

The realm of Rueda



RUEDA is one of the five *Denominación de Origen* (DO) wine regions in *Castilla y León* (usually known as Castile in English). The name of the region is derived from *castillo*, the Spanish word for castle. Certainly the largest concentration of castles in Spain can still be found here. In the 10th and 11th centuries, this was a battleground between the Moors and the Christians, and towns were fortified for protection. However, most of the surviving castles in this region were built as palatial residences after the 'Reconquest' when there was no military purpose. The DO extends 75 km in an east-west direction and 60 km north-south. The town of Rueda, located in the northern part of the region, is 45 km south of the city of Valladolid. The northern boundary of the DO is just 15 km south-west of that city.

Vines have been grown in Rueda from the Middle Ages and, since early times, local varieties have been used to produce a fully oxidised, sherry-style wine. Initially this may have been because the traditional source of this type of wine, Andalusia in the south of Spain, was in the hands of the Moors until the late 1400s. Verdejo was one of the local grape varieties and, because it oxidises readily, it was well suited to this wine style. By the time phylloxera arrived in the 19th century there had been a greatly reduced demand for this local wine because Andalusian sherry had taken over the market. As a result, during most of the 20th century, the higher-yielding Palomino was used for replanting at the expense of Verdejo. The wine industry of the region stagnated until the 1970s: up to that time it only produced lightly fortified wines, mainly from Palomino. A major change in direction came about when a Rioja-based company, Bodegas Marques de Riscal, recognised the region's potential for dry



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Vineyards of the World

white table wine. As a result of the success of table wine from Verdejo, the region was awarded DO status in 1980.

Today there are a total of 7,000 ha made up of the white wine varieties Verdejo (3,000 ha), Viura [= Macabeo] (1,300 ha), Palomino (1,000 ha), Sauvignon Blanc (400 ha), together with 1,000 ha of Tempranillo for red wine and rosé. The area of Palomino has decreased substantially in recent times, largely at the expense of Verdejo and Sauvignon Blanc (introduced in the early 1980s).

The landscape is flat to moderately undulating. Vineyards tend to be scattered among fields used for cereals and grazing. Due to the high elevation of the vineyards (up to 900 metres), winters are very cold and minimum temperatures during the growing season are relatively low. In other respects, the climate is similar to that of the Ribera del Duero region¹. Soils are sandy and chalky, often with gravel throughout the profile and on the surface. In the northern half of the region, soils tend to be alluvial over limestone whereas in the south, sandy clay over sandstone dominates.

¹ See volume 17(2) of this *Journal* for information on the climate of Ribera del Duero

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In general, soils are very deep which means that with irrigation there is a tendency for vines to become excessively vigorous.

Traditionally, vines have been grown without trellises as 'bush' vines at spacings of 3 metres \times 3 metres. The bush vines were originally trained with very low heads, virtually at ground level. This facilitated the former practice of burying vines to reduce risk of cold injury in winter. Moreover, they were kept covered until after the risk of severe frost had passed. However, most new vineyards have been trellised (VSP) at a spacing of 3.0 metre row \times 1.5 metre vine. With the exception of Verdejo, spur pruning is the standard in both cases: this is relatively severe at 16 nodes per vine. Verdejo tends to have low fruitfulness at basal nodes so bush vines typically have 4 \times 6 node short canes plus 4 replacement spurs. When trellised, Verdejo has a combination of spurs and canes on cordons with up to 30 nodes per vine (this includes the new 'Yuste' system developed specifically for this variety).

Trellised vines are cordon-trained with a single fruiting wire at 50–60 cm plus one or two pairs of moveable or fixed foliage wires. Trellis posts are 1.5 to 1.8 metres out of the ground. Summer pruning is practised in some trellised vine-

yards with shoot thinning at the end of May, shoot trimming and some leaf removal in the bunch zone. The use of bunch thinning is increasing. The most common rootstocks are 110R and 41B.

Budburst is typically at the beginning of April with harvest in the third week of September at 12–12.5°C. To reduce the tendency of Verdejo to oxidise, it is often hand-picked in the early morning before sunrise and protected with inert gas. The yield limit of the DO is 9 tonnes/ha. As in the other regions of Spain, the amount and timing of irrigation is regulated by a local committee. In practice it is said to be the yield limit which tends to regulate the amount of irrigation applied.

Most new vineyards have irrigation installed but the amount applied in mature vineyards is normally less than 100 mm. Clean cultivation is the most common method of soil management due to a combination of low growing season rainfall and high frost risk. Verdejo is a variety with a very sprawling growth habit and shoots are readily broken by wind.

The main production of Rueda is a light, fruity, dry white wine. It may be a blend of Viura and Verdejo but the latter must be more than 50% of the blend to have DO status. Rueda Superior must have at least 85% Verdejo: the wine is aromatic with good extract and a distinctive slight bitterness on the palate, and capable of ageing well.

Fortified wine (made from Verdejo or Palomino) is still produced but production is declining. Rueda Pálido has a minimum alcohol content of 14% (in style it is similar to flor fino sherry). Rueda Dorado has a higher alcohol content.

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