

The Grapes of Spain

A decade and a half into the 21st century, it seems that the winemakers of Spain have finally reached that point where people know that the wines from Spain are quite good, and at times, even iconic. Unfortunately, while Spain's tourism sector has managed to sell the world quite well on it being a destination of sand, sun, good food, and siestas (which admittedly all of Southern Europe has) the winemaking sector hasn't been able to communicate that they have a great wealth of native grapes to make use. And this is despite their being in the top three highest producing wine countries in the world.

Indeed, if there is one grape the normal wine drinker will know is Spanish, it's the red, Tempranillo but after that, what else do people know? It's for this, as well as ease of viticulture that many French varieties made inroads during the second half of the 20th century. Winemakers didn't want to explain Monastrell when everyone already knew and was happy to drink Cabernet Sauvignon. Even though Syrah and Petit Verdot have shown good results, there are countless more vineyards of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot which have never made truly interesting wines.

In seeking to stand out in a crowded world of wine, many Spanish winemakers are taking stock of and returning to their native varieties. This has been made possible due to a more curious wine drinker as well as modern viticulture and winemaking practices. So, let's take a look at a few of the Spanish grapes that form the spine of Spanish wine.

White Grapes

Airén

This is a grape grown primarily in Castilla-La Mancha and unbeknown to many, it's actually Spain's most widely-planted grape, besting even Tempranillo with plantings at nearly 300,000ha! It comprises over 25% of all the vineyard plantings in Spain and covers more land than any other grape variety in the world. So why don't we see it on every wine list? It's for the simple reason that a tremendous portion of the production goes in making Spanish Brandy. Those grapes that do make it in to wine are typically quite light in body and while crisp, don't offer up much more than a glass of generic Spanish white wine. There are some producers who challenge that and via working with their old vines and barrel or amphora aging, have created wines with a bit more personality.

Albariño

For the white grapes, Albariño (or Alvarinho in neighboring Portugal) has made good headway in terms of recognition and the vines have even been exported out of the country and planted around the world including along the Pacific Coast of the US. Its native home straddles the very top of Portugal and Galicia with Rias Baixas having good name recognition these days. In terms of flavor, it can run over a large range and will often be both fruity and floral with honeysuckle and peach notes, but green apple is not uncommon either. Whichever direction the flavor profile leans, pronounced acidity is common as well as salinity.

Albillo Real

A grape from the center of Spain that's been making a resurgence as a varietal wine in recent years, it's something of an underdog. While it used to be widely-regarded as just a table grape, there are now producers in DO Méntrida, DO Vinos de Madrid, and VdT Castilla y León making excellent, highly-aromatic wines from this grape that tend to have a very full mouthfeel. Other wineries in Ribera del

Duero have even taken a page out of the Côte Rôtie playbook by adding up to 5% of Albillo to some of their Tempranillo wines for an added aromatic lift.

Garnacha Blanca

Like its red variant, Garnacha Negra, the white version has spread far and wide albeit usually known by its French name, Grenache Blanc. It's actually found more outside of Spain (where there are just over 2,000ha), especially in France which has 5,000ha all in the south. Of course it should be noted that of that total in Spain, there are often other more obscure grapes classified as Garnacha Blanca due to oversimplified vineyard assessments in the early 20th century. In general, it is often blended as the high alcohol can stand to be brought a bit in line with other grapes, especially Macabeu. That said, when properly worked, it can stand up very well to barrel aging and the wineries of DO Terra Alta in Catalonia (where it is also known as *vernatxa blanca*) are producing some of the best varietal wines of the grape with taught minerality, plenty of body, and ripe green fruit.

Godello

This grape is a bit complicated and while its profile has risen quickly within the sommelier community, it's still at something of a crossroads in terms of its definition. Its homeland is Galicia but it can be found under several synonyms throughout the Iberian Peninsula. While it can take well to barrel aging and be refined and 'mineral' it can also be rather undefined and neutral. Newer styles are taking on more floral interpretations that are more vibrant and energetic. The revival of this grape in Spain is just 30 years old at this point so the evolution will undoubtedly continue.

Macabeu

Generally considered to be native the region of Catalonia, this grape can also be spelled Macabeo or be found under the alternate name used in Rioja, Viura. It dominates white grape plantings in Northern Spain, mainly due to the vast plantings existing in Penedès where it is used as part of the traditional Cava blends as well as for DO Penedès still wines. While young still wines tend to be lightly aromatic, low-production bush vines in Rioja can produce white wines that will age for many years such as the iconic, Viña Tondonia. The grape has made inroads to France as well in the Roussillon area where they've had great success blending it with White Grenache and White Carignan (all from the Aragón/Catalonia region originally) although in French it has the rather amusing pronunciation of 'ma-cah-BUH' instead of 'ma-cah-bay-u'.

Palomino Fino

Often people don't know this grape but they'll know the style of wine largely made from it, which is Sherry. One of the three authorized grapes for Sherry production (the other two being Moscatel and Pedro Ximénez) it dominates the vineyards of the 'Sherry Triangle'. With nearly 14,000ha in plantings, the Canary Islands are the only other place in Spain to come close with their 9,000ha although the grape there is known under the synonym Listán Blanco, which is **not** a mutation of Listán Negro. For Sherry production, the oxidative nature of the grape is ideal but for a varietal wine it can come up a bit short, neutral, and at times needs acidification.

Xarel·lo

As the interpunct (or *punt volat* in Catalan) isn't readily-found on most keyboards, you will often find this grape written as Xarel-lo, Xarel.lo, or Xarello. The · is important as it makes the pronunciation become two l's instead of the Spanish, 'll' letter that's equivalent to the Portuguese 'lh'. Given that the interpunct is used in the Catalan language, it's easy to guess that the grape is originally from the region of Catalonia and 99% of all the vineyards in Spain are in Catalonia. There, the grape is used heavily for

Cava production, often being blended with Macabeu and Parellada but also often produced as a varietal wine in both sparkling and still versions. With excellent body and acidity it can at times be overpowering in terms of fruit but lovely varietal still wines are being crafted using stainless steel, oak barrel, amphora, and concrete egg aging both with selected and ambient yeast fermentation.

Verdejo

Not to be confused with verdelho, grown mainly in the Madeira island, Verdejo is thought to originate in North Africa and has made its modern home in DO Rueda and Castilla y León. Highly aromatic, varietal wines are common in DO Rueda where wines labeled 'Rueda Verdejo' must contain at least 85% of the grape although many are 100%. Aromas can include notes of bay leaf and bitter almonds which can also come through on the finish.

Red Grapes

Bobal

A quite serious grape in terms of production, there are around 90,000ha in Spain. These vineyards are concentrated in the Valencia and Castilla-La Mancha regions but both historically and currently, most of it is sold off as bulk wine. The grape responds well to cultivation over 700m in elevation and several wineries have been trying to work the grape in to more elegant varietal wines. Generally smooth in the mouth, it holds less alcohol than other grapes in Spain (often 11%) and retains its acidity well.

Mazuelo/Cariñena/Samsó/Carinyena

This poor grape has been abused by naming rights in Spain due to there being DO Cariñena in Aragón, the logical point of origin of the grape. Due to this, the name Cariñena or its Catalan version Carinyena can't be used and you'll see it generally labeled as Mazuelo. The Catalans would rather use their original name, Carinyena but as it's been forbidden, you'll find it written as Samsó. This is theoretically an old name for the grape as well, but it unfortunately sounds like the French, Cinsaut grape despite being unrelated. Some producers use variations such as *Caranyena*. In English we usually use the French name, Carignan which is ironic as it's specifically in the Languedoc where the grape earned a poor reputation due to their making flabby, weak wines for years as the grape will easily overproduce. In its ancestral home, the grape has fared much better, especially in terms of old bush vines in Catalonia where the wines carry good acidity and floral notes, verging on light violets in the best examples. Often thought to be 'only for blending', this is being proven wrong with numerous varietal wines being produced these days although there are still excellent blends between it and Garnacha.

Garnacha/Garnatxa

Tempranillo gets the glory for producing great wines and if most people were asked, they'd think that Garnacha is a French grape due to the fame of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas, and others in the Rhône Valley. Spelled Garnatxa in Catalan, it is actually from Catalonia/Aragón and is the third most planted red variety in Spain (after Tempranillo and Bobal). It has countless mutations including: Garnacha/Garnatxa Blanca, Garnatxa Peluda (Hairy Grenache), Garnatxa Roja (Grey Grenache), and a few more. Thankfully more winemakers are starting to see it as a quality grape capable of producing excellent varietal wines due to the bottles that started emerging in the 1990s from Priorat, Catalonia. Very much red fruit driven, it can have exceedingly high alcohol (15.5% or even 16% is typical) although this depends on the region as the higher-altitude vineyards in DO Méntrida can produce much lighter wines in terms of body, color, and alcohol.

Mencía

Found mostly in northwestern Spain, this grape has seen a large resurgence due to the popularity of the wines from DO Bierzo although it can also be found in DO Valdeorras and DO Ribeira Sacra as well. The initial attraction was to the fact it produced light, aromatic wines but this has been changing as denser, higher-alcohol wines have been emerging given that winemakers are learning more over time. Due to this, taste profiles can vary wildly but it is generally found to have red cherry and herbal notes.

Monastrell

Long thought to be an ancient grape brought to Spain by the Phoenicians in 500 BCE, there is no way to fully prove this, but documentation has been found dating it back to at least the 14th century in the Empordà county of Catalonia. Most people won't know it by this name, though, as it's either referred to by the rather difficult to pronounce French name, Mourvèdre or then the name used in Australia which, for some curious reason is the other old Catalan name, Mataró. In coastal Penedès it is also known as Garrut. It sits just behind Garnacha in terms of overall plantings with the highest concentration in Murcia. Often rustic in character, varietal bottles are becoming much more common and show a good balance of the high alcohol, tannins, and blackberry notes.

Tempranillo

This is it, **the** Spanish grape and why not? Despite being most famous in the wines from Rioja, you can find it just about everywhere in the country under countless different names from Jacibiera or Cencibel in Castilla-La Mancha to Tinta del País in Ribera del Duero to Ull de Llebre in Catalonia. Over 200,000ha are planted with the grape mainly due to the fact it's very pliable. At its most basic, it holds red fruit notes such as strawberry but can also develop spice, tobacco, and leather notes depending on the aging regimen. The wines from Ribera del Duero tend to be a bit denser than those in Rioja and can be full varietal wines but overall, given its generally neutral aromatic profile it takes well to blending with other grapes such as Garnacha and Mazuelo to give it a bit more zing than it has inherently.

Trepat

What was once a relatively unknown, rustic grape in Catalonia (also known as Bonicaire in the Murcia region) has been recuperated at a fast pace. Initially, it was popular for making rosé wines as well as going in to Cava production but this has eventually given way to pale reds, and now deeper, more profound reds that, despite their overall lightness show good potential to age. The wines are dominated by fresh red berries and hold excellent levels of acidity. A great deal of effort is being put behind the promotion of this grape, specifically in DO Conca de Barberà of Catalonia, so it's one to watch.

More Discoveries

There are of course many more grapes out there waiting to be discovered but this a sample of the main native grapes in Spain that you'll find as well as a few up-and-comers to keep a lookout for. Just keep in mind that if you encounter a Spanish grape you haven't heard of before (Prieto Picudo, Sumoll, Manto Negro, Callet, Morenillo to name a few) give it a try as it means that someone thought well enough of it to make a wine instead of just 'going French' although as you can see, a lot of France has actually 'gone Spain.'