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EXCITING WINES,
FOOD, ARCHITECTURE

Rioja's Hotel Marqués de Riscal,
designed by Frank Gehry
EXPLORING RIOJA
WINE, FOOD AND ARCHITECTURE STAR IN SPAIN'S PREMIER VINEYARD REGION
BY MIKE DESIMONE AND JEFF JENESSEN

From the mellow earth tones of old stone walls to the brilliant colors of space-age titanium, the bodegas of Spain's most prestigious wine region embody a dynamic culture of architecture, providing visitors the pleasures of both past and present.

Bordered to the north by the Sierra Cantabria mountains and nourished by the Ebro river and its numerous tributaries, Rioja enjoys a sheltered microclimate perfect for the cultivation of Tempranillo, its signature red grape. Rioja consists of three distinct regions: Alta, around the town of Haro to the west; Alava, mostly north of the Ebro; and Baja, east of the capital city of Logroño.

From a distance, it is hard to tell the difference between a walled medieval village and a craggy outcropping of rock; you can only be sure if a telltale steeple comes into focus. Less difficult to spot are

Above: Rioja has long been considered Spain's foremost wine region. Today, stunning architecture and stellar lodging and dining options are making it a prime travel destination as well.
a host of striking new wineries and hotels, designed by a distinguished group of international architects. The foothills of this dramatic environment are crisscrossed with an extensive network of vineyards.

Spend some time here, and you can experience the sophisticated luxury of a hotel designed by world-famous architect Frank Gehry (responsible for the Guggenheim museum in nearby Bilbao) and the earthy pleasures of Logroño’s traditional tapas bars. You can track the evolution of the region’s wine styles by visiting traditional bodegas such as R. López de Heredia and new-wave producers such as Ysios. You can explore the history of wine at Dinastía Vivanco’s impressive museum, or simply grab a bicycle and lose yourself in the rolling vineyards.

The moment you arrive at Logroño–Agoncillo airport, you know that you are in wine country. The modern terminal is topped by large eaveless barrels. You are faced with the choice of old versus new immediately upon leaving the airport—take the winding local roads crisscrossed by the Ebro, or the modern highway, the AP-68? Although the two paths run roughly parallel to one another, the autopista will certainly get you to your destination faster. But that’s not always the point when driving through wine country.

It would be easy to bypass Logroño—Rioja’s largest city and the first you will come to—in search of the charms of a small village or stand-alone luxury hotel, but that would rob you of one of the great pleasures of Spain, the “tapas crawl.” Spend an afternoon or evening moving from bar to bar, enjoying a glass of wine and small plate in each. Daytime in Logroño can be spent shopping for wine, wine accessories and specialty foods at a variety of local shops.

The thick, stone walls of nearby Laguardia, a tiny hilltop village, enclose many treasures, including world-class dining, multiple tapas bars, two churches and perfectly preserved cobblestone streets. Don’t miss French architect Philippe Mariès’ work at Viña Real Cuné bodega, which resembles a huge wine barrel. Not far from there, the landscape is brought into focus at the Domecq Group’s Bodegas Ysios, where Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava—whose World Trade Center Transportation Hub in New York and Chicago Spire are currently in progress—has set the winery against a backdrop of saw-toothed cliffs. Echoing the hills beyond, this graceful metal-and-wood structure evokes floating barrels about to take flight.

Just beyond the medieval ramparts of Laguardia stands what appears to be a classic, Bordeaux-style château. Actually built in the late-20th century, Bodegas Campillo’s visitors center is a symbol of Rioja’s history. In the late-19th century, when phylloxera virtually destroyed all the vines of Bordeaux, a handful of winemakers brought their knowledge, methods and money to the north of Spain, contributing to Rioja’s evolution as a winemaking capital for export to England and France.

If you head toward Elciego, whose skyline is punctuated by the two Renaissance-style towers of San Andrés church, you can catch a glimpse of Marqués de Riscal’s Frank Gehry–designed hotel, a kinetic sculpture crowned by giant swirling ribbons of tritoned titanium.

The charming village of Cenicero boasts a structure of oxidized metal panels that houses Bodegas Martínez-Laoiren, financed in part by Project Optima, a European Union initiative on water resources management. “My winery is environmentally balanced, using 40 percent less electricity because of our solar panels,” says third-generation winemaker José María Martínez.
graphic installations, this modern-day temple is dedicated to the cult and culture of Bacchus. It lies at the entrance of the village of Briones.

Just outside Haro stands a cluster of bodegas, including Muga and the iconic R. López de Heredia. The stone walls of R. López de Heredia's wine cellar are covered in age-old mold, yet the family was forward-thinking enough to enlist Baghdad-born architect Zaha Hadid, the 2004 recipient of the Pritzker Prize for Architecture, to design its walk-in, mirrored tasting room in the shape of a wine decanter.

Whether you think of yourself as a modernist, a traditionalist or some combination of the two, Rioja can satisfy every sense. Dining options range from stand-up tapas outside a storefront bar to high-style interpretations of Riojan cuisine prepared by a Michelin-starred chef. Although wine lists understandably lean toward Rioja, other regions are covered as well. You can sleep in a 17th-century convent arranged around a central cloister or in a five-star hotel with a bird's-eye view of George's three-toned confection. Whether your idea of a day in wine country is being pampered with wine treatments in a winotherapy spa or bicycling village to village to sample the local wines, you can happily spend that day in Rioja.

Although Rioja is a year-round destination, the best months to visit are April, May, September and October. The climate is similar to that of the U.S. Northeast, so a jacket may be necessary in the evening. Stylish, casual clothing is appropriate for day or night.

Lunch is generally served from noon to 3 p.m., and dinner from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m.; tapas bars stay open later. Many restaurants and wineries are closed in August. Most wineries require that you make reservations in advance for their tours.

Note: When calling the following establishments from North America, dial 011, then the telephone number. Prices have been converted to U.S. dollars using the exchange rate at press time; US$1 = 0.71 euros, and rounded to the nearest dollar.
Where to Stay

HOTEL LOS AGUSTINOS
Calle San Agustín, 2, Haro  Telephone (34) 941-31-13-08  Web site www.hotellosagustinos.es  Rooms 62  Rates $121-$312

A n artful marriage of traditional and modern, this hotel has formerly been a convent, a hospital and a prison. The enormous 17th-century central cloister is furnished with stylish chrome and leather lounging areas. Wide, ceramic-tiled hallways lead to spacious traditional rooms, which have open views of the low-rise city of Haro.

Under the arched gallery at the rear of the glass-topped courtyard is Las Dauelas restaurant, run by chef Juan Nalés Rückauer, who describes his cuisine as “classic Rioja with a modern flair.” Standout entrees, priced from $24 to $35, include grilled shoulder of baby pig, and sirloin medallions in Roja red wine sauce. The wine list features 200 different wines, ranging in price from $22 for Muga Crianza 2004 to $350 for Benjamin Romeo Contador 2005.

The space that Hotel Los Agustinos occupies was variously a convent, a hospital and a prison. In this latest iteration, the hotel combines traditional and modern elements in its design and boasts a standout restaurant.

MARQUÉS DE RISCAL
Calle Torre de 1, Elciego  Telephone (34) 945-18-08-80  Web site www.luxurycollection.com/marquesderiscal  Rooms 32  Suites 11  Rates $456-$5,179

Designed by Frank Gehry and part of the Starwood Hotel Luxury Collection, this is a benchmark for contemporary luxury in Rioja. Spacious rooms include amenities such as WiFi, Bang & Olufsen audio systems and marble baths. Views from the hotel are of vineyards and the ochre brick and terra cotta town of Elciego. Comfortable public areas include the Vinotheque wine bar, with more than 2,000 bottles tucked into its walls, and the Roof Top Lounge and Library. There is a heated pool in the Caudalico Vinotharacerie Spa, which uses grape-based products for its “wine therapy” treatments and massages. A fitness room is on site, bicycles are available for hire, and golf courses are located nearby. The concierge staff will set up a visit to the namesake bodega—Marqués de Riscal is one of Rioja’s oldest producers—or arrange for a chauffeur-driven car on other winery tours.

HOTEL VILLA DE LAGUARDIA
Paseo de San Ramón  15, Laguardia  Telephone (34) 945-60-05-60  Web site www.hotelvilladelaguardia.com  Rooms 78  Suites 5  Rates $125-$245

Just steps from the medieval walls of the village of Laguardia, this full-service hotel boasts a glass-walled, exterior elevator with panoramic views of the vineyards. The rooms are decorated in a neo-rustic style and feature large ceramic baths. Room service is available round the clock, and the hotel is handicapped-accessible. The multilingual staff can arrange winery tours with a car and driver. There is a small fitness room, but you can get a more scenic workout by renting one of the bicycles parked out front. In-house dining options include formal restaurant El Medio Adjacent, featuring Spanish cuisine served in a French style, and informal Italian café El Villa.
Where to Eat

**ASADOR ALAMEDA.**
Plaza Folks Agüileutas, 1, Fuenmayor Telephone (34) 941-45-00-44 Web site www.restaurantalameda.com Open Lunch, Tuesday to Sunday; dinner, Tuesday to Saturday Cost Entrées $39–$77 Credit cards All major

Chefs Esther Álvarez and Tomás Fernández serve seafood from the Cantabrian Sea, meat from Galicia and vegetables grown in the Ebro valley. Appetizers include a sumptuous goose foie gras, and a braisingly briny shrimp and langoustine carpaccio. Chuleton de borja, a large beef chop grilled to perfection and served simply in its own jus, barely fits on the plate. Vegetable lovers will be pleased with the grilled vegetable entrées and composed salads. The 200-selection wine list is well-priced, with most selections falling between $10 and $125, and includes R. López de Heredia Viña Bosconia Reserva 2000 ($34) and Torre Muga 2004 ($71).

**CACHETERO**
Calle Laurel, 5, Logroño Telephone (34) 941-22-84-63 Web site www.cachetero.com Open Lunch, Monday to Saturday; dinner, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Monday, Tuesday Cost Entrées $21–$25 Credit cards VISA

Framed, handwritten accolades from members of Spanish high society cover the yellow Venetian plaster walls and testify to almost 100 years of prestigious dining, served by four generations of the Arechonolaza family. Start your meal with ham croquettes or pan-seared foie gras in a Pedro Ximénez reduction, then move on to filet mignon in Port sauce, or monkfish with eggplant, langoustine and clams. The Rioja-focused wine list offers 50 selections, including Díaz de Vivanco Crianza 2004 ($18) and Baron de Chirel Reserva 2001 ($84).

**FRANCIS PANIEGO PARA MARQUÉS DE RISCAL**
Calle Torrea, 1, Elciego Telephone (34) 945-18-08-80 Web site www.luxurycollection.com/marquesedelrical Open Lunch and dinner, daily Cost Entrées $20–$50; tasting menu $112 Credit cards All major

Chef de cuisine Francis Paniego, the first Riojan chef to receive a Michelin star, has developed a menu worthy of Frank Gehry’s showpiece hotel. The 10-course tasting menu may feature the amusing and delicious “Egg Gehry,” a truffled poached egg festooned with metallic-colored pastry ribbons to mirror the hotel’s roof. Equally artful is mousse of foie gras served with caviar de vino tinto—tiny pearls of red-wine gelée. In addition to an array of more than 70 Rioja wines, the 250-bottle wine list features many selections from the New World. The bodega’s own wines run from $28 for the Reserva 2002 up to $336 for its Frank Gehry Selección 2001. The reserve list offers an opportunity to taste the 1994 and 1995 Baron de Chirel side by side, for $308 and $280 respectively. For deeper pockets, a 1945 Marqués de Riscal Cosecha is available for $953.

**POSADA MAYOR DE MIGUELOA**
Mayor de Migueloa, 20, Laguardia Telephone (34) 945-62-11-75 Web site www.posadamayordemigueloa.com Open Lunch and dinner, daily Cost Entrées $20–$31 Credit cards All major

Housed in a 17th-century palace replete with a carved stone wine cellar, this Riojan institution serves regional specialties such as veal, ox and local game in a romantic setting. Three small dining rooms feature terra cotta floors and high, wood-beamed ceilings. Among the main courses are filet mignon with truffle sauce and foie gras, and sirloin with a Cabrales blue-cheese sauce. The wine list boasts a great selection of producers, such as LAN, Viña Toscana and Marqués de Riscal, with many bottles at less than $35. A reserve list with bottles costing $56 to $154 is also on hand. Should you decide to sleep here, eight comfortable rooms are available from $161.
Wineries to Visit

DINASTÍA VIVANCO
Calle Nacional 232, Briones Telephone (34) 941-32-23-32 Website www.dinastia-vivanco.es Open Tuesday to Saturday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Cost Tour and tastings $7; museum $10

Both wine lovers and history buffs will enjoy the comprehensive bodega tour and Museo de la Cultura del Vino. Set aside several hours to experience the history of wine and winemaking in the five-story subterranean museum. Tours begin in the garden of Bacchus, where more than 200 grape varieties are cultivated, and conclude with a tasting of Dinastía Vivanco’s 1998 Reserva and 2002 Crianza. A shop offers the bodega’s wines, along with wine-themed gifts, glassware and books in English. The restaurant here uses wood from old barrels and dried rootstock to fire its grill and oven.

R. LÓPEZ DE HEREDIA VIÑA TONDONIA
Barrio de la Estacion, s/n, Haro Telephone (34) 941-31-02-44 Website www.lopezdeheredia.com Open Monday to Saturday, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Cost Tour and tastings free

This bodega is one of the most distinctive in Rioja, built in 1877, and is easily recognized by its red-roofed tower. Despite owner Pedro López de Heredia’s faithful adherence to the traditional style in his highly regarded wines, he showed daring in hiring Zaha Hadid to design a sleek glass-and-white leather, rocket ship-style tasting room and shop. The underground tunnels of the original structure are up to 200 meters in length, and their walls are covered with black mold. The tour is heavy on history and production. Tastings are held around a sturdy wooden table down among the barrels, and feature two Viña Tondonia reservas.

VIÑA REAL CUNÉ
Calle Real 48, Laguardia Telephone (34) 941-30-48-09 Website www.vina-real.com Open Thursday to Monday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Cost Tour and tastings $7

Evoking a giant wine barrel, French architect Philippe Mazières’ design for this winery crowns a plateau on the road between Logroño and Laguardia. Constructed of Canadian red cedar, concrete and stainless steel, it was designed to integrate all aspects of winemaking on two floors. The one-hour tour of this modern facility takes you through the entire process and concludes with tastings of the Monopole Blacno 2005 and the Viña Real Crianza 2004.

BODEGAS YSIOS
Camino de la Hino, s/n, Laguardia Telephone (34) 945-60-06-40 Website www.bodegasyssios.com Open Monday to Friday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Cost Tour and tastings $7

This boutique winery was designed by internationally acclaimed, award-winning architect Santiago Calatrava, who was born in Valencia. The facade of curved wood is pieced together like the staves of a barrel, and the jagged chrome top echoes the mountains and clouds that are its backdrop. The building is as functional as it is beautiful, and the interior is much more intimate than it appears from the outside. Only reservas using 100 percent Tempranillo are produced by this Domecq group showpiece.

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R. López de Heredia Viña Tondonia was built in 1877, but the recently added tasting room and shop are decidedly contemporary; award-winning architect Zaha Hadid is responsible for the bold concept.
AN EVENING OF TAPAS

When in Spain, as the Spanish do: Enjoy a moveable feast of small plates paired with glasses of wine. When it comes to tapas bars, those on Calle San Juan and Calle Laurel in Logroño are legendary. Most are little more than storefronts, so locals eat standing outdoors around upright wine barrels lining the street. Most bars feature one bodega’s wine in three different vintages: a young tinto, a lightly aged crianza and a reserva, which has spent more time in oak. These three words are all the Spanish you will need to know. Many places also serve some of the more prestigious bodegas’ wines by the glass. Most glasses of wine cost $1 to $6, and tapas are $1 to $4. The bars are generally open from noon to 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. to 2 a.m. During the prime hours of 10 p.m. to midnight, the streets are jammed with locals, which the adventurous will find exhilarating.

BAR ÁNGEL Calle Laurel, 12 • A large griddle sizzling with mushrooms and shrimp can be seen right through the front window, causing pedestrian gridlock at tapas time.

BAR TENESSI Calle San Juan, 15 • The moros, or deep-fried pig snouts, are not for the squeamish, but everyone will enjoy the setas, or garlicky grilled mushrooms. Customers queue four deep at the bar for these local specialties paired with the house wines.

IN VINO VERITAS Corner of Calle San Juan and Traviesa San Juan • This small kitchen turns out some of the best bocaditos, or miniature sandwiches. A variety of Riojan reds and whites from Rueda are poured.

JUAN Y PINCHAME Calle Laurel, 9 • The offering of stylish and innovative tapas changes daily, and more than a dozen wines are served by the glass.

EL REY DE JAMÓN Calle Portales, 45 • Enjoy some of the mini jamón Serrano sandwiches that are piled high on the bar; your check will be tallied by the number of empty toothpicks on your plate.

LA TORTILLA MERE Traviesa San Juan, s/n • This place serves some of the world’s best tortillas, or potato omelets, either plain or with a spicy tomato salsa.

—Mike DeSimone and Jeff Jenssen