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Spanish wine fraud ring accused of selling fake royal family bottles under Rioja label

Authorities allege thousands of counterfeit wines were exported to China and sold in Spain, damaging consumer trust and industry reputation

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Two men from La Rioja, Spain, are under investigation for allegedly selling thousands of bottles of wine with fake labels claiming the product was “Wine of the Spanish Royal Family.” The case, led by the police as part of Operation Alduo, centers on a wine trading company based in La Rioja Baja. The suspects, aged 36 and 42, are not winemakers or producers authorized under the Denomination of Origin Calificada Rioja (DOCa Rioja). Authorities accuse them of fraud and industrial property crimes after they exported 3,567 bottles of falsely labeled wine to China and sold more within Spain.

The investigation began in January 2025 when the Judicial Police Unit in La Rioja received information about possible irregularities involving a local wine distributor. The company was suspected of distributing wines both nationally and internationally under the prestigious DOCa Rioja label. Early analysis of bottles distributed by the company revealed several inconsistencies. Labels on the bottles did not match official records from the DOCa Rioja Regulatory Council. In some cases, the bottling winery listed on the label did not correspond with the security seal or guarantee label required by DOCa Rioja regulations. In other cases, bottles lacked these official seals entirely, making it impossible to verify their origin, vintage, or producer.

Further examination showed that the labels were applied manually and inconsistently, suggesting a lack of professional equipment. Investigators found that the company used a “para-por” bottling method: they contracted legitimate Rioja wineries to bottle wine for them under their own registered brands. Once these stocks ran out, they sourced lower-quality wines from other wineries or even supermarkets. In their own facilities, workers removed original labels and capsules using hot water, glue solvents, and scrapers—leaving only the official security seal intact. They then applied their own labels and sold these bottles as higher-quality products.

The fraudulent activity extended beyond Spain’s borders. Among those deceived were organizers of a well-known musical in Madrid and several clients in Asia. The company exported over 3,500 bottles to China labeled as crianza and tempranillo wines with their own brand names. The back labels falsely stated “Wine of the Spanish Royal Family,” a claim with no basis in fact.

After gathering sufficient evidence, authorities obtained a judicial warrant to search the company’s premises. During the raid, officers caught several workers in the act of re-labeling bottles. Police seized documents and tools used for altering bottles, including hot glue guns, wax seals, stampers, and adhesive labels.

The case highlights ongoing concerns about wine fraud affecting protected designations like DOCa Rioja. By passing off inferior wines as premium products with false claims about their origin and quality, such schemes damage consumer trust and harm legitimate producers who adhere to strict standards. The two men now face charges related to industrial property violations and consumer fraud. All evidence has been submitted to judicial authorities as the investigation continues.