

The Wine Club Trip to Rioja – As Told By the Travellers

The best place to start is at The Start! John Blackburn, Chairman of the Club and the co-leader and travel organiser, kicks off.

This has definitely been “The Year of Rioja” and it has been great organising a trip to somewhere I’d never been before and somewhere I didn’t know a lot about!

It all started for me with the Tim Atkins wine tasting event in London in February. It was where Patrick McHugh and I met for the first time most of the winemakers we eventually visited on the September trip. It was great to understand their passion for wine as we went round the room sampling wines which were very different than the Oaky Tempranillos I was expecting. This passion came across even more as we met them on our recce in Rioja and it was fantastic to understand we were developing relationships with such renowned wine makers as Juan Carlos Sancha, who is a professor leading the way in developing “new wines” but also produced in the “traditional way”, and Abel Mendoza, the “go to for advice” for the other wine makers in Rioja. On the recce we visited lots of plots in stunning locations overlooking mountains, picturesque slopes and rich rolling valleys.



These wines at CVNA are more than 100 years old

The things that particularly spring to mind were heading in Hummers up terraces created by the Romans; walking round cellars with wines over 100 years old; drinking wine directly from the concrete vats just before it was going to be bottled; eating lots of sharp local cheese, savoury sausages and meats and lots of LAMB!



Was this a second Breakfast or an early Lunch?

Those relationships we developed we then carried through and the winemakers of the 14 vineyards we visited in September made the trip truly memorable for us all as we tasted around 100 exceptional wines in the days we were in Rioja.

Rioja truly is a stunning region with iconic vineyards and passionate winemakers. I can't wait to go back.

Ann Chapman highlights a bonus experience on top of the wine tastings

For our visit to Bodegas Y Vinedos Valcuerna, we met up at the little San Cristobal chapel high above the vineyards, originally built by local people and where, each May, the saint's assistance in protecting the vines from hailstorms that would destroy the grapes is sought. Here, we were introduced to the traditional 'porron', a glass pitcher with a long narrow spout designed for sharing wine with others.



Preparing to try the *porron* at San Cristobel, and Ann checks John has it right!

Drinking from the spout is an acquired skill that I think I mastered rather well! And one more comment - there really is a limit to the amount of chorizo and cured pork any one person can eat.

Mary Johnson reflects on the striking hotel we stayed in

Eguren Ugarte was our upside down hotel!



We arrived at this splendid hotel after two nights on the boat and a half-day travelling by mini bus.... Such a splendid sight and site, but with elements of Faulty Towers!

Although it is a working winery, I suspect that the business model depends very heavily on the hotel and venue to balance the books...

We arrived about an hour early – at about 3pm.... but the rooms were not ready, as the wedding had overrun!.... During our stay we were treated to another wedding – this one in both English (Groom) and Spanish (Bride)... but it really is a magnificent site.

Being built on the side of a hill, the reception is at ground level on one side, but 4th floor on the other. This means expansive views over Rioja, its villages, vineyards and rivers. Eating breakfast with views to three sides was a great way to start the day.. BUT don't expect breakfast before 8.30 am PROMPT. Even if the buffet is ready and you are on a tight timescale, no one was allowed to eat before 8.30am. With several guest groups, all wanting to start their day and get out into the vineyards and wine tasting, this led to the suggestion of using bath towels to mark your spot.

The rooms were tidy and out-of-the-ordinary – the massage shower for example and the observation lift that went through the wine cellar. But why would you dust the walls of a cellar?

David Peregrine-Jones particularly thinks of a piece of Rioja village history.

In Rioja, winemaking is full of the latest technology but they also grow olives. I'm off to Italy shortly to pick olives. We then send them to the local frantoya (press) to extract the oil, so I was really fascinated by this old press we were shown that, remarkably, is still in use and is the oldest working one in the village



Our very own Wine Master and co-leader Patrick McHugh had a Red Letter experience with a personal first.

Special event: persuading Bodega Miguel Merino to sell us six bottles of their 2021 La Loma which six of us now proudly own. Mine is bottle number 1,480 from the 2,282 they made. Here are Tim Atkin's notes on this wonderful wine, '2021 Miguel Merino La Loma – 100 points. Red wine of the Year. Perfection, drink 2025-32.' I've never owned a 100 pointer before and normally the wine is not for sale. That we were able to buy it at all is down to the interest and dedication of those on the Wine Trip which so deeply impressed Miguel Merino that he sold us six bottles.

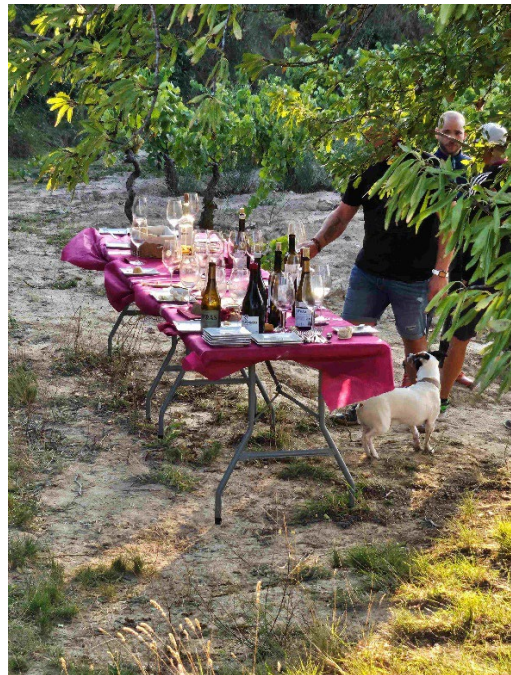
A golden moment in concrete that Jim Foster treasures.

One of our visits was to the [El Mozo winery](#) in Lanciego where its Herrigoia wine is fermented in concrete vats. Before tasting the 2022 vintage our host, Gorka Mauleón, opened a hatch at the top of one of the concrete vats and served us a tasting of the Herrigoia 2023 wine stored in the vat. A unique opportunity to taste a wine before any is bottled.

Chris Sutton travelled by Madrid Airport and took the short wine tour!

Hilary and I enjoyed our two days on the tour.

In Rioja we really enjoyed the landscape, food and wine, and the combination of all three at the evening picnic in the hillside vineyard at Bodegas La Terra. We loved exploring Salamanca and Leon en route from Madrid, and on the way back we enjoyed feasting on Tapas for lunch at a restaurant in Zaragoza recommended by (then) First Warden Andy Miles.



And we were delighted to be back home in time for the birth of our second grandson!

Collette Stone especially remembers how she took guidance and learned how to love tannins

During the CVNE winemakers' visit I learned a lesson about pairing good wine with food. We were having yet another Breakfast Wine tasting (i.e. 30 mins after we actually finished

breakfast, we were gathered at a winemaker's cellar somewhere in the Riojan mountains tasting wine).

To show willing, I sampled my flight of four reds, but I didn't like any of them and poured most of each one away. To the horror of our host.

'It's the tannin', I said by way of explanation. 'Too strong'. 'Try it all again with some food', said the host, It wasn't a request. So, he repoured, and I took a little cheese with each wine, and wow! What a difference. Each wine was differently lovely. Absolutely not pouring a drop of it away now.

(Later I learned that one of the wines I had ditched sells at £80 a bottle. Hence the horror!)

The last word should go to Matthew Desoutter of [Simply Spanish Wine](#)), our vineyard advisor, guide, viticulture language gap filler, and all-round great guy

The trip was a fantastic opportunity to visit and get to know some of Rioja's smaller, family-run producers who don't usually include "enoturismo" - wine tourism - as part of their offer.

Thanks to the carefully curated programme, we were able to visit many of the leading lights of "new wave" Rioja - the likes of Artuke, Miguel Merino, Exopto, or Bodegas Tierra, for example - and learn at first hand about their wine-making philosophy and what they are seeking to achieve. All this at a time when Rioja is undergoing a hugely exciting transformation, with a lot more emphasis on provenance, single plot wines or the resurgence of lesser-known (at least outside Rioja) grape varieties.



Matthew (r) interprets between the winemaker and us

We also covered a lot of ground. As well as Rioja Alavesa where a lot of the more interesting and award-winning smaller bodegas are based, we got the chance to head south the cooler climes of the Najerilla valley and visit Juan Carlos Sancha, possibly Spain's leading expert on minority varieties and producer of some brilliant, single plot wines made from Garnacha, Maturana Tinta and Maturana Blanca.

All in all, a packed and exciting trip that really got under the skin of the new Rioja.

My thanks to all contributors. My own striking memory is of meeting so many innovative and passionate artisanal wine-growers and -makers.

Edward Sankey