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Rolling On The **RIBERA**

by Elyse Glickman

While Ribera del Duero wines are flowing onto American hotel and restaurant wine lists, they're also bridging northern Spain's culinary past, present and future.



When Spain is mentioned in a room full of wine lovers, two things that quickly come to mind are Sherry (Jerez), the liquid gold of southern Spain, and Rioja, which shares historic ties with Bordeaux, France dating to 1858, when Don Guillermo Hurtado de Amézaga (the namesake of the Marqués de Riscal winery) brought groundbreaking winemaking techniques from Bordeaux to Spain. Castilla y León, which incorporates the Ribera del Duero appellation, is now boosting its profile internationally with the help of the individual wineries and Spain's national and regional tourism boards.

In recent years, DOC wines from the Ribera del Duero, as well as wineries neighboring the appellation, have been gaining footing in the U.S. market with an aggressive schedule of trade and consumer tasting events. Back in Spain, wineries also recognize in order to continue and strengthen that word of mouth internationally, they also have to sell the cultural and gastronomic lifestyle that nourishes the wines' image in the minds of wine drinkers.

The Denominación de Origen (D.O.) of Ribera del Duero, established July 21, 1982, was formed by wine producers and growers who joined forces to enforce regulatory standards and promote their wines internationally. However, they also set down roots for lifestyle-driven marketing, blending gastronomy, culture, architecture and the legacy of a 2,000-year wine production history. The continued initiatives are intended to not only bring tourism dollars to the region, but also bolster sales of their wines abroad.

LEFT • Duero River running through the city of Zamora.

Uncorking A Wine Region

The wineries of Ribera del Duero D.O. extend over four provinces in Castilla y León (Burgos, Segovia, Soria and Valladolid). Throughout the appellation are restaurants that run the gamut from traditional inns, whose recipes have endured through the centuries (e.g., Mesón Cándido's suckling pig, paired with Bodegas Torrederos' Ribera del Duero "Roble") to contemporary spots operated by young chefs inventing new ways to prepare the area's native produce (e.g., Restaurante El 24 de la Paloma in Burgos, serving Torrenava 2012 Verdejo and Viña Solorca Cosecha), to groundbreaking retailers, like Señorita Malauva in Valladolid, who deliver a dose of entertainment and education with every pour.

Raquel Puente, a representative for the Castilla y León region tourism office, points out that heavy promotion of gastronomy and oenotourism go hand in hand with Ribera del Duero winemakers' efforts to expand their presence and relevance inside and outside of Spain. While she acknowledges that the wines and tourism industry of Rioja in the past decade have mutually benefitted each other in a big way, she is confident that Ribera del Duero will follow suit.

"In terms of tourism in (northern) Spain, much of the wine tourism industry's visibility is heavily concentrated in Rioja," Puente says. "While there's a lot of work that still needs to be done in our region, we know oenotourism works. This is why our wineries and hospitality (businesses) work together to build a higher profile for Ribera del Duero's products as well as its identity as a destination. We want to make consumers, sommeliers and beverage buyers aware of the fact that the Ribera del Duero wines and lifestyle are equal in quality, though very different from the wines of the Rioja."





ABOVE • View from Portia.
RIGHT • Portia Tasting.

Ribera del Duero winery owners and other entrepreneurs outside the cities, meanwhile, are breathing new life into historic estates and properties via extensive restorations. Others are the result of partnerships among parties like internationally renowned architect Norman Foster and the Faustino family, a winemaking dynasty whose operations extend through several wine production regions. Their partnership has begotten Bodegas Portia, a literal rising star in the Ribera del Duero denomination that reconciles 21st-century glamour and technology with winemaking practices the Faustino wineries have engaged in for generations.

"As Faustino is an international group, imported in the U.S. by Palm Bay Imports, it allows us to sell most of our wines (except Portia's one winery exclusive) into the U.S. and other countries," says Ana Melero Gil, Portia's PR spokeswoman. "It helps that the Faustino group itself is internationally known and is taking a hands-on role in selling Portia into North America with key markets in New York City and Miami."

While the Ribera del Duero region was established in the '90s, the Faustino family saw potential in this area beforehand, providing the genesis for Portia. Around 1990, they started doing experiments with Tempranillo, and found the climate and great temperature variances through the year resulted in luxurious, drinkable and food-friendly wines. However, to reconcile nature, history and modern consumer tastes,

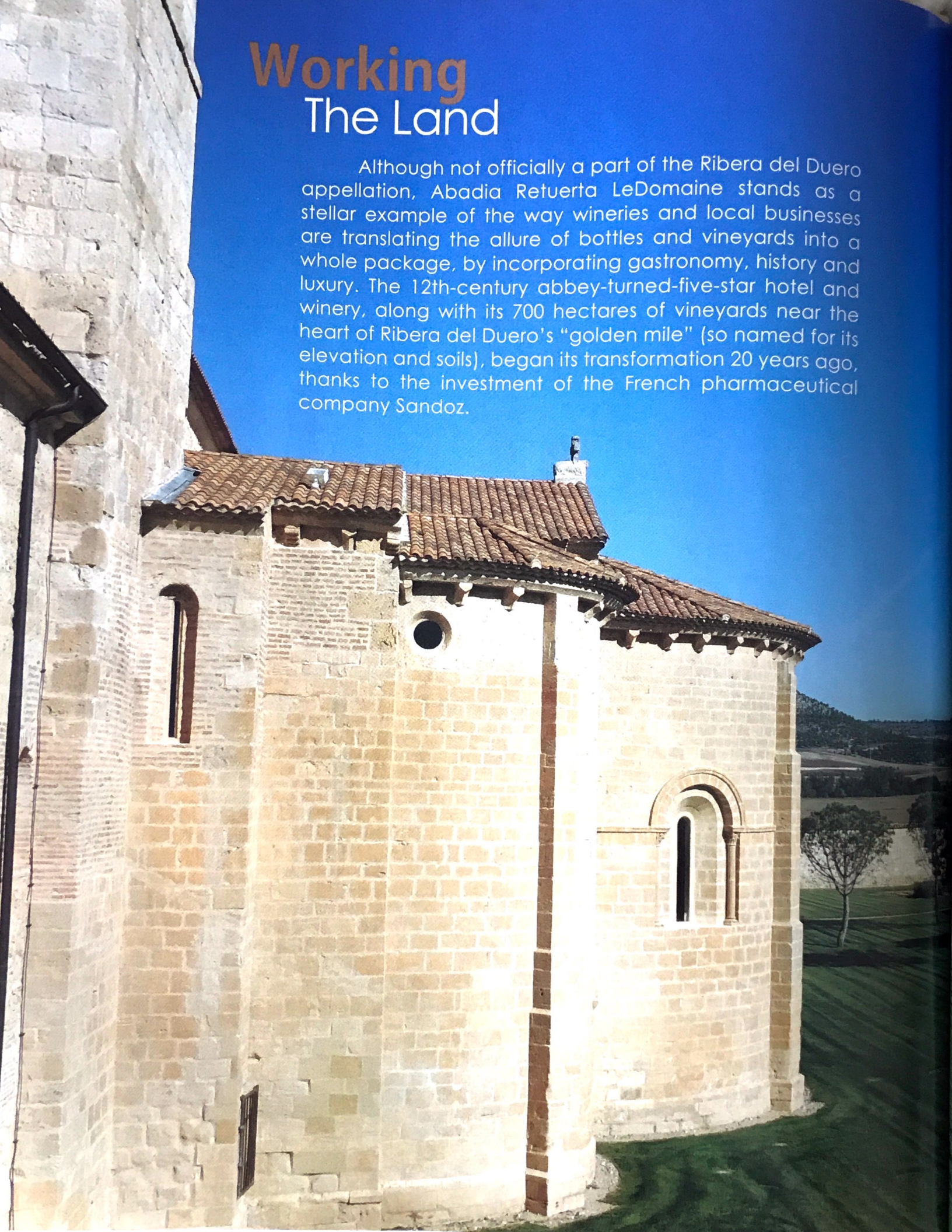


the family brought in Norman Foster to put his spin on their vision.

In Foster's three-point, trefoil "flower" design, each "petal" houses a different stage of the winemaking process. The first "petal" houses the fermentation process; the second, the barriques; and the third, the cellar. All "petals" are connected to the heart of the winery in the center, with a first floor that includes reception, bistro and fine dining restaurant, retail, tasting areas and an AV room. The building materials, meanwhile, are the same elements used in wine production: wood, steel and glass. Transparency is also part of Foster's design. The winery is open year-round, allowing the winemaking process to be more accessible to visitors and more seamless for the workers.

Working The Land

Although not officially a part of the Ribera del Duero appellation, Abadia Retuerta LeDomaine stands as a stellar example of the way wineries and local businesses are translating the allure of bottles and vineyards into a whole package, by incorporating gastronomy, history and luxury. The 12th-century abbey-turned-five-star hotel and winery, along with its 700 hectares of vineyards near the heart of Ribera del Duero's "golden mile" (so named for its elevation and soils), began its transformation 20 years ago, thanks to the investment of the French pharmaceutical company Sandoz.





The quality of Abadía Retuerta's wines, which are produced under the *Vino de la Tierra** designation of the *Castilla y León* appellation, along with the presence of the five-star hotel, have provided a substantial boost for Castilla y León's gastronomic tourism efforts. It also doesn't hurt, at least from a trade standpoint, that its winemaking facilities were designed by renowned oenologist Pascal Delbeck, proprietor of Château Ausone.

"We are working hard to bring in travelers from the rest of Europe, the United States and beyond because we want the property to be a starting point for them to get to know the wines of the area, and experience the wines on their own soil and get word out from there," says Mercedes Romero, Abadía Retuerta Hotel's director of marketing. "To provide visitors a complete experience, we're building relationships with all of the wineries in the area including those of Ribera del Duero. While there are some that did not have an interest in having visitors come onto their properties or selling outside of Spain, many of the wineries are interested in both selling the wine experience within the region and using that to generate interest in exports."

According to Alvaro Perez Navazo, the Abadía Retuerta winery's marketing director, a key objective is to sell the destination, which will in turn create interest by word of mouth that will ultimately sell the wines internationally. In addition to the quality of their wines – especially with the acclaimed vintages from their 2009 harvest, imported into the U.S. by Golden State – they are using a mix of their proximity to Ribera del Duero and their independence from the appellation to catch the interest of consumers, sommeliers and retailers.

"We want to communicate in a fluent way that we are independent," he says. "(However), we recognize selling our wines overseas may be a little bit more challenging because we are not part of the Ribera del Duero appellation. We therefore support our importers, distributors and retailers to get word out about our unique advantages. We also recognize the end consumer is the most important thing, whether they're visiting the area and our winery, or learning about it in the States through sommeliers or importers who have visited us."

*"Vino de la Tierra" is a quality of Spanish wine that designates the rung below the mainstream quality wine indication of Denominación de Origen (DO). It is the equivalent of the French "vin de pays." It covers not only still wine but also sparkling wine and fortified wine. It represents a higher quality than table wine. The labels of *Vino de la Tierra* wines are allowed to state the year of vintage and the grape varieties used in production. In 2008, there were 43 registered *Vino de la Tierra* wines in Spain.



Hotel & Spa Arzuaga, pictured above, offers a barbeque lunch on their restaurant terrace with their Arzuaga Crianza 2012 Tinto.



Build It, and They Will Taste

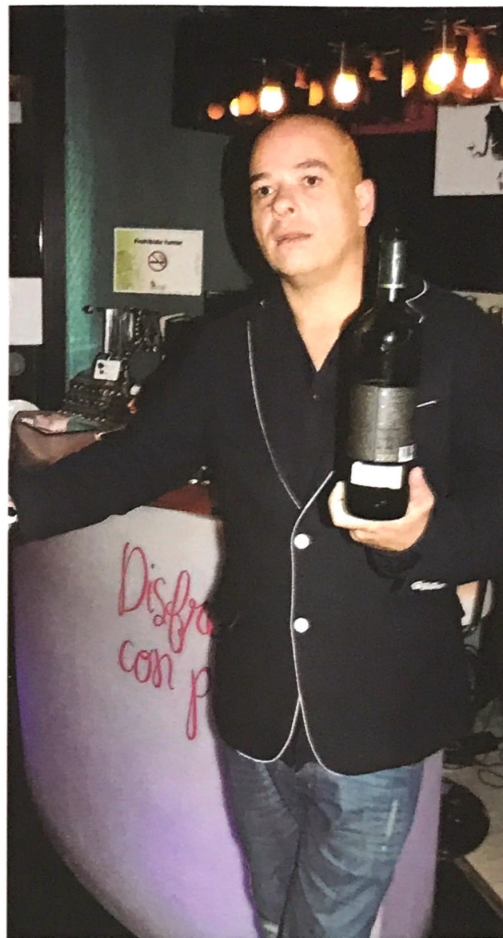
As you scoot around the region via rental car, wine tour company or user-friendly Rail Europe, you will quickly notice that the convergence of the old and the new effectively sells the area's wines and the "joie de vivre," or joy of living, that comes with every uncorking.

On one end of the spectrum, places use a casual, comfort food-driven approach, such as the Hotel & Spa Arzuaga's offering a barbeque lunch on their restaurant terrace with their Arzuaga Crianza 2012 Tinto, imported into the U.S. by Fine Wine Imports. There's also Meson Restaurante El Legar, an offshoot of El Legar de Isilla winery, in Aranda de Duero. This "meson" integrates a tapas bar, a family-style dining room and a museum in their former wine cellar, to drive traffic to the present-day winery. The new Museo Gastronómico de Segovia does its bit to present the area's gastronomic legacy and wine traditions in an internationally accessible way.

The flagship location of Señorita Malauva in Valladolid, on the other hand, turns the winery shop tasting room experience upside down, with a mad dash of fashionable, woman-friendly appeal.

"We are not a restaurant, but a wine shop that builds events around different wines," says owner Gustavo Calvo. "Customers come in and choose a bottle. We open it, and explain the wine's origins and how it's made. The price is the same whether you enjoy your purchase here or elsewhere. While we sell wines from all over the world, we of course prefer to promote the wines of the Ribera del Duero. We have special relationships with several of the local wineries, giving us the capability of selling their product and introducing them to a broader audience."

Games involving blindfolds, aroma bottles and darkened wine glasses turn what could be a stuffy discussion or lecture into a party. Calvo contends his format is "a much better way for the average consumer to get to know wines than reading reviews in newspapers and magazines, as that can get boring. You need the taste and the aromas to form an opinion about what you're drinking. Why not have fun doing it with your friends?"



ABOVE • Gustavo Calvo, owner of Señorita Malauva in Valladolid.

BELOW • Plaza Mayor And The City Hall Of Valladolid.



Beyond the River



ABOVE • Mandarin Oriental Barcelona penthouse terrace.
BELOW • Moments Restaurant in Mandarin Oriental Barcelona.



Essential information and useful websites:

Turismo Castilla y León:

turismocastillayleon.es

Ribera del Duero wine region information:

drinkriberawine.com

Rail Europe: raileurope.com

Bodegas Portia: bodegasportia.com

Señorita Malauva: vinotecamalauva.es

Arzuaga Navarro: hotelarzuaga.com

Restaurante el 24 de Paloma:

restauranteel24delapaloma.com

El Museo Gastronómico de Segovia:

museogastronomicodesegovia.es

Abadía Retuerta LeDomaine:

abadia-retuerta.com

Elsewhere in Spain, sommeliers like Judith Cercós Terrés of the Mandarin Oriental Barcelona are also doing their part to help international guests expand their Spanish wine vocabulary beyond Rioja and Jerez. As a fan of California Cabernet Sauvignon wines, she notes these share characteristics with Ribera del Duero's modern red wines, with their powerful red fruit notes. She uses it as a barometer to match wines to hotel guests as well as to the food they order.

"We find American clients gravitate toward Ribera del Duero wines," Cercós Terrés observes. "The wines' characteristics include powerful aromatics and concentrated flavors. I also encourage my customers to tell me what styles and flavors of wines they prefer. This will inform my choice of which Ribera del Duero wine to serve them. Even within a single wine production region or varietal, there are going to be several different expressions, so it's good to get an idea from the customer about which nuances of wine appeal to them."

As the gastronomy culture of Spain takes hold in the U.S. and elsewhere, it is only a matter of time before people discover there are wonderful things to behold between the production areas of La Rioja and Jerez, which can be paired with the foods. Thanks to the velvety reds of the Ribera del Duero and neighboring growing areas, the wineries introducing themselves to tourists and trade through restaurants, hotels, fancy food markets, are not only proving to the public that production down the river is flowing, but also that it is branching off in all kinds of interesting directions.