

Wine, etc.: Rioja continues to grow in popularity

Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr have been writing a weekly, syndicated wine column since 1985. (Capital Gazette)

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Interest in Spain's Rioja region continues to grow as we have noted in past columns. In 2017, Rioja wines enjoyed a worldwide 4 percent growth rate with almost a 6 percent increase in sales in the U.S. Reasonable prices, a tilt to less oak, and more fruit driven, clean, well-made wines are fueling this merited increase in interest.

We recently met with Alejandro Lopez, director for Bodegas Bilbainas, to get his overview of Rioja and to taste the wines from Vina Pomal, one of Bodegas Bilbainas brands.

Lopez was a wealth of background information about the Rioja region. The modern style of winemaking in Rioja was the result of two developments in the mid-1800s, according to Lopez .

The first was the arrival of French winemakers bringing French winemaking techniques to Rioja. The French influx was the result of a debilitating outbreak of mildew in France and the beginning of phylloxera that decimated their vineyards. The French taught the Spaniards traditional fermentation techniques used today and discouraged more traditional carbonic maceration. The result was sound, longer-lived wines that could stand the rigors of transport.

The second element that brought Rioja into the modern world was the arrival of rail transportation that opened up new markets in the United Kingdom and South America. Today, Vina Pomal, located in the town of Haro, is the largest vineyard in Rioja Alta. Producing wine from approximately 600 acres, Vina Pomal dwarfs the average vineyard size of one acre.

Rioja Alta is arguably the most prestigious of the three sub-regions of Rioja.

Lopez said only tempranillo is used in the Crianza and Reserva wines, while 10 percent to 15 percent graciano is added to the Gran Reserva. He noted the tempranillo provides “black and red fruit” to each wine and that the graciano adds “acidity, spice, and color” to the Gran Reserva.

We tasted three wines from the current Bodegas Bilbainas Vina Pomal lineup and following are our tasting notes:

Vina Pomal Reserva Rioja 2013 (\$22). This is a very agreeable wine to drink. Just a bare hint of oak matched with mature ripe cherry and strawberry fruit and a hint of cedar. Very soft and round in the mouth with mild tannins.

Vina Pomal Gran Reserva Rioja 2011 (approximately \$50). The result of three years in wood and three years in the bottle has produced a very elegant wine with ripe dried cherry and plum elements with a deft touch of oak and a hint of licorice. The wine smoothed out further over several hours and the little note of oak receded. A very nice package.

Vina Pomal Vinos Singulares Graciano 2012 (\$65). This may be a difficult wine to source but is worth the trouble. True to Alejandro’s description, this graciano displays a very deep opaque color and pleasant spice notes. Although 6 years old, it is still a baby that needs time to open. Somewhat reminiscent of a young California syrah with ample berry notes and a broad mouth coating element. Delicious!

Guigal wines

E. Guigal has a series of excellent wines that exemplify the Rhone Valley. Not only are the 2015s relatively inexpensive for the Rhone, but they come from a vintage with excellent growing conditions.

“In 55 years, I’ve never seen anything like it,” said Marcel Guigal, second-generation family owner of Rhone

Valley winery E. Guigal. “Everything was perfect, it was sunny when it needed to be sunny, it rained when it needed to rain, and it was windy when it needed to be windy.”

Our favorite was the **E. Guigal Saint-Joseph Rouge 2015** (\$35), a wine that is all syrah. Rich red berry fruit, a dash of spice, floral aromas and long finish.

The **E. Guigal Crozes-Hermitage 2015** (\$25) has a very earthy character with meaty and dark berry fruit.

The steal is the **E. Guigal Cotes du Rhone Rouge 2015** (\$15), a simple and pure-fruit wine with red berry and spice flavors. It is a blend of syrah, grenache and mourvedre. Guigal saves you the wait and ages their wines in bottle for two years before release.

And for a summer treat, there is still time and reason for **E. Guigal Cotes du Rhone Blanc 2015** (\$15). We have liked this wine year to year. Very aromatic, its bright acidity and effusive stone-fruit flavors make it a nice match to summer seafood dishes.

Wine picks

Amici Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2015 (\$50). A 13 percent blend of cabernet franc, petit verdot, malbec and merlot rounds off this delicious, plump cabernet. We loved the ripe black cherry and coffee flavors with generous aromas of cassis, mocha and spice. Very long finish.

Olema Sonoma County Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 (\$25). We have a friend who is loyally bound to this sister wine of Amici. Made by John Harris and Bob Shepard as reasonably priced, approached wines, Olema wines are good across the board. The cabernet sauvignon has cassis and cedar aromas with forward plum and toffee flavors and a hint of oak-infused vanilla and mocha.

Murphy-Goode Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley 2014 (\$28). Murphy-Goode has a reputation for tasty wines at value prices and this beauty from Alexander Valley is no exception. Presenting an enticing nose and flavors of plum and cassis with a spicy edge and chocolate notes. Blended with 2 percent petite verdot, this wine is a pleasure to drink and would pair beautifully with grilled beef.

Frescobaldi Alie Rosé Toscana IGT 2017 (\$20). Crafted from mostly syrah with a touch of vermentino this delicious rosé really delivers. Enticing light pink color with mouth-watering cherry and strawberry notes, this wine finishes with lively acidity.

Willakenzie Estate Rosé Pinot Noir Willamette Valley 2017 (\$23). This is a big bold rosé. Strawberry and watermelon with a bit of strawberry dominate the nose and taste of this very well-crafted rosé.

Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr have been writing a weekly, syndicated wine column since 1985. See their blog at www.moreaboutwine.com. They can be reached at marq1948@gmail.com.

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