

The results

Our tasters were stunned by the quality on offer from Rioja at under £20 in the UK, and particularly by the older vintages. No other region does complexity and value like it, they agreed. Tina Gellie reports

TO SAY OUR experts were impressed by these wines would be an understatement. 'If these wines cost up to £30, even £40, I'd still have been very impressed,' said Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW. 'The fact that they all retail at under £20 is truly amazing.' Ben Henshaw admitted to being 'blown away' by the quality. Annette Scarfe MW agreed: 'This is one of the best tastings I've been to at *Decanter*.'

Henshaw said the value for money these wines offer is unparalleled. 'They were really complex Riojas that will get better with age. Even the wines that were over 10 years old were still as fresh as anything.' Of the older wines, it was the 2001s that came in for the most praise from Scarfe. 'Stunning: still so youthful, showing lots of concentration and depth, with lovely acidity to keep them going for a decade or more.' Ballesteros Torres said he challenged anyone to find more complex wines for under £20. Henshaw agreed: 'Nowhere else on earth can deliver this sort of complexity and pleasure at this price point for aged wines.'

On other vintages, our experts were disappointed with the 2011 and 2012 wines in general, but Henshaw said this wasn't surprising given that they were difficult vintages. Scarfe found the 2010s 'mixed' and said the 2009s 'didn't

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show that well'. She found the 2008s 'consistent with lots of concentration and typicity' while Henshaw felt they were 'quite delicate'. He added: 'They're not the ones you could age for the longest but are drinking well now, with lovely red fruit and great acidity.' He and Scarfe both agreed the 2007s were 'riper, more serious and reliable'.

Ballesteros Torres said this tasting proved how different and important vintages are in Rioja and how with this variation, plus sub-regional differences and grape and oak choices, people should not expect Riojas to all taste the same. 'For example, Grenache-based wines should be flagged up as such on the label. Grenache wines from Rioja Baja come from a different climate and have a totally different expression than the Tempranillo-based wines from Rioja Alta and Alavesa, but are both under the banner

The scores

87 wines tasted
4
Outstanding
20
Highly recommended
41
Recommended
19
Fair
2
Poor
1
Faulty

The tasters' verdicts

Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW



Ballesteros Torres MW is a columnist at Spain's PlanetaVino and Vino y Gastronomía magazines, as well as Vino! magazine in Belgium. He works in four languages, is active in wine promotion and education, and is also on the governing board of the Spanish Taster Union.

Ballesteros' verdict

'During our day-long tasting, I felt as though I were in a suspense film, starting calmly, almost anodyne, increasing in

tension and interest as things unfolded, and finishing with lots of emotion. The rationale is because the wines were tasted from youngest to oldest.

'This proves a key feature of Rioja: its best wines need long ageing to express themselves. With very few (but great) exceptions, young Tempranillo-based blends tend to be simple and shallow. With age, new creatures emerge, more balanced, expressive, deep, elegant. The best old Riojas become a unique class of wines on their own, impossible to imitate.

'While managed oxidation in oak is beneficial to Rioja wines, new French oak is not necessarily the best solution. The top wines of this tasting were aged in classic used American oak barrels, which allow them to express their complexity without being made up by any oak tannins or banal spicy and toasty flavours.

'Last but not least, the most relevant conclusion of this tasting is that the wines are incredibly cheap, when considering their intrinsic quality. It was difficult for us to believe that the best 2001s (or 2005s or 2008s) could be bought at a shop in the UK for less than £20. It's amazing!'

Ben Henshaw



Henshaw joined the wine trade in 2002 to work with his family's newly acquired Languedoc vineyard. He set up Indigo Wine in 2003, focusing initially on importing artisanal wines from southern France. He has since built up the most diverse list of Spanish wines of any UK importer.

Henshaw's verdict

'In terms of consistency and value this was one of the best tastings I've been to and proves why Rioja is such a successful

region. Young Tempranillo is refreshing but not that interesting, so the excitement really started after we moved from the juvenes to the crianzas. My advice is to seek out some of our top-rated reservas and gran reservas, some of which will deliver unsurpassed pleasure for wines under £20.

'With regards to vintage quality, one surprise was how many good wines there were from the supposed "lesser" years of 2006, 2007 and 2008, the last being my favourite for freshness. Most of the 2001s, 2004s and 2005s were an absolute joy, but we already knew that should be the case. This offers further insight into the enduring popularity of Rioja; even in lesser vintages, the customer can be sure that the quality and consistency of the wines will be good. Compare this with Bordeaux!

'It was hard to find a pattern in style or quality from the sub-regions of Alavesa, Alta or Baja – all of them having their ups and downs. Much of this is due to the differing approach of each bodega in vineyard and cellar in terms of picking dates, extraction levels and use of oak. But there were a few sweeter fruit-style Garnacha-based wines from Baja that offered a different profile which consumers may not recognise as typical Rioja.'

“Rioja”. To me, Rioja Baja should be a completely different appellation, but at the very least the buyer should see the distinction on the label.’

Henshaw weighed in: ‘What people don’t understand is that Rioja is a blending region: producers will take grapes from different areas so they can make the best wine possible in a particular vintage. Yes, there are single-vineyard wines, but they are much more expensive than those we tasted here. I like that we don’t know where the fruit comes from – every wine is still an expression of Rioja but they’re all unique.’

Our tasters highlighted the fact that there were very few faulty wines – ‘not the case seven or 10 years ago,’ said Ballesteros Torres, who also praised improved oak management within the region. He added that while there was a trend in Rioja for French oak, ‘I’d like to defend what top-quality American oak can offer’. Henshaw agreed: ‘Some of the best, most elegant wines with the most delicate fruit were the ones aged in almost 100% US oak. Not what you’d expect, but it was a revelation.’

A key point made by the panel was how refreshing it was that Riojas at this price point were not trying to be too ambitious. Henshaw said: ‘Spain is a fascinating wine country and luckily Rioja does its own thing to a degree and doesn’t try to copy others too much. It makes Rioja remain Rioja, and that’s important.’

Entry criteria:
Producers and UK agents were invited to submit their latest-release Riojas available in the UK market at between £8 and £20. Only one wine per producer was permitted.

Outstanding 18.5–20pts (95–100pts)



Faustino, Faustino I, Gran Reserva 2001

Decanter average score: 19.25/20pts (97/100pts)

Individual judge’s scores: Pedro Ballesteros MW 20 Ben Henshaw 18.5 Annette Scarfe MW 19

£16–£20 Asda, CellarVie, Constantine Stores, Drinkshop, Fenwicks, Fine & Rare, Nickolls & Perks, Page & Sons, Sainsbury’s, Temple Wines, Wine Rack

Faustino (founded 1860) with its iconic frosted bottles and portrait labels is one of Rioja’s most easily recognised brands. It’s a family business based in Oyón in Rioja Alavesa, and the largest private holder of vineyards in Rioja, spread across the region. The style of the Rioja is as classic as the packaging: look for the sweet, vanilla notes of American oak, plenty of bright cherry fruit, and a fine, delicate palate. For those interested in tasting great old Riojas, Faustino is one company that still releases older vintages going as far back as 1970. Among the other wineries it owns is Portia in Ribera del Duero.

Pedro Ballesteros MW Deliciously decadent, with extraordinary vitality on the palate and a long, unique finish. A jewel at this price.

Ben Henshaw Complex nose, quite grippy but fresh and moreish. A touch dry, but amazing fruit. Classy, complex and long.

Annette Scarfe MW A more restrained, mineral style with elegant tannins. Youthful, feminine and complex with a long length. A classic Rioja that is still fresh after 12 years, with more to come.

Drink 2013–2030 Alcohol 13.5%



Valenciso, Reserva 2006 19 (96) PBT 19 BH 19 AS 19

£18–£20 All About Wine, D Byrne & Co, Define Food & Wine, Highbury Vintners, John Hattersley Wines, Swig, Woodwinters

Valenciso (founded 1998) may be young in years, but founders Luis Valentin and Carmen Enciso (who gave their surnames to the bodega) were already long in experience when they began. They had worked together for 28 years by the time they left Bodegas Palacio to start their own business. This Valenciso Reserva, a 100% Tempranillo, is the only red they produce annually, from vineyards in Rioja Alta (though there is now also a small production of white). Fermentation is in concrete tanks, and ageing is in French oak. Despite the use of French oak they are keen to stress that they are not part of the new wave of modern Rioja – they look for fruit but not over-extraction.

PBT Excellent. A unique expression from Rioja with balanced tannins, minerality and a spicy finish.

BH Classically styled. Very driven palate with sweet red fruits and prominent acidity. A lively wine with a very long finish.

AS Traditional, classical style with fresh acidity and ripe but structured tannins. Black coffee and sweet spice. Precise and long finish. Delicious, complex and multi-layered.

Drink 2013–2025 Alc 14% ➤

Annette Scarfe MW



Scarfe consults for restaurants in London, Hong Kong and Singapore and runs regular training sessions at several restaurants in London. She is a certified wine educator and regular competition judge, including on the Spanish panel of the Decanter World Wine Awards.

Scarfe’s verdict

‘I came to this tasting with anticipation and hope as to what this popular category could deliver and was not

disappointed. Overall the quality was good with clear evidence of precise and careful winemaking, the oak was not overdone and faults were encouragingly at a minimum.

‘The 2001, 2004 and 2005 vintages, all rated as excellent by the Rioja DOC control board, showed how gracefully top Rioja can age. The 2011 vintage, again rated as excellent, was disappointing here and the wines we tasted lacked depth and complexity. It was a very low-yielding vintage and I suspect the best fruit will show up in the reservas, so we need to be patient. The biggest joy and surprise was in the 2008s – all the wines I tasted were medalworthy. This is a vintage that readers can buy with confidence across all categories.

‘Whether you prefer a traditional Rioja with creamy coconut oak or modern, more precise styles, there are wines here to please every palate. Rioja is a familiar name in every wine-loving household and, judging by this tasting, it deserves the following that it has.’