

VIEW FROM THE CELLAR

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By John Gilman



Many of the wines starting to ship from Spain or building up in the pipeline are from the 2018 vintage, which is very different on the Iberian Peninsula than it was in the more northerly wine-producing sectors of Europe. The blazing heat that helped define the 2018s in France and Germany was not part of the equation in Spain or Portugal during this growing season, which started out very cool and rainy (with a constant threat of mildew) and watched maturity lagging in the vineyards up through midsummer. However, July and August were sunny and warm, but not torrid, and maturity started to catch up and in the end, the vintage of 2018 seems to have turned out quite well. In regions where baking heat can be a challenge, such as the lower altitude sections of Ribera del Duero or Toro, the more temperate backend of 2018 may well have been a blessing- time will tell, as it is still pretty early on in the evolutions of the reds from these regions to see how the vintage will ultimately fare. The 2018s from Rioja, which for many of the classicists in the region are still many years away, are reported to be beautifully balanced wines and lower in alcohol than in several recent vintages; they are likely to make great wines for the long haul. In Galicia, 2018 was slow out of the blocks, but ended up ripening nicely by the time of harvest in the second half of September and the wines seem likely to be quite classical in style and high in quality.

2017 was a far more challenging year for winegrowers on the Iberian Peninsula than 2018, with frost, hail, drought and very high temperatures at times making for a volatile mix and multi-faceted challenges for bodegas. Northern Spain was hit very hard by spring frosts in 2017, with extensive damage from Bierzo all the way to Ribera del Duero and Rioja cutting back yields heavily in the wake of the freezing temperatures. Crop losses due to frost damage in Ribera del Duero range from forty percent in the lower altitude vineyards to as much as seventy-five or eighty percent in upper elevations such as Gumiel de Mercado. After the frost damage, there was drought and blazing heat, so though the remaining grapes managed to ripen up in the end of summer heat, acidities are low, alcohol levels are high and the wines can be concentrated beyond their normal parameters. In places like Toro, alcohol levels were high in 2017, often without fully ripe phenolic maturity to go with the high sugars. Further west from Bierzo, frost damage was equally bad in Valdeorras and Ribeiro, but Rías Baixas was able to escape freezing temperatures in the spring and this may well be the most “classical” region for wine in Spain in 2017. Ribeira Sacra was not generally as badly frosted as some of these other D.O.s, but drought and heat were antagonists here in 2017 and the generally most gifted sections, such as Amandi, will have produced the most concentrated and powerful wines in the region in 2017, from the combination of heat and drought. Cooler sub-regions here such as Bibei and the Miño River Valley may have fared a bit better.

When one looks back to the 2016 vintage, which was generally unheralded, many of the wines are turning out beautifully. It was a year of high yields in places unaffected by hail damage (sadly, Ribeira Sacra was pummeled by hail in midsummer and lost more than half the crop), which affected concentration to a certain degree, but in an age of global warming, perhaps the best years for the cellar are going to end up being those that are less concentrated. Flowering was late across Spain in 2016, but it was prolific, and the crop promised to be generous. Though winter and spring had been wet leading into the growing season of 2016, drought conditions descended on many growing regions starting in June and July and then it was very hot during the second half of August. Several producers in Rioja had gone out in the vineyards and had done a green harvest in July, fearing that they would not be able to ripen up all of the bunches out on the vines in the drought conditions, and this proved prescient. All of the heat and drought eventually ended in September, as heavy rains arrived mid-month and unblocked vines suffering from hydric stress and plumped up berries that may have been suffering from dehydration (with the exception of Cataluña, where the rain was modest or non-existent in September and the drought continued through to picking). After the rains cleared through, the fin de saison of 2016 was very good and many winegrowers were able to wait until late September and on through the entire month of October to harvest and were able to bring in a large cropload with good maturity. The resulting wines that I have tasted from 2016 thus far have been quite good, with perfectly satisfactory concentration, but not the power we see so often in warmer D.O.s in this age of global warming, which may augur very well for their long-term cellaring potential.

Bierzo

Luna Beberide Godello 2018 (Bodegas Luna Beberide) –

I love the combination of high quality and very reasonable prices in all of the wines from Luna Beberide and their 2018 Godello is another absolute bargain. This is a classic example of this fine varietal, grown in a combination of clay and slate soils at an elevation of over two thousand meters, which allows the wine to stay crisp and soil-driven in style. The 2018 Godello offers up a lovely nose of

Luna Beberide Mencía 2018 (Bodegas Luna Beberide) – 90 points

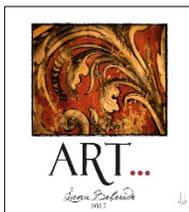
The 2018 Mencía from Luna Beberide is produced from thirty year-old vineyards that are planted on clay and limestone. It is fermented and raised in stainless steel tanks and bottled unfiltered. This is the *bodegas'* entry level bottling of Mencía and it has been a superb value that last three or four vintages that I have tasted. The 2018 continues the string of successes, offering up a bright and complex bouquet of cassis, pomegranate, tree bark, woodsmoke and a fine base of dark soil tones.

On the palate the wine is full-bodied, pure and beautifully balanced, with a lovely foundation of soil tones, a good core of fruit, suave, modest tannins and a long, focused and complex finish. This is light on its feet, but has great intensity of flavor and superb backend lift. At well under twenty dollars a bottle here in the US, it is an absolute steal (yet, again)! 2020- 2035.

Finca Luna Beberide 2017 (Bodegas Luna Beberide) – 92 points

The Finca [Luna Beberide] bottling of Mencía from Luna Beberide is produced from decidedly older vines, as these vineyards are sixty years of age and their soils, though still based on clay and limestone, also include plenty of slate. This wine is aged for ten months in older, neutral French oak prior to bottling. The 2017 version is excellent on both the nose and palate, reflecting the more powerful personality of the vintage in its aromatic constellation of cassis, black raspberry, espresso,

woodsmoke, graphite, a complex foundation of soil and a topnote of anise. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and nicely plush on the attack, with a fine core and soil signature, ripe, moderately chewy tannins and fine length and grip on the complex finish. The lower acids of the vintage here are apparent in comparison to the 2018 Mencía, but the balance is still impeccable and this wine is going to age beautifully. It is certainly approachable today and quite easy to drink, but another layer of complexity is bound to emerge with some bottle age. 2020-2050.

Luna Beberide Art 2017 (Bodegas Luna Beberide) – 93 points

The 2017 Art bottling of Mencía from Luna Beberide is from even older vines than the Finca la Cuesta, as these vineyards are eighty to ninety years of age, planted at eight to nine hundred meters above sea level and on an almost pure base of slate, so this is much more Ribeira Sacra-like in its soil composition than most of the vineyards in Bierzo. The wine undergoes its malo in barrel and is raised in a combination of a few new French *demi-muids* and older two hundred and twenty-five liter barrels. It spends just over a year in cask prior to bottling. The 2017 Art is pretty ripe for this bottling,

coming in at fourteen percent in this vintage and delivering a superb, old viney nose of sweet cassis, pomegranate, graphite, a beautiful base of slate minerality, cigar smoke, wild fennel, a touch of tree bark and a deft foundation of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, precise and full-bodied, with a great core of fruit, fine soil signature, ripe, suave tannins and excellent focus and grip on the long, polished and complex finish. This is more refined in personality than the Finca la Cuesta bottling, with the same fine depth, but more a more elegant personality. First class juice. 2023-2050.

Paixar 2016 Bodegas Luna Beberide) – 93+ points

Paixar is, of course, the top of the line bottling from Luna Beberide, hailing from vines that are all in excess of eighty years of age, with most of these old vines stand alone, bush vines, planted at the highest elevations in the *bodegas'* vineyard patrimony. It undergoes a bit of a cold soak" prior to the start of fermentation and its *elevage* is similar to the Art bottling, though it spends a couple more months in cask. The 2016 Paixar comes in at fourteen percent octane and offers up a super bouquet of sweet dark berries, pomegranate, licorice, cigar smoke, a very complex base of soil, tree bark and a gentle foundation of new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and nascently complex, with great mineral drive and core, tangy acids, fine focus and grip, buried, fine-grained tannins and a long, vibrant and complex finish. This is really serious juice and impressively light on its feet, given how much depth and dimension are here. 2024-2050.

*Campo de Borja***Legado del Moncayo Garnacha Blanca 2018 (Isaac Fernandez Selección) – 89 points**

The 2018 Garnacha Blanco from Legado del Moncayo is a fine follow-up to the strong 2017 version. These white grenache vines are grown at high altitude on soils of stony-clay soils. The 2018 comes in at the same octane as the 2017, 13.5 percent alcohol, and delivers a bright bouquet of pear, citrus blossoms, a fine base of soil, coriander seed, wild fennel and a bit of orange zest in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and has a good core, with fine soil signature, zesty acids and good length and grip on the well-balanced and complex finish. This carries its ripeness quite nicely and remains one of the best white wine values to be found from Spain. 2020-2025+.

Legado del Moncayo Garnacha Tinta 2018 (Isaac Fernandez Selección) – 89+ points

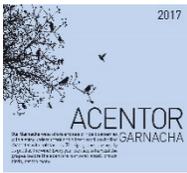
The 2018 Garnacha Tinto from Legado del Moncayo is another superb bottle for its price tag, but like the 2017 version, this will be most rewarding if tucked away in the cellar for at least a couple of years. The bouquet is deep and nascently complex, offering up notes of black raspberries, *garrigue*, smoked game, a hint of pepper and a fine base of soil stones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and chewy, with a fine core, very good soil signature, ripe tannins and a long, well-balanced and promising finish. Like the 2017 version, this comes in measured at fourteen percent octane and is going to be a lovely bottle with a bit of bottle age. 2023-2035+.

Legado del Moncayo Dry Muscat 2017 (Isaac Fernandez Selección) – 87 points

The 2017 Dry Muscat from Legado del Moncayo is a bit riper than I would have imagined, as it comes in listed at 13.5 percent, but the wine was fermented to full dryness and is still bright and fresh and reminds me quite a bit of a similar bottling from Alsace. The bouquet offers up scents of pear, nectarine, acacia blossoms, chalky soil tones (this is grown on brown limestone) and orange zest in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and nicely focused, with a good core, sound acids and a complex, though slightly clipped finish. I have the sense that the backend pinching of the wine is from the closure, rather than the wine, and I would opt for dinking this over the next year. At \$14 a bottle in the US, I understand the economics behind the choice of closure, but an agglomerated cork would not cost much more and might allow the wine to age more gracefully. Certainly, this 2017 possessed the constituent components to age several more years under cork! Still, this is quite tasty and just a touch short. 2020-2022+?

Legado del Moncayo Garnacha “Vendimia Seleccionada” Montaña 2017 (Isaac Fernandez Selección) –

The Vendimia Seleccionada bottling of Garnacha from Legado del Moncayo is aged for nearly a year in older, French oak casks, during its *eleveage*, rather than simply in stainless steel, as is the case with the regular bottling from this fine producer. All of the vines that go into both bottlings are at least forty years of age, and the 2017 Vendimia Seleccionada is a touch riper than the regular bottling, hitting 14.5 percent octane and offering up

*Calatayud***Acentor Garnacha 2017 (Isaac Fernandez Selección) – 88 points**

The 2017 Acentor is another fine vintage of Garnacha from this consistently strong estate. The wine is ripe and nicely balanced, offering up a deep nose of black raspberries, bonfire, dark soil tones, spit-roasted game, coffee grounds and a bit of spice in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and plush at the core, with a good touch of meatiness and spice, good focus and grip, moderate tannins and just a whisper of backend heat perking up the long finish. This is listed at 14.5 percent, but carries its octane very well and is a tasty example of old vine grenache made without any makeup in the cellar. Good juice in a riper style. 2022-2040.

*Getariako Txakolina***Txakoli Malda 2018 (Txakoli Zudugarai) – 89 points**

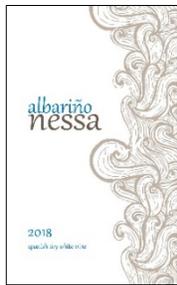
The 2018 Txakoli Malda” from Txakoli Zudugarai is composed entirely from the Hondurrabi Zuri grape and is a lovely example of this lightly effervescent and minerally, dry white wine. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of tart pear, lime peel, salty minerality and a topnote of lemongrass. On the palate the wine is medium-bodied, bright and slightly spritzy, with good intensity of flavor, zesty acids and a long, tasty finish. Good juice. 2020-2023.

*Jumilla***Porta Regia Monastrell “Colección Privada” Old Vines 2017 (Bodegas Sierra Norte) – 90 points**

The Colección Privada bottling of Porta Regia from Bodegas Sierra Norte is produced from fifty year-old Monastrell bush vines, which are farmed organically. The wine is aged exclusively in “two wine” barrels for one year prior to bottling, with sixty percent of the casks of French origin and forty percent made from American oak. The 2017 version is 14.5 percent octane and offers up a deep and complex bouquet of black cherries, cassis, roasted meats, bonfire, menthol, a fine base of soil and a bit of cedary wood. On the palate the wine is fullbodied, focused and shows off fine mid-palate depth, with ripe tannins, good grip and length and just a bit of heat poking out on the complex and robust finish. Good juice and a fine value. 2023- 2040+.

*La Mancha***Pago de la Jaraba Sauvignon Blanc 2018 (Pago De La Jaraba) – 88 points**

The 2018 Sauvignon Blanc from Pago De La Jaraba is an impressively cool customer, coming in at twelve percent octane and offering up a bright, youthful and vibrant nose of lime, tart apricot, fresh-cut grass, lovely soil tones, gentle smokiness and just a whisper of upper register botanicals. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and gently grassy, with a lovely core, fine cut and grip and a long, complex and tasty finish. This is a lovely, low octane example of the varietal. 2020-2023.

*Rías Baixas***Nessa Albariño 2018 (Adegas Gran Vinum) – 89 points**

The Nessa bottling from Adegas Gran Vinum is their entry level bottling and made from local growers with whom the winery works each year, with all of the vines used for the production of this bottling hand-harvested and at least twenty-five years of age. The 2018 version is really fine, offering up a deep and complex bouquet of tart pear, lime peel, lovely ocean breeze salinity, good minerality and a touch of dried flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is crisp, full and bright, with a lovely core, good soil signature and a long, vibrant and complex finish. There is just the first hint of pinching starting to pop up on the tail end of the finish, due to its closure, so I would opt for decanting this bottle before serving, just to let it unlock completely. It is really too bad that it is bottled under screwcap, as it has the depth and balance to age nicely for five to seven years, but I would fear keeping it that long under screwcap. But, for drinking over the near-term, it is really a lovely example and a superb value! 2020-2023+?

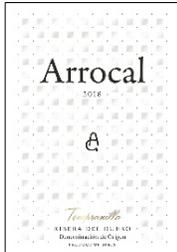
Esencia Diviña Albariño 2018 (Adegas Gran Vinum) – 89 points

The 2018 “Esencia Diviña” from Adegas Gran Vinum is a lovely example of Albariño. The bouquet is bright, briny and complex, wafting from the glass in a mix of apple, lime blossoms, salty soil tones, a touch of wild fennel and a topnote of candied citrus. On the palate the wine is crisp, full-bodied and nicely focused, with a good core of fruit, lovely balance and grip and a long, salty and zesty finish. This is good juice, with plenty of stuffing at the core. 2020-2025+.

Gran Vinum Albariño “Selección Especial” 2018 (Adegas Gran Vinum) – 92 points

The 2018 “Selección Especial” from Adegas Gran Vinum is an outstanding young Albariño, offering up superb depth and complexity right out of the blocks, but also with the structure to age very nicely for at least the next decade. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a fine blend of lemon, tart pear, dried flowers, lovely minerality and a topnote of sea salts. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully light on its feet, with a good core, fine focus and grip, bright acids and very good length and grip on the complex finish. A very lovely bottle of Albariño. 2020-2030.

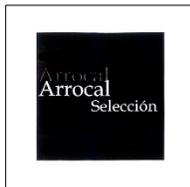
Ribera del Duero

Arrocal 2018 (Bodegas Arrocal) – 90 points

The 2018 Arrocal Tinto from Bodegas Arrocal is composed entirely of tempranillo and only spends eight months in cask prior to racking and bottling. The 2018 is fourteen percent octane and delivers a fine nose of black cherries, cigar smoke, gentle spice tones, a nice touch of soil, a discreet framing of oak and a bit of lavender in the upper register. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied, focused and very nicely balanced, with a good core of fruit, lovely grip and a long, classy and moderately tannic finish. This is a young wine and not overly complex today, but it is quite drinkable already and more complexity is certain to come with some bottle age. In a region with generally pretty over-heated prices, this is a fine value. 2020-2040.

Arrocal Passión 2017 (Bodegas Arrocal) – 91+ points

The Passión Arrocal cuvée is made entirely from tempranillo, with the vines now forty five years of age. It is not raised in any new barrels, as its *elevage* is done in a fifty-fifty mix of two and three year-old French barrels. The 2017 Passión Arrocal comes in at 14.5 percent octane and offers up a superb bouquet of plums, black cherries, dark chocolate, a touch of cigar wrapper and just a bit of nutty oak from the used casks. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and beautifully balanced, with a lovely core, good soil signature and a long, ripely tannic and nascently complex finish. This will be an excellent bottle with a few years' worth of cellaring, but it will probably take a full decade for it to blossom completely and hit its plateau. This is a great value! 2025-2050.

Arrocal Selección 2016 (Bodegas Arrocal) – 93 points

The 2016 Arrocal “Selección” comes in at a very civilized fourteen percent octane and offers up fine precision on both the nose and palate. The wine is raised in fifty percent new oak and the 2016 version delivers fine aromatic complexity in its blend of cassis, black cherries, bitter chocolate, lovely soil tones, cigar ash and a judicious serving of smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and nicely reserved in personality, with an excellent core of fruit, fine soil signature, ripe, well-integrated tannins and a long, complex and very promising finish. This is beautifully built to age and will need some time in the cellar to blossom, but it should prove to be long-lived and a superb bottle for many decades to come. 2028-2055.

Ángel de Arrocal Reserva 2015 (Bodegas Arrocal) – 93 points

The Ángel bottling from Bodegas Arrocal is one of the *bodegas'* old vine cuvées, with the 2015 version hailing from the eighty-plus year-old tempranillo vines of the Finca Clara vineyard. The wine is raised entirely in new French oak, with the malolactic fermentation also taking place in barrel. The 2015 Ángel comes in at fourteen percent octane and offers up a deep and classy bouquet of red and black cherries, a hint of raspberry, a fine base of soil, cigar wrapper and a very refined framing of smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full bodied, focused and very well-balanced, with a fine core, really good soil signature and a long, ripely tannic and classy finish. As I mentioned in my note on the 2014 Ángel, this is quite new oaky in personality out of the blocks, but it is impeccably balanced and will age beautifully. 2030-2060+.

Arrocal Máximo Reserva 2015 (Bodegas Arrocal) – 93+ points

As I have noted in the past Bodegas Arrocal's Máximo bottling is their top of the line cuvée, made from seventy-five year-old vines in a prime section of the El Portillo Vineyard in the village of Gumiel de Mercado, which is one of the highest elevation villages in Ribera del Duero and hence, has good diurnal temperature swings to keep freshness in the wine in the hot summers here. The 2015 Máximo is a touch riper than the Ángel, coming in at 14.5 percent alcohol and delivering fine aromatic sophistication in its blend of red plums, black cherries, cocoa powder, cloves, cigar wrapper, a fine base of soil tones and a suave base of nutty new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full, with lovely focus and grip, a very good core of fruit, good soil signature and a long, ripely tannic and gently warm finish. The balance here is very good and I have no doubts the wine will age long and gracefully, but it would have been ideal to see it come in a half degree lower in octane, so that the backend of the palate was as pure as the attack. But, in this twisted world of global warming, this is really a beautiful bottle from a warmer region in a world aflame. 2028-2060.

Aptus 2018 (Bodegas Peñalba Herraiz) – 87 points

The 2018 Aptus Tinto from Bodegas Peñalba Herraiz is composed of a blend of ninety five percent Tempranillo and the other five percent a mix of Garnacha and Monastrell, with the vineyards farmed organically. In the torrid European summer of 2018, the Aptus has come in riper than in any previous vintage I have tasted of the wine, as this is a full fifteen percent octane. The wine offers up a nose of backed red and black cherries, a bit of apricot, chocolate, a bit of coffee grounds, soil and a discreet foundation of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full bodied and reasonably balanced for its octane, with a good core of fruit, moderate tannins and just a touch of backend heat on the long finish. This is a strong effort in a very challenging growing season, but it is not at the same level as previous vintages, from more classically inclined summers. 2020-2025.

Nuestro "8 Meses" 2018 (Bodegas Nuestro de Dias Bayo) – 90 points

The Nuestro "8 Meses" Tinto is composed entirely from tempranillo and aged for eight months (as the name suggests) in French oak barrels, prior to bottling. The 2018 version comes in at 14.5 percent octane and offers up an attractive bouquet of black cherries, cigar wrapper, a nice base of soil tones, espresso, spices tones redolent of clove and nutmeg and a deft framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is bright, full-bodied and nicely soil-driven, with a good core of fruit, moderate tannins and fine length and grip on the nascently complex finish. These vineyards lie at more than nine hundred meters above sea level and this can be felt in the backend bounce and vibrancy. Good juice. 2023-2045+.

Nuestro "15 Meses" Crianza 2016 (Bodegas Nuestro de Dias Bayo) – 92 points

The 2016 Nuestro "15 Meses" Crianza from Bodegas Nuestro de Dias Bayo is from slightly older vines than their "8 Meses" bottling (thirty years of age, versus twenty) and hails from equally high altitude vineyards. The wine spends fifteen months of its *elevage* in a combination of French and American oak casks, and then another fifteen months of bottle aging in the cellar prior to release! The 2016 is excellent, offering up a deep, complex and still youthfully vibrant bouquet of black cherries, plums, cigar ash, dark soil tones, a nice mix of both spicy and smoky oak and a topnote of cigar smoke. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a superb core of fruit, fine soil signature, ripe, well-integrated tannins and a long, classy finish. This is an outstanding value, as even here in the over-heated US market, this sells for just over \$25 per bottle! Fine juice! 2024-2050.

Nuestro “20 Meses” 2015 (Bodegas Nuestro de Dias Bayo) – 92+ points

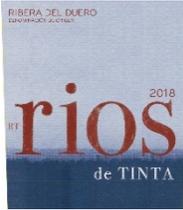
The “20 Meses” bottling from Bodegas Nuestro de Dias Bayo is their oldest vine cuvée, being made from seventy year-old vines that grow nine hundred meters above sea level. The wine is composed entirely of tempranillo, sees its malolactic fermentation take place in four hundred and fifty liter French casks and is raised for twenty months in these barrels prior to bottling. After bottling, the wine is given another year and a half of bottle aging in the cellar prior to release. The 2015 “20 Meses” comes in listed at fourteen percent octane and offers up a superb bouquet of sweet dark berries, black cherries, Cuban cigar wrapper, dark soil tones, bitter chocolate and smoky new oak. On the palate the wine is plush, full-bodied, focused and shows off beautiful mid-palate depth, with lovely focus and grip, fine-grained tannins and excellent length on the complex finish. The raw materials here are obviously superior to the “15 Meses” bottling, as the vines are so much older, but I wonder if a bit of this advantage was lost with the malolactic fermentation taking place in cask here? In any event, this is really good wine, which is starting to already drink very nicely, but which will be even better four or five years down the road. 2020-2050.

Isaac Fernandez Ribera del Duero Tinto 2014 (Isaac Fernandez Selección) – 92 points

The 2014 Ribera del Duero bottling from Isaac Fernandez hails from a different vineyard source than the 2015 version. This cuvée hails from the Pagos de La Calabaza vineyard, which is planted to sixty year-old tempranillo vines and is a touch higher in altitude than the 2015 version’s vineyard, as these vines sit at nine hundred meters above sea level. Again, the malo here is done in tank prior to racking into barrels, with the 2014 version raised all in new oak, but with ninety percent French and ten percent of the casks made from American oak in this vintage. The *elevage* here was also a bit longer than the 2015, with the wine spending fully two and a half years in cask prior to bottling. The 2014 offers up a superb bouquet of plums, red and black cherries, cigar wrapper, a fine base of soil, lovely spice tones and a well-done framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and full-bodied, with a fine core of fruit, tangy acids, firm, well-integrated tannins and just a wisp of heat perking up the long and nascently complex finish. There is no alcohol listed on the label here, as the bottle was shipped from the winery, but I would guess that it is around 14.5 percent, which is pretty standard fare in Ribera del Duero these days. It is a very good wine in the making, and the only way I would seek to improve it would be to get the octane down just a half point and make it a touch cooler on the long finish. 2028-2055.

Isaac Fernandez Ribera del Duero Tinto 2015 (Isaac Fernandez Selección) – 92+ points

The 2015 Ribera del Duero Tinto from Isaac Fernandez is produced from more than eighty year-old tempranillo vines that are grown in the el Pago de Las Tenerías vineyard that sits at eighty hundred and fifty meters of elevation. The wine undergoes its malolactic fermentation in stainless steel tanks, prior to racking into one hundred percent new French barrels for two years of *elevage*. The 2015 offers up a superb, young nose of plums, black cherries, cigar ash, a touch of lavender, fine soil tones and a well-done foundation of gently spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, youthful and very, very promising, with excellent mid-palate depth, ripe, well-integrated tannins and excellent focus and grip on the nascently complex and very classy finish. This has excellent potential, but it is built for the cellar and will take at least a decade of bottle age to start to sing. It should age very long and gracefully. Impressive juice! 2028-2055+.

Rios de Tinta 2018 (Isaac Fernandez Selección) – 89 points

The 2018 Rios de Tinta is a very pretty young Ribera del Duero, offering up a bright bouquet of cherries, raspberries, cigar smoke, a nice touch of soil, spice tones and just a touch of cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is medium-full, ripe and focused, with pretty good depth at the core, just a whisper of backend tannin and nice shape and bounce on the fairly long finish. This comes in listed at fourteen percent octane, but seems perhaps just a shade higher. This is made for early drinking and is a very tasty example. 2020-2030.

Finca La Mata 2017 (Isaac Fernandez Selección) – 92 points

The 2017 Finca La Mata is a fine follow-up to the lovely 2016 version. These old vines have come in at fourteen percent octane in this vintage and offer up a deep and nascently complex bouquet of black cherries, plums, cigar wrapper, lovely soil tones, gentle spice elements and a judicious framing of new oak (one-third of the casks are new each year). On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with lovely fruit tones, good soil signature, buried, ripe tannins and excellent length and grip on the youthfully complex finish. This is a serious wine and deserves time in the cellar to blossom into its secondary layers of complexity, but for those a bit impatient, it is already pretty easy to drink! 2025-2055+.

*Rioja***Alma la Rad 2016 (Bodegas Casa la Rad) – 92+ points**

I know I do not get around as much as I used to, but this is the heaviest bottle of Rioja I have ever crossed paths with, including some of those glass behemoths from Roda. However, despite the heavy-gauged glass, the wine is quite classical in its sensibilities, being composed of a blend of forty percent Tempranillo, forty percent Garnacha and ten percent each of Graciano and Maturana. It is a single vineyard bottling from the la Rad vineyard and was fermented and underwent malo in eight hundred liter French casks, after which it spent fourteen months in new French oak barrels prior to bottling. This is a very limited bottling, as there are only four hundred and sixteen cases produced, which is too bad, as the wine is excellent. The complex and classy bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of raspberries, cherries, Rioja spices, a fine base of soil tones, a touch of nutskin and a very deft framing of cedary oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and focused, with an excellent core of fruit, impressive soil signature, ripe, buried tannins and a long, tangy and gently warm finish. This is listed at 14.5 percent octane and is a bit warm on the backend, but also long, complex and balanced. I would love to see it a bit lower in octane, but there is serious depth and complexity here and I suspect it will age quite gracefully, even at 14.5 percent alcohol. Given my predisposition for the traditional camp in Rioja, I was surprised just how much I liked this wine! It is slightly modern in style, but still pays homage to the great *terroir* of Rioja and is more hybrid than brazenly modern in personality. It is certainly a very, very good wine in the making! But, given that the world is burning, could we perhaps bottle future vintages in a less heavy bottle? 2024-2055.

Viña Otano Reserva 2014 (Bodegas y Viñedos Union Viticultores Riojanos) – 89+ points

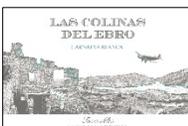
The 2014 Viña Otano Rioja “Reserva” is composed of a blend of eighty-five percent tempranillo, ten percent graciano and five percent mazuelo. It was raised for eighteen months in a combination of both French and American oak barrels, with rackings every six months. The wine shows a bit of its French oak influence in its fine bouquet of raspberries, cloves, cigar smoke, a good base of soil, just a hint of meatiness and spicy oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and already nicely silky on the attack, with a good core of fruit, moderate tannins and a long, tangy finish. This is fourteen percent octane, which has allowed the wine to absorb a bit more wood tannin that needs further resolution on the backend, but it has fine constituent components and with a few more years in the cellar, should be a lovely drink. I would not mind this wine at all raised entirely in older American casks, as texturally, it has a lovely old school style already and the cedary French wood seems somehow slightly inappropriate. But, that said, this is a well-made wine. 2022-2045+.

Viña Otano Gran Reserva 2012 (Bodegas y Viñedos Union Viticultores Riojanos) – 91+ points

The 2012 Viña Otano Rioja “Gran Reserva” has a slightly higher percentage of Graciano in the *cépages* than the 2014 Reserva, as this wine is fifteen percent of that grape, to go along with eighty percent tempranillo and five percent mazuelo. This bottling sees fully two years in a combination of American and French casks prior to bottling, and then an additional three years bottle aging prior to release. The wine offers up a complex aromatic constellation of black cherries, black raspberries, cigar smoke, a bit of spiced meats, dark soil tones, Rioja spices and a deft framing of spicy oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and beautifully balanced, with a suave attack, a lovely core of fruit, good soil signature and a long, modestly tannic and tangy finish. There is a bit of toasted coconut from the American oak here on the backend that is very enjoyable (at least to a classicist such as myself). Fine juice. 2020-2050.

Rueda**Egeo Verdejo 2018 (Isaac Fernandez Selección) – 91 points**

The 2018 Verdejo “Egeo” from Isaac Fernandez Selección is a terrific example of this underrated varietal, with the nose jumping from the glass in a vibrant blend of lime, green olive, beautiful floral scents, a lovely base of minerality and just a hint of beeswax in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and beautifully deep at the core, with bright acids, lovely focus and grip and a long, well-balanced and complex finish. This is a stunning value! 2020-2030.

Terra Alta**Las Colinas del Ebro Garnatxa Blanca 2018 (Bodegas Abanico) – 88 points**

The 2018 Las Colinas del Ebro Garnatxa Blanca from Bodegas Abanico seems just a touch riper in its panoply of aromatics in comparison to the 2017 version, though the new vintage comes in listed at 13.5 percent again. The bouquet is ripe and effusive, offering up scents of pineapple *coulis*, wild fennel, salty soil tones and a topnote of dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and full-bodied, with a good core, a nice foundation of soil tones, sound acids and good length and grip on the bouncy and nicely buxom finish. This is quite tasty, and my comments about last year’s version not being overly complex, but hitting all the right notes, is equally true of this very good 2018. Good juice. 2020-2025.

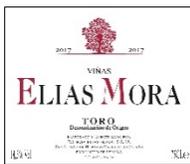
Las Colinas del Ebro Garnatxa Negra-Syrah 2018 (Bodegas Abanico) – 87 points

The 2018 Las Colinas del Ebro Tinto is composed of a blend of eighty percent Garnatxa (thirty-five year-old vines) and twenty percent Syrah (from twenty-five year-old vines). The wine is fermented and raised in stainless steel tanks and the 2018 version comes in at a robust 14.5 percent octane and sealed under a plastic cork. It offers up a deep and gently jammy bouquet of red and black raspberries, roasted meats, *garrigue*, candied orange peel, coffee grounds, bonfire and a good base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and plush at the core, with plenty of stuffing and length, a nice touch of backend pepperiness and a long, warm finish. This is a bit out of my comfort zone in terms of octane, but it is complex and well-balanced for its alcohol level, and for those who do not mind this level, there is an awful lot to like here (except for the plastic cork), particularly for \$14 a bottle here in the states. If higher octane wines are up your alley, add three points to me score. 2020-2025+.

Las Colinas del Ebro “Selección de Viñas Viejas” 2016 (Bodegas Abanico) – 84 points

The 2016 Las Colinas del Ebro “Selección de Viñas Viejas” is made from a blend of forty-two percent Garnaxta, thirty-six percent Syrah and twenty-two percent Cariñena. Part of the blend is fermented in stainless steel (with the malo for this portion taking place in three hundred liter casks) and part in large oak vats, with the malo for this part of the blend taking part in vat. The wine is aged for five months after blending in French barrels, with the 2016 version coming in at a full fifteen percent octane. The wine smells quite a bit like a Priorat, offering up jammy scents of black raspberries, black cherries, a bit of fruitcake, *garrigue*, a nice touch of soil and spicy oak. On the palate the wine is deep, powerful and plenty ripe, with broad shoulders, a rock solid core, firm tannins and a long, chewy and warm finish. This is too high octane for me as well, but clearly, there are some great vineyard parcels underlying this wine and if they could be harnessed at fourteen percent octane, this could be stellar. But north of fifteen percent, it is a bit beyond my comprehension and, as it is also sealed with a plastic cork, I have no idea how it will age. 2024-2040?

Toro

Elias Mora Tinto 2017 (Bodegas Elias Mora) – 88 points

The 2017 Toro Tinto from Elias Mora is a ripe wine at 14.5 percent, but it also has a good sense of balance and carries its octane quite well. The deep nose offers up scents of black cherries, chocolate, cigar smoke, a touch of tariness and a bit of cigar wrapper in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite broad-shouldered, with a rock solid core of fruit, firm, but buried tannins and very good length and grip on the focused and gently warm finish. This is a classic example of Toro in this era of global warming, with plenty of muscle and the structure to age, and with the alcohol managed fairly well. It will need some bottle age to soften up, but should be a pretty good drink when it is ready to go. 2024-2045+.

Elias Mora Crianza 2016 (Bodegas Elias Mora) – 88+ points

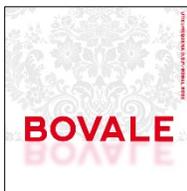
The Crianza bottling from Elias Mora hails from vines that are a bit older than the Descartes below, but these are not at elevation and do not have a northerly exposition, so they realize a bit more octane and the 2016 version comes in listed at a full fifteen percent alcohol. The wine does not see any new wood, but is raised in a fifty-fifty mix of American and French barrels that are “one wine-old”. The 2016 offers up a deep, ripe and surprisingly fresh nose of black cherries, sweet dark berries, balsamic overtones, cigar ash and a nice touch of oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, plump and nicely light on its feet for fifteen percent octane, a good core, slightly coarse tannins and good length and grip on the slightly warm finish. Not bad in its idiom. 2023-2040.

Descarte 2015 (Bodegas Elias Mora) – 91 points

The 2015 Descarte from Elias Mora is composed entirely of tempranillo, from a forty year-old vineyard that faces north and sits at seven hundred meters above sea level. The is aged for one year in a combination of new and older oak casks prior to bottling and the 2015 version comes in tipping the scales at 14.5 percent octane. The wine delivers a ripe and generous bouquet of black cherries, black raspberries, coffee grounds, cigar smoke and a bit of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and plush on the attack, with a rock solid core, suave, buried tannins and very good length and grip on the impressively well-balanced finish. This carries its alcohol beautifully and is quite cool in the backend. Good juice in that riper and plusher style. 2020-2040.

Gran Elias Mora 2014 (Bodegas Elias Mora) – 92 points

The 2014 Gran Tinto from Elias Mora is from their oldest parcel of vines, as these tempranillo vines are fully ninety years of age. This vineyard also sits up at elevation, being planted at seven hundred and fifty meters in a stony sand and clay soil foundation. The spends seventeen months in French casks prior to bottling and the 2014 is a full fifteen percent octane. It offers up deep and ripe bouquet of black cherries, dark berries, cigar ash, a good base of soil, spit-roasted meats and smoky oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very nicely balanced, with a bottomless core, excellent focus and grip, ripe, well-integrated tannins and a long, complex and gently chewy finish. This is really good wine, and only shows a touch of backend heat, which is pretty remarkable for a wine that is fifteen percent alcohol! 2024-2050.

*Utiel-Requena***Bovale Rosado 2018 (Isaac Fernandez Selección) screwcap – 88 points**

The 2018 Bovale Rosado is composed entirely from the lovely grape of Bobal, with the wine fermented and aged in stainless steel and coming in at a cool twelve percent alcohol in this vintage. It is a pale salmon color and offers up a bright bouquet of watermelon, cherry skins, dried flowers, a nice base of gently chalky soil tones and a topnote of wild fennel. On the palate the wine is bright, bouncy and medium-full, with good focus and grip, zesty acids and fine length on the well-balanced finish. Very tasty and a good value. 2020-2025.