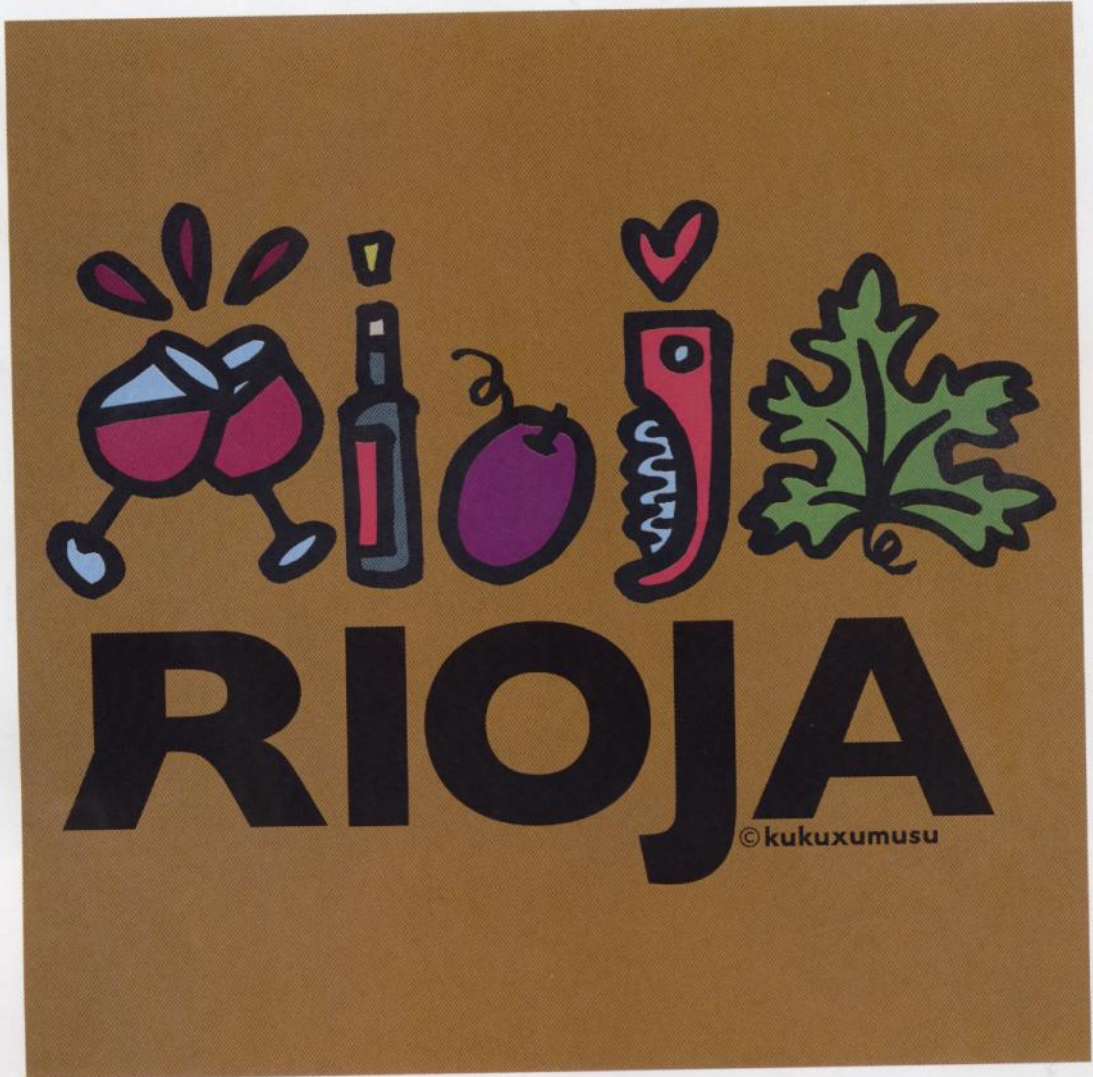


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Rural as Valdeorras is, lodging and dining options are limited:

WHERE TO STAY:

Pazo do Castro in O Barco is a classic country inn housed in a building from the 17th century. It features spacious rooms, a restaurant, a garden for strolling, and a carriage museum. (34) 988-347-423

WHERE TO EAT:

Not technically in Valdeorras, but instead in nearby Ponferrada (León), is Mesón El Lagar de Montejos, a good asador with the best wines from Valdeorras and neighboring Bierzo. (34) 987-402-029

Photos: Left, Valdeorra vineyards with village of Larouco beyond © Mick Rock/Cephas; below: 100-year-old vine in vineyard of Bodegas Valderroa; hillside Godello vineyard owned by Viña Godeval; the author with María Añibarro, sales manager for Bodegas Valderroa (last three images © M. Schachner).

POSTMARK: VALDEORRAS

By Michael Schachner

Valdeorras is hardly a household name. But this sparsely populated region located in Spain's northwest corner has long held importance as the primary link between dry and dusty Castile and lush, verdant Galicia.

Entering rugged Valdeorras from the more maritime western portion of Galicia, one immediately takes notice of this region's diversity. Deep valleys have been cut by a series of meandering rivers—the Sil, Xares and Bibei—while tree-covered mountains rise as visual backdrops. There are vineyards of Godello and Mencía grapes almost everywhere you look, yet most eye-grabbing is the fact that unlike any place else in Spain, black slate tiles cover the rooftops of nearly every home, warehouse and factory. Which makes perfect sense: slate, what the locals call pizarra, is the region's primary natural resource.

After the ubiquitous slate, a.k.a. "black gold," viticulture is next in terms of importance. Valdeorras has been a governed denominación d'origen since 1945, and while the native Godello almost fell into extinction about 30 years ago as growers turned to more vigorous, less complex varieties, it is back with a vengeance courtesy of three decades worth of tireless work put in by those convinced that this fragile but luscious white grape should not go by the wayside.

Today there are more than 2,000 individual growers in Valdeorras, almost all of whom are specializing in Godello. Yet that doesn't make Valdeorras a booming wine region; to the contrary, there are fewer than 40 wineries in the Valdeorras, with only a handful exporting to the United States. Of the wineries that have targeting the U.S., one of my favorites is Viña Godeval, founded by the leader of all Godello reclaimers, 75-year-old Horacio Fernández; other quality producers include Guitián; Bodegas Valderroa, which makes the lovely Val de Sil and the affordable Montenovo; and Rafael Palacios, whose brand new wine, dubbed As Sortes, is akin to a fine Burgundy.

"This is where we will make Spain's first great white wine," Palacios told me during a visit in early June. The weather was hot then, the land already dry in advance of summer, yet the surroundings still green as an emerald forest. "We are a little bit continental in climate, with poor soils rich in minerals. It is perfect for Godello."

Despite Palacios' bold proclamation, labeling Valdeorras a two-tune region is neither an insult nor an exaggeration: it's the plain truth. Slate drives the economy, while grapes give the region stature and a will to thrive. And let's face it, for a small area with a population of only about 30,000 inhabitants spread throughout just nine towns, the largest of which is O Barco de Valdeorras, that's enough.

Which isn't to say that there's nothing in Valdeorras besides slate mining and grape growing. There is white-water rafting and fishing; hiking and trekking; and the knowledge that you are walking on the same grounds as Roman settlers and once-starving pilgrims. And if that thought draws a thirst, rest assured that it can be quenched with a glass of crisp, citric, mineral-laced Godello.



Michael Schachner is a contributing editor to Wine Enthusiast Magazine. He specializes in the wines and cultures of Spain, Chile, Argentina and Italy.

