

The Wines of Grandes Pagos de Espana



Last week I waxed poetic about some of the amazing wine values coming out of Spain. And while I still believe that Spanish wine represents some of the best quality-to-price ratios on the international wine market, there is a group of Spanish winemakers who are quietly raising the bar on quality and preparing to market their wares on the world stage.

Spain's best vineyards have historically always played a leading role in the country's wine culture. One clear example can be seen in the centuries-old appreciation shown for the best plots in Jerez, in southwest Spain. However, with the onset of the 19th century a great industrialization of wineries took place throughout the country. This led to dramatically high production levels often achieved using bought-in grapes from numerous sources. This process made cheap wine accessible to many but it also had a negative effect on the ultimate quality of wines.

In 2000, a group of single vineyard estate producers, each carefully crafting wines from their own grapes cultivated from single vineyard plots in the region of Castilla, agreed to band together to form the Grandes Pagos de Castilla. Their aim was to highlight the unique personality of wines made from the best vineyards and to promote the culture of single vineyard estates. In 2003, this non-profit organization became known as Grandes Pagos de España, with the goal of expanding and sharing their unique approach to winemaking.

Today, the Grandes Pagos de España (GPE) is an association of 29 Spanish wine producers dedicated to upholding and promoting very high quality single estate wine and all that is entailed in its production. Their member's wines faithfully reflect the soils, subsoils and climate from which they hail, each offering an unmistakable personality that can only be drawn from a specific terroir located throughout Spain. Perhaps their slogan sums it up best, "The Expression of Terroir in Every Bottle"!

In the heart of the Penedès in northeast Spain, the fifth generation of Gramona recently celebrated their 135th anniversary; a tribute to a winery that works magic with flavors and aromas dedicated to Cava has been uninterrupted since 1881. Produced using the method Champenois, the **2007 Gramona Lustros Cava** uses a dosage that is made from a secret family blend that includes grapes from a solera (think sourdough starter) dating back over 100 years and then is aged seven years (including nearly three years on the lees) before it is released. The result is a wine that features a nose that is full of fennel, white flowers and aromatic herbs, with hints of orange and Sherry. Flavors of rich Meyer lemon, ripe stone fruit, and toasty brioche are carried by fine bubbles on a richly textured frame. Reminiscent of a fine Champagne at twice the price. **\$50**

Bodegas Enrique Mendoza is located near the town of Alfàs Del Pi, about 45 miles from the city of Alicante. Most of the vineyards are located at an average of 1,200 feet of elevation, with some parcels as high as 2,100 feet. The **2011 Enrique Mendoza Estrecho** is made from 100 percent Monastrell and aged for 15 months in French Oak barrels. The resulting wine shows attractive aromas of red cherry, plum and wet slate. On the palate, the wine is soft and approachable with nice red berry and cherry flavors that are lifted up by refreshing acidity and an elegant finish. **\$35**

Nestled in the eastern corner of Spain in the commune of Catalonia, Mas Doix is a family winery well known for producing wines that reflect the characteristics of their vineyards. They produce wines that convey the classic and distinctive hallmark terroir of Priorat. The **2012 Mas Doix Salanques** is true to its environment, soil, and microclimate. Produce from a blend of Grenache, Carignan and Syrah and aged for 14 months in French oak, the wine exudes aromas of cassis, black fruit, and violets. Wonderfully integrated flavors of blackberry, sour cherry, black currants take on a warm, mellow quality as moves over the palate. The long finish displays hints of green peppercorn and dill, which accents more dark fruit, with elegance, balance and structure. **\$36**

The Finca Valpiedra (valley of stone) estate is situated in the best area of Rioja (and the only member from Rioja in the Grandes Pagos organization), in a spectacular bend on Ebro River. The exceptional qualities of this single vineyard site stems from the unique combination of soils (layers of limestone pebbles and stones) and microclimate. The stones in particular play a key role in wine quality as they act as a natural radiator, collecting sunshine throughout the day and then keeping the vines warm throughout the evening. I fell in love with steak sauce aromas in the **2009 Finca Valpiedra Reserva**. Made from a blend of Tempranillo, Graciano and Maturana Tinta, it has a fantastic super-savory umami quality on the front of the tongue, followed by plums, roasted meat, graphite and cassis. A touch of kumquat and herbs fill in the lengthy, luscious finish. **\$41**