



Tempranillo: undisputed queen of the Spanish viticultural landscape

Ask the average consumer about Spanish wine, and probably two words come to mind: Rioja and Tempranillo. Both are intimately intertwined, but the Tempranillo grape is the most famous of all vitis vinifera varieties and the most widely planted red variety in Spain, giving diverse wines, pairing with a vast range of dishes and types of food. Put simply, Tempranillo is a great all-rounder of a grape.



AN ANCIENT VINE

There is a hypothesis that Tempranillo has some relationship with Burgundian Pinot Noir, and that it was brought to northern Spain by monks from the monasteries of Cîteaux and Cluny who were walking the Santiago de Compostella pilgrimage route. There is in fact some similarity between the growth cycle of the two varieties, even if each gives a very specific wine. Tempranillo was mentioned for the first time back in 1513. Alonso Herrera, in his General Agricultural Treaty mentions this variety under the name of Aragonés, which is how the grape was known in the Burgos region. He describes it as a “firm grape, with big bunches and thick skin.” Two and a half centuries later, in 1791, this same grape was named in Rioja, the heartland of Tempranillo, by Valcárcel in his book on General Agriculture. Research is currently underway to determine the true origins of this grape, and news is expected soon: watch this space.

TEMPRANILLO IN MODERN TIMES

Like many other grapes, Tempranillo has different names: it is called Tempranillo in Rioja, Ull de Llebre in Catalunya, Tinta Fina in Ribera del Duero, Tinta de Toro in Toro, and Cencibel both in La Mancha and Valdepeñas. However, it is only recently that the scientific community has realized that in fact all these grapes were one and the same, further to morphological and DNA analysis. After Airén (250,000 hectares), Tempranillo is the most widely planted red variety in Spain with 226,000 hectares, followed by the Bobal grape (81,000 hectares), Grenache and Monastrell (Mourvèdre). It is without doubt the grape that best identifies Spain: after bullfighting, sunny beaches and paella, there is Tempranillo. It is one of Spain's finest *vitis vinifera* varieties.

A UNIQUE SPANISH CHARACTER

Tempranillo has a few firm advantages: it buds relatively late and ripens early (*temprano* means early in Spanish), at least a couple of weeks before Grenache. This quality means that in Rioja and Navarra, Tempranillo can avoid even late frosts and give reasonable yields. However, it has one fault: it has only medium level acidity, which means that in some cases other grape varieties have to be called to the rescue: for instance, Grenache, Mazuelo (Carignan) and Graciano blends in Rioja.

Due to the relatively short growth cycle, this vine tends to be more at ease with cool sites: it will ripen evenly anyhow. If temperatures are high, chances are the grape will lose its acidity and give a rather flabby, uninteresting wine. In fact, even though it is widely planted across red producing regions, Tempranillo acquires its prestige in the cooler central and northern parts of Spain. Another advantage of Tempranillo is that it marries very well with wood, American wood being the most popular type used in Rioja. Now, most domaines - not just in Rioja, but also in Ribera del Duero and La Mancha - looking to produce high quality cuvées would rather use French oak, because it gives the wine a more subtle character. With this grape variety, quality is sublimated by controlled yields: it is widely estimated that a yield of around 55 hl/ha will result in balanced, seductive wines.

WINE PROFILES

Wines go from light, fruity, quite pale in colour and relatively low in alcohol (around 12,5% - 13%) to heavy, full-bodied and very high in alcohol (more than 15% is not uncommon). All styles can be found, depending on a series of factors, mainly climate and vinification techniques used, combined with yield. As mentioned before, acidity plays a key role with Tempranillo. Wherever acidity is preserved, the wine will be truly enjoyable. This is the case in Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa, where the climate is more influenced by the Atlantic and wines have a good balance between alcohol, tannins and acidity. Navarra is another region offering great reserve wines based on Tempranillo harvested in cool vineyards, like those located in the Valdizarbe



TEMPRANILLO BUDS RELATIVELY LATE AND RIPENS EARLY

area. Heading east towards the Mediterranean, Tempranillo-based wines have a different personality: they are more full-bodied and have a southern character. In the south and west, Ribera del Duero is an ideal spot for Tempranillo. Average altitudes of 700 - 800 metres along with extreme temperature variations of as much as 15 to 20 degrees Centigrade during the summer days give the wines a natural balance. With its extreme continental climate, Atlantic influence and arid character, Toro has everything it needs to produce high quality Tempranillo, giving deep, concentrated wines that can even be harsh if poorly vinified. Cigales also has a continental climate, hot summers, cold winters, and an Atlantic influence with strong thermal oscillations both during the day and throughout the year: it boasts interesting wines with tannins that need some time to soften in the bottle.

A GRAPE MADE FOR FOOD LOVERS

A perfect meal with Tempranillo-based wines might start with a Cencibel from La Mancha, for instance a Casa Gualda joven (with 5% added Cabernet Sauvignon). It is a fresh, vibrant wine, with bramble and blackberry notes, that is well-matched with a typical Spanish cured ham, salami or any good quality dried sausage. Next, why not try a light young Rioja that has undergone carbonic maceration, such as the wonderful *Mitarte maceración carbónica* from Bodegas Mitarte. Slightly fizzy, it is a cheerful wine and a real pleasure that goes remarkably well with simply grilled tuna fish. For the next course, how about a roast lamb, paired with a Ribera del Duero, such as the Noyal 2005 from Pago de los Capellanes? To finish such a delightful meal, let yourself be seduced by a Toro *crianza* from Dominio del Bendito. Paired with an aged, cured sheep milk cheese from La Mancha, it is quite outstanding.

Diego Bonnel