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SPAIN: THE NEW HOTBED OF WINES

One of the hot new areas for wine—perhaps *the* hot new area for wine—is Spain. There are so many new, delicious wines coming from every corner of Spain that it's hard to follow them all. And it's a challenge to keep track of all the new regions and grape names.

Ever hear of the Campo de Borja, for instance? Neither had I until a few years ago. A producer there, the Bodegas Borsao, produces a charming, modestly priced wine called Tres Picos from garnacha grapes (grenache in French and English). See what we're up against?

Exciting as it is to explore all these new wines and regions, it often pays dividends to revisit the classic old regions of Spain—the Rioja, for instance, or Navarra; and, perhaps the greatest of them all, the Ribera del Duero.

The greatest estate bearing that name, the one that created the Ribera del Duero as a recognized district, is also the oldest: Vega Sicilia. Their top wine, called Unico (or unique), is one of the most expensive wines in Spain—or anywhere else, for that matter. I recently tasted the 1985, listed at \$325 a bottle; the current vintage, the 1995, runs \$341 per copy.

A bit more reasonably priced is their second wine called Valbuena; I tasted three vintages ranging in price from \$108 to \$142 a bottle. And for folks in my price range they offer the wines of a nearby estate they own and have operated since 1992: Alion. These wines range from \$53 to \$67 for recent vintages.

At a recent blind tasting of all these Vega Sicilia wines, I often scored the Alion wines as high, or higher, than the more expensive wines. I was especially impressed by the 1998 and the 2000.

The nine wines tasted presented us with an unusually high level of quality, from top to bottom. My scores ranged from 88 points to 94 points. They were as fine as any comparably priced Bordeaux or Napa Valley Cabernet you can name. I think that was the most surprising thing about the tasting.

But then, these wines have been surprising people since 1864, the year the winery was founded. In that year the owners purchased 18,000 vines from Bordeaux: cabernet sauvignon, carmenere, malbec, merlot and pinot noir (what pinot noir was doing in Bordeaux is anybody's guess). Today, all but the carmenere and the pinot noir are used to produce Vega Sicilia, along with the more traditional tempranillo.

Also surprising is the barrel treatment, a complicated process of racking the wine from large barrels to small, from new to old barrels, from French to American oak—and back again. In the case of the Unico the aging takes seven years (or more—the 1970 was in barrel for more than 16 years), yet the wine never seems

overoaked or old—the fruit is that concentrated. Three years, at least, of bottle aging follow the time in barrel, making Unico one of the world's oldest wines when released. Yet they have years of life in front of them.

Sometimes the winery holds the wine back even longer—the 1968 was more than 20 years old when first released. The Valbuena and the Alion don't take so long to produce—the current vintages are 2001 and 2002, respectively.

There's another unusual aspect to the Vega Sicilia story: until 1915 the wines from the estate were sold in bulk, probably shipped to the Rioja to be blended into the locally produced wines. (The fuller-bodied, darkly colored wines from the Ribera del Duero would have enriched the lighter wines of Rioja.)

In 1915 the first Unico and Valbuena wines were created. But the wines were not sold—they were given away to friends, members of the aristocracy and the wealthy. This began their reputation for wines that were incredibly rare—and thus expensive. It was almost a generation before the wines were sold commercially. Today, the estate produces some 25,000 cases, yet world demand makes them difficult to find.

And what do they taste like? The colors are deep and concentrated, as are the flavors of toasty, spicy oak. The fruit more than stands up to the oak, with ripe cherry and dark berry sweetness in abundance. Rich and long, they are wines that develop with swirling—they should probably be decanted—and will age beautifully. Over the years I've had the chance to taste older vintages, and they never disappoint.

Do yourself a favor: Find a special occasion and open a bottle as a special treat. You might become addicted.

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