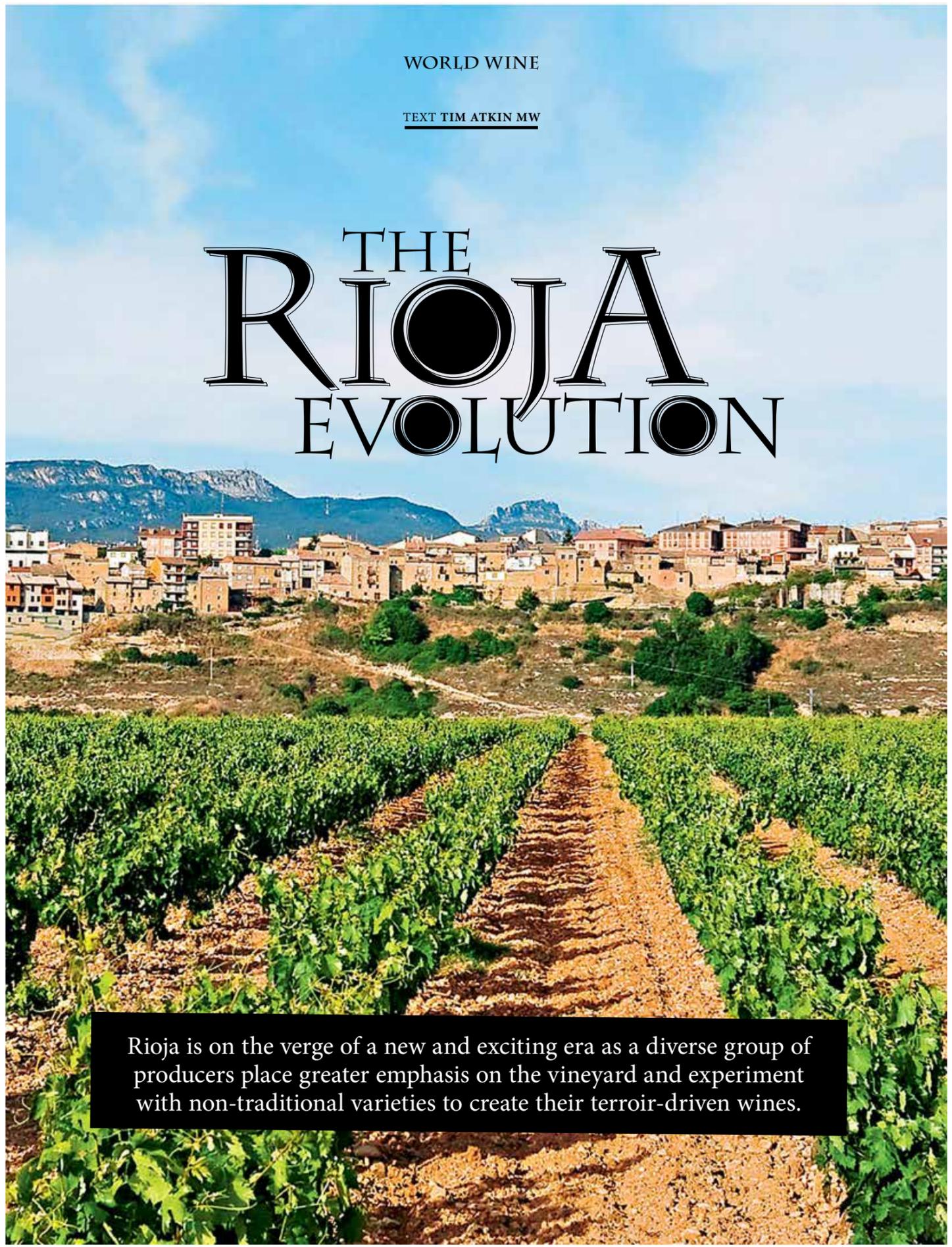


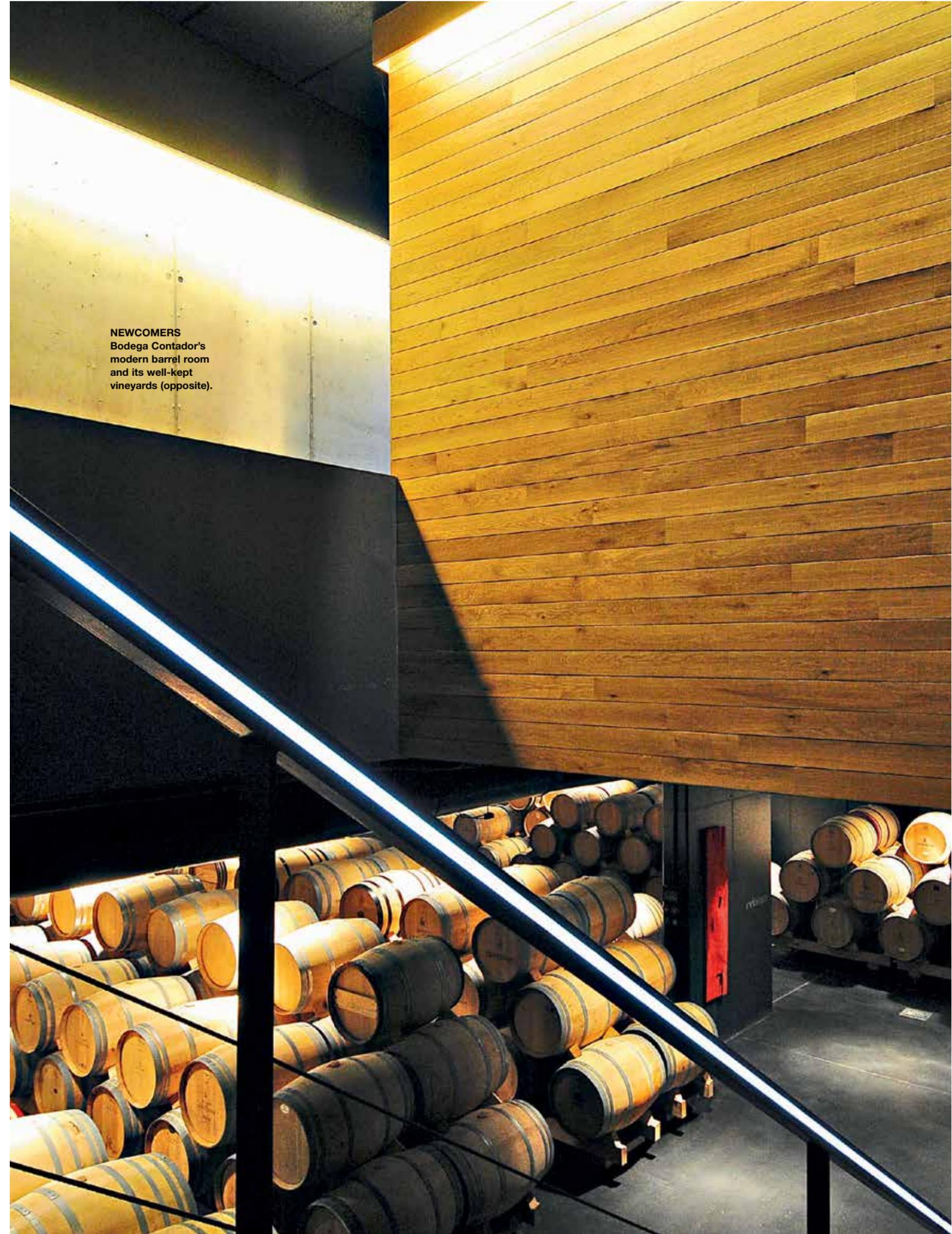
WORLD WINE

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# THE RIOJA EVOLUTION



Rioja is on the verge of a new and exciting era as a diverse group of producers place greater emphasis on the vineyard and experiment with non-traditional varieties to create their terroir-driven wines.



**NEWCOMERS**  
Bodega Contador's modern barrel room and its well-kept vineyards (opposite).



**WATCHFUL EYE**  
Telmo Rodriguez  
relaxes at his winery.

**LAI D BARE**  
Remirez de Ganuza's  
pared-back and artistic  
cellar door (right).

Tucked away in the corner of Haro's Plaza San Martín, Los Caños is one of my favourite Spanish bars. It's a great place for tapas and a glass of Rioja, as well as a base to visit the town's historic wineries. And yet the main reason I go there is to gaze at the photos on the walls. Every year for the last half a century, the regulars (and that includes children and, for some reason, a horse) have been the subjects of a group shot. Looking at them in chronological order is a study in changing fashions and dental care, but it's also one of those *carpe diem* moments: children become adults, adults become elderly, old men and women pass away. I love the sense of gentle, unhurried continuity they convey.

Those photos could also be regarded as a metaphor for Rioja. Or at least for the image that the area often likes to project of itself: traditional and historic, but capable of gradual, rather than rapid evolution. This is only part of the truth, however. Rioja is certainly historic: the Romans grew grapes near Logroño, the region's capital, although it didn't become an important wine region until the 1880s. It is also, at times, highly traditional. Stroll up the hill from Los Caños to R. López de Heredia in the Barrio de la Estación with its creaking, wood-paneled offices, cobwebbed cellars and sublime, barrel-aged wines and it feels like you've been transported back to the late 19th century. But it's capable of revolution, too.

Indeed, you could argue that Rioja has been through greater changes in the last 25 years than at any point since the region started to make fine wine in the 1850s, when wineries such as Marqués de Murrieta (1852) and Marqués de Riscal (1858) were founded. The problem, is that the majority of its consumers, both overseas and especially in Spain, haven't noticed. Many love to drink the soft, cheap, easy-going, undemanding, oak-influenced reds that are made in substantial quantities. There's nothing wrong with most of them, but these so-called 'industrial Riojas' have as little to do with the best, terroir-focused wines as a Bordeaux Supérieur does with Château Latour.

Among punters, there's also an overwhelming tendency, encouraged by the local

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**"Where and how you farm is almost more important than the grape varieties."**

Consejo Regulador (regulatory council), to classify Riojas according to the time they do, or don't, spend in oak. This is something of a sideshow, in my view. Worse, it can be misleading. It's interesting to learn that 45 per cent of Rioja is made *sin crianza* (unoaked), especially given the region's reputation for producing oaky wines. But things are not as simple as that. If a wine spends 11 months and 29 days in oak, legally it still has to be called *sin crianza*. Many people still believe that the more time a wine is in oak and bottle (right up to Gran Reserva level, which has to be at least five years on release) the better, when this is seldom the case. Most of Rioja's best wines are aged for less time.

Another way of classifying Riojas is to divide the bodegas and co-operatives that make them into 'modern' and 'traditional' camps. There is some validity in this. The differences in style between R. López de Heredia, CVNE and La Rioja Alta at one extreme and, say, Artadi, Finca Allende and Benjamín Romeo at the other are marked. The modernists tend to pick later, ferment on skins for longer, use more new oak (especially French oak) and age their wines for less time in barrel. But the division isn't that clear-cut. It's not just that some wineries (Muga and Marqués de Riscal, for instance) make both styles, it's also that the best modern, traditional and even so-called 'modernised traditional' wineries have something in common: they care about vineyards.

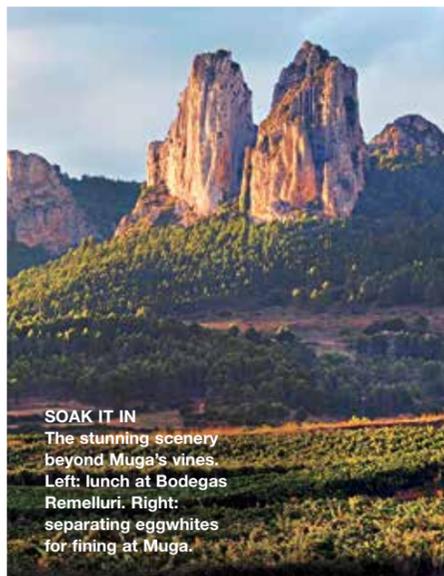
People have always acknowledged that there are significant differences in geology, geography and climate between Rioja's three sub-regions: Alta, Alavesa and Baja. In fact, the traditional Rioja recipe, which continues today at the industrial end of the scale, was to blend grapes from across the region to minimise vintage discrepancies. The Rioja Baja, where most of the rich, more alcoholic *garnacha* grows, is a source of alcohol and texture, while the Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa provide backbone, acidity and colour.

Rioja is subject to two major climatic influences: Atlantic weather from the north, tempered to a degree by the Sierra de Cantabria mountains that mark the region's northern boundary, and warmer, drier Mediterranean weather from the south east. Depending on which influence has the upper hand, the best parts of Rioja tend to have Atlantic (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010) or Mediterranean (2003, 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2011) vintages.

Blending three sub-regions may enable a producer to make a more homogenous wine. But it's anathema to most self-respecting, terroir-focused bodegas. (Exopto is an exception to the rule, buying grapes from a single grower in each of the three sub-regions and producing something exceptional.) As Jorgé Muga of the eponymous Haro-based winery puts it, "Where and how you farm is almost more important than the grape varieties you use in this sub-region."

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF TELMO RODRIGUEZ AND REMIREZ DE GANUZA.  
PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF BODEGAS CONTADOR.

## WORLD WINE



**SOAK IT IN**  
The stunning scenery beyond Muga's vines. Left: lunch at Bodegas Remelluri. Right: separating eggwhites for fining at Muga.



It's hard to say what percentage of Rioja's wines express a sense of place – partly because it's a subjective thing – but I'd say that they represent less than 25 per cent.

When did these wines begin? The received wisdom is that the first two estates were Remelluri, which made its first wine in 1971, and Contino, which followed in 1973. These two companies inspired others to follow suit, either by planting their own vineyards, or by buying grapes from growers in well-situated areas, especially the clay-limestone soils of the Rioja Alavesa and the Rioja Alta towns of Haro, Villalba, Briones and San Vicente de la Sonsierra, the area that Jesús Madrazo of Contino calls "Rioja's Côte d'Or". Today's leading terroir-led bodegas include Artadi, Benjamin Romeo, Pedro Balda, Allende, Telmo Rodríguez, Pujanza and Juan Carlos Sancha.

In the past, very few bodegas owned sizeable vineyards, but that has changed to a certain degree. The bigger wineries, even some very good ones, still buy grapes – Marqués de Riscal has 220 hectares, but sources from a further 985 hectares – but the best of them are increasingly focused on the land. Rioja is like Champagne in the sense that it has a lot of growers (18,000 at the last count) who sell their grapes to the region's 587 bodegas and co-operatives. In some cases, they become producers in their own right, the most celebrated examples being Abel Mendoza and Ostatu, but most don't, partly because of poor economies of scale.

In Rioja, less than one percent of the plots are over 30 hectares and most are very small. In this respect, Rioja resembles Burgundy, which is why altitude, soil type, vine age and aspect are so important, especially in the higher areas.

Another way in which Rioja is like Burgundy, not necessarily to its advantage, is in its growing focus on a single variety: tempranillo in this case, rather than pinot noir. Rioja's plantings of red grapes have grown from 29,903 hectares in 1985 to 58,389 hectares today. The overwhelming majority of these (51,252 hectares) are tempranillo, which currently represents more than 80 per cent of Rioja's area under vine. Is this a good thing? No one would deny that tempranillo is potentially a great grape, capable of different expressions all over Spain, but there are some who feel that it has limitations. Garnacha may have fallen out of fashion, at least among most of the top bodegas, but mazuelo and graciano are frequently used to add extra colour, structure and acidity to blends, as more rarely and on an "experimental basis" is cabernet sauvignon at wineries such as Marqués de Vargas, Barón de Ley, Marqués de Riscal and Finca Valpiedra.

Juan Carlos Sancha, who runs his own small organic winery in Baños de Río Tobía on the southern border of Rioja Alta as well as holding down a full time job as professor of oenology at the University of La Rioja in Logroño, says that the region had 44 varieties in 1912. By 2000, it was down to seven authorised grapes. This increased to 16 in 2008, when the Consejo Regulador allowed producers to use tempranillo blanco, tempranillo tinto, turruntés, verdejo, chardonnay and sauvignon blanc for whites and tempranillo tinto, an old grape variety rediscovered by Sancha, matorano and monastel for reds.

As recently as 1973, Rioja's plantings contained 39 per cent garnacha and 31 per cent tempranillo. Since then, tempranillo has taken over, with a corresponding drop in the percentage of old vines. "Now," says

Sancha, "96 per cent of our vineyards are tempranillo, garnacha and viura. In the last 100 years, we've lost a host of local grape varieties, such as cirujal, morisca, San Jerónimo and anavés." Sancha himself has 27 varieties planted in his own 5.5 hectare vineyard and is excited about the potential of monastel and, naturally, his own find, matorana tinta.

Will the new focus on vineyard origin train the spotlight on "rediscovered" local varieties such as these? It's an intriguing possibility. But for now, the best bodegas are working with one or more of the four classic red grapes. What is certain is that Rioja is on the verge of a new era. "We have realised that the vineyard, not the winemaker is the protagonist," says Telmo Rodríguez.

The intriguing thing is that the emphasis on vineyards harks back to an older time in the 18th century, when cosecheros (grape growers) made wines from their own grapes, mostly for their own friends and families, before the boom of the 19th century, which favoured a négociant rather than a producer-based model. "That's the real Rioja," adds Rodríguez, "based on places and people. Vineyard-focused wines are a return to our best traditions."

### TASTING NOTES

#### WHITES

**1998 Viña Tondonia Blanco Reserva, A\$100**

This is the current vintage of López de Heredia's incredible, age-worthy white, which is given six years in old wood before bottling. Complex, toasty, honeyed, yet fresh, it's a blend of viura with a little malvasia. 94 points

**2010 Remelluri Blanco, A\$150**

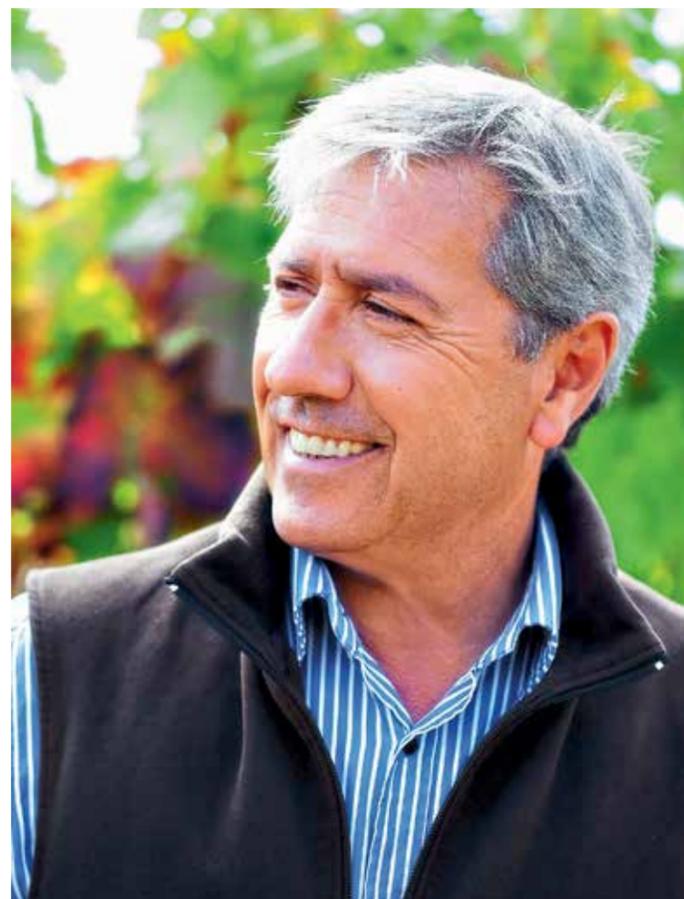
A blend of no fewer than eight grapes: viura,

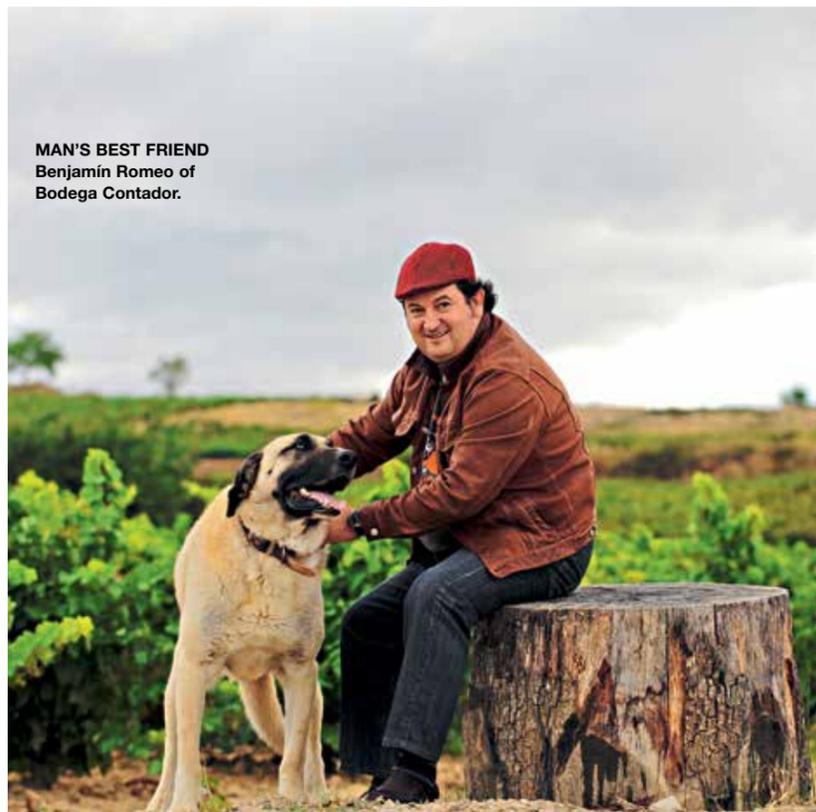


**GO WITH THE FLOW**  
Making tempranillo at Muga. Right: Luis Valentín and Carmen Enciso of Valenciso. Below: Fernando Remírez de Ganuza. Below right: tempranillo at Bodegas Remírez de Ganuza.



"We have realised that the vineyard, not the winemaker is the protagonist."





**MAN'S BEST FRIEND**  
Benjamín Romeo of  
Bodega Contador.

**RIOJA AT A GLANCE**

**TOTAL AREA:** 63,137 hectares.

**SUB-REGIONS:** Rioja Alta (26,387 hectares), Rioja Alavesa (13,319 hectares) and Rioja Baja (23,431 hectares).

**CLIMATE:** continental, but with more Mediterranean influence in the Rioja Baja and cooler, Atlantic-influenced temperatures at altitude, especially in the Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa.

**SOIL TYPES:** a mixture of chalky clay, ferrous clay and alluvial.

**NUMBER OF WINERIES:** 587, of which 28 are co-operatives.

**RED GRAPE VARIETIES:** garnacha, graciano, maturana tinto, mazuelo, tempranillo.

**WHITE GRAPE VARIETIES:** chardonnay, garnacha blanca, malvasía blanca, maturana blanca, sauvignon blanc, tempranillo blanco, turruntés, verdejo, viura.

**STYLES OF WINE:** Sin Crianza (less than 12 months in oak), Crianza, (at least 12 months in oak and one in bottle), Reserva (at least 12 months in oak and 24 in bottles), Gran Reserva (at least two years in oak and three in bottle). Unoaked joven (young) wines are included under Sin Crianza.

**LEADING WINERIES:** Abel Mendoza, Allende, Artadi, Baigorri, Barón de Ley, Benjamín Romeo, Contino, CVNE, David Sampedro, Dinastía Vivanco, Eguren Family (Sierra Cantabria, San Vicente, Páganos), Exopto, Finca Valpiedra, Juan Carlos Sancha (Peña del Gato), Lan, La Rioja Alta, Loli Casado, López de Heredia, Luis Cañas, Marqués de Cáceres, Marqués de Murrieta, Marqués de Riscal, Marqués de Vargas, Muga, Orben, Ostatu, Palacios Remondo, Pedro Balda, Pujanza, Remelluri, Remírez de Ganuza, Roda, Solar de Samaniego, Telmo Rodríguez, Valdemar, Viña Ijalba, Viña Salceda, Valenciso, Viña Izadi.

sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, viognier, chenin blanc, muscat, roussanne and marsanne. This revolutionary wine has changed the face of white Rioja. Subtle, aromatic and stylishly oaked. 93 points

**REDS**

**2004 CVNE Imperial Gran Reserva, A\$125**

Vying with 2005 as one of the best Imperial Gran Reservas of the last 20 years, this is a modern, still youthful blend of 85 per cent tempranillo with 10 per cent graciana and five per cent mazuelo. Structured, dense and concentrated with sweet black fruits and tangy acidity. 95 points

**2008 Bodegas Baigorri Baigorri de Garage, A\$70**

Sourced from bush vine tempranillo vineyards that are more than 50 years old, this gets 22 months in French oak and is built to last. It's a compact, vanilla-scented red with lovely perfume, plenty of fruit and impressive minerality. 94 points

**2010 Abel Mendoza Grano a Grano Graciano**

Abel and Maite Mendoza are among the leading names in the village of San Vicente de la Sonsierra, making small quantities of silky, perfumed, terroir-based wines. Sweetly oaked, refreshing and intense, with a savoury undertone. 94 points

**2010 Finca Allende Aurus**

Miguel Angel de Gregorio thinks this blend of 85 per cent tempranillo and 15 per cent graciano is "the wine of my life so far". Sourced from very old vines on red clay soils, it's a complex, textured red that needs a decade in bottle. 97 points

**2009 Marqués de Vargas Reserva, A\$190**

Made from a blend of 75 per cent tempranillo, five per cent garnacha and 10 per cent 'experimental' cabernet sauvignon, this is one of the most Bordeaux-like Riojas, but none the worse for that. Silky, herbal and richly oaked with a streak of cassis-like fruit. 93 points

**2005 Muga Prado Enea Gran Reserva, A\$50**

The Mugas make modern as well as



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF BODEGAS CONTADOR AND MARQUÉS DE VARGAS. PRICES ARE APPROXIMATE; WHERE UNLISTED, WINES ARE NOT AVAILABLE IN THAT COUNTRY. TO SOURCE WINES, SEE PAGE 159.



**STACKS UP**  
The barrel room at  
Marqués de Vargas.

**Sancha's impressive wine is a blend of six parcels, all more than 100 years old.**

traditional wines under the same bodega roof, and this is very much in the latter camp. It's a sweet, delicate, spicy red with autumnal complexity. It's deceptively forward, such is its capacity to age. 98 points

**2005 Marqués de Murrieta Castillo Ygaya Gran Reserva Especial, A\$65**

A blend of 89 per cent tempranillo and 11 per cent mazuelo that's still very youthful indeed. Densely coloured and concentrated, this old vine red has notes of tobacco, licorice, incense, sweet oak and rich blackberry and raspberry fruit. 97 points

**2008 Ostatu Reserva**

This small family winery in the Rioja Alavesa takes all of its grapes from high altitude vineyards. This varietal tempranillo is appropriately serious with sinewy tannins, fresh acidity and savoury, vanilla-scented complexity. 94 points

**2011 Juan Carlos Sancha Peña El Gato Garnacha, A\$108**

Jaun Carlos Sancha's impressive wine is blend of six garnacha parcels in the south of the Rioja Alta, all of them more than 100 years old. Spicy and intense with subtle oak and remarkable acidity and freshness for a 15 per cent alcohol wine. 94 points

**2007 Contino Reserva, A\$100**

One of the best young Contino Reservas I've tasted, this blend of tempranillo with 10 per cent graciano and five per cent mazuelo and garnacha has amazing focus and

intensity with spicy, tobacco and Christmas cake notes balanced by acidity. 95 points

**2011 Pujanza Cisma**

Sourced from a single, bush vine tempranillo vineyard that was planted in 1925, this is the top wine from this small Rioja Alavesa winery. It's a big, thick, almost tarry wine with lots of oak and the concentration and acidity to age. 93 points

**2010 Artadi Viña El Pisón, A\$800**

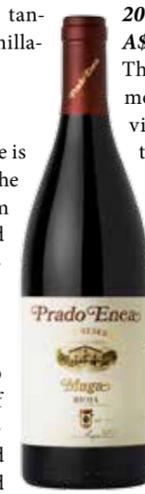
One of the most expensive wines in Rioja, but one of the best. This blend of tempranillo with a little graciano and garnacha is from a super vintage: sweet, plush and oaky but driven by acidity and balance. 98 points

**2011 Telmo Rodríguez Las Beatas, A\$150**

This is the first release of this wine, mostly from an old, high-altitude vineyard in Labastida, combining tempranillo with graciano and even some white grapes. Floral and refreshing, with subtle oak, supple sweetness and great finesse. 96 points

**2010 Sierra Cantabria Colección Privada, A\$125**

From the Eguren family's impressive line up of Riojas, this is made from 100 per cent tempranillo and including 50 per cent whole bunches. It's a polished, refined, aromatic



wine with sweet oak and a touch of savoury spice. 97 points

**2010 Pedro Balda Vendimia Seleccionada, A\$165**

Made in tiny quantities, this hand-destemmed, sulphur-free tempranillo from the Majuelo de la Red vineyard is a stunner: violet-perfumed and appealingly wild, with understated power. 95 points

**2009 Benjamín Romeo La Viña de Andrés Romeo, A\$460**

This comes from a vineyard planted by Benjamín Romeo's father. It's not as expensive as the same producer's Contador, but it's not far behind in quality with super ripe, focused flavours balanced by acidity. 95 points

**2004 La Rioja Alta Viña Ardanza Reserva**

Typical of the very traditional La Rioja Alta style, this is a pale, mature, leafy red with sweet American oak notes, silky tannins, fresh acidity and gamey, spicy red fruits' complexity. Old style Rioja at its affordable best. 94 points

**2010 Viña Ijalba Dionisio Ruiz Ijalba Maturana Tinta**

A rare sighting of Rioja's rediscovered red grape, maturana tinta, which tastes like something out of Bordeaux rather than northern Spain. Deeply coloured, grassy and quite firm, with a hint of pepper spice and tangy acidity. 93 points