



The wine regions of Spain: Málaga

by Great British Chefs

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Rachel McCormack visits a vineyard in Málaga's Axarquía mountains to learn more about its award-winning sweet wine and the history of such a thriving wine region. Photography by Jason Orton


Great British Chefs
 Great British Chefs is a team of passionate food lovers dedicated to bringing you the latest food stories, news and reviews.

David Dupuch did warn me that it was a winding, mountainous road, but I didn't expect a dizzying, practically vertical, drive to winemaker Telmo Rodríguez's smallest vineyard in the Axarquía mountains. 'It is quite steep,' David admits. The vineyards here are on land that is so steep that all the grapes have to be picked and carried by hand. 'You can't even get a donkey down there,' he says, pointing to a vineyard on a slope that would give a black run on a ski resort envy. 'The pickers have to load their grapes onto their backs and transport them, so our grapes are very precious. The grape is Moscatel de Alejandría (Alexandria Muscat), one of two grapes permitted to make Málaga wine.

One of Spain's great fortified wines, its grapes have been grown in this area since the Phoenicians arrived in the sixth century BC. The Romans vastly expanded the vine growing and created a wine industry, and during the Moorish reign the grapes were turned into the Málaga raisin, which is still famous today and has geographically protected status. After the Reconquest the wine industry had an injection of life and sweet Málaga wine became famous, firstly throughout Spain and then beyond. In 1791, after receiving a gift of Málaga wine from the Spanish ambassador, the Russian empress Catherine the Great liked it so much that she banned any taxes being placed on Málaga wine coming into Russia.

But in 1878, the phylloxera bug arrived there and destroyed most of the vines, as it did for so many European wine regions. Sweet Málaga wine went into decline and only began to recover in the very late twentieth century. That recovery was spearheaded by Telmo Rodríguez, one of the great Spanish winemakers, who, in the mid 1990s, decided to create a winery in the Axarquía mountains. 'I hadn't long finished my wine studies and had been doing some work near my home in Bordeaux when I got a phone call to tell me I had been put forward for a job setting up a vineyard in the mountains in Spain for Telmo Rodríguez,' winemaker David Dupuch tells me. 'I thought I would maybe do that for a couple of years, and here I am more than 25 years later.' He initially started working inside the Almirajara bodega just next door. 'You can't just arrive in a place like this and buy grapes and make wine,' he says. 'You have to work with someone from here who knows the farmers, the land and how the local culture works. So in 1996 we made two barrels of Moscatel to see what these grapes could do.' The next year they made 200 bottles, and they now have their own winery next door to Almirajara.



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This tiny winery, which from the outside looks like a fancy shed, is now producing some of the best wines in Spain. The range of sweet wines is called Mountain Wine, partly due to journalist and author Hugh Johnson's comment that the best wine he ever had was old Mountain Wine from Málaga, and it regularly wins best sweet wine in Spain in wine competitions. This is a tiny production and sales across the world are strictly allocated due to increasing demand for one of the best sweet wines available outstripping supply. On site, David is the winemaker, winery manager, filler of barrels, tour guide, dryer of grapes and everything and anything else that needs to be done in the winery. The day I visited, a small group of women from the village were labelling the dry Mountain Blanco wine bottles, so David's job was to move the bottles around on trolleys to enable the work.

The grapes which make the wine are often from old vines that have been used for the raisins – farmers here make most of their living planting avocado trees and the vines are an extra. Once picked, they are dried in the sun at the winery and then used to make the sweet wines. The younger, lighter Moscatel bottlings are called MR, while the wine which is aged longer in French oak barrels is Molino Real. Outside of the core range, David still gets to experiment with different types of fermentation and barrel-ageing to see what else can be made – pretty good for a man who initially arrived in Spain to work for a year or two more than twenty-five years ago. 'I love this,' he says, while tasting his own wine. 'That's the thing about working here using these grapes. In a well-known French winery back home what you have to do is keep everything the same. Here, we have to do everything new and that has been really rewarding.' And, for that, wine drinkers around the world who manage to get their hands on the Mountain Wine of Málaga are extremely grateful.

Other not so well known D.O.s in Andalusia:

Sierras de Málaga: The sister to the Málaga D.O, Sierras de Málaga was created in 2001 to manage the explosion in unfortified wines being made in the area. One of the fastest growing and most exciting wine regions of Spain, the production tends heavily towards white wine using the indigenous Moscatel de Alejandría while the red wine production uses both national and international varieties.

Condado de Huelva: This is the most westerly D.O. in Andalusia. The white wines made in Condado de Huelva are mostly made with the indigenous Zelema while the tiny red wine production, permitted since 2009 tends towards Syrah blends. Better known for the fortified wine, vinos generosos, aged for a minimum of three years, the two types are called Condado Palido and Condado Viejo.

Granada: One of the newest D.O.s in Spain, created in 2018, D.O. Granada boasts the most days of sun of any wine region in Spain. There is an emphasis on using indigenous white grapes such as Vijariego, Verdejo and Pedro Ximenez while the red wine production uses mostly national varieties such as Garnacha.

Montilla-Morilles: Centred around the towns of Montilla and Morilles, this D.O. is most famous for unfortified sweet wines that have been aged using the Solera method common to both Sherry and **fondillón**. The classification system for the resulting wines is the same categories as Sherry: fino, amontillado, palo cortado and Oloroso. It also has a joven afrutado, a young white wine and moscatel similar to Málaga sweet wine.

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