

From the Wine Cellar
by Jo and Tom Chesworth

The Noble Wine of Rioja

Just south of the Pyrenees Mountains in the north of Spain is the Rio Oja. The area around the river is the ancestral home of a black grape variety called Tempranillo (pronounced Tempera-knee-oh – tempera like the water color paint, knee like the hinge joint in the leg, and oh like the exclamation). These grapes are made into a big, tannic, alcoholic and full-bodied tinto (red) wine, strangely enough called Rioja after the region where it is made.

Tempranillo wines are ruby red in color with aromas and flavors of berries, plums, tobacco, vanilla, leather and herbs. If you wish to taste a Spanish Tempranillo try Arena Loca at \$11, a Tapena at \$12 or a Torres Coronas at \$16. In Spain Tempranillo grapes are grown in Navarra , also just south of the Pyrenees, Valdepeñas, the Penedes around Barcelona and the Ribera del Duero where they are made into perhaps the best of the Tempranillo wines. The grapes do best in a high desert where the cool temperatures guarantee a sufficiency of acid and the sunshine insures adequate sugar.

The grape was grown exclusively in Spain up until the 17th century when the Spanish Conquistadores and attendant Padres brought them to the Americas. Perhaps the most extensive plantings in the new world are in Argentina – try a Finca La Daniela Tempranillo at \$12. The grapes came to California and were planted in the Central Valley around the turn of the 20th century. The Central Valley has plenty of sunshine but doesn't have the requisite cool temperatures. Due to its dislike of hot climates the wine was lackluster and was used as a mainstay in jug wine for many years till someone tried planting the grapes in the mountains. Bingo! the wine was more acid and, as in Spain, became a “noble” wine. Since the turn of this century Tempranillo has had a renaissance and is now extensively planted in Spain (Rioja, Ribera del Duero and Navarra), South America, Australia, USA and South Africa.

Surprisingly, in 1988 in Rioja a grower found a cluster of white grapes growing on a Tempranillo vine. Where the cluster was removed, the remaining heel produced two buds of white grapes. The buds were grafted at the experimental research station in Rioja. Subsequently in 2000 a hectare of vines was planted and the first bottling of White Tempranillo occurred in 2005. The exciting part of this business is that these white grapes are mutations (proved by gene analysis) and not a cross or hybrid.

So there you have it. You can have a glass of White Tempranillo without taking the red grapes and pulling the skins out of the must like one must if you must have a White Zinfandel.

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