



The wine regions of Spain: Rías Baixas

by Great British Chefs · 4 October 2022

Rachel McCormack visits Rías Baixas, the home of the Albariño grape, which is fast becoming a favourite amongst white wine aficionados, to find out more about this thriving wine region.



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You first get the idea that Rías Baixas is not your typical wine region driving towards the Atlantic coastal town of Cambados. If you are on the lookout for big fields of vines supported vertically by long rows of trellises, you'll wonder why there aren't any, and where all this wine must come from. When you look more closely, what you do see are lots of small, raised vines, grown high above the ground all on various small plots of land. The reasons why this method of growing vines, called *peral*, is so popular throughout the wine region has various theories behind it. The two main ones are that as mildew is a big problem for grapes in such a damp region on the shore of the Atlantic. Elevating the vines allows far more air to circulate and the grapes are more likely to dry. The other theory is that as Galicians traditionally divided up inherited land, rather than merely giving everything to the eldest son, plots of land over generations got smaller and smaller and with raised vines smallholders could grow other crops underneath, as they would get enough sun to grow when there were no leaves on the vines. Today a few modern growers also use high enough vine perals to park their cars in the shade on a hot sunny day.

D.O. Rías Baixas production is almost exclusively white wine and 95% of that is from the Albariño grape. While the first commercial Albariño brand, Palacio de Feñanes, was sold in 1926, it really wasn't until the 1960s that Albariño wine properly entered the commercial wine industry, albeit still using artisanal methods. Previously, Rías Baixas wine was mostly made in small amounts at home by the smallholders for domestic consumption. The winery Martín Códax was one of the game changers for Rías Baixas as fifty families from around Cambados joined forces and decided to create a modern winery making wine to a global standard and produced their first wine in 1985. As many of the family members were teachers, they named the winery after the thirteenth century Galician troubadour Martín Códax, and some of his poems and sheet music are used on the bottle labels and on the corks. Nowadays Martín Códax winemakers work with over five-hundred families in the region throughout the year, categorising the different vineyards, directing the smallholders in the year-long upkeep of the vines. Before the harvest, the winemakers at almost all of the D.O. Rías Baixas have to organise the arrival of growers' grapes following a strict timetable, as the crop from each plot of land has been assigned to be turned into a specific wine.



Vineyards in Rías Baixas tend to use a method of vine growing called 'peral', where the vines are elevated above the ground.

This year at Feñanes, says director Juan Gil de Araújo, the grape harvest started a few days later than usual due to the very recent rain and some of the smallholders had been stopping him in the street in Cambados asking when it's going to start. On the single-track backroads of the county surrounded by perals bursting with grapes it felt like most of the county was desperate for the harvest to start. At Martín Códax on the day the harvest began, winemaker Aníazu Álvarez was almost bursting with excitement for the grape collection to get properly underway so she could start making the wine. The winery car park had been taken over in order to process the grapes and the road outside of the vineyard had a long queue of people in small tractors or cars with trailers full of grapes. The whole atmosphere was one of excited expectation at the end of a long year of preparation.

"Most of the smallholders who sell us grapes all across the D.O.," explains Gil de Araújo, "have full time jobs. They're doctors, teachers, fishermen, pharmacists and they may have as few as thirty vines. Growing these grapes and taking care of these vines is such a large part of who they are that if you took their vines away it would be like you were cutting their arms off."

"The only grape we, and most of the other wineries in the immediate area work with is Albariño, we never make blends, all we do is treat the vines differently depending on the soil and the location of the plots, and we use different methods for our different wines," Aníazu Álvarez says. "All of our small holders feel like they have a piece of themselves in their vines, as if Albariño is a part of them."

But what of the end product? The result of all this effort is a wine that is fast gaining fans and a great reputation throughout the world. The granite soil of the region gives the wines some great minerality and the characteristic Albariño flavour is of intense aromas and a light crispy finish that is so important in good white wines. Demand for Albariño is increasing all over the world and some makers have had to introduce quotas for each buyer as they simply don't make enough. As Gil de Araújo says, "this wine is like a party for your tastebuds, it's no wonder it is becoming so well loved."

The other D.O.s in Galicia

D.O. Ribeiro: Situated in the province of Ourense, in the valleys alongside the Miño, Avia and Arnoia rivers, Ribeiro is one of the oldest wine regions in Spain. Wine has been made here since Roman times and in the 14th and 15th centuries it was exported all over Europe. The Ribeiro wine region also lays claim to being the wine that was on board Christopher Columbus' ships on his first voyage to America. Most of the modern Ribeiro production is white wine using grape varieties such as Treixadura, Loureira, Torrontés, and Albariño, while the significantly smaller red wine production uses mostly Mencía, as well as small amounts of Calfo and Brancellao grapes.

D.O. Valdeorras: There's a great variety of soil types in this wine region in the westerly corner of the inland province of Ourense and the main grape variety for the white wine, which is about 75% of the production, is Godello, while the much smaller amount of red wine production is mostly Mencía, both indigenous Galician varieties.

D.O. Ribeiro Sacra: Winemaking in this part of Galicia dates back to Roman times and was continued by monks in the Middle Ages; the D.O is called Sacred River in English. Far less affected by Atlantic humidity than neighbours Rías Baixas, this region has a more continental climate. Unlike most other Galician wine regions most of the production here is red wine from the indigenous Mencía grape, while the smaller white production is mostly made from Godello.

D.O. Monterrei: The most southerly of the Galician registered wine regions, almost touching the Portuguese border, and both the youngest and the smallest of them, Monterrei surrounds the town of Verín and is one of the driest parts of the province. In common with other Galician regions, most of its production (about 70%) is white wine and mostly the Godello grape variety, while the red wine is mostly Mencía.



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