

# WINE News

*Freshen up on wines of Spain and Portugal.*



## MARCH 8, 2021 FEATURES

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## Hits from the B-Sides

By Kirk Walker

**Rioja, Priorat, Albariño.** These are the three biggest Spanish regions in terms of sales and popularity at K&L. And, if I *had* to only drink wines from these regions for the rest of my life, I would be very content. There is a reason why we sell so much of these wines. They are great. But, there is so much more that Spain has to offer. Here are a couple of thoughts on less obvious choices from the Iberian Peninsula.

### Ribera del Duero (the Other Tempranillo)

I find that I have often overlooked this other Tempranillo region. Ribera del Duero is kind of like “the Santa Cruz Mountains of Spain.” Like that Californian AVA, it is very close to a large urban center—Madrid,

in this case (and the San Francisco Bay Area in the other). It has a long history of winemaking, but it has always been overshadowed by a more established region to the north—Rioja (similarly, Napa). Lots of good things are happening in both regions, so keep your eyes peeled.

### Rueda (the Other White Wine)

Rueda is no longer just good, cheap white wine. The best way to describe it is in contrast to Sauvignon Blanc, but given more time, I think we can establish its own identity. These wines are a hybrid of a white Bordeaux style and New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc style. The fruit is a more

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### 2019 Bodegas Torremorón Ribera del Duero

**(\$15.99)** This is sourced from Tempranillo vines that are almost 100 years old. This is not a big, intense, oaky wine. This is all about the fruit: dark berries lifted by hints of spice and soft florals. It's medium bodied, and the fruit is bright, dark berries, lifted with some limestone minerality and a moderate, tannic bite. This is a perfect weeknight takeout dinner red for pizza, burgers, Korean, or Thai—it is simple, delicious, and versatile. **90 VN**



### 2019 Verdeal Verdejo Rueda (\$17.99)

Verdeal is a longtime Direct Import for us. It has been great to see how their wines have evolved. They have started less invasive viticultural practices and the wines have become much more expressive. The fruit tones flirt with tropical, but maintain a cooler reserve. There is weight to the palate, which is not just defined by acidity—and there's a whisper of minerality. This is a characterful white that is delicious by itself and will accompany almost anything.



### 2019 Zestos Garnacha Vinos de Madrid

**(\$10.99)** This wine is sourced from a 50-year-old vineyard, and grown in granitic soils in the foothills to the west of the capital. This gives the wines a higher-toned quality, bringing out a little more red berries and a hint of delicacy along with a touch of mountain herbs and fine cracking of spice. It is strawberries, raspberries, a whiff of savory herbs, and just a hint of spice. It is medium-bodied, with easy tannins, and enough acidity to keep it clean and fresh. **91 VN**



## There's Only One Albariño — Except When Its Alvarinho

**I have to start with a quick digression.** Back in the late '90s and the early '00s, the American and the world markets didn't quite know what to make of Albariño. The going hypotheses were that Albariño was related to Viognier, or it was related to Riesling, both grapes being transported to the region with pilgrims traveling along the Camino de Santiago. You can almost see what we were thinking: Albariño can be aromatic and moderately floral; it can also be linear and mineral-driven. We now know that it is native to the regions of Vinho Verde and Rias Baixas. Its thick skin, which is a perfect adaptation to the humid coastal environment, is a characteristic that neither of the previously suggested varieties possess.

This is a very long detour to get to the **2019 Soalheiro "Granit" Alvarinho Monção e Melgaço (\$24.99)**. This wine made me think of Riesling. This wine is sleek, cool, and precise. It has Wachau-like precision and a penetrating Mosel-like minerality. Soalheiro is one of my all-time favorite Alvarinho-Albariño producers. Their regular Alvarinho is one of the best white wines from the Iberian Peninsula. They are located on the south side of the Minho River across from

Rias Baixas in the subregion of Vinho Verde called *Monção e Melgaço*. Located upriver from the coast, it's a little warmer, and there is a little more elevation. Typically you find a riper expression of Alvarinho here. The mix of granite and schist soils give the wines fuller, rounder fruit tones with focus and minerality. This wine comes from a selection of sites where the soils are all granite based—hence the name.

This is a wine that is all about soil. The wine is a conduit for the energy and minerality of stone. It feels cool and stony, just like you would imagine coastal granite being. Chilled, barely ripe apricot, lime and grapefruit zest, and wet river stones on the nose and the palate. As I said, this wine is about energy. The acidity is high and you might be tempted to use the adjective "nervy," but it is not—it is deep, steady, and focused. This wine has great length. It moves across your palate and yet it also persists—delicious, penetrating, and thought-provoking. I love this style of wine. **94 DC, 92 RP**



## Clearly Catalanian: Terra Alta Garnacha Blanca

**It is hypothesized that the origin of Garnacha is somewhere in Aragon, in the Ebro River Valley not too far from Rioja.** Down the Ebro River, in the Catalanian region of Terra Alta, a mutation occurred and the famous black-skinned grape turned green. Terra Alta's two most famous neighbors are Montsant and Priorat. Not nearly as famous as its red-hued relative, Garnacha Blanca is most often seen in blends. Its biggest contribution is to the palate: body, richness, and texture. The aromatics and fruit are great, ranging from Asian pear to persimmon, with layers of spice, herbs, and minerality. It is not high in acid, so we normally see it blended with a little something to give it a little more verve. The secret to Terra Alta's success with this white variety, while its neighbors are so famous for their reds, is chalk. The soil here is called "panal," which is essentially fossilized sand dunes, and it brings a fine minerality and freshness to the wines.

### 2018 Vinos Piñol "Portal" Blanca Terra Alta (\$19.99)

Vinos Piñol is a family-run estate that makes only a small amount of wines from their certified organic vineyards. The Portal Blanca is 85% Garnacha Blanca, with the remainder being Viognier and Sauvignon Blanc, planted in the '90s. Fermented and aged in stainless steel, this wine is a bewitching combination of freshness and texture. The flavors are glacial, with chilled Asian pear, sweet citrus, ginger, and wet rock. The texture is round and mouth-filling, yet it has so much energy that the wine doesn't stand still long enough for you to feel its weight. The texture never interferes with the flavors, which always remain pure and focused. There is something for everyone in this aromatic, textured, and complex wine.



### 2019 Edetària "Via Edetana" Blanca Terra Alta (\$16.99)

Edetària was founded to promote Garnacha Blanca. They work with a great deal of old vines and they are currently converting to organic practices in the vineyard. This wine is a blend of 70% Garnacha Blanca and 30% Viognier. Vinified in stainless steel, part of it is aged in French oak, while the rest remains in tank, with some battonage. This wine feels Mediterranean, sun-drenched yet fresh. It's aromatic with soft florals and spice, but the ripe stone fruits shine. The palate is round and full, not quite Chardonnay full, but almost. You feel the oak but do not taste it, just like the lees. It finishes clean and fresh with the limestone minerality leaving a dusty saltiness across the palate. **91 JS**



### Hits from the B-Sides (Continued from page 1)

reserved expression of the ripe tropical fruits of New Zealand; the wines are structured like a more relaxed Bordeaux blend. The best part is that there is no pungent green quality to these wines. They are all fruit, with varying amounts of a fine, dusty minerality.

### Vinos de Madrid (There is Always More Garnacha)

There is a long history of Garnacha in the mountains and hills that surround Madrid. Recent history has forgotten and abandoned these vineyards, or the fruit was destined for bulk production. A new generation of winemakers have seen these opportunities and jumped on them. Now, some of the most exciting Garnachas from a country full of Garnacha come from this region.

## Monastrell: No Longer a Third Wheel

**What is this?** Monastrell is Mourvèdre. Where do you always see Mourvèdre on a wine label? As the “M” in “GSM.” It’s more often than not the third wheel of a traditional “Rhône blend.” And what does the variety bring to the blend? It’s a late-budding, late-harvested, and a thick-skinned grape. It can make intense wines which are deeply colored, with lots of fruit and tannin—just what a blend consisting mostly of Grenache needs.

There are two specific regions in the world that often come to mind when one thinks of mono-varietal Monastrell, or Mourvèdre, wines. One is in France, but this is a Spanish newsletter, so we will not focus on that. The other is Murcia. Murcia? Dónde está Murcia? So, another problem this variety faces is that no one knows where it’s grown. Murcia neighbors Alicante to the west, and it is in the valleys of both regions that Monastrell calls home. Have you heard of Alicante? Do you know where it is? Yeah, it’s not on the short list of vacation sites for Americans in Spain. If you draw a line on the map from Madrid to Algiers, Alicante is at the midpoint. You would then have to drive 40 miles inland to get to where the wine region starts.

Photos of this region’s vineyards have always captured my imagination. They are organized, but so unlike the “typical” vineyard organization. They speak to wine’s endless variability and possibility. What you cannot recognize in these photos is the high amount of chalk in the soils. The chalk helps the soils retain water and helps with acid in the grapes. These big, rich reds have freshness that you do not always find in wines made in more moderate climates. Yeah, it’s hot here, the summer temps regularly exceeding 100 degrees, but the best of these wines are never flabby.

If we are to take a quick tour through our selections of Monastrell right now, the first place to start is the **2018 Bodegas Olivares “Altos de la Hoya” Jumilla (\$10.99)**. This is an incredible value. The first thing that jumps out on the label is that this is made from ungrafted vines. This showcases how undervalued this region and the grape is. Ungrafted wines from the best-known sites regularly go for several hundred dollars. Grown in sandy soils, this wine has a surprising aromatic lift, with crushed berries, subtle florals, and hints of spice and earthiness on the nose. The wine is medium-bodied and fresh. It’s simple in the best way, and so much fun to drink. **90 DC, 90 RP**

**2018 Bodegas Juan Gil Monastrell (Silver Label) Jumilla (\$14.99)** is the next stop on our tour of Monastrell. Juan Gil has been a go-to for what seems forever. 2018 is the first vintage that they were certified organic. What really jumps out, in a good way, is French oak with this wine. The dark berries and spice are accented with a hint of toasty oak that has a very subtle, balcony smokiness to it. That savory accent



*“Latest images from the Mars rover indicate budbreak is still weeks away on the red planet.” No, wait—this is a Monastrell vineyard planted in red, rocky soils in Spain. (Photo: Shutterstock)*

brings the dark berries into more contrast as it softens and rounds out the wine. It is also more substantial—not a food-only wine, but certainly something for hearty, cool weather fare. **93 RP**

**2016 Bodegas Sierra Salinas “Mira Salinas” Alicante (\$14.99)** Now we are going to follow the Sierra Salinas, which run through Jumilla toward the west into Alicante. It is these mountains from which this winery takes its name. And it’s here where we start to see how Monastrell develops with a little extra time in the bottle. Just like in the more famous French region, this wine becomes more savory and gamy, yet it never loses its fruit, showing lots of dark blackberries, spice, a little more herbs, and the meaty element. It basically hits every flavor. It is not sweet, but the ripe berries and hints of vanilla definitely suggest it. Complete unto itself, but it really wants a meal—simple braised meats would be perfect. **93 JD**

**2016 Enrique Mendoza “Estrecho” Monastrell Valencia (\$35.99)** Enrique Mendoza has been putting Monastrell in the best restaurants in Spain from their inception. This is all from the single vineyard “Estrecho” that was planted in 1947. This is next-level winemaking compared to the others on this list. This is 100% barrel fermented and then 100% aged in various sizes and ages of oak for over a year. The oak is integrated and frames the beautiful fruit, which has a brighter flavor spectrum. There are more herbs and a finer spiciness, but it is on the finish where this wine shows its breeding. Long and energetic, it dances with a fine minerality that makes the fruit pop and dance along with its savory accents. This is impressive wine. **94 RP**





*It's a cool, late winter scene, overlooking the Cantabrian sea near Getaria, Spain—yet it's not too early to start thinking rosé! (Photo: Shutterstock)*

## Rosé, Rosado: Let's Call the Whole Thing Quaffable

**It's still early in the year, and I know that more cold weather is to come, but the plum trees are blossoming in my neighborhood, and the cherries will be soon following, and that has my mind wandering to rosado.** Yes, it's quite obvious, with the plum blossoms being so vibrantly pink and that cool afternoon breeze—pink, cool, and refreshing, low-hanging fruit. There are two places that immediately come to mind when I think of Spanish rosé: Txakolina and Rioja.

Txakolina is the most late winter, early spring rosé region for me. Why? It is deliciously bracing. That cold breeze on the warm and sunny day that tells you, it's not summer yet. Grown on the northern slopes of the Cantabrian mountains as they race down toward the Bay of Biscay, Txakolinas are a special, unique wine. This is a coastal wine, but not how we generally think about "coastal wine." This is very green, wet and windy. It is fringe winemaking. There are three sub-regions for Txakolina. The smallest and the one located closest to San Sebastian is Getariako. That's where the **2019 Zudugarai "Amats" Rosé Getariako Txakolina (\$16.99)** hails from. I mention San Sebastian because I will always have this style of wine and the city, and what that city means to food and food culture, intertwined. Txakolinas are bracing. They are a high acidity, low alcohol, minerally, and spritzy. They are simply some of the best wines to enjoy with food. It's that last splash of acid and sprinkle of salt that ties everything together, enhances the flavors, then refreshingly washes it down and prepares the palate for the next bite to be as good as the first. That's Txakolina. Now, when it's rosé, the party really starts. There is that whiff of berry on the nose and tart bite of raspberries and strawberries on the palate. It is even more fun. Made from the local variety Hondarrabi



Beltza (the red Hondarrabi), rosé is only a small percentage of the region's production, but it creates a large impression.

Rioja may not be the first place that you think of when it comes to rosé. That should be no surprise, as they have only recently allowed the pink wine made in the region to be called rosé. That was done to make it more marketable abroad. Locally it is *rosado*. For this rosado we have to travel south and east, from where we started in Txakolina, over the Cantabrian mountains, through the Ebro River Valley (the heart of Rioja) and to the foothills of the Sierra de la Demanda, the mountains that are the southern border to the region. Taller than the Cantabrian mountains, the Sierra de la Demanda have the peaks that keep the snow longer than any other in the region. This is one of the coldest places in Rioja, a place that has a long history with pinkish wines. In fact, it's the only corner of the region that has a rosado festival. **2019 Pedro Martinez Alesanco Rosado Rioja (\$11.99)** comes from vineyards around the village of Badarán, the village with the festival. These cooler, higher sites have lots of limestone in the soil and are perfect for Garnacha. This is labeled as rosado but it's really a clarete. Clarete are made by co-fermenting the red and white grapes together. The entire wine is exposed to the Garnacha's skins for a particular time. This gives the wine a slightly deeper color but also impacts the texture. This is a more solidly built wine. There is texture and tannin that you normally do not find in a wine with this color. In all other aspects this delivers rosado. It's mountain rosado vs beach rosado, late winter and spring vs summer. It's refreshing and substantial. It hints toward warmer times, while washing down hearty, cold weather cuisine.



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