

Bierzo reds

Bierzo, whereas for others it was simply a way of saving money, by using cheaper American instead of European oak. 'Where American oak was used, it stood out a mile,' she said. 'American oak and Mencia just don't go together but if producers have the right fruit from the right plot together with the right winemaking then you can make oak work and it won't dominate at all.'

She said the unoaked Bierzos could all be enjoyed now, while some of the more serious, oak-aged styles would age well for another few years. 'These aren't wines that you're going to buy, collect and then sell on, they're wines you're going to buy and enjoy drinking yourself soon.' Her tip was to 'buy a few bottles of different styles, line them up and see what you like'.

Regardless of whether they were oaked or unoaked, our judges found Mencia adaptable to many occasions – as a party wine or to pair with different foods – and as such consumers would soon see Bierzos more frequently on shop shelves and on wine lists. Ritchie said: 'At the moment, Bierzo is something sommeliers and merchants have to recommend as people don't know much about it yet, but the region and its wines have a big, exciting future ahead.'

Evans recommended buying the youngest current vintage and to enjoy them with food. 'That's where they show their best and that's why they are so good in restaurants.'

Entry criteria:
Producers and UK importers were invited to submit their latest-release Bierzo, of one or more cuvées

Outstanding 18.5–20pts (95–100pts)



Dominio de Tares, Cepas Viejas 2009

Decanter average score: 18.75/20pts (95+/100pts)

Individual judge's scores: Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW 19

Sarah Jane Evans MW 19 Mike Ritchie MW 18.5

£16–£19.50 Raymond Reynolds, Swig

Dominio de Tares is a young business founded in 2000 by a group of local enthusiasts excited by Bierzo's potential for elegant, fine wines. The winery itself is no more than an Australian-style shed on an industrial estate, while the serious investment has come in the vineyards. They work only with Mencia and Godello (white), and draw on plots across the region to build complexity. Their success has been in producing great quality at very good prices, with wines that express the varietal character. For Cepas Viejas they use 60-year-old vines and a blend of American and French oak.

Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW Meaty, earthy, sensual, unique. Intense fruit palate, with fine-grained tannins and a complex, original fruit expression. Long finish, very open. Great now but will improve.

Sarah Jane Evans MW Aromatics abound with cedar, mint and spices. Densely flavoured palate with spicy dark fruits, plums, oak, and fine grip of tannin. Style is bold and confident, full of character.

Mike Ritchie MW Black cherry and berry nose, allied to a discreet bolster of oak. Round and complete with juicy acidity. Very moreish. Nice work!

Drink 2013–2022 Alcohol 15%



Descendientes de J Palacios, Villa de Corullón

2010 18.75 (95+) PBT 19 SJE 18.5 MR 18.5

£35.60 Berry Bros & Rudd, WoodWinters

What a pedigree: made by one of the stars of Priorat, Alvaro Palacios and his nephew Ricardo Pérez Palacios. (José Palacios, after whom the winery is named, was Alvaro's father. He died as they were starting the project.) They hunted down small plots of old-vine Mencia, convinced they would make exceptional wine. So it has proved. The enthusiastic Ricardo farms biodynamically, using mules to plough. Corullón is named after the mountain village around which the Priorat-like slate vineyards cluster. The wine is fermented in open wooden vats, and aged 14 months in barrel.

PBT Restrained; needs time to open up and show the elegant fruit aromas over the smoky notes of the French oak. In the mouth it shows balance and complexity, with delicate fruit expression. Subtle, round and long.

SJE Complex, elegant aromas of ripe red fruits with cedar and vanilla. More seductive, ripe red and black fruits on the palate – evenly balanced with acid underneath. Chalky tannin adds fine structure, with a long finish and impressive concentration. Plenty of life to come.

MR Very good indeed. Big, powerfully structured wine with layers of oak and ripe black fruit juiciness. Impressively structured on the palate with more to come – at present it is a little tight and closed.

Drink 2013–2020 Alc 14.5%

Mike Ritchie MW



Ritchie has worked in the wine trade for 30 years. He passed his MW in 2002 and has worked with Spanish specialist Moreno Wines since 2006.

Ritchie's verdict

'This was a very good and timely tasting that confirmed the Mencia grape and region of Bierzo are on the up. Recent investment and increased winemaking expertise has raised greatly the standard and profile of the

wines. It was good to see both the simpler unoaked and more complex, barrel-aged styles working well, especially the latter. In the best wines, what I loved was the bright inky-dark purple colour and vibrant black fruit character, allied to a really pleasing partnership with French oak.

'2010 was the current stand out vintage, generally excellent on the evidence tasted, but the jury is out on Mencia's ability to age gracefully. Older examples from 2007 and 2006 were decidedly savoury and fully mature, so the ideal drinking window looks to be about one to four years. Commercially, reds from Bierzo are fairly priced, and offer value for money without being bargains, but one needs to bear in mind the hand-picking and patchwork vineyard sizes. What they provide is an extra reference for consumers looking for interest and excitement from Spain beyond Rioja, Priorat or Ribera del Duero.

'I was pleased to see fewer examples of sulphide-related reduction notes than in past tastings. What hitherto has been the curse of Mencia seems largely to have been tamed through improved winemaking, but it is still something for consumers to be aware of.'