

Regional profile

Navarra

This diverse region struggles to compete against Spain's most powerful brand, Rioja. Is it time to forgo the emphasis on 'serious' red blends and international whites so that its native varieties can come to the fore? Adam Lechmere reports

Navarra at a glance

Area under vine
11,500ha

Grapes planted

Reds 91%: Tempranillo 34%, Garnacha 23%, Cabernet Sauvignon 16%, Merlot 14%, Graciano & Mazuelo less than 2%, Syrah & Pinot Noir less than 1%

Whites 9%:

Chardonnay 5%, Viura 2%, Garnacha Blanca, Malvasia & Sauvignon Blanc less than 2%

Sub regions Tierra Estella, Valdizarbe, Baja Montaña, Ribera Alta, Ribera Baja

Soils The Tierra Estella hills have a high limestone content and can be extremely rocky; more chalk-based soils in Valdizarbe. Through Ribera Alta and into Ribera Baja, soils get poorer and sandier

Annual production
60m litres of wine; 70% red, 5% white and 25% rosé

Tying up vines in a vineyard near Ucar, in Navarra, Spain. The region has struggled to find its place – and its signature grape – on the world stage

'WHAT IS OUR signature grape?' is a question asked in many wine regions around the world, but especially in those which compete with dominant neighbours. It's highly pertinent in Navarra, which fits into Rioja as one piece of a jigsaw into another, but which is very much in the shadow of Spain's most powerful brand. In the list of 107 winners of last year's Wines from Spain Awards in London, just one still wine was from Navarra – and that, tellingly, was from Bodegas Julián Chivite, a producer busily distancing itself from the region that is its home. Indeed, the Chivite story could be seen as a distillation of the problems Navarra faces in achieving recognition on the world stage.

The ancient producer, family-owned since the 17th century, is doing its best to disassociate itself from Navarra. Its vineyards are all in the northernmost Tierra Estella region, including Finca de Arinzano, which has pago status, the most exalted level of Spanish wine. But none of its top labels – Arinzano, Coleccion 125 and Finca Villatuerte – say DO Navarra on the label. The only Chivite brand with that distinction is the mid-level (but excellent) Gran Feudo, a wine which is distanced from its parent company by carrying a tiny trademark but not the far more recognisable slanting Chivite signature. 'We want to develop the Chivite brand as high-quality wines from Spain. While Navarra is going to a low price level, Chivite is premium,' export director José Maria Nieves said.

It's a bit like Vega Sicilia announcing it no longer wants to be associated with Ribera del Duero; only worse, as Chivite is really the only Navarra producer with any sort of international traction. In a way, it's perverse that this should be so. Navarra is one of Spain's most diverse and ancient wine regions. It has always been proudly independent: the last kingdom to be integrated into greater Spain in 1512, to this day it is allowed to set its own taxes – the only other state with this distinction is the Basque country.

Mountains to deserts

Navarra is a huge region, extending 100km south from Pamplona and encompassing a variety of different climates, from the cooler, damper northern mountains to the dry, continental conditions of the centre and the more Mediterranean climate of the south. Soils, generally poor and well-drained, vary from shallow sandy loam, limestone and clay to gravels and – in some cases – extremely rocky. In the south-east is the Bardenas Reales National Park, 42,000ha of semi-desert, whose vast escarpments put one in mind of Arizona's Monument Valley.

So Navarra is nothing if not diverse. 'That is our unique selling point [USP]'; one producer said to me. But diversity can blur the focus. A wine region ➤

'Diversity can blur the focus. A wine region needs a clear message if it is to succeed in the crowded international market'



Left: Gran Feudo is the only Chivite wine to carry DO Navarra on the label



Above: The vineyards at Bodegas Nekeas, in the far north of Navarra, sit at 450m – and higher

Right: The Garnacha grape is thought to express place better than any other variety in the region

‘Garnacha shines among the fog of international varieties. Particularly fine examples come from the smaller, artisan producers such as Domaines Lupier’



needs a clear message if it is to succeed in the crowded international market, and Navarra has yet to find a coherent story. Indeed, my head was spinning after a few days in the region with the bewildering range of styles, varieties and blends that winemakers are putting out.

The most recognisable style, internationally, has always been rosé: Garnacha produces a fine, light style that has been famous for centuries – Catherine the Great was reputed to be a fan. But in the 1980s, the official state laboratory Evena (Estación de Viticultura y Enología de Navarra) decided that serious red blends would be the future of the region, and efforts were made to promote Tempranillo or a ‘Navarra blend’ of Tempranillo with Cabernet Sauvignon, Garnacha or Merlot.

At the same time, international white varieties have become more and more popular. Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, for example, work well in Estella, the more temperate northern region.

Varietal star

In many cases, these international whites and the red blends are well-made, bright and lively, but you are seldom struck by the thought, ‘Aha! This is Navarra.’ It is Garnacha that most seems to express place. In the cooler northern regions, the grape produces light reds with fresh natural acidity; in the south, rounder styles with less acidity but more robust tannins. At Nekeas, a former cooperative in the Valdizarbe region, export manager Carlos Biurrun says, ‘In Garnacha, with an Atlantic influence, we believe we have the Pinot Noir of

Vintage guide

2013 Rainy winter and cold spring followed by a fine summer meant harvest was about 20 days later than in 2012, with yields 50% lower. Best wines light and fresh with good acidity and fruit definition.

2012 Dry, low yield. Both reds and whites ripened well, with particularly good

concentration in Chardonnay and Tempranillo.

2011 Varied quality: fine aromatic qualities, complexity and concentration in the best wines.

2010 An excellent vintage. Buy up if you can find any still on the market.



Spain.’ He’s not exaggerating: its Cepa x Cepa is lovely. It has all the hallmarks of great Garnacha – raspberry and red cherry and bright acidity – and a typically cool-climate crunchiness to the fruit.

Time and again, Garnacha shines among the fog of international varieties. Particularly fine examples come from the smaller, artisan producers such as Domaines Lupier in Baja Montaña, whose perfumed, complex La Dama comes from vineyards 700m in altitude on clay and limestone. ‘It adapts so well to our terroir,’ owner Elisa Ucar told me, adding that she ‘would love to see more Garnacha in Navarra.’

That isn’t going to happen within this >

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Six producers to watch

Domaines Lupier

Superlative 4,000-case operation run by Enrique Basarte and Elisa Ucar (former export director for Chivite) in Montaña Baja. The self-confessed Garnacha lovers are convinced the Atlantic influence and 700m altitude of their vineyards give the best expression to the grape. Their La Dama is one of the very best wines I tasted in Navarra, with wonderfully complex, perfumed fruit and ripe tannins. Lupier is at the vanguard of sensitive, small-scale production in the region.



Above: Garnacha fans Elisa Ucar and Enrique Basarte grow it at 700m at Domaines Lupier

Bodega Inurrieta

Ultra-modern, 230ha, family-owned winery started in 1999. A slick 1.5m bottle operation sourcing grapes from all over Navarra, with a huge range of well-made though rather characterless wines made from international varieties: fresh Sauvignon Blancs and Garnacha rosés. But at the top end it’s a different story – the Laderas Graciano and the Cuatrocientos Crianza (a Cabernet Sauvignon-Merlot-Graciano blend) have real class and typicity.

Bodegas Nekeas

In the far north of Navarra in the Nekeas Valley in Valdizarbe, this former co-operative is now owned by seven families. The vineyards sit at altitudes of 450–650m and higher; the Sierra Perdón to the northeast forming a barrier against cold winds sweeping down from the Pyrenees. Very much an outward-looking operation, 90% of the wines are exported. Nekeas produces a superb and diverse range of reds, ranging from modern, fruit-forward Cabernet



Sauvignon-Merlot blends to the tarry, tannic El Chaparral Garnacha: ‘The old taste of the valley’, as export manager Carlos Biurrun puts it.

Bodegas Julián Chivite

Navarra’s only bona fide first growth, Chivite was founded in 1647 and has been run by the Chivite family for 11 generations. Chivite today produces wine in Rioja, Rueda and Ribera del Duero as well as Navarra, where its Señorío de Arinzano is a *vino de pago* and therefore not part of DO Navarra.

Gran Feudo is its only true Navarra label: the brand spans affordable, classy Chardonnay, Garnacha rosé and blends from Tempranillo, Cabernet, Merlot and Garnacha. ‘Chivite in Navarra is Gran Feudo,’ says export director José María Nieves

Bodegas Ochoa

Family-owned for 160 years, Adriana Ochoa is the sixth-generation winemaker, farming 145ha to produce a typical Navarran range of



Above: The 60-year-old vineyards at Bodegas y Viñedos Artazu are planted with Garnacha

whites, rosés and red blends. It is the reds that are worth searching out, the single-varietal Tempranillos and Gracianos. The Tempranillo-Merlot-Cabernet reservas and gran reservas all show bright, lifted fruit and brisk acidity. Everything is machine-harvested. ‘We couldn’t do by hand what we do by machine,’ Ochoa says. ‘From vineyard to winery takes 45 minutes.’



Above: Single-varietal reds from the 145ha Bodegas Ochoa estate are worth seeking out

Bodegas y Viñedos Artazu

Part of renowned winemaker Juan Carlos López de Lacalle’s Rioja-based Artadi group, Artazu specialises in Garnacha from 60-year-old vineyards in Artazu in Valdizarbe. Described by Berry Bros as a ‘punctilious craftsman’ with ‘alchemical gifts’, López de Lacalle – whose top Riojas command £100 price tags – produces a trio of Navarra wines, the finest of which is the Santa Cruz de Artazu, a superb modern style with sweet lifted fruit and fine, juicy tannins.

‘At the beginning of the 1980s, Garnacha accounted for some 90% of vines; today the figure stands at 23%’

generation. Navarra has embraced international varieties, and too many producers are churning out well-made, inoffensive, cheap and marketable wines, which left judges at the last *Decanter* panel tasting of Navarra wines less than overwhelmed. The worst were considered over-oaked and over-extracted, the best were very good but characterless with no sense of place.

Panellist Pedro Ballesteros railed against the ‘crazy’ bureaucracy that insisted Navarra should plant ‘improving’ international varieties because Tempranillo was considered bland – and, moreover, Navarra was desperate to distinguish itself from Rioja and its indelible association with Tempranillo. He, too, thought that Garnacha should be the signature grape of the region: ‘It is the story of Navarra.’

Or it used to be. At the beginning of the 1980s, Garnacha accounted for some 90% of vines in Navarra, the vast majority of it going into rosé. The figure now stands at 23%, with two-thirds going into red wine and a third to rosé.

While Ucar might want to see Garnacha dominate, others celebrate diversity. At Bodegas Ochoa in Ribera Alta, winemaker Adriana Ochoa, representing the sixth generation of her family at the helm of the 150-year-old winery, told me diversity is their USP – although later she agreed the region suffers ‘from having no signature grape’.



Above: Winemaker Adriana Ochoa (right) is the sixth generation of her family to be at the helm of Bodegas Ochoa

Ochoa’s range goes from fresh, fruity young reds through rosés and whites to complex, aged reds. The wines are excellent, the reservas and gran reservas especially showing depth and complexity – the 2005 Gran Reserva is ‘like good old Rioja but with a sweet, round twist’, my notes say. They’re much cheaper than Rioja, but how to get them noticed? Do they have a flagship wine? ‘We have four flagship wines,’ she said.

That, I feel, goes to the heart of the Navarra dilemma: does its strength lie in diversity, or in focus? **D**

Adam Lechmere is a freelance wine writer

Six top Navarra buys



Artadi, Bodegas Artazu, Santa Cruz de Artazu 2009

19/20 (96/100)

£29.95 **Berry Bros & Rudd**

80-year-old Garnacha from 750m vineyards. Perfumed nose with black cherry and damson, sandalwood and floral scents. Complex, mineral palate, dry tannins exploding into juiciness, bright acidity. Delicious. **Drink** 2014-2020 **Alcohol** 14%

Domaines Lupier, La Dama Garnacha 2009 19 (96)

£25.99 **AG Wines**

From 75-to-100-year-old vines, perfumed, tarry nose with sweet

black cherry fruit. Tannins ripe and nervy, fruit lifted, acidity brisk. Elegant and complex.

Drink 2014-2020 **Alc** 14%



Nekeas, El Chaparral Old Vines Garnacha 2011 17.5 (91)

£9.99 **Majestic**

Tar and liquorice on the nose, leading to fresh, bright, lifted red cherry and ripe plum fruit and bracing acidity, held up by structured tannins. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 14%

Ochoa, Gran Reserva 2005 17.5 (91)

£20 **Evingtons, Fine Wine Co, Magnum Wine Co**

This Tempranillo-Merlot-Cabernet blend has a lovely fresh nose with hints of tar and green notes of tobacco leaf. Acidity very fine with sour-sweet black fruit, and structured, grainy tannins. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 14%



Inurrieta, Cuatrocientos Crianza 2010 17 (90)

£10.99 **Christopher Piper, Hayward Bros, Vineyards of Sherborne**

Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Graciano from 400m-high vineyards. A nice leathery, sweet plum nose, and on the palate lots of blackberry, some cassis, cedar

and spice. Very soft, integrated, well-structured tannins and a dry, food-friendly finish.

Drink 2014-2015 **Alc** 14%



Bodega Camilo Castilla, Capricho de Goya Moscatel 2009 18.5 (95)

£19 **Haslemere Cellar**

Aged for three years in glass demijohns, a superb, intensely sweet raisined nose, with a palate of dried apricots, peach and honey, balanced by salinity and fine acidity. Mouthwatering, unctuous and opulent. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 15%

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