duero wines I tried. They generally had beautiful acid and tannin structure, often with more elegant but noticeable savoury fruit. A highlight was the Torremilanos winery visit, a grand looking bodegas. The quality of the wine was only matched by the infectious enthusiasm of the owner’s son. They make both traditional savoury reds and a more modern fruit driven style, but all were clean and structured. Unfortunately not in Australia yet.

- The world’s top wine regions gain a distinctive style from their soil and surroundings – their terroir. Like some of Australia’s cooler wine areas can pick-up a hint of eucalypt from their surrounding gumtrees. In Rioja & Ribera del Duero as we rode amongst the vineyards, the smell of damp earth was common – coming from the fields of cut hay which adjoined most vineyards. Now I understand the particular savouriness you find in these northern Spanish wines. When you open a bottle years later, it brings back fond memories of good times. And for me, it makes me more appreciative of subtle regional wine characteristics, even eucalypt or mint in some Tasmanian and Coonawarra wines or tomato leaf from the WA Great Southern. It’s a personal thing.

WINES BY CAR - PRIORAT

Location plays a big part in wine style. For Priorat, its closeness to the Mediterranean sea is critical, as is the vineyards sitting high on the sides of its hills. Many of the best vineyards are sited on extremely steep terraced sites around 800+ meters above sea level in sub-districts like Gratallops, Porrera, Falset and La Morera de Montsant.

For better or worse, the influential American wine writers found Priorat a few years ago, so many of their better wines now sell at Napa prices (ie expensive) and with Napa fruit ripeness levels (ie ripe, with higher alcohol). In part the higher prices probably reflect the expense of producing wine in the hills with steep terracing, with manual labour, no irrigation and low volumes. But the equally interesting wines from the Montsant region right next door were half the price.

Can you figure that out? Well from chatting with some resident foreigners, my guess is that American demand has fuelled part of the price hike; and Spanish internal politics (no, really?) also helps, by dictating that the poor old Monstant D.O.C. cannot call itself, or be part of, the renowned Priorat D.O.C. wine district.

We stayed mainly in the beautiful hillside town of Morera de Montsant, visiting the boutique Pasanau winery. I was pleased to find their wines made more with the classic savoury structure than the riper style more evident in more prominent sub-regions.

Here are a couple of light-hearted observations on Priorat:

- The Ghost Villages. Don't be surprised if you think you are the only person left alive in some of the hillside villages. Morera de Montsant was beautifully tidy, but there was not a soul in sight in daylight hours. Apparently the new generations live in the city during the week and return for weekend breaks or holiday season – an increasingly common phenomenon in rural Europe. At our hotel, the only one in town, the concierge gave us the key to the front door and said it remained locked all day & night apart from holiday season. He then disappeared. We were so convinced that everyone had forgotten about us that we drove 50km to a nearby town for back-up food (ie wine & potato crisps) just in case. We laughed hysterically when the concierge returned at 8pm that night and transformed himself into the waiter, chef and cleaner. He cooked us (yes, only us) a delightful meal – although we were less than hungry, having devoured the crisps & wine just beforehand. The funniest day of our trip!



- Do logic & wine politics work together in Spain? I was amused to find that the wineries of La Morera de Montsant are not in the “lesser” Montsant D.O.C. wine district, but in the next door Priorat D.O.C. district. Just like in Australia!



- There are some massive upmarket bodegas in the region, which just smell of wealth. But I enjoyed the irony in driving down a broken dirt road to see the tin shed winery of Clos Mogador, one of the super-premium wines of Gratallops. Their adjacent vineyards were on ultra-steep terraces, often containing only one or two rows of vines per terrace. For Australians, Clos Mogador may be a victim of its own (USA) success, as a bottle of its 2003 wine selling for E52 (roughly about \$A100) in a liquor store in Priorat has to sell for over \$A200 at our store in Sydney – an unfortunately common result for Australian consumers.



- Tourists Beware. Sometimes there are tourist traps even in country Spain. Morera de Montsant was quirky but great value. A beautiful regional town we found in the hills further down the road, Falset, was full of life, good restaurants, clothing shops, liquor stores and all sorts of accommodation. Unfortunately if you don't do your research and bookings in advance, you will eventually find an expensive tourist trap. We did, at a local (very ordinary and expensive) restaurant attached to a (good quality) hotel. Such is life! On a positive note, the Falset Tourist Center is very helpful, being run by a now-local English-woman. Contact them at: oit@priorat.cat or www.turismepriorat.org



- Car hire in Spain (like much of Europe) is easy enough. But if you don't want the added hassle of changing gears in a left-hand drive manual car, then you will have to pay for the privilege. Automatics in Spain appear to cost much more –especially if you have not pre-booked from Australia. And don't think you won't get lost because you have a GPS in the car. Ours kept going to sleep on long roads and got lost among tall buildings. That's nothing new!



DRINKING SPANISH

For Spanish people it's all about the food, and drinking is only an accompaniment. Conversely, there is no cultural & few legal limits controlling when you drink. You can pretty much drink what you feel like, whenever someone will serve you. So what are the wine varieties & other drinks native to Spain?

- **Albarino** white wine originates from Galicia in cool, damp northwest Spain. Think of tastes like pear and citrus fruits and floral aromas, with acid structure to end. This makes it a match for lighter white meats & seafood.
- **Verdejo** white wine – it's not Verdelho – grows in the hills of Reuda. Think tropical fruit aromas, a rounded softer texture from gentle acidity. It's good with Spanish type dishes with a salty bite.
- **Tempranillo** red wine is the primary grape variety of Spain, like those from Rioja and Ribera del Duero. Good tempranillo (without excessive oak) reminds me of Italian barbera (from Piedmont) with maybe a touch more earth. And you find it increasingly in Australian wines from our warmer climates. Think of spicy red fruits. It has earthy, gentle tannins with a food-friendly, meaty or earthy end. It's made for dishes with meat, mushrooms or some spice.
- **Granacha** (Granache) red wine originated in Spain. Think of raspberry fruits, earth and herb aromas, with enough acid. In the Australian version the fruit is often more overt and the acid is usually lower. While it is often blended with other red grapes (the classic Rhone style GSM), it can also make a light, fruity rose or rich, fruity full bodied reds.
- **Sherry** originated from Jerez in the south-western corner of Spain. They are lightly fortified wines, made mostly from white grapes, with good ones spending a minimum of 4 years in oak – the “solera” top-up system. They come in various styles from dry to sweet, but few would argue that it makes a great aperitif, with the acidity enlivening your taste buds. Think of bone-dry & nutty, yet floral, **Manzanilla** with its salty & crisp “sea shell” characteristics; matched with oysters, sardines, fried whitebait or mussels. Or try **Fino** with less of the sea characters, and fuller, nuttier and yeasty; great accompaniment for the oily seafoods (eg mackerel) or even a meat & olive antipasto.

Alternately, elegant styles with a little more sweetness are **Amontillado** and **Oloroso**. Amontillado has aromas of honey and roasted nuts, tastes of sweet almonds and finishes crisp; great as a pre-dinner drink with nibbles, like salted almonds or hazelnuts. Oloroso is a richer fortified on the line between dry & sweet. Think of walnuts with touches of caramel, toffee & wood-spice, being dried up on the end with refreshing acidity. Maybe enjoy Oloroso after the main with a dryer style cheese or a fruity almond tart.

For dessert you need Pedro Ximenez, syrupy, dark, sweet & sticky with aromas of figs, dates, prunes, sultanas & Christmas cake. Imagine indulging yourself with a dessert of ice cream or chocolate anything and a chilled glass of Pedro Ximenez.

- **Sparkling Wine – Cava.** If you want to keep the get-together simple and not too expensive, then a sparkling Cava is a top option. Mostly simpler than good French Champagne, occasionally the equal of a quality Champagne (and never worse than one of those very average Champagnes we sometimes find at low or higher prices). It's a sparkling for the masses – and its way cheaper too.
- **Beer (Cerveza).** Just like Australia, Spain has a hot climate plus it has many salty foods. So beer is a good option, and Spain makes a few good one that are available in Australia.
- **Sangria.** It's cheap, it's a party, it's young and fun - red wine, citrus and lemonade. Just don't drink too much of it guys, or you will get a bigger bang than you bargained on!

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