RIOJA RISING

An intoxicating brew of beauty, bodegas, and bold flavours awaits in the foothills of the Sierra de Cantabria mountains.

Words **Jocelyn Pride**

This image: Vine rows in the foothills of the Sierra de Cantabria (Credit: Getty Images).

"Welcome to Hotel Finca de los Arandinos," the woman at reception says, her smile radiating warmth. "You're in one of the David Delfin suites, which means you have to find everything in the room by yourself."

Puzzled, and feeling like I may have lost the plot after 48 hours travelling by plane, train and automobile, I casually respond – "Is it like a mystery?"

"Yes, exactly."

Intrigued, I open the door and step into a chic, natural, light-filled Scandinavian-style space where thankfully the bed is visible, but little else. Scanning the room for clues, I spend the next few minutes sliding back a series of colourful panels within the wooden walls, unearthing a bathroom, separate toilet, office space, and TV nook. All beautifully decorated. All hidden in plain sight.

This first impression of one of the most famed wine regions in the world stays with me. Sprawled across approximately 5,000 square kilometres in north central Spain, La Rioja is a juxtaposition – a place steeped in tradition, yet wildly imaginative, where cutting edge architecture like Frank Gehry's Hotel Marqués de Riscal, Santiago Calatrava's Bodegas Ysios, and Ignacio Quemada Sáenz-Badilloss' Bodegas Campo Viejo sit alongside castles towering over cobblestone laneways winding through medieval villages. And then there's the main event – the wine.

AT THE ROOT OF THE VINE

Winemaking in La Rioja can be dated back to the Phoenicians in the 11th century BC, and archaeological finds of cellars and wine presses from Roman times are still found in the area. The dreaded phylloxera outbreak in the late 19th century decimated the wine industry throughout Europe, but somehow a few La Rioja winemakers hung in there, producing fine wines. By the 20th century, Rioja reds started to rival Bordeaux and Burgundy regions in not only quality, but also price.

Tempranillo is the main varietal, together with Garnacha, Mazuelo, Graciana, and Maturana. In 1991, La Rioja was the first region to be granted Calificada DO (DOCa), the highest accolade that wine produced in Spain can achieve, meaning wines are under strict quality control. Today, there are 600-plus bodegas (wineries) scattered throughout the mighty Ebro River valley (Spain's longest river) taking in three subzones - Rioja Alta, Rioja Alavesa, and Rioja Orientale (previously known as Rioja Baja).

Against a backdrop of the Sierra de Cantabria range, the region lies at the convergence of two climates – Atlantic and Mediterranean. Cold in winter, hot in summer, the terroir of each subzone makes for a lively diversity of wines. Alta in the west at higher altitude, rugged and steep, is known for wines with

Left: Mountain views from Fina de los Arandinos (Credit: Finca de los Arandinos).
Above right: In the cellars of Marqués de Riscal (Credit: Hotel Marqués de Riscal).
Top: The stunning architectural charm of Bodegas Ysios (Credit: Bodegas Ysios).

Top: A leisurely afternoon at Bodegas Muga (Credit: Jocelyn Pride). **Above:** Camino de Santiago, or The Way of Saint James (Credit: Getty Images).

great structure and high acidity; Alavesa is the wettest and coolest, with clay soil producing more light-bodied wines; and Orientale, leaning more to a Mediterranean climate, with alluvial soils creating wines with lower acidity.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

"As a family we decide if a vintage is good enough to proceed with," says Eduardo Muga, whose grandparents founded Bodegas Muga in the Alta subzone in 1932. "We never want our reputation to diminish." Walking through the winery I gain an appreciation for what it takes to maintain the standard his 100 per cent owned-and-operated family business is renowned for. There's not a single hint of stainless steel in sight.

Row after row of wooden casks, handmade on site by coopers, line the walls. Stepping around a thick hose, Eduardo explains the casks are going through the *trasiga* (racking) process. "Every four months the wine has to be moved and emptied into new barrels."

He also talks through the clarification (fining) of the wine. The traditional way, using egg whites. Given the fact Muga produces around 1.5 to 2 million bottles a year, the chooks around here must be mighty busy. "We do rely on local farmers for the eggs. It takes 2-3 eggs for every 10 litres of wine."

Eduardo describes how the egg whites drag any remaining sediments and absorb bitter tannins, leaving behind softer tannins. "The egg whites and sediment at the bottom of the vessel is used to produce compost to fertilise the soil."

Later, sipping on the richly balanced complexity of a 2019 Muga Reserva, I ponder over the journey of every drop.

"Our wines represent who we are, where we've been and where we're going," Eduardo tells me.

REPURPOSE AND REGENERATION

A short drive away, still in the Alta area, Bodegas Corral adds a different dimension to the wine scene. "The winery is over a century old, but this site was built in 1971," says Sara Nájera Romeo, Brand Ambassador for the label.

With the ruins of the 12th-century San Juan de Acre Pilgrims Hospice in the foreground, Corral is a popular stop for pilgrims on the 800-kilometre Camino de Santiago, known locally as The Way of St James.

"When we moved here, we tapped into the providence of the site. The Don Jacobo label is a tribute to St James for the Camino trail."

Sara also shows how they're attracting pilgrims to the winery by transforming a large vat into a gathering place. "Pilgrims can stop here, have a glass of wine (gratis) and chat about their experiences. We have another vat made into a bedroom and bathroom for pilgrims."

With a focus on organic viticulture, Bodegas Corral has also achieved something quite extraordinary, reviving the near-extinct 18th century Maturana grape.

"Instead of using oak, we age the Maturana for 12 months in these clay vats from Navarrete, a nearby village famous for its pottery," Sara explains as we stop in front of a row of rounded pots standing like sentinels with clay feet and pointy domed lids. Once bottled, the wine is ready to drink. The result? Layers of history unfold with high intensity and a fresh, elegant taste.

TAPAS CENTRAL

Like the wine, Riojans take their food seriously. Especially on a tapas/pintxos (served on wooden sticks) crawl.

"How we eat this divides our population," local guide Celia Cardero says, balancing a skewer filled with plump mushrooms and shrimp dripping in garlic in her hand. Following Celia's lead, I push a mushroom from the stick onto a piece of bread, trying not to waste a drop of the heaven-sent sauce. We're perched on stools outside Bar Soriano, one of the most popular tapas bars in the old district of Logroño, La Rioja's capital. "There are around 50 bars around here, most doing only one of two types of tapas or pintxos," Celia informs me.

As we wander from bar to bar, the streets fill with locals and the soundtrack of the city is a happy mix of laughter, sizzling pots and strumming guitars, as irresistible aromas waft through the air. I savour every morsel, knowing I will never have a clue how to recreate anchovies with green peppers like Blanco y Negro, the spicy pig ear at Bar El Perchas, or chicken kebabs with a 'secret' green sauce, the speciality of Bar Lorenzo.

In addition to the vibrancy of its street food, La Rioja has its lion's share of Michelin-starred restaurants, including one in a most unexpected place.

WHERE THE STARS ALIGN

A long lunch at Venta Moncalvillo in the tiny village of Daroca de Rioja (population 54), around 20 kilometres from Logroño, is another of my 'etched in the mind for ever' experiences in La Rioja.

When brothers Iganacio and Carlos Echapestro grew up in Venta Moncalvillo, little did they know their home would become a multi-Michelin star-studded restaurant, together with every other conceivable accolade, including a Michelin green star for sustainability.

With Iganacio as head chef and Carlos the maître d and sommelier, the atmosphere is welcoming and down-to-earth. From amuse-bouches served in the garden to a cooking demonstration by Iganacio and simply sitting in the restaurant gazing through the picture windows, it's as much food for the soul as for the body.

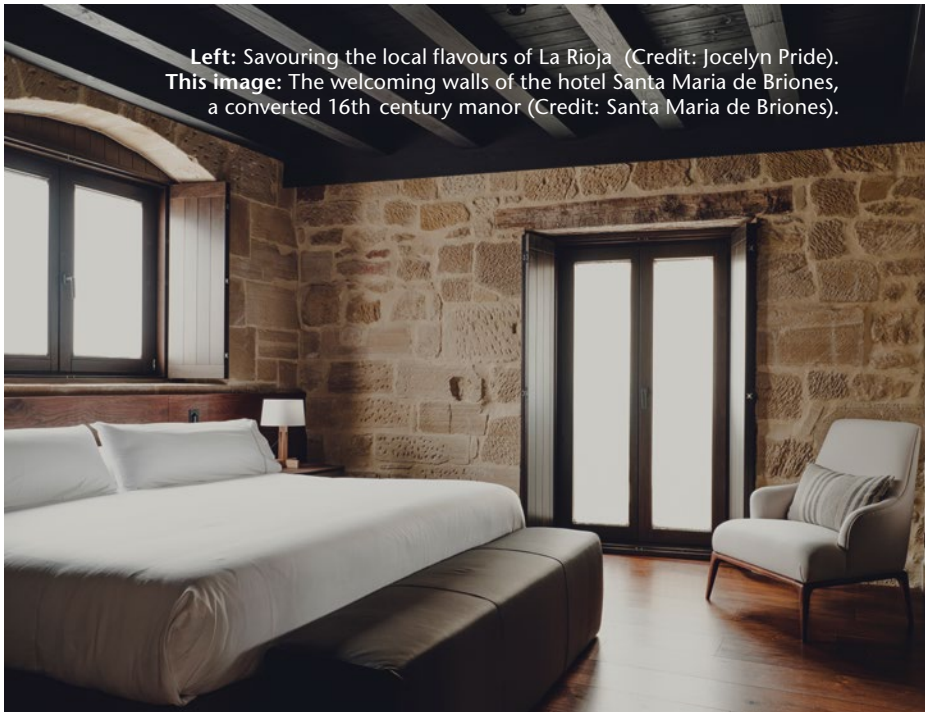
"I've never been to chef school," Iganacio says. "My mum taught me to cook and nature guides me." Around 80 per cent of the ingredients is sourced within 30 kilometres of the restaurant, many staples from the kitchen garden.

Presentation of each course (22 in total) is as extraordinary as the flavours: the paprika chorizo is served on a deer horn; a sliver of trout with wasabi nestles into a plate filled with river stones; and the hot soup made from cardon hazelnuts and mushrooms is in a bowl created to look like the underside of a mushroom.

"All our plates are crafted here in the village by a local potter," Carlos explains as presents a taste of a 2017 Cupani Rielo Viura to complement the soup. Carlos' knowledge of wine is exceptional, and the cellar at Venta Moncalvillo with more than 1,000 bottles (mostly Rioja) is considered the best in the region.

In addition to wine, mead brewed in their own meadery is served, and Magma water in sleek black bottles, that only carbonates once it's exposed to light, adds another element.

On my final night, cocooned inside hotel Santa Maria de Briones, a glorious 16th-century manor with its thick original stone walls, exposed beams and superb restaurant in the original wine cellar, I reflect on what it is that makes La Rioja a rarity in today's world. Is it the respect for history? The can-do attitude of the people? Diversity of the terrain? Whatever it is – the wines and food tell the story.



Left: Savouring the local flavours of La Rioja (Credit: Jocelyn Pride).
This image: The welcoming walls of the hotel Santa Maria de Briones, a converted 16th century manor (Credit: Santa Maria de Briones).