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THE POUR

Rooted in Rioja, Traditions Gain New Respect

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ABUNDANT wreaths of ghostly mold hang from the ceiling like sentinels, guarding thousands of bottles of gran reserva wine deep in the cellars of the R. López de Heredia winery here in the heart of Rioja. More mold and copious cobwebs are draped over the bottles, some of which have been aging in their bins for decades.

Perhaps no winery in the world guards its traditions as proudly and steadfastly as López de Heredia does, especially in a region like Rioja, which has been swept by profound changes in the last 25 years. And yet, as fusty and as backward-looking as López de Heredia may seem, it is paradoxically a winery in the vanguard, its viticulture and winemaking a shining, visionary example for young, forward-thinking producers all over the world.

How is this possible? As López de Heredia has stayed true to its time-honored techniques in the 132 years since its inception, the rest of the wine-producing world has spent decades doggedly trying to improve what it does, only to come practically full circle, ending up where López de Heredia has been all along.

I don't mean that anybody the world over is making wine in the style of López de Heredia. Almost alone, the winery clings to the notion that it must age its wines until they are ready to drink. Rioja requires gran reserva wines to receive a minimum of six years of aging before they can be released. The current vintage for many gran reserva producers is 2001. López de Heredia has just released gran reservas from 1991 and 1987, exquisitely graceful wines that show the lightness of texture and finesse that comes of long aging.

And these are just the red wines. López de Heredia makes white Riojas that age just as well, achieving a beautifully complex, mellow nuttiness that is a special delight. Nobody makes white Riojas like López de Heredia anymore.

Red or white, the wines are great values, starting at \$25 to \$50 for crianzas and reservas, which can be 10 to 20 years old. Even 20-year-old gran reservas will be under \$100, a steal compared to French or Italian wines of similar age and quality.

But while López de Heredia's wines are almost singular, its ideas about growing grapes and making wines have become increasingly influential, regardless of stylistic concerns.

For more than 50 years after World War II, the great wine regions of the world sought to modernize. Where once backbreaking labor was the only method to grow grapes, science and technology began to offer shortcuts. Growers and producers everywhere seized the chance to mechanize; to deploy chemical pesticides, herbicides and fungicides, to adopt the latest technological recommendations.

Increased knowledge was welcome, and some technology was useful. But, too late, many learned that chemicals were killing the soil, and that techniques to increase vineyard yields also diminished the quality of the grapes, just as too much technology in wineries could harm the quality of the wine. All over the wine-producing world, the brightest winemakers have set out to relearn the wisdom and techniques of their grandparents. All, except for one Rioja producer right here in Haro.

“We don't need to, we never lost it,” said Maria José López de Heredia, who today, with her sister, Mercedes; brother, Julio César; and father, Pedro, runs the winery founded by her great-grandfather. “New technology is fine, but you can't forget the logic of history.”

But what many in the wine-producing world have seen clearly from afar is coming more slowly to the rest of Rioja, a region in transition, where many producers are debating stylistic and viticultural issues that have long been resolved in other parts of the world.

For decades, Rioja has emphasized brand over terroir. Many of the biggest names bought grapes from different parts of the region, blending them like the big [Champagne](#) producers to make wines — often delicious wines — that fit a house style but revealed little sense of place beyond a generic sense of Rioja.

But López de Heredia, and very few others in the old guard, like Marqués de Murrieta, have always owned their own vineyards and grown their own grapes. The López wines, which come from four distinct vineyards, almost always show characteristics of their site. The reds from the

Tondonia vineyard, for example, tend to be lighter and silkier than reds from the Bosconia vineyard, which are sturdier and a bit more powerful.

Today, a growing number of smaller and younger producers are, like López de Heredia, trying to show a sense of place in their wines, by gaining control of vineyards, improving their viticulture and becoming more conscious of the ideals of terroir that have long been accepted in other wine regions.

“The old producers wanted to show a brand, not a place,” said Telmo Rodríguez, who produces wine all over Spain and has recently, with a partner, opened a small, sleek winery, made of earth and old barrel staves, in the village of Lanciego east of Haro. “I want to make a wine that could show a village.”

In some ways, Mr. Rodríguez seems the antithesis of López. He prefers French oak to the traditional American oak found in the López de Heredia cellars, and he no longer uses the traditional terms *crianza*, *reserva* and *gran reserva* to indicate, in ascending order, the aging a wine has received before it has been released. Instead, he uses Burgundian terms — *village*, *premier cru* and *grand cru* — to describe his Riojas: LZ, Lanzaga and Altos de Lanzaga.

His wines are very different, too, fruity, floral and progressively dense moving up the quality scale. The Altos de Lanzaga is marked by the vanilla scent of new French oak.

Yet Mr. Rodríguez clearly respects and venerates López de Heredia. “For me, the only winery that works in an authentic way is López,” he said. “Their vineyards are still worked in a traditional way with direct links to the past.”

Driving through the gently rolling Rioja terrain, where grapes are often planted right up to the edge of the road, it is becoming harder to find vineyards planted in the older bush-vine style, their scraggly canes trained upward from thick, free-standing trunks in the shape of goblets. With the encouragement of agricultural authorities, more and more of the vines are now trained on neat rows of wire trellises, which make vineyards easier to negotiate with tractors and to harvest mechanically. Mr. Rodríguez abhors the changes, and has sought to buy old fields of bush vines, which he says are crucial to good Rioja. “We are more obsessed with authenticity than beauty,” he said.

All the grapes in the López de Heredia vineyards are grown on bush vines, even though, climbing the hill on which Tondonia is planted, one can see occasional rows of grapes on

trellises. When asked about them, Ms. López de Heredia explains that tiny parcels of Viña Tondonia are owned by small growers who, over the years, have refused to sell their land to López de Heredia.

“Everything on wires is not owned by us,” she said.

Since the winery was founded 132 years ago by Don Rafael López de Heredia y Landeta, she said, each succeeding generation has adhered to the founder’s guiding principles: “old vines, low yields and careful, gentle handling.” It’s a litany that today can be heard all over the wine-producing world.

While wine has been made in the Rioja region for centuries, Rioja wine as we know it is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating from the mid-19th century. Back then, French vigneron, victimized by phylloxera, the voracious aphid that destroyed vineyards all over Europe, came to Rioja prospecting for new places to make wine.

The Bordelais taught the Spanish how to make wines in the style of Bordeaux, which emphasized long aging in barrels before release.

Today, López de Heredia may be the last Rioja winery still taking those lessons literally. Even venerable Rioja producers like Marqués de Murrieta and La Rioja Alta, which once stood with López de Heredia as bastions of tradition, have tweaked and tinkered in an effort to add a touch of modernity to their wines, hoping that rounding off the edges might make them more appealing to the critics who dispense the scores.

At Marqués de Murrieta’s 741-acre Ygay estate, just outside the city of Logroño, the grapes are planted in a mixture of bush and trellised vines. Today, V. Dalmau Cebrián-Sagarriga, who took over the estate when his father died in 1996, is on a campaign to update his wines stylistically. “We refused to change the identity,” he said. “But we added more fruit to the wine, we release the wines sooner, we use newer oak and we leave the wine in oak less time.”

The reds clearly have become darker and fruitier. Yet the 2001 Castillo Ygay gran reserva remains true to the style, graceful, light-bodied and balanced. It will be a lovely wine in 20 years.

The same cannot be said with certainty about the white Rioja. Only a few years ago, Murrieta made a white Rioja in the traditional style, like López, the wine aged in American oak from

which it gained an almost coconut-like character. Now the white is aged in toasty French oak, and while it may be delicious, it is no longer distinctive.

Like many Rioja wineries, Murrieta also makes a red wine in a modern style — darker, richer, with tannins imparted by French oak. It's called Dalmau, which Mr. Cebrián-Sagarriga calls “a modern concept of Murrieta.” It, too, is balanced and not overripe, like other versions of what many in Rioja call “alta expression” wines. With Castillo de Ygay and Dalmau, Marqués de Murrieta manages to have it both ways.

Not every producer is as careful as Murrieta to stay tethered to its traditions. With its [Frank Gehry](#)-designed hotel on its grounds, Marqués de Riscal is the new face of Rioja in many tourist brochures and guides. The winery is a huge industrial operation, making 4.5 million bottles a year. A 1958 Riscal gran reserva today is a beautiful wine, delicate and harmonious. But Riscal doesn't make these sorts of wines anymore, opting even in its gran reservas for dark colors and big mouthfuls of fruit.

“Our technical director is very keen to protect the Marqués de Riscal identity, which I understand, but business is business,” the commercial director, Javier Ybañez Creus, told me.

At López de Heredia, there is a serenity that comes with adherence to core principles. For many years, the winery was criticized at home for being backward and old-fashioned. Appreciation came instead from its export markets.

“Acceptance overseas has people here in Spain reconsidering our wines,” Ms. López de Heredia said. “There are people who want to go back again, and we are happy to teach.”