

# The grape escape: Spain's natural nose for wine

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Sun-drenched, sprawling Spain is home to 400 different grape varieties – no wonder its lovingly made *tintos, rosados y blancos, cavas* and the rest are so popular around the world

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Grape expectations: monastrell vines ripen in the sun before becoming highly quaffable wines (©ICEX/Patricia R Soto)

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Grapevines thrive in Spain, with its enviable dry climes and vastly varied terroirs. It's these growing conditions, along with winemakers who've perfected their craft over generations, that have produced some of the finest in the world.

Whether the occasion calls for an easy-drinking tippie or a fine wine, there's always a Spanish bottle worth savouring. Their wines are as diverse as they are distinguished, from bubbly cava and sweet muscatel to crisp txakoli. There are 400 different grape varieties and a wealth of wine styles to sample, including fruity verdejo and powerful reds from Navarra and Ribera del Duero, plus dozens of other fascinating regions to explore.



¡Salud! Tapas bar culture thrives on great local wines to complement the small plates (©ICEX/Fernando Madariaga)

From chilled fruity numbers to long-aged oaked *rosados*, Spanish rosé may interest those who appreciate a lighter wine. In some regions, deeper pink wines are often referred to as *claretes*. Traditionally, these were rosés made from red and white grapes with fermentation taking place in partial contact with the skins, known as the "short maceration" method. Today the only legally recognised term is rosado and in most regions it can be made using either the short maceration or direct press method – when red grapes are pressed to extract very little colour and fermented without the skins for pale rosé.

In Castilla-La Mancha, where the land is dry and flat and the sun blazes, pickers work from five o'clock in the morning until the day becomes too hot and only venture out again as temperatures dip. In the Canary Islands, dry white "volcanic wines", such as the award-winning malvasia, are made in Lanzarote's La Geria, sourced from vines that grow in hollows carved out of the volcanic gravel.

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And it doesn't take a master of wine to see change afoot even in the vineyards of venerable grape varieties such as monastrell, mencía and bobal, which are taking on a new lease of life in the hands of creative winemakers.

With more land under vine than anywhere else, Spain is the world's third largest wine producer and the biggest producer of organic wine in Europe. The country is already home to more than 100,000 hectares of organic growing areas, and is on course to have the largest surface area of certified organic vineyards in the world by 2023 (some 160,000 hectares). It's a milestone that will surely benefit both oenophiles and the environment.



Dream view: the Ebro river winds its way past San Asensio in the winegrowing region of La Rioja (©ICEX/Dpto. Multimedia)

Known worldwide for its tempranillos, the region of La Rioja is home to 600 wineries and its Qualified Designation of Origin (DOCa Rioja) is the oldest in Spain. Here too, organic wine production is in full swing. At family-run winery Las Cepas, which has dedicated itself to organic production since 2003, the grapevines clinging to the rocky terrain benefit from a rich biodiversity that naturally contributes to pest control. Elsewhere in La Rioja, vineyards such as Ramón Bilbao in Haro – set to release its first organic wines (a Rueda white and a Rioja red) later this year – are also putting ambitious sustainability programmes in place.

Discerning wine lovers keen to savour a bottle's provenance and sustainable credentials should make sure to talk to local producers. They'll tell you that organic wine should be made from certified grapes, grown in an organic vineyard without the use of industrial herbicides, fungicides, pesticides or fertilisers. Their approach is one of minimal intervention – there's no gene technology here, just working in harmony with nature in an environment where the connection between winemaker and the land is vitally important.

Try a glass or two within touching distance of vines, where you can listen to the passionate *bodeguero* tell you just why Spanish wine is the best in the world.

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