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DEC. 15, 2008



EXPLORING RIOJA

WINE, FOOD AND ARCHITECTURE
STAR IN SPAIN'S PREMIER VINEYARD REGION
BY MIKE DESIMONE AND JEFF JENSSEN



From the mellow earth tones of old stone walls to the brilliant colors of space-age titanium, the bodegas of Spain's most prestigious wine region embody a dynamic culture of architecture, providing visitors the pleasures of both past and present.

Bordered to the north by the Sierra Cantabria mountains and nourished by the Ebro river and its numerous tributaries, Rioja

enjoys a sheltered microclimate perfect for the cultivation of Tempranillo, its signature red grape. Rioja consists of three distinct regions: Alta, around the town of Haro to the west; Alavesa, mostly north of the Ebro; and Baja, east of the capital city of Logroño.

From a distance, it is hard to tell the difference between a walled medieval village and a craggy outcropping of rock; you can only be sure if a telltale steeple comes into focus. Less difficult to spot are

Above: Rioja has long been considered Spain's foremost wine region. Today, stunning architecture and stellar lodging and dining options are making it a prime travel destination as well.

a host of striking new wineries and hotels, designed by a distinguished group of international architects. The foothills of this dramatic environment are crisscrossed with an extensive patchwork of vines.

Spend some time here, and you can experience the sophisticated luxury of a hotel designed by world-famous architect Frank Gehry (responsible for the Guggenheim museum in nearby Bilbao) and the earthy pleasures of Logroño's traditional tapas bars. You can track the evolution of the region's wine styles by visiting traditional bodegas such as R. López de Heredia and new-wave producers such as Ysios. You can explore the history of wine at Dinastía Vivanco's impressive museum, or simply grab a bicycle and lose yourself in the rolling vineyards.

The moment you arrive at Logroño-Agoncillo airport, you know that you are in wine country: The modern terminal is topped by large ersatz barrels. You are faced with the choice of old versus new immediately upon leaving the airport—take the winding local roads crisscrossed by the Ebro, or the modern highway, the AP-68? Although the two paths run roughly parallel to one another, the *autopista* will certainly get you to your destination faster. But that's not always the point when driving through wine country.

It would be easy to bypass Logroño—Rioja's largest city and the first you will come to—in search of the charms of a small village or stand-alone luxury hotel, but that would rob you of one of the great pleasures of Spain, the "tapas crawl." Spend an afternoon or evening moving from bar to bar, enjoying a glass of wine and small plate in each. Daytime in Logroño can be spent shopping for wine, wine accessories and specialty foods at a variety of local shops.

The thick, stone walls of nearby Laguardia, a tiny hill-

top village, enclose many treasures, including world-class dining, multiple tapas bars, two churches and perfectly preserved cobblestone streets. Don't miss French architect Philippe Mazières' work at Viña Real Cuné bodega, which resembles a huge wine barrel. Not far from there, the landscape is brought into focus at the Domecq Group's Bodegas Ysios, where Spanish architect Santiago

Calatrava—whose World Trade Center Transportation Hub in New York and Chicago Spire are currently in progress—has set the winery against a backdrop of saw-toothed cliffs. Echoing the hills beyond, this graceful metal-and-wood structure evokes floating barrels about to take flight.

Just beyond the medieval ramparts of Laguardia stands what appears to be a classic, Bordeaux-style château. Actually built in the late-20th century, Bodegas Campillo's visitors center is a symbol of Rioja's history. In the late-19th century, when phylloxera virtually destroyed all the vines of Bordeaux, a handful of winemakers brought their knowledge, methods and money to the north of Spain, contributing to Rioja's evolution as a winemaking capital for export to England and France.

If you head toward Elciego, whose skyline is punctuated by the two Renaissance-style towers of San Andrés church, you can catch a glimpse of Marqués de Riscal's Frank Gehry-designed hotel, a kinetic sculpture crowned by giant swirling ribbons of tritoned titanium.

The charming village of Cenicero boasts a structure of oxidized metal panels that houses Bodegas Martínez Laorden, financed in part by Project Optima, a European Union initiative on water resources management. "My winery is environmentally balanced, using 40 percent less electricity because of our solar panels," says third-generation winemaker José María Martínez.



Bodegas Ysios was designed with an undulating chrome roof to echo the nearby mountains.



The locals of Haro often convene in the town square for an evening of wining and dining.



Dinastía Vivanco winery is home to the Museo de la Cultura del Vino, which presents the history of winemaking from the Egyptian era to the present. Exhibits feature everything from ancient amphorae to holographic installations.



Bodegas Martínez Laorden, in the village of Cenicero, was built as a commitment to organic viticulture. A large portion of the winery's water is recycled, and the building uses solar panels to conserve electricity.

"And we purify and recycle a large portion of the water here." Although many "green" wineries throughout Europe and the United States are turning to organic viticulture, what sets Martínez Laorden apart is its commitment to conserving water and energy. Bodegas Martínez Laorden exemplifies the way Rioja is putting avant-garde notions at the service of traditional ideals of *terroir*.

The full history of winemaking, from the Egyptian era to the present, can be experienced at Dinastía Vivanco's breathtaking Museo de la Cultura del Vino. From ancient amphorae to holo-

graphic installations, this modern-day temple is dedicated to the cult and culture of Bacchus. It lies at the entrance of the village of Briones.

Just outside Haro stands a cluster of bodegas, including Muga and the iconic R. López de Heredia. The stone walls of R. López de Heredia's wine cellar are covered in age-old mold, yet the family was forward-thinking enough to enlist Baghdad-born architect Zaha Hadid, the 2004 recipient of the Pritzker Prize for Architecture, to design its walk-in, mirrored tasting room in the shape of a wine decanter.

Whether you think of yourself as a modernist, a traditionalist or some combination of the two, Rioja can satisfy every sense. Dining options range from stand-up tapas outside a storefront bar to high-style interpretations of Riojan cuisine prepared by a Michelin-starred chef. Although wine lists understandably lean toward Rioja, other regions are covered as well. You can sleep in a 17th-century convent arranged around a central cloister or in a five-star hotel with a bird's-eye view of Gehry's three-toned confection. Whether your idea of a day in wine country is being pampered with wine treatments in a vinotherapy spa or bicycling village to village to sample the local wines, you can happily spend that day in Rioja.

Although Rioja is a year-round destination, the best months to visit are April, May, September and October. The climate is similar to that of the U.S. Northeast, so a jacket may be necessary in the evening. Stylish, casual cloth-

ing is appropriate for day or night.

Lunch is generally served from noon to 3 p.m., and dinner from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m.; tapas bars stay open later. Many restaurants and wineries are closed in August. Most wineries require that you make reservations in advance for their tours.

Note: When calling the following establishments from North America, dial 011, then the telephone number. Prices have been converted to U.S. dollars using the exchange rate at press time, US\$1 = 0.71 euros, and rounded to the nearest dollar.

Where to Stay

HOTEL LOS AGUSTINOS

Calle San Agustín, 2, Haro **Telephone** (34) 941-31-13-08 **Web site** www.hotellosagustinos.es **Rooms** 62 **Rates** \$121–\$312

An artful marriage of traditional and modern, this hotel has formerly been a convent, a hospital and a prison. The enormous 17th-century central cloister is furnished with stylish



The space that Hotel Los Agustinos occupies was variously a convent, a hospital and a prison. In this latest iteration, the hotel combines traditional and modern elements in its design and boasts a standout restaurant.



The Marqués de Riscal hotel is as contemporary on the inside as it is on the outside. Part of the Starwood Hotel Luxury Collection, the hotel features a spa that uses grape-based products for its wine therapy treatments and massages.

chrome and leather lounging areas. Wide, ceramic-tiled hallways lead to spacious traditional rooms, which have open views of the low-rise city of Haro.

Under the arched gallery at the rear of the glass-topped courtyard is Las Duelas restaurant, run by chef Juan Nales Rückauer, who describes his cuisine as “classic Riojan with a modern flair.” Standout entrées, priced from \$24 to \$35, include grilled shoulder of baby pig, and sirloin medallions in Rioja red wine sauce. The wine list features 200 different wines, ranging in price from \$22 for Muga Crianza 2004 to \$350 for Benjamin Romeo Contador 2005.

MARQUÉS DE RISCAL

Calle Torrea, 1, Elciego **Telephone** (34) 945-18-08-80 **Web site** www.luxurycollection.com/marquesderiscal **Rooms** 32 **Suites** 11 **Rates** \$456–\$2,179

Designed by Frank Gehry and part of the Starwood Hotel Luxury Collection, this is a benchmark for contemporary luxury in Rioja. Spacious rooms include amenities such as Wi-Fi, Bang & Olufsen audio systems and marble baths. Views from the hotel are of vines and the ochre brick and terra cotta town of Elciego. Comfortable public areas include the Vinoteca wine bar, with more than 2,000 bottles tucked into its walls, and the Rooftop Lounge and Library. There is a heated pool in the Caudalíe Vinothérapie Spa, which uses grape-based products for its “wine therapy” treatments and massages. A fitness room is on site, bicycles are available for hire, and golf courses are located nearby. The concierge staff will set up a visit to the namesake bodega—Marqués de Riscal is one of Rioja’s oldest producers—or arrange for a chauffer-driven car on other winery tours.

HOTEL VILLA DE LAGUARDIA

Paseo de San Raimundo, 15, Laguardia **Telephone** (34) 945-60-05-60 **Web site** www.hotelvilladelaguardia.com **Rooms** 78 **Suites** 5 **Rates** \$123–\$245

Just steps from the medieval walls of the village of Laguardia, this full-service hotel boasts a glass-walled, exterior elevator with panoramic views of the vineyards. The rooms are decorated in a neo-rustic style and feature large ceramic baths. Room service is available round the clock, and the hotel is handicap-accessible. The multilingual staff can arrange winery tours with a car and driver. There is a small fitness room, but you can get a more scenic workout by renting one of the bicycles parked out front. In-house dining options include formal restaurant El Medoc Alavés, featuring Spanish cuisine served in a French style, and informal Italian café El Villa.

Where to Eat

ASADOR ALAMEDA

Plaza Felix Azpilicueta, 1, Fuenmayor **Telephone** (34) 941-45-00-44 **Web site** www.restaurantealameda.com **Open** Lunch, Tuesday to Sunday; dinner, Tuesday to Saturday **Cost** Entrées \$39–\$77 **Credit cards** All major

Chefs Esther Álvarez and Tomás Fernández serve seafood from the Cantabrian Sea, meat from Galicia and vegetables grown in the Ebro valley. Appetizers include a sumptuous goose foie gras, and a bracingly briny shrimp-and-langoustine carpaccio. *Chuletón de buey*, a large beef chop grilled to perfection and served simply in its own jus, barely fit on the plate. Vegetable lovers will be pleased with the grilled vegetable entrées and composed salads. The 200-selection wine list is well-priced, with most selections falling between \$70 and \$126, and includes R. López de Heredia Viña Bosconia Reserva 2000 (\$34) and Torre Muga 2004 (\$71).

CACHETERO

Calle Laurel, 3, Logroño **Telephone** (34) 941-22-84-63 **Web site** www.cachetero.com **Open** Lunch, Monday to Saturday; dinner, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Monday, Tuesday **Cost** Entrées \$21–\$25 **Credit cards** Visa

Framed, handwritten accolades from members of Spanish high society cover the yellow Venetian plaster walls and testify to almost 100 years of prestigious dining, served by four generations of the Arechinolaza family. Start your meal with ham croquettes or pan-seared foie gras in a Pedro Ximénez reduction, then move on to filet mignon in Port sauce, or monkfish with eggplant, langoustine and clams. The Rioja-focused wine list offers 58 selections, including Dinastia Vivanco Crianza 2004 (\$18) and Baron de Chirel Reserva 2001 (\$84).

FRANCIS PANIEGO PARA MARQUÉS DE RISCAL

Calle Torrea, 1, Elciego **Telephone** (34) 945-18-08-80 **Web site** www.luxurycollection.com/marquesderiscal **Open** Lunch and dinner, daily **Cost** Entrées \$21–\$36; tasting menu \$112 **Credit cards** All major

Chef de cuisine Francis Paniego, the first Rioja chef to receive a Michelin star, has developed a menu worthy of Frank Gehry's showpiece hotel. The 10-course tasting menu may feature the amusing and delicious "Egg Gehry," a truffled poached egg festooned with metallic-colored pastry ribbons to mirror the hotel's roof. Equally artful was mousse of foie gras served with *caviar de vino tinto*—tiny pearls of red-wine gelée. In addition to an array of more than 70 Rioja wines, the 250-bottle wine list features many selections from the New World. The bodega's own wines run from \$28 for the Reserva 2002 up to \$336 for its Frank Gehry Selección 2001. The reserve list offers an opportunity to taste the 1994 and 1995 Baron de Chirel side by side, for \$308 and \$280 respectively. For deeper pockets, a 1945 Marqués de Riscal Cosecha is available for \$953.

POSADA MAYOR DE MIGUELOA

Mayor de Migueloa, 20, Laguardia **Telephone** (34) 945-62-11-75 **Web site** www.mayordemigueloa.com **Open** Lunch and dinner, daily **Cost** Entrées \$26–\$31 **Credit cards** All major

Housed in a 17th-century palace replete with a carved stone wine cellar, this Rioja institution serves regional specialties such as veal, ox and local game in a romantic setting. Three small dining rooms feature terra cotta floors and high, wood-beamed



Asador Alameda offers a seafood salad with ingredients fresh from the Cantabrian Sea.



The filet mignon at Posada Mayor de Migueloa is served with truffle sauce and foie gras.



Francis Paniego is the first Rioja chef to receive a Michelin star. His eponymous venue, at the Marqués de Riscal, offers dishes that match the hotel's design in whimsy.

ceilings. Among the main courses are filet mignon with truffle sauce and foie gras, and sirloin with a Cabrales blue-cheese sauce. The wine list boasts a great selection of producers, such as LAN, Viña Tondonia and Marqués de Riscal, with many bottles at less than \$35. A reserve list with bottles costing \$56 to \$154 is also on hand. Should you decide to sleep here, eight comfortable rooms are available from \$161.

Wineries to Visit

DINASTÍA VIVANCO

Carretera Nacional 232, Briones **Telephone** (34) 941-32-23-32 **Web site** www.dinastiavivanco.es **Open** Tuesday to Saturday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. **Cost** Tour and tastings \$7; museum \$10

Both wine lovers and history buffs will enjoy the comprehensive bodega tour and Museo de la Cultura del Vino. Set aside several hours to experience the history of wine and winemaking in the five-story subterranean museum. Tours begin in the garden of Bacchus, where more than 200 grape varieties are cultivated, and conclude with a tasting of Dinastía Vivanco's 1998 Reserva and 2002 Crianza. A shop offers the bodega's wines, along with wine-themed gifts, glassware and books in English. The restaurant here uses wood from old barrels and dried rootstock to fire its grill and oven.

R. LÓPEZ DE HEREDIA VIÑA TONDONIA

Barrio de la Estacion, s/n, Haro **Telephone** (34) 941-31-02-44 **Web site** www.lopezdeheredia.com **Open** Monday to Saturday, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. **Cost** Tour and tastings free

This bodega is one of the most distinctive in Rioja, built in 1877, and is easily recognized by its red-roofed tower. Despite owner Pedro López de Heredia's faithful adherence to the traditional style in his highly regarded wines, he showed daring in hiring Zaha Hadid to design a sleek glass-and-white leather, rocket ship-style tasting room and shop. The underground tunnels of the original structure are up to 200 meters in length, and their walls are covered with black mold. The tour is heavy on history and production. Tastings are held around a sturdy wooden table down among the barrels, and feature two Viña Tondonia reservas.

VIÑA REAL CUNÉ

Carretera Logroño-Laguardia km. 4.8, Laguardia **Telephone** (34) 941-30-48-09 **Web site** www.cune.com **Open** Thursday to Monday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. **Cost** Tour and tastings \$7

Evoking a giant wine barrel, French architect Philippe Mazières' design for this winery crowns a plateau on the road between Logroño and Laguardia. Constructed of Canadian red cedar, concrete and stainless steel, it was designed to integrate all aspects of winemaking on two floors. The one-hour tour of this modern facility takes you through the entire process and concludes with tastings of the Monopole Blanco 2006 and the Viña Real Crianza 2004.

BODEGAS YSIOS

Camino de la Hoya, s/n, Laguardia **Telephone** (34) 945-60-06-40 **Web site** www.bodegasysios.com **Open** Monday to Friday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. **Cost** Tour and tastings \$7

This boutique winery was designed by internationally acclaimed, award-winning architect Santiago Calatrava, who was born in Valencia. The façade of curved wood is pieced together like the staves of a barrel, and

the jagged chrome top echoes the mountains and clouds that are its backdrop. The building is as functional as it is beautiful, and the interior is much more intimate than it appears from the outside. Only reservas using 100 percent Tempranillo are produced by this Domecq group showpiece.

Mike DeSimone and Jeff Jensen are travel writers based in New York and Spain.



Rioja's dynamic architecture is evident in Frenchman Philippe Mazières' design of Viña Real Cuné. The building integrates all aspects of winemaking on two floors.



R. López de Heredia Viña Tondonia was built in 1877, but the recently added tasting room and shop are decidedly contemporary; award-winning architect Zaha Hadid is responsible for the bold concept.