



The wine regions of Spain: Alicante

by Great British Chefs · 4 January 2023

Home to one of the oldest D.O.s in Europe, Alicante has a long history of wine production but since its vines were destroyed in the late-nineteenth century by the phylloxera bug, it has had to slowly rebuild its reputation. We take a look at three bodegas in Alicante helping the region to do just that.

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Alicante lays claim to the oldest D.O. in Spain and one of the oldest in Europe. In 1510, Ferdinand the Catholic King of Aragon decreed that only wine from Alicante could leave the city's port, then a highly important strategic port in the Spanish Mediterranean. A process of certification guaranteeing Alicante's wine origins, called 'Junta de Inhibición del Vi Foraster d'Alacant' (the council for preventing wines from outside of Alicante) was created in order to guarantee traceability, as Alicante wines were highly prized across Europe, especially in England, Scotland and Sweden. It was said that King Louis VI of France would only eat cake soaked in Alicante wine on his deathbed in 1715 and Alicante wine was more highly regarded in the 18th century than Sauternes, sherry and port.

This highly prized wine region was decimated when the phylloxera bug destroyed the vines at the end of the nineteenth century; winemaking in Alicante went into decline as 100,000 hectares were destroyed, never fully recovering. The past thirty years however has seen a number of people and organisations in the region help to create a renaissance in the world of Alicante winemaking. The Vinalopó area surrounding the town of Villena was one of the first places within D.O. Alicante to take a return to winemaking seriously; what follows is a modern-day snapshot of three of the region's significant bodegas.

Las Virtudes, a co-operative founded in 1961, produces wine and olive oil similar to many co-operatives in the region. As Villena has expanded over the past sixty years the winery is now on the outskirts of town beside a hypermarket and a tile merchant, and the shop is always packed full of locals stocking up. As with many co-operatives in Spain, its winemaking made a huge leap forward in the 90s, 'what happened here in the 90s, like many such wineries throughout Spain', says export manager Clara Menor, 'is we decided to work with qualified professional winemakers for the first time and really explore what kind of wines our grapes could make, as well as experimenting with new varieties and different innovative winemaking techniques.'



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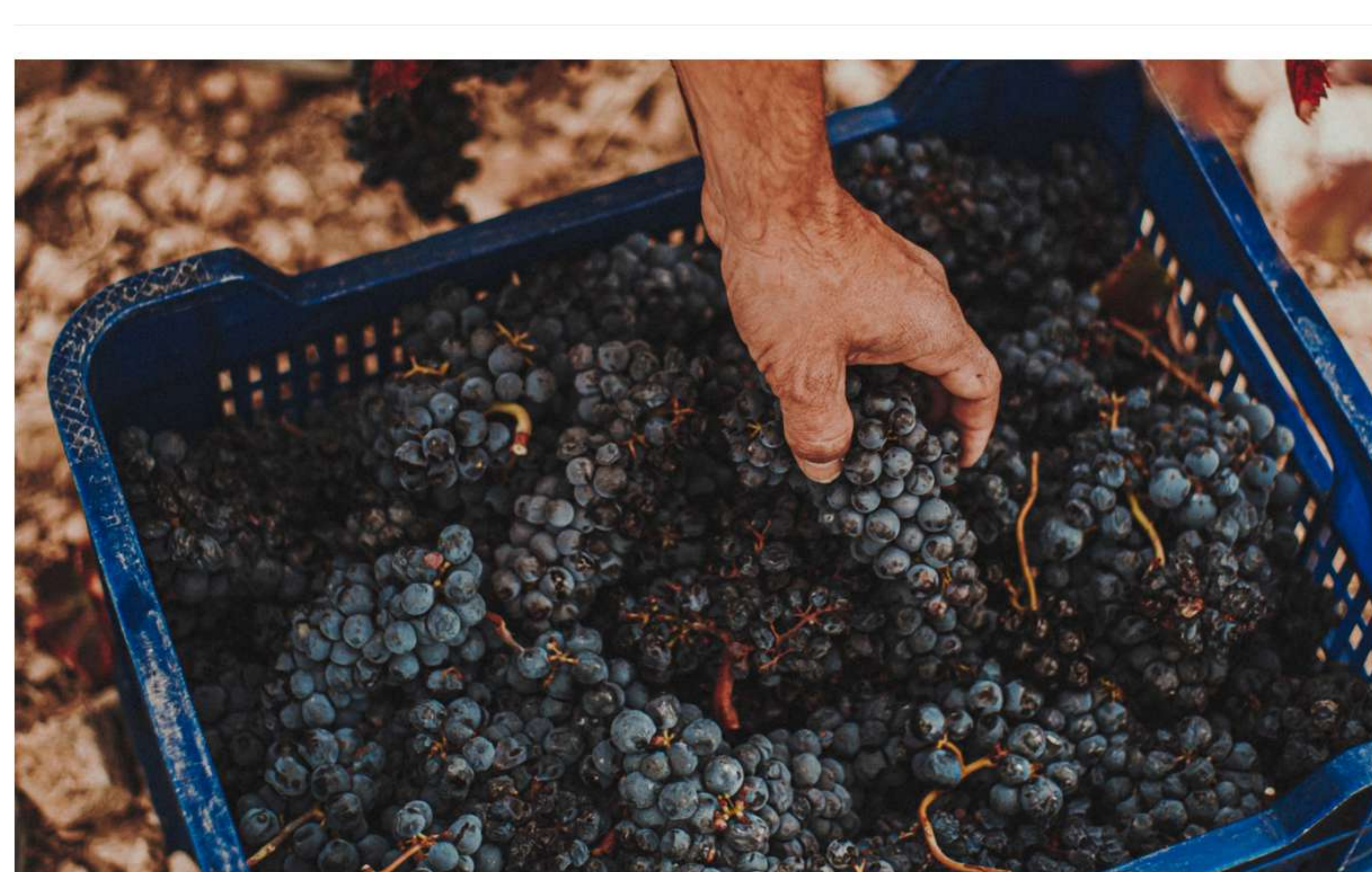
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Today they produce over fifteen different wines - both blends and monovarietals - and, like the whole of the Alicante wine region, as well as Yecla and Jumilla, their largest grape production is Monastrell, 'Monastrell is ours' says Menor, 'it thrives in our dry climate, with the lack of rain and the really hot summers. Every other red grape that we plant has to measure up against it. We've recently made a great wine with Petit Verdot, but Monastrell is still our go to.'

Further outside Villena in the middle of countryside, reminiscent of a hamlet in an updated spaghetti western, is the Francisco Gomez winery. Opened in 2000, the first wine was produced here in 2004 as an integral part of the new wines of Spain. As well as making wines, Francisco Gomez is very much a destination and events space hosting weddings and corporate events. They also have a private wine club and a special small cellar just to age their Fondillón.

Fondillón is unique to the Alicante D.O. and was the style of wine that historically ensured its popularity throughout Europe. It's a Monastrell monovarietal, often described as the pride of Alicante. Monastrell grapes are left on the vine to over ripen, and are then hand picked and dried for at least a couple of weeks before fermentation, which takes twenty to thirty days. The wine is then barrel aged for at least ten years when it is then aged further using the solera method, similar to sherry. It's a strong, sweet wine (normally about 18% ABV) and unlike sherry it hasn't been fortified with alcohol - its high alcohol levels come from the sugar in the over-ripened grapes.



Fondillón is a semi-sweet style of wine produced exclusively in Alicante D.O. from overripe Monastrell grapes.

'We age our Fondillón in a separate cellar as we really want to show our wine tourism visitors just want Fondillón means to us' says Lola Sanchis, Francisco Gómez's head of wine tourism and events, 'we got some of our Fondillón from 1972 and also from 1988 and have been making two different wines since we opened. Everything with Fondillón, from the picking of the grapes to their pressing and the fermentation has to be done on a small scale by hand. We are one of the few wine producers in Alicante that make Fondillón and we want people to know how special it is.'

Casa Balaguer is a tiny winery owned and run by Andres Carull and Marta Ribera. Situated at the end of a country road, around the back of a farmhouse, its garden is home to some fierce geese and a very laid back donkey. All of Casa Balaguer's wines are organic, with most being made using natural and biodynamic methods and they are the pioneers of natural wine in the D.O. 'One of the problems with making natural wine is fermentation and since we have used the biodynamic calendar we haven't had any problems fermenting our wines' says Casa Balaguer's cellar master Arturo González, 'what we do here is as little as possible to the wine. We leave our natural wine in clay jars or concrete tanks and we never know what we'll find when we check the fermentation.'

While their red grape focus is on Monastrell, from which they make some excellent natural rosés, they are also trying to revive other red grape varieties such as Valencí and Tortonegra. Their smaller white wine production, like others in the region, focuses on the Moscatel grape, making surprisingly dry wines from a variety traditionally used for the famous sweet Moscatels.

If these three wineries are representative of Alicante's current viticultural status, the region could soon be restored to its former glory as a top choice for royals and oenophiles throughout Europe and beyond.

Other important D.O.s in the Spanish Levante:

Yecla: This D.O. is found in the north of Murcia, surrounding the town of Yecla and bordering Alicante. Like many Mediterranean coastal regions, it wasn't until the 20th century that winemaking was taken seriously as a business here and since the 1980s the D.O. has worked with the wine producers to make a distinctively Yecla style of wine with the Monastrell variety of grape at its heart.

Jumilla: Situated to the south of Yecla and with vines in both Murcia and the Castillo-La Mancha regions, Jumilla is regarded as the most important wine region in Murcia. Its D.O. was established in 1966 but the big change for Jumilla came in 1989 when phylloxera destroyed the vineyards, and wine growers turned this into an opportunity to replant using mostly the indigenous Monastrell grape.

Utiel-Requena: On the east of the province of Valencia, you'll find Utiel-Requena, a D.O. bordered by the towns of Utiel to the northwest and Requena to the southeast. The D.O. was established in 1957 and its focus is on the native Bobal grape variety, which until recently was used mostly to make rosé wine and is now producing some really fine reds.

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