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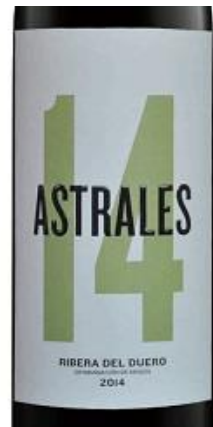
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**Astrales, Ribera del Duero (Spain) 2014 (\$65, Grapes of Spain) – 95 points**

In a lineup of 12 exemplary Spanish wines that I showed during a class last week, this was the consensus winner. Although this is a “big” wine in terms of concentration, depth of flavor and sheer flavor impact, it also shows purity and class at every sensory point from the first whiff to the last whisper of flavor in the long finish. There’s a notable dose of spicy, toasty oak, but it is perfectly proportioned in relation to the overall weight of the wine and its intensity of fruit. Soft flavors of dark berries and black cherries are totally seductive, and at its current stage of development, there’s also a savory undertone beginning to emerge from bottle aging. I reviewed this in mid-summer of 2017, scoring it at 93. As things have turned out, my score was too low, as the wine has exceeded my already-high expectations for it. Mea Culpa. This is a complete and obviously terrific wine.



**Elias Mora, Toro (Spain) “Gran Elias Mora” 2012 (\$90, Grapes of Spain) – 95 points**

This is an astonishing wine, but not for the faint of heart. It is hugely impressive, with “huge” being the most important element in that clause. Still nearly black in color and opaque in pigmentation at 6 years of age, it is phenomenally rich and concentrated. Aromas of baking spices and subtle woodsmoke are quite appealing, but then the sheer intensity and power of the wine just kick down the door and the wild ride begins. Those who think Tempranillo (or Tinta de Toro, as it is called in this region) just makes light- or medium-bodied wines will be set straight permanently by this bottling, which is actually “thick” in texture, as in milkshake thick. Flavors of blackberries, cassis and black cherry are very intense but not remotely obvious or over-ripe, and though there’s a lot of bracing from oak, the wood accents are definitely overwhelmed by the fruit’s sheer strength. You could enjoy this now with decanting and a grilled steak, but it will be better in another 5 years and undoubtedly can hang on or even improve for a full decade from now. What a wine!



**Egeo, Rueda (Spain) Verdejo 2017 (\$14, Grapes of Spain) – 92 points**

This is among the best Rueda Verdejos I've ever tasted, and certainly the best vintage of this wine (and I've tasted almost all of the vintages that have been imported to the USA). It shows a truly medium-bodied profile, whereas most of its counterparts are light, and yet its unusual heft doesn't come at the cost of any lack of freshness. On the contrary, it backs up its flavors of melon and figs with very zesty citrus acidity that focuses the flavors through the long, generous finish. Very expressive in aroma and flavor, and supremely versatile at the table, this is a standout wine at a great price.



**Pago de Jaraba, La Mancha (Spain) 2014 (\$29, Grapes of Spain) – 90 points**

This is a relatively high-end wine from La Mancha, which hasn't traditionally been known as a prominent source for fine wines. Examples such as this may change that, as this shows quite open, engaging flavors, tastefully subtle oak, soft but notable tannic structure, and very good overall proportionality and balance. The blend is 70% Tempranillo, 20% Cabernet Sauvignon and 10% Merlot. This blend of Spanish and French varieties works very well, showing open flavors (mostly black in fruit tone, but with a thin red streak also), fine-grained tannin, a bit of spice, and a relatively soft finish that will enable this to work well for sipping purposes while also doing well with food.



**Casa La Rad, Rioja Blanco (Spain) 2015 (\$37, Grapes of Spain) – 92 points**

In my experience, most white Rioja is either forgettable or downright bad, for one of two reasons: Either the wines are thin and cheap-tasting, or they're overoaked and clumsy. This one avoids both of those pitfalls, showing very good substance and depth of flavor, with mostly stone fruit notes but also a juicy tropical layer as well. Light spice and just a subtle whiff of toast from 12 months of ageing in new French oak barrels adds additional aromatic complexity plus some pleasant grip in the finish, which nicely off-sets the juiciness of the 30% Malvasia (a quite notable component, along with 50% Chardonnay and 20% Viura). You'll have a tough time finding a better modern-style white Rioja than this one.

