

Slate

Vinos Blancos

Northern Spain has become a white-wine Valhalla.

By Mike Steinberger

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If you factor out the 20 percent unemployment rate, an ongoing real estate meltdown, and separatist rumblings in Catalonia, it has been an awesome summer for Spain. Its soccer team captured the World Cup, favorite son Rafael Nadal won the French Open and Wimbledon, and Michelle Obama took a splashy vacation on the Costa del Sol. In keeping with the Iberian theme, I've been gorging myself on Spanish white wines lately, and total immersion has left me totally smitten. I don't think there is a more exciting category of wines on the market these days than the *vinos blancos* coming out of northern Spain. These are pure, distinctive wines that pair brilliantly with all sorts of summery dishes, and many of them also offer good value. Better still, they are made from local grape varieties that were hardly known a generation ago.

This gusher of sensational whites is part of the broader quality revolution that has turned Spain into arguably the most dynamic wine region on the planet. During the Franco era, production was dominated by large cooperatives churning out insipid bulk wines. There were pockets of excellence—Vega Sicilia,

Spain's most acclaimed winery, had a number of stellar vintages in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, and some brilliant Riojas were also made during this period—but they were a distinct minority. With Franco's death in 1975 and the establishment of democratic rule, many of Spain's cellars and vineyards underwent a dramatic overhaul. New and better vines were planted, antiquated equipment was replaced, and over time, the emphasis shifted from quantity to quality.

Spain's renaissance has not been an unqualified triumph. In some regions, there has been a move toward "international-style" wines—inky, lush reds strongly marked by new oak flavors. These *alta expresión* wines thrilled critics but seem to have lost their charm for rank-and-file drinkers; sales have

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slumped sharply in recent years. There's even talk of Spain suffering the same cataclysmic reversal that has befallen the Australian wine industry.

I don't think that will happen, in part because Northern Spain has become such a white wine Valhalla. Galicia, an autonomous region in the northwest of the country renowned for its firth-like inlets and verdant landscape, has been at the forefront of this development. At the turn of the last century, Galicia was hit hard by the phylloxera virus, vineyards were abandoned, and the wine industry fell into a prolonged slump. In the mid-1970s, Galician vintners took interest in some long-neglected local grapes, and an infusion of financial aid from the European Union helped modernize wine production. Albariño, a thick-skinned grape said to have arrived in Galicia in the 12th century and now the pillar of the Rías Baixas appellation, was one of the varieties given a second life. In the mid-'00s, it emerged as the first big breakout star of Spain's wine boom, becoming a trendy pour in New York, San Francisco, and other cities. Albariño remains very popular but now has some competition in its own barrio: Another born-again grape, godello, mainly associated with the inland Valdeorras appellation, has lately been generating considerable buzz.

Similar stories have played out elsewhere. In Castilla y León, the verdejo grape began making a comeback in the 1970s and has turned the Rueda appellation into a source of toothsome white wines. For much of the 20th century, the Basque country was a viticultural basket case. The local quaffer, known as Txakoli (*chaco-lee*) or Txakolina, a white composed primarily of the indigenous hondarrabi zuri grape, was a fairly nasty garage brew, produced in miniscule quantities by mom-and-pop vintners. But increased investment in the 1980s and '90s led to a big improvement in the quality of the wines, and consumer interest, undoubtedly encouraged by San Sebastián's emergence as Europe's gastronomic Mecca, has soared. Indeed, Txakoli just got a close-up in the , a sure sign it has arrived. .

Not all the white wines coming out of northern Spain are winners; there's

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plenty of mediocrity and rotgut, too. (I've completely omitted Rioja mainly because its white wines are just not all that exciting.) Some Albariños have a tutti-fruitedness that I personally detest; if I want that—and I don't—I can find it closer to home, in any number of California chardonnays. The better ones, however, combine zesty fruit with bracing acidity, the same kerosene note that you often find in Muscadets, and an invigorating whiff of brine. Godello tends to produce slightly rounder wines, but the fruit is balanced by a chalky, Chablis-like minerality. For its part, verdejo is an intensely aromatic grape yielding wines that manage to be both crisp but also mouth-filling, a nice yin-yang effect; it is sometimes blended with sauvignon blanc, which can impart a flattering herbal note. Most of these wines are fermented and aged in stainless steel, so there's no oak influence mucking things up, and the alcohol levels are modest; these are complex but also deliciously transparent and refreshing wines. Txakolis are a breed apart—lean, austere, with rapier acidity and a slight effervescence. They are perhaps an acquired taste, but with their low alcohol (typically between 10.5 percent to 12 percent), they are ideal for afternoons at the beach or pool when thirst-quenching is the priority and just a gentle buzz will do.

They are even better, though, when drunk with seafood, which is their calling. In fact, all of these wines go swimmingly with fish of one kind or another. I just returned from a couple of weeks at the beach, during which time I paired albariños, godellos, Ruedas, and Txakolis with lobster, striped bass, monkfish, cod, raw scallops, fried scallops, raw tuna, raw oysters, raw clams, fried clams, linguine with clam sauce, and clam chowder, and there was not one combination that didn't succeed (though experience has taught me that Tums is truly the best match for fried seafood.)

As always with foreign wines, it helps to know your importers. For my taste, the finest purveyors of Spanish whites are two importers that I raved about last year, José Pastor Selections and De Maison Selections. Both companies have rosters loaded with compelling wines, and they keep adding new ones. Pastor

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now brings in the sensational albariños of Pedralonga. De Maison, in addition to representing what is widely and rightly regarded as the leading albariño producer, Do Ferreira, has the deepest selection of Txakolis of any importer. According to André Tamers, who started the company in 1996, white wines now account for two-thirds of De Maison's Spanish portfolio. He says he never envisioned tilting so heavily in that direction but was just seduced by the quality of the white wines he discovered in Spain. "I have a passion for seafood and white wine, and Spain is a peninsula surrounded by water and turning out these amazing, unadulterated white wines—it sort of made the decision for me."

Tasting notes for some wines that I loved:

(Wine-searcher.com, which was recently the subject of a good piece in the , is the best way to hunt down these wines.)

2005 Do Ferreira Albariño Cepas Vellas (De Maison Selections): A mix of grapefruit, honey, and mineral flavors, with a briny saltiness and a touch of herb, too. *Cepas vellas* means old vines; this wine comes from a 200-year-old, pre-phylloxera vineyard, and some of the vines themselves are believed to be that old. There is a depth of flavor here that

is certainly consistent with really ancient material. A stunningly good albariño; if there's a better white wine being produced in Spain, I'd love to make its acquaintance. The current vintage of the Cepas Vellas is 2007, which is going for \$39; I have not tasted it yet, but the reviews have been enthusiastic.

2007 Do Ferreira Rebisaca (De Maison Selections): \$25: A blend of 85 percent albariño and 15 percent treixadura, another resurrected Galician grape. It's full of bright citrus flavors complemented by a molluscan mineral note (go ahead and laugh, but you'll see what I mean) and a dash of anise.

2007 Benito Santos Albariño Viñedo de Xoan (José Pastor Selections): \$28: Aromas of honeysuckle, pineapple, lanolin, and kerosene burst out of the glass. A rich, almost chewy albariño that just builds in flavor and intensity across

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the palate. Excellent acidity, a nice saline mineral kick, and a touch of green apple bitterness on the finish, all of which adds up to a sensational drink.

2009 Pedralonga Albariño (José Pastor Selections): \$28: Pedralonga's basic albariño—they have three different cuvées, plus a red wine—is testament to the quality of this producer. Perfumed with notes of honeysuckle and tart peach, it shows great purity of flavor but also a deceptive richness, which is parried by the nice mineral crunch that carries through to the finish.

2008 Valdesil Godello Val de Sil (Eric Solomon Selections): \$17: An impeccably balanced godello with pristine lemon/lime and peach flavors, a floral kick, and a terrific cushion of chalky minerality.

Some other wines that I really liked and strongly recommend:

2008 Valdesil Godello Montenovo (Eric Solomon Selections) \$14

2009 Burgans Albariño (Eric Solomon Selections) \$14

2009 Aforado O Rosal Albariño (José Pastor Selections) \$18

2008 Viña de Martin Os Pasas (José Pastor Selections) \$32

2006 Pedralonga Albariño Vendetta (José Pastor Selections) \$120

2007 Mengoba Godello and Dona Blanca (José Pastor Selections) \$22

2009 A Coroa Godello (De Maison Selections) \$23

2008 Viña Sastre Flavus (De Maison Selections) \$20

2009 Ameztoi Getariako Txakoli (De Maison Selections) \$19

2009 Xarmant Arabako Txakoli (De Maison Selections) \$17

2009 Avinyó Vi D'Agulla (De Maison Selections) \$15

2008 Viñedos de Nieva Rueda Pie Franco (Frontier Wine Imports) \$21

2009 Can Feixes Blanc Selecció (Classical Wines) \$15

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