

The results

The only criticism of this line-up was that the judges couldn't cope with so many top wines! Christelle Guibert reports on *Decatner's* most successful tasting for years

WITH 50% OF wines Highly Recommended and above, and just two failing to hit at least the Recommended mark, this is undoubtedly the most successful Decatner panel tasting of the past decade.

"It was outstanding for so many reasons," said Pierre Mansour. "Because of the quality, because it showed how brilliant Rioja is at traditional styles but also in a modern guise, because it showed both classic blends and also Rioja's experimental side with single varietals."

Despite the enthusiasm, our judges found the two-day tasting extremely difficult, but for good reason: "Your body cannot cope with so many good wines," said Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW. "You have a duty to evaluate these 191 in the best possible way, but with such complex wines you need a lot of concentration."

If there was a complaint, the tasters struggled to see a distinction between the crianza and reserva categories. "Crianza and reserva are commercial labels," said Ballesteros Torres. "What is reserva? In many cases, for the cheaper wines, it is just a crianza that you didn't sell last year. This should be forbidden." Sarah Jane Evans MW agreed: "When you have a bodega's 2011 crianza which is the same age as its 2011 reserva, you wonder why they are still selling the crianza?" Mansour, however, felt the terminology was still relevant. "One producer's crianza might be another's reserva. Once you find a producer whose style you like, you should just follow that producer rather than the age category."

The jury also felt the gran reservas were sometimes too youthful. "When buying a gran reserva, you think you are buying a wine that is already so old that it's the perfect time to drink it," said Evans. "But in fact we tasted many wines which had lots of energy and are going to last another 20 years." Ballesteros summed up the category well: "Gran reserva Rioja is a very classic, distinct style of wine. They are gorgeous, unique wines

'It showed how brilliant Rioja is at traditional styles, but also in a modern guise' Pierre Mansour

but not for everybody. They suit experienced wine lovers who enjoy subtlety and nuance, not power."

Mansour found a few wines that were quite oakly but admitted "part of being Rioja is being oakly." Evans felt that producers were handling wood use elegantly, both with American and French oak, mainly thanks to using larger-format barrels. Ballesteros Torres recalled: "In the past these wines would have been drying out because of the oak tannins, but this is no longer the case."

For what is traditionally a blend, Rioja's varietal wines – a relatively new category – are becoming very serious, said Evans. But it is another layer of confusion for consumers to deal with. "Rioja has to find a way to explain that it can do blends, it can do single-varietal wines and also single-vineyard wines. Producers should be able to say, "our Garnacha comes from this particular vineyard in Rioja Baja." Ballesteros Torres advised Decatner readers not to focus so much on the grape varieties, but to look at the producers and prices. "Get information about the style of wine from producers' websites or your wine merchant," he said. "You may like round, velvety, soft 100% Tempranillos. Maybe you prefer the fruity, fresh style of Garnacha. Perhaps you enjoy the seriousness of Graciano. Or you love a traditional blend. Decide your style first, then go by producer and price."

With more than 45% of these wines under £30, this tasting shows Rioja's strength: diversity, reliability and value. Ballesteros Torres summed up the tasting nicely: "If you have £20 in your pocket, bet on Rioja. There's a very high likelihood of getting a lot of pleasure in return."

The scores

191 wines tasted

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|--------------------|----|
| Exceptional | 0 |
| Outstanding | 8 |
| Highly Recommended | 88 |
| Recommended | 93 |
| Committed | 1 |
| Fair | 1 |
| Poor | 0 |
| Fabry | 0 |

Entry criteria: producers and UK agents were invited to submit their latest-release premium red Riojas (£20 or more). All levels, from crianza to gran reserva as well as 'Ata Expression' were accepted.

Outstanding 95–97pts



Finca Nueva, Gran Reserva 2004

Decatner average score: 96/100pts Individual Judges' scores: Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW 98 Sarah Jane Evans MW 95 Pierre Mansour 96

£30.99 *Barkman Wine Cellars*

Miguel Angel de Gregorio, one of the great revolutionaries who pushed for modernity in Rioja, is the man behind Finca Nueva. His aim at this estate is to evoke the history of Rioja by creating wines in the spirit of its great, old bottles. De Gregorio is a staunch defender of terroir – from his basic wines to the top single vineyards. This is his second project, after his stellar Finca Alenda, and the first vintage of the Gran Reserva.

Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW A rich, savoury example that is amazingly concentrated. The finish is memorable and long, showing that the wine has great complexity. A truly superb Rioja that rings fine and true.

Sarah Jane Evans MW Fine oak character on the nose and palate meld with aniseed and red fruits. It is juicy, succulent and brambly with spice and vanilla. This retains its youth well and ends with a super-long finish.

Pierre Mansour Full of smoky notes and secondary toasty oak. It is dense and immensely satisfying yet still evolving, so it clearly has a lot to give. There is no doubt that this will continue to inspire and improve.

Drink 2017–2033 Alcohol 14%



Bodegas de La Marquesa, Valserrano Finca Monteviejo 2012

95 PBT 95 SJE 95 PM 93

£23 *Duay's Wine Merchants, The Wintner*

A small family-owned winery, one of the oldest in Rioja, now in its fifth generation, at Villabuena in Rioja Alavesa. It makes most of its wine from its own vineyards – this comes from a single site planted more than 60 years ago with Tempranillo and a bit of Garnacha and Graciano. High-tech winemaking and ageing for two years in French oak barrels. PBT The elegant, retained aromas open up with impressive power in the mouth, giving an explosion of flavour on top of very finely grained tannins. A top-quality Rioja with real charisma.

SJE Blackberries and sour cherries coat the mouth. It is dense and resonant – a wine that is full of life and energy. The length is hugely impressive, taking you right through onto a lift of freshness at the end.

PM A smoky, full-bodied Rioja that has notable structure. The fruit character is generous, resulting in a powerful and dynamic wine with the acidity to bring it all neatly together.

Drink 2017–2024 Alc 15%



Paganos, La Nieta 2014

96 PBT 96 SJE 96 PM 97

£67 *Garrett Sell*

One of Marcos Eguaren's masterpieces. La Nieta is a small, 1.75ha vineyard in Rioja Alavesa where Tempranillo on loamy, shallow soils is cultivated biodynamically. Vines struggle to survive in this poor earth, their low vigour giving out tiny yields of deliciously scented fruit. The wine is made in a cellar carved in the cold rock below the vineyards, in an almost religious attempt to capture the essence of the terroir.

PBT Blackberry fruit and dense, balanced oak make this an incredibly concentrated and ambitious wine. It is a true extract of old-vine Tempranillo, superb in its length and wholeheartedly deserving of the highest marks.

SJE A bouquet full of dark red fruits makes this a lovely, seductive expression of Tempranillo. Beautifully refined, this is an enticing Rioja from Alavesa. It does itself proud with its great finesse, long finish and memorable character.

PM Such an open and intense nose of wonderful, vanilla-laden new oak floats effortlessly around generous blackberry notes. The palate is full but extremely focused; there is real clarity here and some seamlessly integrated ripe tannins.

Drink 2017–2028 Alc 14.5%



Campo Viejo, Dominio 2011

95 PBT 95 SJE 95 PM 95

£22.50 *Penrod Retail UK*

Campo Viejo, a 30-million bottle winery owned by Penrod Ricard, is known as a supermarket wine in the UK, but this is its top bottling. The wine, from five selected plots of very old vines, is carefully made in small vats with great attention to detail, blended and aged in French oak barrels for 11 months. Winemaker Elena Adell describes it as "exhilarating flamboyance and an astute level of craftsmanship".

PBT The unique balance that this wine displays gives it a great expression with unsuspected length; an authentic assertion of style and terroir. A signature wine with a captivating personality.

SJE Rich and bold, but not too weighty, this is a ripe Rioja with all the classical style you want. The gentle notes of oak are well tuned to the blackberry flavours and it shows real flair.

PM Charming hints of leather and spice ooze from the concentrated palate, but it is well balanced with great presence. This is a well-proportioned and beautifully structured wine.

Drink 2017–2027 Alc 13.5% >

The judges

Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW



Ballesteros Torres is DWWA Regional co-Chair for Spain and Sherry. He has studied in Jerez, Burgundy, Napa and Bordeaux, and has a masters degree in viticulture and oenology. A columnist at Spain's *Vino y Gastronomía* and *Planeta Vino* magazines, he is on the council of the *Institute of Masters of Wine*, and the governing board of the *Spanish Tasters' Union*.

Sarah Jane Evans MW



Evans is co-Chair of the DWWA and former co-Regional Chair for Spain with Ballesteros Torres (left). An awarded journalist and wine writer since the 1980s, she became a Master of Wine in 2006. In 2010 Evans was knighted into the *Gran Orden de Caballeros del Vino* for services to Spanish wine, becoming chair of the *Institute of Masters of Wine* in 2014. She was invested as a *Dama de Albalillo* in 2015.

Pierre Mansour



Mansour spent four years with merchant *Berry Bros & Rudd* after an introduction to the wine trade in 1995 with the *Antique Wine Company*. He completed the WSET diploma in 1998 before joining wine visitor centre *Vinopolis* as tastings manager. In 2000 he moved to *The Wine Society*, before taking on the role of buyer in 2004. He currently buys *The Society's* Spanish wines, among others.