

Exploring Castilla y León

Located in northwest Spain, this large region is home to a diverse selection of grapes and wine styles. David Williams takes a tour, from Ribera del Duero to Rueda, and recommends wines to try

Castilla y León is one of Europe's greatest cultural centres. The region, which covers a vast chunk of northwestern Spain – from just north of Madrid, in the centre of the country, to Galicia in the far northwest, and from Rioja in the east to Portugal in the west – is home to no less than nine

UNESCO World Heritage sites. It's a land of sometimes-breathtaking Roman, medieval and prehistoric sites.

Here visitors will discover one of the world's finest gothic cathedrals (Burgos), as well as one of the world's oldest, most respected universities (Salamanca, which was founded in the 12th century) and, in Salamanca, Segovia and Avila, some of Spain's most atmospherically historic cities. There are also a host – literally hundreds – of noteworthy galleries, castles and museums.

But it's not just in the fields of history, art and architecture, where Castilla y León's cultural richness is found. As any visitor to the region learns soon enough, it is also one of Europe's most important viticultural centres, with an outsized share of Spain's (and Europe's) most exciting contemporary wine producers.

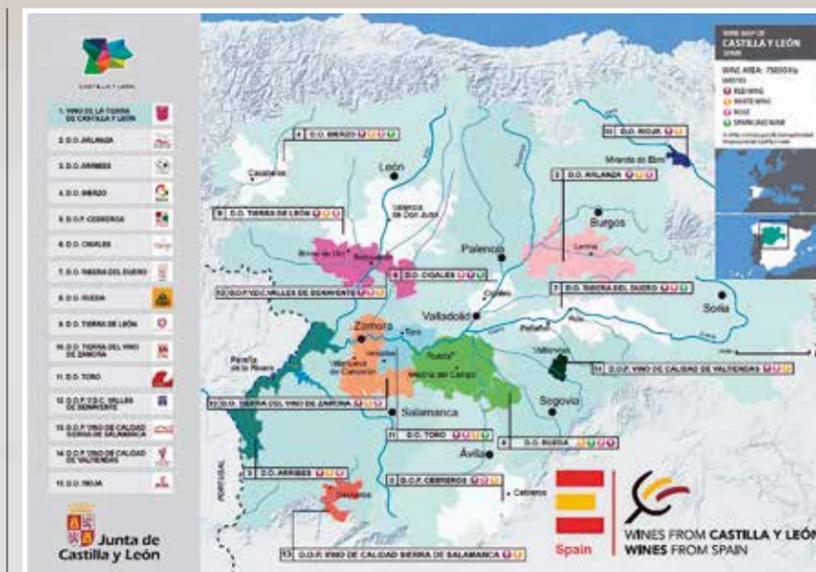
Looking back

Of course, as ever in Europe, the history of wine in Castilla y León is inseparable from the region's wider history. It reaches back at

least as far as the 1st century BCE, and to the early centuries AD, when wines of the region were in wide circulation – and high repute – in the Roman world. The vine continued to spread even once the Romans had left, and by the 6th century, religious orders had begun to set up throughout the region. It was the monks of, among other orders, Cluny, who, as in Burgundy, brought a range of new ideas about vine cultivation and production across the region in the following centuries.

By the 12th century, wine was firmly established as one of the most significant pillars of the local economy throughout the region, with its wines amongst the most favoured of various European courts – a position it maintained right up until the phylloxera crisis of the late 19th century. As with neighbouring Rioja, the crisis was initially a boon for winemakers throughout Castilla y León, with desperate French wine traders, their vineyards decimated by the louse, coming to Spain to find an alternative source of wine.

The arrival of the French brought new ideas and in many cases higher quality to Castilla y León's cellars. But, although pockets of vines on sandy soils in higher altitudes survived (and, in some cases, are still producing astonishing wines ➤



Castilla y León: the wine regions

Denominación de Origen
 Arlanza
 Arribes
 Bierzo
 Cigales
 Ribera del Duero
 Rueda
 Tierra del Vino de Zamora
 Toro

Denominación de Origen Protegida Vino de Calidad con Indicación Geográfica
 Cebreros
 Sierra de Salamanca
 Valles de Benavente
 Valtiendas
Vino de la Tierra de Castilla y León

Castilla y León at a glance

Total area of region:
94,226km²
Total vineyard:
75,000ha
Top three grapes by plantings:
 Tempranillo (65%)
 Verdejo (11%)
 Mencía (8%)



today), the louse destroyed many of the region's vineyards once it followed those traders south of the Pyrenees. For much of the tumultuous century that followed, production in Castilla y León was mostly concerned with quantity rather than quality.

That all began to change in the 1970s and 1980s, when Castilla y León became one of the epicentres of a new wave of Spanish winemaking, and when a generation of innovative, talented, cosmopolitan winemakers looked to unleash the true potential of the region's terroirs – a cultural ferment that is still very much in action, and still producing new styles and stars, today.



Museo Provincial del Vino, Peñafiel

Diverse DOs

Of course, while there are some superbly ambitious wines being made within the looser regulatory and liberal varietal framework of the region-wide *Vino de la Tierra* Castilla y León designation (first introduced in 2005), it's the names of the

region's many and varied DOs that will likely resonate most deeply with the world's wine lovers.

'Many' and 'varied' are certainly the operative words here. Although this part of the world is sometimes stereotyped as Big Red Wine country,

Williams recommends 12 Castilla y León wines

① Ermita del Conde, Albillo Mayor, *Vino de la Tierra de Castilla y León* 2016 93

£11.03 **Vinissimus**
Made from 100-year-old-plus vines of the exceptionally rare local variety, Albillo Mayor, planted at 972m above sea level, this is an intensely complex, dry white with layers of yellow plum and soft toasty oak leading into a fascinatingly textured palate that is charged with mineral freshness. Long, ageworthy, fascinatingly original. **Drink** 2020-2026 **Alcohol** 13%

② José Pariente, *Verdejo Fermentado Barrica, Rueda* 2018 90

£13.14 **Vinissimus**
Like the Sauvignon Blanc with which it is often compared, Verdejo is generally made in a fresh, youthful style, but it also takes well to sensitive oak ageing. This is very nicely done, with the natural exotic fruit notes and tang complemented and deepened by 10 months of French oak. **Drink** 2020-2025 **Alc** 13.5%

③ Pardevalles, *Rosado Prieto Picudo, León* 2019 88

£7.90 **Vinissimus**
A gastronomic rosé that has depth and character. A nip of food-friendly tannin and spice alongside ripe berry fruit and some balancing acidity. A wine for those who don't always want our pinks pale and pastel. **Drink** 2020-2021 **Alc** 13.5%

④ Abadía de Acón, *Ribera del Duero Gran Reserva* 2009 93

24.95 (2012) **Castelnau**
A red wine of grand scope and scale that still tastes remarkably young, the structure still very much in place with satisfyingly firm tannins and intense dark blackberry Tempranillo fruit, the mouth filling up, too, with a swirl of mature oak savouriness, baking spice, chocolate and coffee grains. Impressive. **Drink** 2020-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

⑤ Arzuaga Navarro, *Ribera del Duero Reserva Especial* 2015 93

£49.90 **Gourmet Hunters**
The fruit of 90-year-old Tempranillo vines is aged for 24 months in new French oak,

and it's all knitting together nicely five years down the line. A distinctly savoury feel to the flavours, a brothy umami tang that comes through on the long finish, after the soft, mature red and black fruit and the smoothly rendered tannins. **Drink** 2020-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

⑥ Hermanos Perez Pascuas, *Ribera del Duero Gran Reserva* 2012 93

£58 (2009) **Street Wines**
Wonderfully composed and mellow as it is, with beautifully integrated oak, this gran reserva teems with life beneath the surface, the dark inky fruit still lively with balancing freshness along with notes of leather, meaty savouriness and black



the individual DOs in fact cover a remarkably wide variety of styles.

Anyone looking for red wines of awesome brooding power and depth will find much to enjoy in Castilla y León. But these are only one (albeit highly significant) part of a picture that makes full use of the red-wine spectrum, from the deep and dark through the succulent and easy-drinking to the aromatically pretty and silky – as well as taking in a full range of whites from the aromatically crisp to the gastronomically rich and structured. The scene also includes rosés that can be both intensely deep-coloured and flavoured or lighter and prettier in a modern style.

Around the regions

A tour of Castilla y León's modern wine culture would likely start in the DO that was quickest to gain an international reputation back in the 1980s: Ribera del Duero.

Like many parts of Castilla y León, Ribera del Duero is a land of Tempranillo – although it's the local variant known as Tinto Fino or Tinta del País that is planted in the vineyards which follow the upper valley of the Duero River. The thick-skinned, early-ripening Tinto Fino thrives here, thanks in no small part to the altitude. High up on the Central Iberian plateau, vineyards are planted at between 700m and 850m above sea

level. That brings a moderating, brightness-preserving nighttime cool to the otherwise hot summer days in this classically continental climate, yielding juice of vivid black-fruited intensity with a wonderful balancing freshness.

Those raw materials make wines of great variety, depending on the producer's intention: the intensity of the fruit marries well with the softening effects and flavours of high-quality oak in gran reserva and reserva styles, but can be just as good with minimal oak ageing (or entirely unadorned) in vibrant, youthful roble and joven wines (some 'natural') – an easy exuberance that's also apparent in the area's rosados. ➤

olive. A very satisfying winter evening wine. **Drink** 2020-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

⑦ Rico Nuevo Viticultores, *Jirón de Niebla, Cebreros* 2018 93

£27.93 **Decantalo**
From north-facing vines planted at around 1,000m in the Sierra de Gredos mountains, this is a superb example of the pale, haunting, red-fruited, silk-textured style of modern Spanish Garnacha. Subtle notes of aniseed, red plum and wild strawberry fill the fluent palate, and there's a wave of freshness on the long finish. **Drink** 2020-2030 **Alc** 14%

⑧ Pago de los Capellanes, *Ribera del Duero Reserva* 2016 93

£31.86 **Gourmet Hunters**
A smart, super-slick and stylish example

of modern Ribera del Duero from one of the region's leading producers, the expensive oak is seamlessly woven in with the pure and true Tempranillo fruit – all intense mulberry and blackberry, but with complexing layers of sweet spice and hints of something savoury to come as it ages for at least a decade. **Drink** 2020-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

⑨ Bodegas Fariña, *Gran Colegiata Original, Toro* 2014 92

£18.90 **Vinissimus**
A deep, dark and brooding example of the local Tinta de Toro variant of Tempranillo that manages to retain a sense of proportion and drinkability among the layers of inky blackberry fruit, tannic grip and vanilla toastiness – an agile quality which is no doubt

thanks to the 60-year-old *pie franco* (own root) vines. **Drink** 2020-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

⑩ Bodegas y Viñedos Luna Beberide, *Finca Luna Beberide, Bierzo* 2018 91

£8.95 **Vinissimus**
Made with fruit from 60-year-old vines, this is a beautiful expression of Bierzo Mencía that showcases the variety's ability to conjure floral fragrance, with intense and fleshy fruit flavour – in this case black cherry. There's also a mix of satiny cherry skin texture on the palate and a hint of dark plum skin tang. **Drink** 2020-2026 **Alc** 13.5%

⑪ José Antonio García, *Unculín Mencía, Bierzo* 2019 91

£7.90 **Carte Blanche Wines**
US stockists: De Maison Selections
Made from 85% Mencía mixed with a hotchpotch of local indigenous varieties, this is a beautifully harmonious and agile lighter red that is filled with red fruit and peppery spice. Has a natural drinkability and freshness but also plenty of flavoursome depths. A true original. **Drink** 2020-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

⑫ Malcaracter, *Ribera del Duero* 2017 91

£15.95 www.goodwineonline.co.uk
An effortless, succulent, supple and natural take on Tinta Fina (aka Tempranillo) that puts the emphasis on fresh-fruited drinkability, with lithe tannins and fresh acidity and a splash of spice-inflected blackberry fruit. **Drink** 2020-2023 **Alc** 13%



Tinto Fino/Tinta del País – often from very old vines – is also the principal variety in Ribera del Duero’s small, rising-star neighbouring DOs of Cigales and Arlanza, both of which produce wines of similar verve, intensity and ageability. But it’s another local variant of Tempranillo, Tinta de Toro, which is the principal ingredient in Toro, further west along the Duero Valley towards Portugal.

Once again, the extremity of the continental climate ensures very hot days. Any maritime influence from the Atlantic is shielded by the Cantabrian Mountains to the north, and the plateau is also bound by the Central Mountain ranges to the south. Meanwhile a relatively short growing season is leavened by the effects of altitude – a slightly more modest 600m to 750m above sea level.

Although recent years have seen a highly successful movement away from excesses of tannin or alcohol in the DO, Toro is unashamedly powerful and rich – dramatic wines that speak eloquently of the place where they are made.

The wines of León

Located some 200km north of the Duero Valley, Bierzo, up near the border with Galicia, in León has a completely different feel. Here in the vineyards around the River Sil, a tributary of the Miño River, the Atlantic Ocean makes its presence felt with a milder, wetter climate, and the grape variety that rules the local roost is Mencía.

Once considered an everyday red grape capable of producing pleasantly refreshing light red wines but nothing more, in the 21st century Mencía has become one of Spain’s most fashionable varieties – delivering wines of vibrant red and black berry and cherry fruit, boasting pretty floral and herbal fragrance, along with crisp, mineral, almost racy acidity (like the Cabernet Franc with which it is often compared).

While not yet matching Mencía for plantings or international attention, León’s other red trump card when it comes to varieties is Prieto Picudo. Another thick-skinned grape, it has traditionally been used to add pigment to blends, its deep colour also lending itself to a vivacious style of rosé. But winemakers in the León DO have been making increasingly impressive solo reds, which have a blackberry-juicy vivacity all their own.



Vineyards in Bierzo



Verdejo

Old vines and new wave

Further south, meanwhile, the Castilla y León region also lays claim to one of the most influential sites in Spain’s 21st century old-vine Garnacha revival. In the high-altitude (up to 1,200m above sea level) Cebreros to the south of Avila in the Gredos Mountains, a tiny DOP of small producers is creating Garnachas from vines grown on steep slate slopes with a haunting, pale, Pinot Noir-esque feel (*for more on Cebreros see p38*).

Those same producers are also making some of Spain’s most intriguing new-wave whites from Albillo Real: wines of fascinating texture and distinctive savoury and herbal character. Other rising-star white varieties to look out for include fragrant, saline-mineral Godello in Bierzo and floral yet tangy Malvasia, which is often blended with Albillo and Verdejo, in the relatively recently created

(2007) Arribes DO, right up on the border with Portugal.

But for now the indigenous white variety with the highest reputation in Castilla y León is the exotically aromatic Verdejo. All but synonymous with the Rueda DO located along the Duero Valley to the west of Ribera del Duero, where it is perfectly adapted to the poor soils and the extremes of the continental climate, Verdejo has played a crucial role in the development of modern Spanish white winemaking.

It’s hugely versatile: some winemakers prefer cold fermentations and no oak to play up its fresh, tropically fruited aromatic qualities; others choose to ferment and age in oak for a richer, Spanish Graves-like style; in recent years, there has been a great deal of experimentation with extended skin and (especially) lees contact, and concrete, clay, glass, even granite fermentation vessels. But then, experimentation – always with an eye on tradition – is very much in the blood throughout Castilla y León, the heart of Spanish wine culture.



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