

The Chronicle Wine Selections: Ribera del Duero

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Tempranillo - one of Spain's important red grape varieties - is the most produced wine in Ribera del Duero, where it is also called Tinto Fino and occasionally Tinta del Pais.

Officially established in 1982, the Ribera del Duero appellation is north of Madrid and runs along either side of the Duero River. Many vineyards have elevations of 1,700 to 2,400 feet, which allow cooler nighttime temperatures in this otherwise hot climate. The cooler temperature preserves the acidity in these dark fruited wines, which also avoid noticeably high alcohol levels.

Many producers opt for a 100 percent Tempranillo, though it is legal to blend in some Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec, Garnacha and the white grape variety Albillo.

Many Ribera del Duero bottlings we tasted were more modern and New World in style and were aged in new oak barrels - both French and American. With selections from several vintages, our recommendations generally eschew wines that are overly ripe, which occurs less frequently in Ribera del Duero. Our panelists were very enthusiastic about this tasting. Some of these wines may be difficult to find. If you have difficulty, the importer may be able to assist with your search.

Rating: THREE STARS 2005 Bodegas Condado de Haza Crianza Ribera del Duero (\$34) Ripe, rich dark cherry, earth, with subtle spice aromas. Tart, straightforward palate of tangerine rind and black cherry; grippy dry tannins on the finish. Aged 18 months in American oak and bottle aged an additional six months. (Importer: Classical Wines from Spain)

Rating: THREE STARS 2005 Bodegas Los Astrales Ribera del Duero (\$55) Oak-focused vanilla and spice with layers of loam, sweet cherry and blackberry; some panelists thought the oak provided good structure, but others felt it a bit intrusive. Complex, dense and finessed; will age well - even better in five to six years. For three generations, the Romera de la Cruz family provided grapes for other wineries but began producing their own wine, releasing their first vintage in 2001. (Importer: Grapes of Spain)

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2005 Bodegas Los Olmos Canto Petirrojo de Lozar Ribera del Duero (\$15) This relatively new winery's goal is to produce accessible, medium-bodied wines with fresh fruit. This bottling - with vines at least 70 years old - was fermented in refrigerated cement tanks, then aged four months in French oak barrels. Bright, with dusty cherry, beetroot, moist earth and a little musk. Spice, mocha espresso and just enough ripe fruit. Drink now. (Importer: Grapes of Spain)

Rating: THREE STARS 2005 J.C. Conde Neo Ribera del Duero (\$60) A group of young friends started this winery, under direction of Isaac Fernandez, who was previously cellar master

for Vega Sicilia. Assertive oak tannins in this rather broody wine, which has power, density and balance. The cherry and dark fruit will become more generous with time, but shows a bit of polish even now. (Importer: Grapes of Spain)

Rating: THREE STARS 2006 J.C. Conde Sentido Ribera del Duero (\$25) Iron-like aromas and musky earth over ripe berry and cassia. Nicely textured tannins with plenty of zippy acidity, but there's dark fruit to balance. Plum skin on firm finish. With eight months in both new and previously used oak barrels this wine spends less time aging than its sibling. (Importer: Grapes of Spain)

Rating: TWO STARS 2003 Valdubon Reserva Ribera del Duero (\$24) Valdubon was founded in 1997, which is planted with nearly 100 acres of Tempranillo. This midsized Reserva is 100 percent Tempranillo, with spicy oak notes and tannins. Could use a bit more fruit to offset the tannins. (Importer: Freixenet USA)

Rating: THREE AND A HALF STARS 2005 Viña Sastre Crianza Ribera del Duero (\$36) Viña Sastre is in La Horra, a town located in the middle of Ribera del Duero. This wine - produced from 20- to 65-year-old vines - was aged for 18 months in new French oak. A lovely dark fruit nose shows kalamata olive, dried herb and sweet oak aromas. Fresh blackberry and buoyant cassis flavors are layered with a judicious amount of oak. (Importer: De Maison Selections)

Rating: THREE STARS 1999 Viña Sastre Pago de Santa Cruz Gran Reserva Ribera del Duero (\$118) Pago de Santa Cruz is the winery's premier vineyard, which is planted at a 900-foot elevation with vines a minimum of 65 years old. This Reserva bottling was aged in oak for 30 months. Darker aromas reminiscent of teriyaki, smoky pimenton, black cherry and loam. Still vibrant and fresh for its age; integrated with straight-edged structure. (Importer: De Maison Selections)

Rating: THREE STARS 2003 Viña Sastre Regina Vides Ribera del Duero (\$234) Co-founder and current owner-winemaker Jesus Sastre makes this wine from a single parcel of 80-year-old vines only during the best vintages. Being aged 24 months in new French oak contributes to the wine's more international style. Highly extracted, balanced and powerful, with juicy dark fruit backed with oak vanilla and spice on the palate. (Importer: De Maison Selections)

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Vinos de Fabula El Atre de Vivir Ribera del Duero (\$15) Spicy oak supports bright cherry-rhubarb fruit plus hint of cola and tar; a trifle austere, with moderately firm tannins and a slightly lean profile. Grapes of Spain owner Aurelio Cabestrero and winemaker Isaac Fernandez are producing new wines through a joint project, including this wine they've named "the art of living." (Importer: Grapes of Spain)

Panelists include: Lynne Char Bennett, Chronicle staff writer and wine coordinator; Jon Bonné, Chronicle wine editor; Evan Goldstein, president and chief education officer, Full Circle Wine

Solutions; Larry Stone, general manager, Rubicon Estate.

Key: Rating: FOUR STARS Extraordinary Rating: THREE STARS Excellent Rating: TWO STARS
Good

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/10/31/WI7S13N15T.DTL>

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