

Spring Releases

from Around the World





Carlo Pellegrino Winery in Sicily (above); Biferno DOC in Molise, Italy (below).

good-to-very-good results, though down nearly 20% in volume from 2006 (Sicily was down 40-55%). The winter was one of the mildest and driest in 50 years, and the region experienced record-high temperatures in April and July. Top examples include two Sicilian wines, the Pellegrino Passito di Pantelleria (\$15, 375 ml) and Zisola Mazzei Nero d'Avola (\$26).

The excellent 2006 vintage was perhaps even better than the outstanding

2004. Wines from Piedmont and Tuscany are being highly rated for their balance and depth, and the better wines will have considerable longevity. Outstanding new releases from Sardinia include the Pedres Thilibas Vermentino di Gallura (\$18) and Sella & Mosca Torbato Alghero Terre Bianche (\$22).

In 2005, challenging weather produced spotty results, especially in the north. Summer was hot and dry, relieved only by wet and cool rain at the beginning of harvest. Hailstorms and the Baco 22A vine disease hit Piedmont before harvest, and mold and disease impacted many

vineyards throughout the mainland. The better producers made wines that are drinkable now, including the Dievole Novecento Chianti Classico Riserva from Tuscany (\$50) and the Terra dei Re Aglianico del Vulture Vultur from Basilicata (\$25).

2004 was an abundant vintage across the board, yielding complete, complex, and ageable wines in sparkling, dry-white, dry-red, and desert styles. Acid levels and structure were hallmarks, along with high phenolic content and anthocyanins in red wines. In contrast to the warm 2003 vintage, alcohol levels were slightly lower. Wines to watch for this spring include the Agricola Punica Barrua Isola dei Nuraghi from Sardinia (\$55), Arnaldo-Caprai Sagrantino di Montefalco Collepiano from Umbria (\$55), Gaja Conteisa Nebbiolo Langhe from Piedmont (\$225), Michele Chiarlo Barolo Cerequio from Piedmont (\$100), and Tormaresca Bocca di Lupo Aglianico Castel del Monte from Apulia (\$36).

Other outstanding wines just arriving on the market include the 2000 Altemasi Riserva Graal Brut Metodo Classico from Trentino (\$35), the 2003 Borgo di Colloredo Biferno Rosso Gironia from Molise (\$25), and the non-vintage Ca' del Bosco Franciacorta Cuvée Prestige Rosé from Lombardy (\$55).

—Catherine Fallis, MS, CWP

Spain

Classic selections such as the feisty Rioja, rip-roaring Ribera del Duero, gutsy Priorat, beefy Toro, and lemony Albariño have long been must-haves for building a wine list, but today's sommelier has so much more to choose from. Spain's wine industry is evolving rapidly, shifting gears away from industrial agriculture and cookie-cutter wine production toward an emphasis on fine vineyards, old vines, and indigenous varietals.

Dominic Rodriguez, president of Classic Wines, sums up the situation: "Spain has been a sleeping giant in the European agricultural and wine-production scene, mainly because until 1978, all innovation and creativity was suppressed by a dictatorship regime. But once introduced to the miraculous principles of democracy, it has become a freedom-loving country ushering in creativity in all industries; of course, gastronomy, and, specifically, wine production, has transformed itself into an international wonder."



Photo by Mick Rock/Cephas (bottom)



Here is what's happening in Spain today:

- Regional pride is driving the natural farming movement.
- Artisanal producers are coming out of the woodwork.
- Winemakers are using lower alcohol and lighter oak, with a new standard of elegance and freshness rather than power and density.
- French oak is the new American oak; second-use oak is the new new-French oak.
- Obscure native varieties such as Bobal, Mencia, Prieto Picudo, Picapoll, and Xarel-lo are replacing international varieties, and varietal names are appearing more often on labels.
- Old-vine vineyards once denigrated for their low yields are enjoying a new status.
- Areas to watch include Bierzo, Ribeira Sacra, Tierra de León, Manchuela, Liébana, and Sierras de Málaga.
- Navarra's Prado Irache estate in Avegui was awarded Pago status in 2008, bringing the total of these exclusive, denominated vineyards to six. The others are Dominio de Valdepusa (2003), Finca Élez (2003), El Guijoso (2005), Dehesa del Carrizal (2006), and Bodegas Julián Chivite's Señorío de Arínzano (2007).

Categories of Spanish wine available this spring will include non-vintage Cava, 2008 northern whites, 2007 whites and lighter reds, 2006 reds from most regions, and high-end 2001-2005 wines such as Rioja Reservas and Gran Reservas, Ribera del Dueros, and Priorats.

Among recent vintages, 2008 was a cool, late harvest that produced moderate-to-good-quality fruit in many appellations. Ribera del Duero experienced severe frosts in October, and Toro had rain and frost at harvest. Aragon had an abnormally cool July, causing fungal infections in some vineyards, and crops were down. Valencia had trouble with black rot in its Muscat

due to rain at harvest. In Rioja, the harvest was later and cooler than usual. Even the interior and southern plains experienced cooler weather than normal, which was problematic for some red varieties. My top pick among the new whites is the **Egia Enea Txakolina Bizkaiko (\$20)**.

The challenging 2007 season provided variable quality in reds, but outstanding quality in aromatic whites. Rain at various points during the growing cycle caused problems in Rioja, Ribera del Duero, Rías Baixas, and Priorat. Ribera del Duero had hailstorms before harvest, and yields were down in Rioja and Rías Baixas due to mildew. Top '07s include the **Losada Bierzo (\$19)**, **Mustiguillo Mestizaje V.T. El Terrerazo (\$17)**, **Rafael Palacios Godello Louro from Valdeorras (\$24)**, and **Vionta Albariño from Rías Baixas (\$18)**.

The 2006 vintage was particularly challenging because of fluctuating weather conditions, which led to disease in some regions. Harvest was earlier than normal, and production was up

Gutiérrez Colosía cellar in Jerez (above left); Bodegas Montecillo vineyard in Rioja (above); town of Elciego in Rioja (below).



40% in Rías Baixas. One outstanding new release is the **Mas Doix VV from Priorat (\$120)**.

In 2005, severe drought and heat caused a significant drop in production, as much as 40% in Ribera del Duero. The hot, dry weather kept the crops clean and mildew-free, but acid levels dropped below normal. This is not a vintage for aging. Recommended new releases are the **Aalto Ribera del Duero (\$54)** and Segura Viudas Creu de Lavit Xarel-lo from Penedès (\$15).

Other outstanding spring releases include the 2003 Morlanda Criança from Priorat (\$48), the 2001 Luis Cañas Rioja Reserva Amaren (\$50), the 2001 Montecillo Rioja Gran Reserva (\$25), the non-vintage Cava Avinyó Brut Reserva from Penedès (\$21), and the non-vintage Gutiérrez Colosía Moscatel Soleado Dulce from Jerez (\$28, 375 ml).

—Catherine Fallis, MS, CWP

South Africa

Most of the South African spring releases are from 2007 and 2008, with a few wines still coming out from '04, '05, and '06. In 2007, a cold winter with adequate rain preceded a January heat wave, which affected early-ripening varieties like Merlot and Pinot Noir. Small-berried Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon made intense, concentrated wines. Cooler areas were more consistent. The 2008 vintage was uneven, with a late budbreak during a wet spring, followed by a cool summer and late-season rains. Excessive vigor, mildew, and rot were problems. The good news: long hang time maintained the grapes' acidity and promoted gradual flavor development. Lower alcohol and lighter textures could result in some elegant wines.

Those who follow the South African wine industry know of Eben Sadie, an articulate



and innovative young winemaker who helped Charles Back establish Spice Route in Swartland. Sadie is now making his own Sadie Family Syrah-based Columella (2005, \$78) and Palladius white, an old-vine Chenin Blanc blended with white Rhône varieties and a dash of Verdelho (2007, \$34). The second label, called Sequillo, offers red (2005, \$55) and white (2007, \$34) counterparts.

At Spice Route, winemaker Charl du Pessis has introduced the 2007 Chakalaka (\$20), a red blend to complement his higher-priced 2004 Malabar (\$65). Named for a South African vegetable relish, Chakalaka combines Shiraz, Grenache, Mourvèdre, and Carignan.

Cape Point Vineyard and its winemaker, Duncan Savage, have garnered perhaps the most awards and highest ratings of anyone in South Africa. Other than the 2006 Sémillon (\$35), however, these wines are scarce. If you see the white Bordeaux blend Isliedh (2005, \$40), buy it.

Vilafonté, the ambitious collaboration between Mike Ratcliffe of Warwick Estate, American winemaker Zelma Long, and viticulturist Phil Freese, produces two red wines: Series M and the more structured Series C, a Cabernet Sauvignon-based blend from Paarl-Simonsberg; 2005 is its third vintage (\$71).

South African Chenin Blanc can reach a level of quality second only to the Loire Valley's. In 2008, it also provided some serious bargains—light, unoaked refreshers that go with a wide variety of foods—such as the MAN Vintners Coastal Region (\$8) and Ken Forrester Petit Chenin (\$9). Forrester's upper-tier Chenins are the off-dry FMC, barrel-fermented and topped up with a small quantity of botrytised grapes (\$65), and the "T" Noble Late Harvest (\$50, 375ml), both from 2007. But Chenin Blanc's foremost South African advocate may be Teddy Hall of Rudera and Teddy Hall Vineyards. As the consultant for De Morgen-



Sadie Family crew sorting grapes in Swartland, South Africa (below); Spice Route harvest (top right).



Photo by Alain Proust/Cephas (bottom)