

RIOJA'S rising stars

The winemaking scene in Spain's leading region is evolving rapidly. Decanter profiles seven exciting winemakers who are driving change

STORY TIM ATKIN MW

Rioja thrives on tradition, on an image of immutability. There's some truth to this perception. Many of the region's wines are made in pretty much the same way today as they were in the 1970s, give or take the incontrovertible influence of climate change. Rioja is very good at producing large volumes of reliably drinkable wine: supple, perfumed, sweetly oaked with immediate appeal but enough acidity to age.

Yet Rioja is also capable of rapid change. It happened in the boom years of the second half of the 19th century, when merchants from Bordeaux came to Spain looking for wine to replace what they'd lost in their phylloxera-ravaged region; it happened in the 1990s as a response to demand for the bigger, bolder, more concentrated wines that were in vogue in the US and elsewhere; and it's happening again right now.

It's not widely appreciated, but Rioja is making the greatest reds and whites in its history. Many people believe that the pan-regional model, blending grapes and vineyards across a vast area, has always been dominant, but the opposite is true. There was a time when Rioja talked about vineyards, villages and soil types, and that's increasingly so once more.

This piece focuses on seven of the region's rising stars, some better known than others. I could easily have written about another 20, many of them young winemakers who have taken over from their parents or set up on their own using grapes purchased from growers. They are all part of the 'new Rioja', but they are also descendants of an older tradition. In their way, they are every bit as focused on terroir, on expressing the unique properties of their sites, as are great producers in Burgundy and Piedmont. That, increasingly, is the company in which they belong.

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_____ Javier Arizcuren

Javier Arizcuren

He is almost certainly the only top winemaker in Rioja who's also a qualified architect. You can appreciate Javier Arizcuren's aesthetic taste at the stylish urban winery he runs in the backstreets of Logroño, as well as at the Hotel Bodega Finca de los Arandinos in Entrena, southwest of Logroño. His focus is entirely on the Rioja Oriental village of Quel, where his family has grown grapes for five generations. When he took over the family vineyards in 2009, he realised that he had inherited some fantastic mountain vineyards that merited a wider audience.

Owner of 20ha on the Monte Yerga – he sells grapes from 14ha and keeps the best for his own brand – Arizcuren is a passionate advocate of low-yielding old vines and an equally vehement critic of the vast plantings of irrigated Tempranillo that have damaged the image of the hottest and most easterly of Rioja's three sub-regions. Located between 530m and 770m, altitudes that make Quel so special, some of the parcels he works with are more than 130 years old, with pre-phylloxera vines the size of triflids.

Arizcuren makes nine wines, all red: a village blend called Monte Gatún, six varietal wines (two Mazuelos, two Garnachas, a Graciano and a Maturana), three of which are vinified in amphorae, and two single-parcel wines, called Barranco del Prado and Finca El Foro.

The former is from a unique site, co-planted with Garnacha and 3% Tinto Velasco and Calagraño; it produces a red that bears comparison with the very best of the Rioja Oriental.

The bodega's winemaking approach is a reaction to the local grapes as well as a stylistic choice. 'We're working with traditional Mediterranean varieties, most notably Mazuelo and Garnacha, that can be powerful and a little rustic if they're handled in the wrong way,' he says. 'That's why we try to emphasise elegance and subtlety in our wines.'

Arizcuren thinks that Rioja is living through an important period of change. 'You can't call it a revolution because we're going back to our roots. There are more and more producers using their own grapes and expressing the character of their vineyards. It's very exciting.' arizcurenvinos.com



Arizcuren, Sologarnacha Anfora 2019 95

£42 Vinissimus*

Fermented and aged in amphorae in Javier Arizcuren's urban winery in Logroño, this is the best Garnacha release yet from this Quel producer. Fresher, brighter and better balanced than previous releases, this has the youthful enthusiasm of a parcel planted in 2017. Floral, refined and racy, with good minerality and savoury, tobacco leaf tannins. A delicious Rioja Oriental red.

Drink 2023-2027 Alc 13.5% ▶

*Ex-UK stockist: additional charges may apply, check with retailer

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"He is almost certainly the only top winemaker in Rioja who's also a qualified architect".

Tim Atkin MW, Decanter, October 2022

"...new-ish names that have made very good progress are (...) Arizcuren". Luis Gutierrez. July 2022

2019 Arizcuren • Barranco del Prado • Robert Parker

95_{/100}

The 2019 Barranco del Prado, one of two single-vineyard bottlings, has a gorgeous nose that's an explosion of wild flowers, acid berries and wild herbs. It comes from an ungrafted plot at 800 meters in altitude that was planted 120 years ago mostly with Garnacha and perhaps 2% white Calagraño and 1% Tinta Velasco. The wine feels fresh and very harmonious and has 15% alcohol and integrated acidity that makes it long and focused, with a lifted, high-pitched finish that is most impressive. It matured in well-seasoned, neutral French oak barrels for 18 months. Truly delicious. Only 966 bottles were filled in March 2021

2019 Arizcuren • Finca El Foro • Robert Parker

94_{/100}

The new single-vineyard red 2019 Finca El Foro was produced with a blend of five varieties planted in a 0.7-hectare vineyard in the Sierra de Yerga. It's 60% Garnacha, 30% Mazuelo (Cariñena) and 10% other grapes (Viura, Garnacha Gris, Miguel de Arco) from two plots planted 45 and 90 years ago, fermented destemmed and matured in used French oak barrels for 20 months. It's elegant, perfumed and nuanced, with pungent flavors and a combination of power and finesse that I like very much. It has a sensation of freshness reminiscent of acid berries and a long, dry and tasty finish. Another impressive debut. 966 bottles were filled in April 2021.

2020 Arizcuren • Solograciano • Robert Parker

93_{/100}

A new varietal Graciano in the varietal range, the 2020 Solograciano is perfumed and fine-grained, with vibrant acidity and lively flavors. It comes from young vines planted in 2015 at 600 meters in altitude and picked early at 13% alcohol and fermented destemmed with indigenous yeasts, with a short maceration to avoid over-extracting. It matured in a new 400-liter oak barrel for six months and a further 12 months in a fourth-use barrel. It's aromatic and elegant, with the peppery varietal twist. It's medium-bodied and balanced, with clean and tasty flavors. A very impressive debut. Only 533 bottles were filled in February 2022

2019 Arizcuren • Sologarnacha • Robert Parker

93/₁₀₀

They are in the process of certifying their organic agriculture, and there are three reds in the varietal range, including the 2019 Sologarnacha, pure Garnacha from sandy soils in the Sierra de Yerga. It's produced in a ripe and juicy style with 15% alcohol and a voluptuous texture. It's aromatic and powerful, with abundant, fine tannins and a dry finish. 2,450 bottles were filled in December 2020.

2020 Arizcuren • Monte Gatún • Robert Parker

93/₁₀₀

I love the perfumed nose of the 2020 Monte Gatún, their only village red so far, produced with 70% Tempranillo, 20% Garnacha and 10% Mazuelo from the highest mountain in the Sierra de Yerga, a mountain that names the wine. The vines were planted some 30 years ago on sandy soils, and the different varieties fermented separately and then were blended before malolactic. It's ripe but not overripe, with 14% alcohol. It has floral aromas and a spicy twist, with fine tannins after 10 months in new barriques and concrete. There are 4,600 bottles of this impressive red. It was bottled in August 2021

2018 Arizcuren • Solomazuelo • Robert Parker

92/₁₀₀

There are some notes of leather, licorice and scorched earth in the 2018 Solomazuelo, a varietal bottling of Cariñena/Mazuelo grapes from the Monte Yerga in the village of Alfaro. The wine matured in 225- and 500-liter oak barrels and a further year in concrete to avoid filtering or fining. It's 14% alcohol and has some rusticity and abundant dusty tannins. 4,500 bottles were filled in August 2020.

Tim's 2022 Rioja Classification

Second Growths

Arizcuren
Bodegas Bhilar
Bodegas Valdemar
Contino
CVNE
Exopto
Finca Valpiedra

Hermanos Hernáiz
José Gil
Marqués de Riscal
Marqués de Vargas
Ostatu
Roda
Sierra de Toloño

Sínodo
Tentublo
Tierra/Creaciones Exeo
Urbina
Valenciso
Viña Real
Viñas Leizaola



Reds GENÉRICO

2019 Arizcuren Barranco del Prado

“Off all the candidates, Garnacha is surely the best suited and most historic. All over Rioja, Garnacha is enjoying a small revival, thanks to bodegas like Arizcuren”

“... the Mazuelos (Carignans) from the likes of Arizcuren and Miguel Merino are showing that Rioja can provide high-end competition to Chile.”

2019 Arizcuren • Barranco del Prado • Tim Atkin**95**/100

Still on its own pre-phyloxera roots - it's now 130 years' old - this remarkable 0.34-hectare parcel sits at 765 metres on the flank of the Sierra de la Demanda. Combining Garnacha with Tinto Velasco and Calagraño, it's a brilliant red from Javier Arizcuren with thyme, pine and lavender aromas, effortless old-vine concentration, energetic acidity, subtle oak and tangy plum, redcurrant, fig and black cherry flavours. Very exciting. 2024-33

2019 Arizcuren • Finca el Foro • Tim Atkin**93**/100

Finca El Foro is a new wine from the creative Javier Arizcuren, which he produces from a 0.7-hectare parcel at 600 metres. Garnacha-based with support from Mazuelo, Viura and Grenache Gris, it's an example of what the Rioja Oriental can produce at its best: textured, concentrated and complete, with earthy intensity, racy acidity and layers of damson, plum and wild strawberry fruit. 2024-32

2019 Arizcuren • Sologarnacha • Tim Atkin**93**/100

"I'm getting to know my place better," says Javier Arizcuren of these two parcels between 550 and 600 metres in Quel, located in the wilds of the Rioja Oriental. Spicy, full-bodied and intense with Mediterranean herb aromas, tangy, energetic red berry fruit, a hint of oak sweetness and impressive focus and length. 2024-29

2020 Arizcuren • Monte Gatún • Tim Atkin**93**/100

Architect turned winemaker, Javier Arizcuren, produces this cuvée of Tempranillo with 20% Garnacha and 10% Mazuelo from his spectacular vineyards in rediscovered Quel. Youthful and intense, with thyme and rosemary aromas, inky fig and black olive intensity, plenty of grip and tannin and a long, stony finish. 2024-30

2018 Arizcuren • Solomazuelo • Tim Atkin**92**/100

Javier Arizcuren is a one man tourist board for Quel. This impressive Mazuelo is sourced from two parcels in the village, planted seven and 35 years ago. Inky, intense and unruly, with lots of pithy, damson skin acidity, chewy tannins and a dark, meaty finish. A wine that needs a slab of protein. 2024-30



Arizcuren, Solomazuelo, Rioja 2017 92

£26 (2015) *Sommelier's Choice*

Architect and bodeguero Javier Arizcuren has captured the spirit of Mazuelo, not especially common as a single variety in Rioja. There are notes of cedar on the nose, backed up by red fruits. In the mouth there's freshness and fine-grained tannin. Brisk, bright Rioja with light notes of oak. 2017 was a difficult vintage; his 2015 was a star. Track down his young Solomazuelo Anfora: it's harder to find - only 234 bottles of the 2019 vintage were made - but I love its aromatics and energy. **Drink 2021-2024** >





Decanter

WINDS OF CHANGE

TRENDS

Rioja is in a state of transition – from debates around ageing and blending, to a new focus on single-vineyard sites and an increasing diversity of wines and styles. What does this mean for Rioja lovers, and how will the changes shape the future of the region?

STORY SARAH JANE EVANS MW

Surely the most dramatic way to enter Rioja is by road. Travelling from the direction of Bilbao, you rise up to the Sierra de Cantabria, which peaks at 1,221m. Coming down, the view towards the Ebro river is sensational. Great wines await... and fine foods too. The mouth waters as much as the eye is charmed. Unlike so many wine regions, the landscape is not machine-made. Masses of small vineyards intersect with larger ones, a blend of lush vines and canopies. It is a mix of altitudes and aspects, with the mighty Ebro running through.

In fact, the river is not as mighty here as it will become by the time it decants into the Mediterranean. The only one of Spain's great rivers to flow east (the rest flow west into the Atlantic), it receives tributaries running down from the two sierras that enclose Rioja. Rioja was the first DOC in Spain and the first DOCa (Denominación de Origen Calificada). According to official sources, it's also the denomination with the most hectares of 'old and centenary' vineyards. The region's success at wine marketing has given the world for most ▶

RIOJA

GUIDE 2022

THE PEOPLE, THE PLACES, AND THE WINES
OF SPAIN'S LEGENDARY REGION

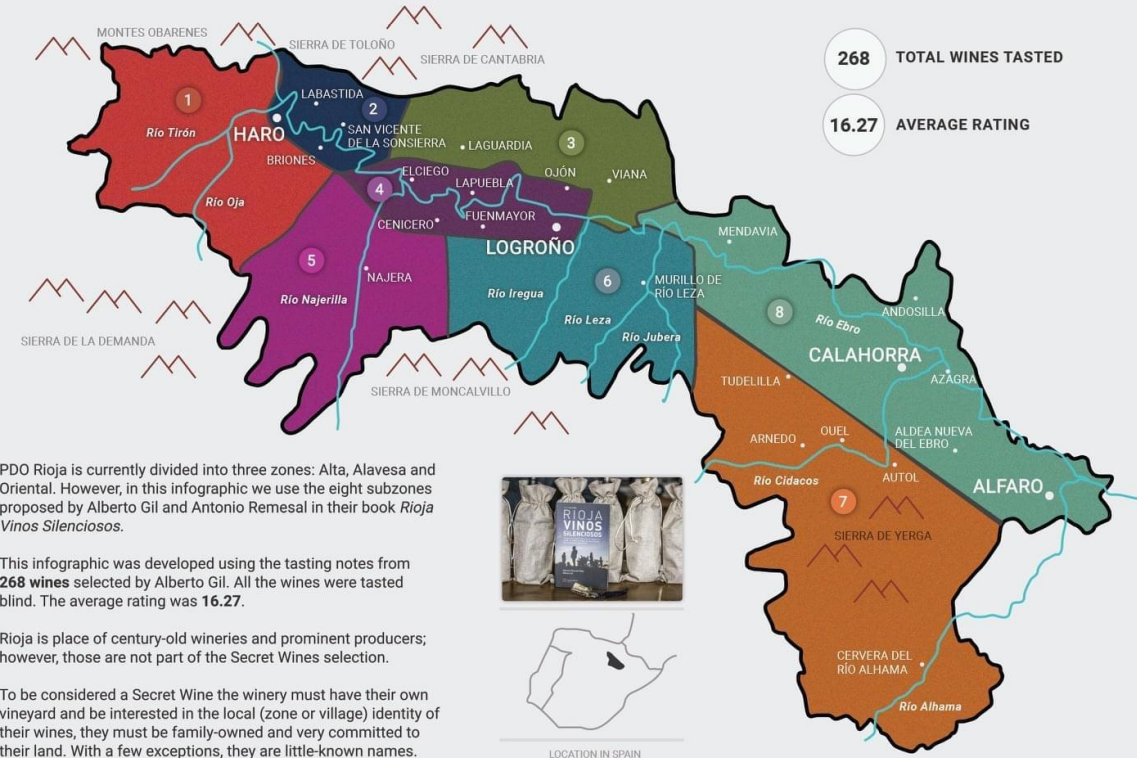
“Rioja is renewing itself, thanks to youthful energy and commitment. It all began with a group of maverick winemakers [...] along with other names such as Javier Arizcuren”

Sarah Jane Evans, Decanter Rioja Guide 2022

RIOJA'S SECRET WINES

THE WINES WERE TASTED BLIND
BY FERRAN CENTELLES
WWW.JANCISROBINSON.COM

268 TOTAL WINES TASTED
16.27 AVERAGE RATING



PDO Rioja is currently divided into three zones: Alta, Alavesa and Oriental. However, in this infographic we use the eight subzones proposed by Alberto Gil and Antonio Remesal in their book *Rioja Vinos Silenciosos*.

This infographic was developed using the tasting notes from 268 wines selected by Alberto Gil. All the wines were tasted blind. The average rating was 16.27.

Rioja is place of century-old wineries and prominent producers; however, those are not part of the Secret Wines selection.

To be considered a Secret Wine the winery must have their own vineyard and be interested in the local (zone or village) identity of their wines, they must be family-owned and very committed to their land. With a few exceptions, they are little-known names.

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| <p>● ZONE 1
OJA Y TIRÓN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of wines tasted: 27 • Average rating of the region: 16.3 • Top-rated producers: Alonso & Pedrajo, Castillo de Cuzcurrita, Hermanos Hernáiz, Gobel, Alegre & Valgañón, Tarón, Urbina, Pretium. | <p>● ZONE 2
SONSIERRA OCCIDENTAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of wines tasted: 59 • Average rating of the region: 16.3 • Top-rated producers: Tobelos, Finca de la Rica, Tierra, Fernández Eguiluz y Carlos Sánchez, Miguel Merino, Exeo, 3 Viñerones, José Gil Vignerón, Monge-Garbatí, Heredad San Andrés, Sonsierra, Exopto, Castillo de Mendoza, Abel Mendoza, Señorío de San Vicente, Ramírez de la Piscina, Viña Eguiluz, Solabal, Eduardo Garrido García, Finca Allende. | <p>● ZONE 3
SONSIERRA ORIENTAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of wines tasted: 43 • Average rating of the region: 16.4 • Top-rated producers: Remírez de Ganuza, Bideona, Basilio Izquierdo, Javier San Pedro Ortega, Pujanza, Ostatu, Amaren, Sierra de Toloño, 202, Páganos, B hilar, Amador Medrano, Tentenublo Wines, Luis R. | <p>● ZONE 4
SONSIERRA DEL EBRO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of wines tasted: 46 • Average rating of the region: 16.2 • Top-rated producers: Ibai, Perica, Viña del Lentisco, Muro, El Conjuro del Ciego, Familia Monje Amestoy, Altún, Artuke, Dominio de Berzal, Rufino Lecea Blanco, Señorío de Villarrica. |
| <p>● ZONE 5
NAJERILLA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of wines tasted: 29 • Average rating of the region: 16.4 • Top-rated producers: Alvia, Juan Carlos Sancha, Nivarius, Adrián Moreno Llorente, David Moreno, Martínez Alesanco, Clemente García, Horola, Gama, Bodegas Proelio, Leza. | <p>● ZONE 6
IREGUA Y LEZA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of wines tasted: 20 • Average rating of the region: 16.3 • Top-rated producers: Vinicola Real, Tierras de Murillo, Ojuel, Sínodo, Paco García. | <p>● ZONE 7
ALTO CIDACOS Y ALTO ALHAMA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of wines tasted: 27 • Average rating of the region: 16 • Top-rated producers: Ortega, Ezquerro, Finca Vistahermosa, Aldonia, Dominio de Queirón, Arizcuren, Pedro Garnica. | <p>● ZONE 8
RIBERAS DEL EBRO DE LA RIOJA Y NAVARRA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of wines tasted: 17 • Average rating of the region: 16.2 • Top-rated producers: Aradón, Bagordi, Lacus, Unión Familiar de Agricultores Las Cepas, Vinos en Voz Baja, Álvaro Palacios Alfaro. |

ZONE 7. ALTO CIDACOS Y ALTO ALHAMA.

Fort he first time, someone stablish a clear diference between the low altitude, fertile soils vineyards along the river Ebro Valley of those located in the traditional vineyard areas of the Iberian mountain range. And Arizcuren is one of the top rated producers!

Decanter
PREMIUM

Rioja travel guide: Great wineries and restaurants to visit

An insider guide to top wineries, restaurants, accommodation and sightseeing in this historic region, renowned for its vineyards but also home to ancient caves, monasteries and award-winning architecture.

 Yolanda Ortiz de Arri Izarra
January 19, 2022



Few people know more about this than architect-turned-winemaker Javier Arizcuren. As well as restoring Conde de los Andes and building modern wineries such as **Finca de los Arandinos**, he makes a handful of quality wines from his family vineyards in Rioja Oriental.

Arizcuren may one day restore his ancestors' cellar in Quel's 18th-century bodega district but, for now, he works in a garage winery – the only one in the centre of Logroño that is open to visitors. Check the website for details.

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Yolanda Ortiz de Arri Izarra, Decanter, January 2022



OhVino, de Javier Arizcuren en Quel, ha ganado el Proyecto Sostenible en Rioja de los II Premios Diario de Vendimia, celebrados este miércoles en el Riojafórum de Logroño. Este premio, novedad en esta edición, pondera las ideas y proyectos que tengan en cuenta tanto el desarrollo socioeconómico y cultural del sector vinícola de la región como la conservación del medioambiente y el entorno. Entre ocho candidatos, el proyecto de Arizcuren ha resultado ganador por su apuesta por la economía circular y el crecimiento sostenible. Este viticultor ha puesto a pastar durante el invierno a un rebaño en la cubierta vegetal de sus viñedos, logrando que estos animales reciban una alimentación herbácea sin coste alguno para el ganadero, al mismo tiempo que se enriquece la tierra y se ahorra tiempo y dinero en segar esa cubierta.

«Me gustaría pedir un deseo un poco especial: ojalá este premio no tenga que entregarse muchos años, que dentro de cinco o diez años ya no haga falta reconocer este trabajo, porque todo el sector trabaje así.»