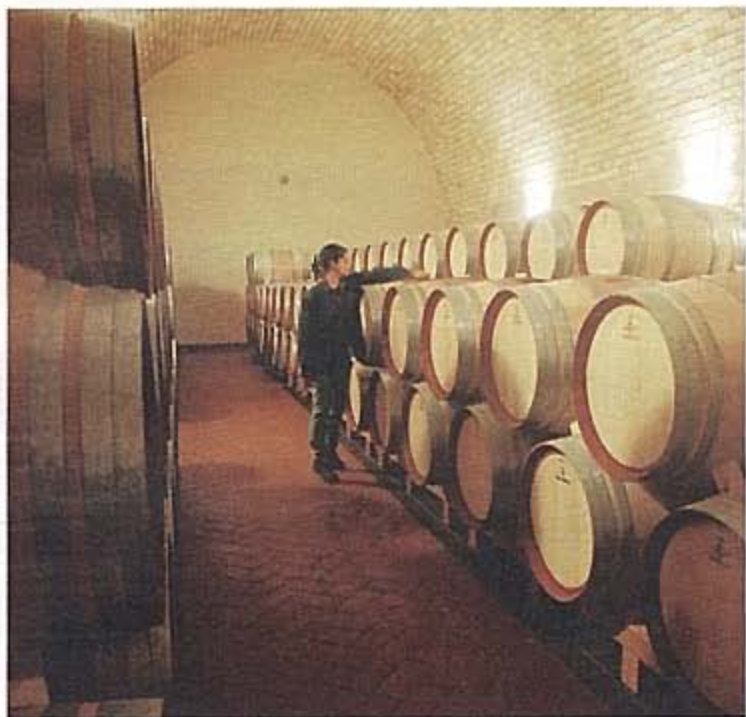


Spain on Track

Despite difficult vintages, Spain's best vintners are still making progress **BY THOMAS MATTHEWS**

Small, quality-oriented wineries in Spain's lesser-known regions are spurring the country's recent surge in quality. Viña Mein is leading the way in the northwestern region of Ribeiro, and the winery, surrounded by bucolic vineyards, doubles as a bed-and-breakfast.



Spain's traditional favorites are also better than ever—after 10 years in Vega Sicilia's barrel room, the 1994 Unico is one of this report's top-scoring wines.

Spain has been on a roller-coaster ride in recent vintages, but even extreme weather hasn't derailed the country's rapid and impressive progress with wine.

From the ripe, balanced 2001 vintage to a cool, rainy 2002 and a scorching 2003, Spanish vintners have faced diverse challenges. They have responded with excellent wines from most of the country's major growing regions. Unfortunately, prices have risen across the board, making exploration more expensive than in the past.

In the past year, I have blind-tasted more than 600 Spanish wines in our New York offices. About 15 percent of them scored outstanding (90 points or better on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale). Five wines earned classic ratings (95 to 100), all of them reds.

The 2001 vintage dominated the roster of top wines in my report last year (see "Spain Strides Ahead," Dec. 15, 2004), and new releases from the vintage continue to show its strength across the country. The 2001 Amancio, a single-vineyard bottling from Bodegas Sierra Cantabria (96, \$142), is the top-scoring Rioja in this report; just behind is another single-vineyard '01, El Puntido from Viñedos de Párganos (95, \$53).

Reports of a difficult growing season and some disappointing early releases raised concerns about 2002, but the vintage showed better than I expected. For example, the 2002 versions of the aforementioned Riojas are only a step behind the '01s: 93 points for the Amancio and 92 for the El Puntido. And two 2002s earned classic ratings, Termanthia, the flagship Toro from top bodega Numanthia-Termes (96, \$202) and LAN's Rioja Edición Limitada (95, \$45).

To add to the excitement, 2003 is off to a promising start. The growing season was a scorcher all across Spain, but microclimate factors helped moderate the effects of the heat, especially in Ribera del Duero and Priorat, where the best wines have freshness as well as concentration.

Many Spanish bodegas hold back their top wines for years of bottle-aging, to bring them to peak drinkability. As a result, older vintages are generally available as well. Vega Sicilia's new release of its flagship Unico, from the exceptional 1994 vintage

(96, \$350), proves the virtues of this approach; it's complex, harmonious and still lively, offering both beauty and character. The 1996 Balbas Ribera del Duero Alitus Reserva (92, \$100) also marries power with the mineral and game flavors of emerging maturity.

While most of these top-scoring wines are expensive, Spain continues to deliver good value, too. I found about 75 very good wines (85 points or higher) selling for \$15 or less. From the crisp, fruity whites of Galicia in the northwest to the rich reds of Jumilla and Utiel-Requena in the southeast, they come from wine regions all across the country.

Spain cultivates more acres of vineyards than any other country in Europe, and its wine regions encompass a wide range of climates and soil types. Its bodegas make bold, ageworthy reds, fresh dry whites, distinctive sparkling wines and the wide range of styles and flavors of Sherry, Spain's unique fortified wine. This is fertile ground for wine explorers. Here is a partial map to this rapidly evolving world.

PRIORAT

Priorat, in the coastal mountains southwest of Barcelona, is producing Spain's most exciting and distinctive reds.

These wines rarely use Tempranillo, which is the signature red grape throughout most of Spain, and rely instead on old-vine Garnacha and Cariñena blended with international varieties such as Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. Often aged in new French oak, these are wines of extraordinary power and complexity.

The slate soils and high elevations helped moderate the negative impacts of both the rainy, cool 2002 growing season and the hot summer of 2003, and excellent wines were produced in both vintages. I give 2003 the edge for its combination of power and harmony. Some '03s are heady, with overripe prune and raisin flavors. But the best are fresh, with wild herb, licorice and mineral flavors.

Álvaro Palacios made an excellent overall showing in 2003.

Thomas Matthews' Recommended Wines From Spain

For complete reviews, see the Buying Guide or www.winespectator.com.
An alphabetical listing of all wines tasted for this report begins on page 179 of this issue's Buying Guide.

TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
NUMANTIA-TERMES Toro Termanthia 2002 Big and beautiful, with expressive ripe blackberry and cassis fruit flavors framed by coffee, mineral and floral notes.	96	\$202
BODEGAS SIERRA CANTABRIA Rioja Amancio 2001 Muscular tannins and mouthfilling flavors of plum, blackberry, coffee and dark chocolate dominate the palate, with superripe fruit and a finish that just won't quit.	96	\$142
BODEGAS VEGA SICILIA Ribera del Duero Unico Gran Reserva 1994 Still dark in color, with alluring aromas of blackberry, mineral and cigar box, this red shows a firm, fresh, balanced palate, with black cherry, vanilla, mineral and floral flavors.	96	\$350
BODEGAS LAN Rioja Edición Limitada 2002 Like blackberry jam on toasted brioche. Thick on the palate, oozing with sweet fruit and oak, with muscular tannins that barely ripple the surface.	95	\$45
VIÑEDOS DE PÁGANOS Rioja El Puntido 2001 Almost syrupy, but this red never loses its balance. Dense, with blackberry, currant, mineral, dark chocolate and espresso flavors through the long finish.	95	\$53
CAMPO ELISEO Toro 2002 Blackberry, espresso and mineral notes mingle over well-integrated tannins and emerge haloed by spices on the toasty finish in this elegant, international-style red.	94	\$50
BODEGAS LAN Rioja Culmen Reserva 2001 Powerful and expressive, with ripe flavors of blueberry, plum and prune backed by plenty of toasty oak and framed by muscular tannins.	94	\$125
BODEGAS MAURO Viño de la Tierra de Castilla y León Terrens Pago de Cueva Baja 2001 Rich yet firm, concentrated yet balanced, this graceful red is packed with flavors of plum, blackberry, espresso, mineral, licorice and toast.	94	\$150
ÁLVARO PALACIOS Priorat Finca Dofi 2003 Rich and mouthcoating, packed with jammy fruit flavors of blackberry and black raspberry, with chocolate and coffee oak notes and accents of wild herbs and licorice.	94	\$70
JOAN SIMÓ Priorat Les Eres Vinyes Velles 2002 An alluring red, refined yet powerful, subtle yet seductive. Bright blackberry, mineral, coffee and anise flavors framed by ripe, muscular tannins.	94	\$70
DOMINIO DE TARES Bierzo Bem bi Bre 2003 Elegance with power; a seamless, silky wine with harmonious blackberry, plum, licorice, mineral and floral notes supported by well-integrated tannins and framed by refined oak.	94	\$46
VALL LLACH Priorat 2003 Cocoa, licorice, blueberry, mineral and floral notes mingle in this powerful, complex red. It has plenty of tannins, wood and alcohol, but all in balance.	94	\$88

TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
BODEGAS RODERO Ribera del Duero Carmelo Rodero Crianza 2001 Alluring floral and espresso aromas, with a thick, rich texture that delivers loads of ripe black fruit flavors.	91	\$25
VIÑA MEIN Ribeiro 2003 Minerals, wild herbs and the sea give way to crisp, focused citrus, mineral and fresh herbs in this intense, distinctive white.	90	\$19
PAGO DE LOS CAPELLANES Ribera del Duero 2003 Focused and expressive, with ripe yet crisp plum and blackberry fruit and underlying notes of mineral and coffee.	90	\$16
BURGÁNS Albariño Rías Baixas 2004 This firm, juicy white mingles flavors of tangerine, melon and herbs in a bright yet generous texture.	88	\$11
BODEGA EMINA Ribera del Duero 2003 Plum, vanilla and spice notes mingle nicely in this lush red, with flavors that build to a long, spicy finish.	88	\$15
SCALA DEI Priorat Negre 2003 A fresh, almost supple texture, with floral, plum, wild herb, mineral and toast notes that build through the finish.	88	\$15
BODEGAS BORSAO Garnacha Campo de Borja Tres Picos 2003 A firecracker red. Bold cherry and cranberry explode across the palate, trailing notes of cinnamon, smoke and herb.	87	\$12
DEHESA DE RUBIALES Viño de la Tierra de Castilla y León Alaia 2002 Berry, herb and smoke flavors mingle in this firm, slightly tart red. It has good focus and is balanced well for food.	87	\$9
J. & F. LURTON Rueda 2004 Expressive peach, melon and mango flavors draw you into this fleshy white, with firm acidity.	87	\$12
FINCA LUZÓN Jumilla Luzon 2004 Plump and polished, this ripe red shows blackberry, espresso, raisin and mineral notes, remaining fresh and clean.	87	\$8
MÄHLER-BESSE Toro Oro Selección 2002 This is rich with black cherry and chocolate flavors. The tannins are firm, but it's balanced through the smoky finish.	87	\$11
HIJOS DE ANTONIO BARCELÓ Sauvignon Blanc Viño de la Tierra de Castilla y León Peñasal 2003 This focused white shows good varietal character, with mineral, citrus and herb flavors. Balanced and crisp.	86	\$7
SEÑORIO DE SARRIA Navarra Rosado 2003 This big rosé has the deep color and tannins of a light red, with sun-baked fruit, dried cherry, spice and raspberry jam.	86	\$9
BODEGA NEKEAS Viura-Chardonnay Navarra Vega Sindoa 2004 This firm white is lively, with citrus, apple and pear flavors, softened by vanilla oak. Straightforward but balanced.	85	\$6
BODEGAS RISCAL Tempranillo Viño de la Tierra de Castilla y León 2003 Ripe with fruit and sweet with oak, this jammy red offers cherry, berry, vanilla and spice flavors.	85	\$9

Rating Spanish Red Wine Vintages in Priorat, Ribera del Duero and Rioja

Priorat

Year	Score Range	Description	Notes
2003	93-97	Heat gave concentration but top wines show great balance	NYR
2002	94	Despite cool growing season, many wines show ripe, concentrated fruit	Drink or hold
2001	98	Fine summer. Ripe, powerful wines; benchmarks for the region	Drink or hold
2000	92	Hot, dry summer produced wines with ripe fruit and firm tannins	Drink or hold
1999	91	Ripe wines of good structure, remaining balanced and elegant	Drink or hold
1998	91	Powerful yet lush and velvety, with good aging potential	Drink or hold

Ribera del Duero

Year	Score Range	Description	Notes
2003	89-93	Scorching heat gave ripeness; cool nights kept wines fresh	NYR
2002	86	Warm summer, rainy harvest. Best wines are balanced and elegant	Drink or hold
2001	95	Powerful wines with ripe fruit, good balance and great aging potential	Drink or hold
2000	90	Balanced wines, elegant and complex	Drink or hold
1999	83	Ripe grapes, rainy harvest. Best wines are fruity and balanced	Drink
1998	82	Solid wines, often with more tannins than fruit	Drink
1997	84	Balanced wines with gentle structure	Drink
1996	92	Ripe, balanced and complex	Drink or hold
1995	92	Big, ripe, concentrated. Powerful, if not always elegant	Drink or hold
1994	95	Great power and ripeness	Drink or hold

Rioja

Year	Score Range	Description	Notes
2003	83-87	Hot year. Ripe fruit with good concentration, some overripeness	NYR
2002	85	Cool summer, rainy harvest, low yields. Best wines are ripe and concentrated	Drink or hold
2001	94	Hot, dry weather gave ripe wines with opulent flavors and powerful structure	Drink or hold
2000	85	Huge yields. Top producers made good wines, but others are light	Drink or hold
1999	81	Irregular ripening and rainy harvest led to light wines	Drink
1998	79	Cold, rainy harvest. Tough wines with structure but little charm	Drink
1997	78	Rainy summer, light wines	Drink
1996	88	Balanced wines with good fruit and firm structures	Drink
1995	92	Rich wines with good structure and excellent balance	Drink or hold
1994	89	Ripe, powerful wines	Drink or hold

A score range indicates a preliminary analysis based on barrel samples and/or a limited sampling; many wines of the vintage not yet reviewed.

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 70-79, average; 60-69, below average; 50-59, poor.

Drinkability: "NYR" means the vintage has not yet been released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink.

"hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature.

SOURCE: WINE SPECTATOR

His Finca Dofi (94, \$70), a blend mostly of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah, is concentrated and rich with fruit. L'Ermita (93, \$450), his old-vine Garnacha, shows both elegance and intensity. Les Terrasses (92, \$30), made from purchased grapes, is plush and harmonious, and perhaps the best value from the region. Val Llach's 2003s include a dense and brooding main bottling (94, \$88) and the plush, fresh Embriux (93, \$31).

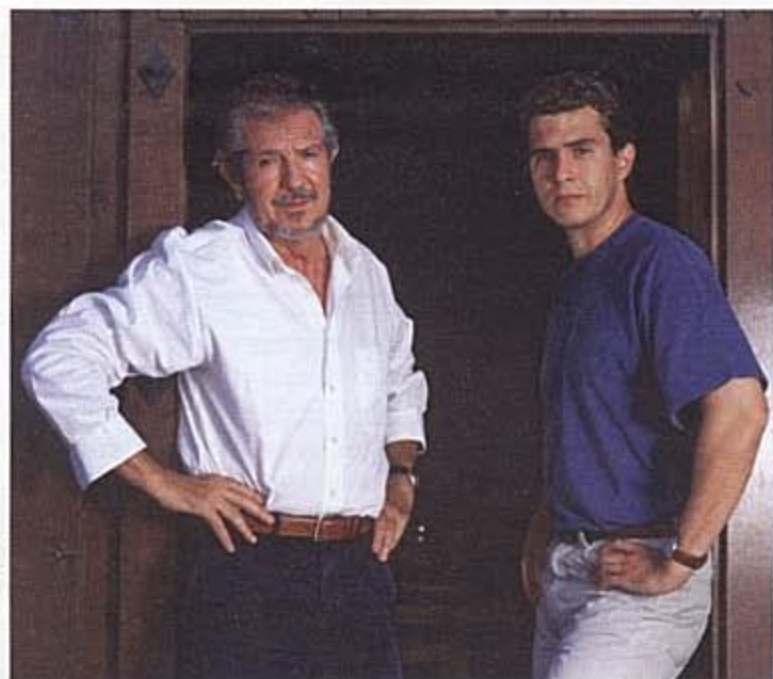
RIBERA DEL DUERO

Ribera del Duero also played the heat in 2003 to advantage, thanks in part to the region's cool nights, which helped retain acidity as the grapes ripened to maturity. The best wines of the vintage are well-structured and quite fresh.

There are some excellent values in 2003. The regular bottling

from Pago de los Capellanes (90, \$16) is focused and expressive. Celeste (90, \$22), a new wine from Selección de Torres, is powerful, with dark flavors of coffee and mineral. And after some lackluster vintages, the Bodegas Alejandro Fernandez Pesquera seems back on form, offering ripe fruit and solid structure (90, \$28). Look for late-release 2001s, too, such as Bodegas Rodero's ripe yet fresh Crianza (91, \$25).

However, prices for some Riberas have left reason behind. I was impressed by Dominio de Pingus 2003 (90, \$450), the cult wine from Peter Sisseck, but more for its extraordinary oak than its fruit; perhaps it will become more expressive with time. I preferred his second wine, Flor de Pingus 2003 (92, \$50), for its vibrant flavors of plum, blackberry and mineral. Emilio Moro, one of the top producers in Ribera, achieves great concentration in the single-vineyard Malleolus de Sanchomartin 2002 (93, \$270),



Left: Bodegas Mauro winemaker Mariano García (left), here with his son, Alberto, makes outstanding Tempranillos in Castilla y León. Right: The vineyards of Rioja are still home to the most important reds of Spain, but rising prices for the region's wines could alienate some consumers.

but most of us will be satisfied with the regular-label 2003 (92, \$32), which balances ripe fruit, solid structure and a fresh finish.

Bodegas Mauro is not technically part of Ribera (it carries the *Vino de la Tierra de Castilla y León denominación de origen*), but its vineyards are nearby, planted to Ribera's clone of Tempranillo, and the wines are made by Mariano García, perhaps the region's top winemaker. García proved his mettle in 2001; his *Terreus Pago de Cueva Baja* (94, \$150) is muscular but graceful, while the *Vendimia Seleccionada* (92, \$95) is focused and expressive.

RIOJA

Rioja has recently had to share the limelight with emerging regions such as Priorat, but it remains the most important source of fine red wines in Spain.

Unfortunately, price appears to be increasing more rapidly than quality. I tasted more than 100 Riojas this year, mostly reds but also many whites and rosés. Only 14 wines earned outstanding scores, and their average price was \$107. As for value, only four wines scored 85 points or higher yet cost \$15 or less. Some of the impetus for this trend can be laid at the feet of the weak dollar, but if it continues, the region risks losing some of its appeal for wine drinkers in the United States.

Nevertheless, top bodegas turned in impressive performances. Bodegas Sierra Cantabria, Viñedo de Párganos, Finca Allende and Bodegas LAN all earned two or more outstanding ratings in this year's tasting, with these scores about equally divided between 2001s and 2002s.

Most of these reds fall into a category Rioja is calling *vinos de alta expresión*. They display concentrated, ripe fruit flavors, massive structure and lavish oak. Many are single-vineyard bottlings, most are matured in new French oak and few are aged in bottle before release. In other words, they abandon many of Rioja's traditional approaches. This has caused a backlash among some critics, who accuse the wines of being too international in style, of losing a specific and authentic Rioja identity.

I strongly disagree with this conservative philosophy. In my opinion, the traditional approach often obscured the true character of the *terroir*, because yields were too high, most wines were blended from many vineyards, and long aging in American oak overshadowed the flavors of the fruit. It's true that some of these new-style wines are overextracted and overoaked, especially in weaker vintages. For example, the 2002 Contador from Benjamin Romeo (87, \$320) delivers more oak than fruit. But when well done, these wines combine fruit and structure with mineral and floral notes that give a fascinating sense of place.

OTHER REDS

The big-three regions account for just under 60 percent of the outstanding wines in this report, a smaller percentage than last year. The rest come from a wide range of more obscure places on the Spanish wine map, all of them showing significant improvement.

Bierzo, a cool region in the northwest, makes red wine from the distinctive, indigenous Mencía grape. Though 2003 was too hot for these wines to show their characteristic elegance, *Domínio de Tares* still achieved harmony and balance with its wines. This young bodega, founded in 2000, extended an impressive track record by delivering three outstanding '03 bottlings: the *Bem bi Bre* (94, \$46), the *Tares P3* (93, \$78) and the *Cepas Viejas* (90, \$28).

Toro, south of Bierzo and west of Ribera along the Duero River, makes bold reds from a local clone of Tempranillo. *Numanthia-Termes* is the consistent standout here, and delivered a trio of outstanding 2002s. Besides the aforementioned *Termañthia*, the *Numanthia* (91, \$54) also showed power and harmony, while the *Termes* (93, \$24, released last year) is structured and fresh. For a more traditional, if slightly rustic, style, look for *Oro* from *Mähler-Besse*; the 1994 *Reserva* (91, \$18) shows intriguing spice, tobacco and mineral flavors, while the 2003 (86, \$9) offers exuberant black cherry and earth character.

Jumilla, in the southeast, relies on *Monastrell* (*Mourvèdre*) to produce ripe reds with intriguing gamy notes. The *Finca Luzón*



The Eguren family (Miguel, center; Marcos, right), of Rioja's Sierra Cantabria, purchased this century-and-a-half-old Tinto Fino (Tempranillo) vineyard from Teodoro Alonso (left) in 1998; Numanthia-Termes is now the top bodega in Toro.

Altos de Luzón 2003 (93, \$16) is bursting with red fruit flavors, while the Excelencia 2003 from Mähler-Besse (90, \$24) leans toward black fruit and smoke. Agapito Rico, Bodegas El Nido and Casa Castillo are other Jumilla producers to watch.

Jean Leon in Penedès came to prominence in the 1960s as the producer of the first estate-bottled Cabernet in Spain. Purchased by Torres in 1994, the winery is now run by Miguel M. (Maczassek) Torres. Jean Leon's Terrasola line, made from grapes purchased throughout the region of Catalunya, offers fine values, such as an expressive 2004 Sauvignon Blanc-Garnatxa Blanca (86, \$11) and a balanced 2003 Red (84, \$11), a blend of Syrah, Garnacha and Tempranillo.

WHITES

Like its red wines, Spain's vivid whites are evolving rapidly. Each vintage offers more depth and diversity of flavor.

My favorites tend to be fresh and fruity wines made from indigenous grape varieties fermented at cool temperatures without overt oak influence. The best of these come from Galicia, the cool, wet region in the northwest.

The Albariños from Rias Baixas are probably the Spanish whites best-known in the United States. They resemble Riesling in their floral and mineral flavors and Viognier in their rich textures. The 2004s are big, with flavors that lean toward mineral and herbs, while 2003s marry ripe fruit with citrusy acidity. The two standouts were the 2003 Campus Stella from Bodegas Agnusdei (90, \$13) and the 2004 Lagar de Cervera from Lagar de Fornelos (90, \$19). Also from Galicia, I liked the crisp, fo-

cused Viña Mein Ribeiro 2003 (90, \$19), made principally from Treixadura and Godello.

Rueda, in north-central Spain, is another good source of value whites. Made from indigenous Verdejo, sometimes blended with Sauvignon Blanc, these wines tend to be richer in texture and riper in flavor than Albariño. Try Viña Sila's vibrant Naia 2004 (88, \$13) or J. & F. Lurton's peachy 2004 (87, \$12).

A few producers are aiming for a full-blown barrel-fermented style. The best retain distinctive character, thanks largely to their unusual grape varieties. The bold, honeysuckle-scented Odysseus GB from Viñedos de Ithaca (90, \$25), a rare white Priorat, is made from Garnacha Blanca. Benjamin Romeo's white Rioja, El Contador de Gallocanta 2003 (92, \$74), a blend of Muscat, Garnacha Blanca, Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Roussanne and Marsanne, is complex yet harmonious.

Spain's wine landscape is astonishing in its diversity and its rapid pace of change. In 1998, British writer John Radford published a pioneering overview of the terrain, titled *The New Spain*. It went out of date so quickly that a revised edition was published last year. To cite just one example of the sea change, the pages devoted to Bierzo in the first edition didn't include Descendientes de J. Palacios or Dominio de Tares, because neither of these bodegas—clearly the region's leaders today—existed at the time.

The coming years will see more new bodegas, and ambitious producers will find more gold in unlikely places. Adventurous wine drinkers will reap the benefit as Spain continues to rediscover and reinvent its wines.

Executive editor Thomas Matthews is Wine Spectator's lead taster for the wines of Spain.