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Rioja celebrates 100 years as a wine region with rising global acclaim for its white wines

Expansion of white grape plantings and innovative winemaking drive Rioja’s emergence as Spain’s second-largest white wine producer

Thursday, May 22, 2025



In 2024, the Rioja wine region in northern Spain is marking its 100th anniversary as a Denominación de Origen Calificada (DOCa), and it is doing so with a renewed focus on white wines. Traditionally known for its robust, aged red wines, Rioja is now gaining international attention for the diversity and quality of its white wines. Over the past two decades, the area planted with white grape varieties in Rioja has nearly doubled, now accounting for almost 10 percent of the region’s total vineyard area. This growth has translated into more than 36 million bottles of white Rioja sold worldwide in 2024,

making it Spain’s second-largest white wine region.

The shift toward white wine production in Rioja reflects changing consumer preferences and global trends. The region’s winemakers are responding with a wide range of styles, from fresh and fruity young wines to complex, barrel-aged whites. Most entry-level white Riojas are made from Viura and Tempranillo Blanco grapes. These wines are typically fermented in stainless steel at low temperatures to preserve their citrus, floral, and green apple aromas. They come mainly from the cooler, higher-altitude zones of Rioja Alta and Alavesa, where the climate helps maintain freshness and acidity. These young whites are popular for their easy-drinking style and pair well with seafood, light dishes, or can be enjoyed on their own.

At the same time, Rioja is producing more sophisticated white wines that undergo aging in oak barrels. Many of these wines come from old Viura vines, sometimes blended with Malvasía Riojana or Garnacha Blanca. As Viura vines age, they develop greater depth and structure, making them suitable for extended aging in barriques or large oak casks. Some of these whites are classified as Reserva or Gran Reserva and spend several years maturing both in barrel and bottle. The best examples come from select parcels in Rioja Alta and Alavesa, where cool nights and limestone soils contribute to their complexity. Winemakers often use techniques such as extended lees contact and batonnage to add texture and flavor. The resulting wines show layers of ripe fruit, spice, vanilla, and nutty notes—making them ideal partners for fine dining, including dishes like game birds, veal, or aged cheeses.

A significant milestone in Rioja’s white wine evolution came in 2008 when the DOCa regulatory council approved six additional white grape varieties for use under the Rioja designation. This included three more indigenous grapes—on top of Viura, Garnacha Blanca, and Malvasía Riojana—as well as three international varieties: Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, and Verdejo. This move expanded the stylistic possibilities for winemakers across the region’s three subzones: Rioja Alta, Alavesa, and Oriental.

Viura (also known as Macabeo) remains the dominant grape for white Rioja due to its versatility; it can produce both fresh young wines and complex barrel-aged styles. Tempranillo Blanco—a natural mutation of the red Tempranillo grape discovered only in

1988—has become a favorite among enthusiasts for its intense citrus notes and lively acidity. Malvasía Riojana is less widely planted due to lower yields and disease susceptibility but offers unique aromatic qualities for high-quality whites. Maturana Blanca is recognized as the oldest documented white grape in Rioja, dating back to 1622; it produces fresh wines with an Atlantic character. Garnacha Blanca and Turruntés add further diversity to the mix.

While blending remains common in Rioja winemaking tradition, there is a growing trend toward single-varietal bottlings as younger generations of winemakers experiment with terroir-driven expressions. Today, about 20 percent of “Viñedos Singulares”—Rioja’s single-vineyard designations—are dedicated to white wines. These site-specific bottlings capture the nuances of Rioja’s varied soils and microclimates.

The region’s geography plays a key role in shaping its white wines. Protected by the Cantabrian Mountains to the north and influenced by both Atlantic and Mediterranean climates due to its proximity to two seas, Rioja benefits from moderate conditions that favor white grape cultivation. The northwest part of the region near the Bay of Biscay is considered one of Spain’s most important cool-climate zones for viticulture. Many vineyards on the north side of the Ebro River are among the northernmost on the Iberian Peninsula—a factor that helps maintain balance and freshness in white wines.

As Rioja celebrates its centennial year as a DOCa in 2024, it is highlighting this new chapter through a series of tastings and events aimed at wine professionals and consumers around the world. The campaign underscores how innovation alongside tradition has allowed Rioja not only to maintain its reputation for top-quality reds but also to emerge as a leader in Spanish white wine production.