



*The Hotel Abadia Retuerta Le Domaine, a former monastery, is situated on the Duero River,*

## Spanish Wine Tour

### PART 1: RIBERA DEL DUERO WINE COUNTRY

AFTER OUR WHIRLWIND TRIP around Jerez de la Frontera, we flew to Madrid and picked up the rest of our guests. We motored north to my favorite Spanish wine region—Ribera del Duero. Our first visit was to Lopez Cristobal Winery, a small and relatively new family winery. We were all pleased with the stunning architecture and the wines. After the tour with winery president Francisco Lopez, we were treated to a tasting of the winery's best reds and whites, accompanied by a nice assortment of tapas. This was a very pleasant visit to start our Iberian adventure.

Our next stop was at one of my favorite Spanish bodegas. For almost 40 years, Pesquera has been one of Spain's most famous wineries. This

bodega rose meteorically in 1972 when Robert Parker mentioned it in the same category as First Growth Bordeaux. Although somewhat exaggerated in this placement in my opinion, it has been in my top echelon of Spanish wines since this time. The winery produces a Crianza each year, a Reserva most years, a Gran Reserva several times per decade, and Janus once per decade on average. These wines are excellent values, and I believe are some of the best wines possible with roasted chicken, roasted suckling pig, wild boar, lamb, and beef. We had a short tour and were treated to the Alejairén made from the white grape Arien which was yellow, fresh, and lemony with slight oakiness. This was followed by the current Pesquera Crianza 2016 and Reserva 2012. Both were excellent examples



*Fan D'Oro 2017 Chardonnay, Reserva Especial 2014, and Gran Reserva 2009 Tinto.*





The wines served at Lopez Cristobal Winery.

of Tempranillo from this region. Both wines show plum, currant, berry flavors, and some oak tannins. The soft tannins of the Crianza 2016 made me wish for a roasted chicken while the bolder Reserva 2012 begged for a lamb or beef dish.

We bid farewell to our hostess at Pesquera and motored to our next stop, the Hotel Abadia Retuerta Le Domaine situated on the Duero River. This is a converted monastery from the 12th century and is a world-class hotel. It is owned by the famous pharmaceutical firm Novartis, but remains at arms-length from its principal business. Although as a consultant, I managed the integration of its two predecessor companies' back offices in 1996-97, I had no idea this was part of the firm.


Once we checked in, we left in two Range

Rovers for an extensive tour of the property from its highest point. The vineyards sloping down the hills towards the hotel were stunningly beautiful in the soft evening light. We stopped en route to the hotel so we could sample some of the luscious Tempranillo and Syrah grapes, followed by a wine tasting at the winery. We finished the day with an outstanding meal at the Vineoteca in our hotel. The food and wines were superlative.

The next day we went to the Emilio Moro winery for a short tour and a tasting of several wines: The Emilio Moro 2015, the entry level Tempranillo true to varietal characteristics followed by three top wines; Malleolus 2013 made from small vineyard plots of 25-75 years, fermented in stainless steel and matured in new French oak barrels;

and Malleolus de Valdarremo 2014, the oakiest wine from 90-year-old vines (ranked the 7th highest rated wine in the world in one review). All the wines tasted were very good, but with too much oak influence for my taste.

We went to lunch at Arzuaga Winery starting with the Fan D'Oro, a cask-fermented 100% Chardonnay with minor levels of oak to add some richness. What followed was my favorite meal of the entire trip—baby lamb roasted over an open fire. This was the most succulent lamb I have ever had, and I honestly believe I ate at least two pounds of this irresistible meal. In fact, I don't even remember what was served with it, except for the two wines and memorable they were. We started with the Reserva Especial 2014 which is 100% Tempranillo from 80-year-old vines. The resulting grapes are low in yield and high in concentration. Fermentation takes place in wooden barrels with malolactic fermentation occurring in new French barrels. The wine was beguiling and evolved beautifully during the hour and half it was served. The other wine served alongside this wine was the Gran Reserva 2009 made from 80-year-old Tempranillo combined with small amounts of Merlot and Albilla from younger vines.

This combination of structure and complexity of the old together with the freshness and liveliness of the young was fantastic and went with the main course, as well as cheese. This lunch sent us back to the hotel for a true Spanish siesta. After this fantastic lunch at Arzuaga, dinner at the hotel was late, light, very good, and over-matched by excellent wines. *À Votre Santé!* 



Tempranillo grapes from Ribera del Duero.



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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