

Navarra reds

Old-vine Garnacha is the greatest asset of a diverse appellation that has long played second fiddle to neighbouring Rioja. Sarah Jane Evans MW reports on progress

THE WINES OF Navarra have proudly refreshed kings and pilgrims for centuries. The pilgrims were travelling, as they still do, to Santiago de Compostela. A millennium ago it was the crossroads between Islam and Christianity; more recently it has been at a crossroads of sorts between Rioja and Bordeaux, reflecting influences from both. Importantly, Navarra has always been outward looking, facing towards Europe and beyond the isolation of the Iberian peninsula.

Navarra is the name of the autonomous region, as well as the strictly defined DO that lies south of San Sebastian, between the French border and Rioja. Lying below the mountains with the river Ebro running up from the south, Navarra's winemakers draw on very different soils and climates. There are five sub-regions: Baja Montana, to the northeast, with spectacular views, and extensive pasture. It has the most old-vine Garnacha vines of the DO, and soils rich in limestone and chalk. Tierra Estella to the northwest has wonderful old castles and architecture. Arinzano, Chivite's *pago* (an estate that is its own appellation) is found here. Next door, Valdizarbe is the most northerly and smallest of the sub-regions, and the one most often crossed by pilgrims. At the heart of the DO, Ribera Alta is altogether warmer with Mediterranean influences. The beautiful and historic town of Olite is the centre of the hi-tech wine research centre Evena. Finally the southernmost of the five sub-regions is Ribera Baja, a great source of sweet Muscats, as well as rich reds with sandier soils.

The range of soils and microclimates enables diversity in the wines. Fresh whites, fruity rosados, ripe reds and sweet late-harvest wines from Moscatel. But Navarra's heritage is its old-vine Garnacha. Once it was a workaday vine, picked at high yields and used in rosé that built Navarra's reputation for pink wine – now, Garnacha is mostly old, low-yielding bush vines giving superb concentration, if in tiny quantities.

Moving with the times

In the late 20th century, echoing Rioja, Navarra chose to take the international path in grape varieties, much as the Somontano DO also did a little further East. Research at Evena, Navarra's research station, in the 1980s and 1990s, found that Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay all worked well. Many vines are well-established today, and the Chivite Colección 125 Chardonnay – made with long-term consultant Denis Dubourdieu – is one of Spain's best.

Unfortunately for Navarra, times have changed and consumers are demanding local grapes. Rioja's Tempranillo, Graciano, Mazuelo and Garnacha, backed up by plenty of production and a strong marketing budget, have taken the lead. Suddenly international varieties do not seem such a clever investment. Navarra has always competed with Rioja but the problem really started after phylloxera when the Bordeaux merchants came to Spain to seek red wines. They chose Rioja, and its handy railway station in Haro. Navarra lost ground and reputation which it has struggled to regain.

There are promising signs. The international vines are improving with age, delivering ever-better quality. A new generation of producers including Domaines Lupier, Emilio Valerio and La Calandria is seeking out Garnacha, and producing outstanding wines either as a varietal or in blends. Established names such as Ochoa continue to



Navarra: know your vintages

2013 A smaller harvest (10% to 15% less) than 2012, and 10-15 days later. In general, good ripening without major disease. Likely to show a cooler Atlantic character.

2012 A hot year – 12% less crop than 2011. A long and healthy harvest, which started on 16 August and finished at the end of October.

2011 Very good year. Drink 2014–2017.

2010 Late-ripening vintage. Also classed very good. Wines are ready to drink 2014–2016.

2009 A generous vintage from a hot summer. Ready to drink.

2008 Very good. Slow ripening gave elegance. Ready to drink.

2007 A good vintage, with a slightly earlier harvest period. Ready to drink.

Navarra: the facts

Vineyard 11,700ha
Growers 2,716
Vineries 113
Production 95% red and rosado
Grape varieties
Tempranillo (38%)
Garnacha (25%)
Cabernet Sauvignon (15%)
Merlot (14%) **Graciano** (1%),
Mazuelo (1%) plus a small amount of Pinot and Shiraz
Garnacha Blanca, Malvasia, Moscatel de Grano Menudo, Viura (6%) **Chardonnay** (3%) plus small amounts of Sauvignon Blanc

innovate. Already well known for its Moscatel, it now has a sparkling Muscatel too. There remains some excellent rosado too, though international competition is making life harder. All in all, the pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela have plenty of choice to smooth the path on their journey. ➤

Sarah Jane Evans MW is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional co-Chair for Spain and Sherry

The results

A poor tasting, with only 55% of wines recommended. Of those that were praised, Garnacha was the star, offering delicate fresh cherry fruit, and trouncing the tough, stewed Tempranillo. Amy Wislocki reports

ONE MESSAGE CAME through loud and clear in our experts' post-tasting discussion: Garnacha is the star in Navarra, performing far more successfully than the more widely planted Tempranillo. This is borne out by the results, which see 4 of the 7 Outstanding and Highly Recommended wines made from Garnacha (aka Grenache).

'The Garnacha gave us everything: a sense of place, quality, expression and balance,' enthused Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW. 'In Navarra, it's a typical expression of cool-climate Grenache – moderate alcohol, fresh natural acidity, light in tannins and with bright red berry fruit.' Christine Parkinson was equally taken with the variety: 'The Garnacha was such an eye-opener. I thought it would be good but was expecting a sweeter, more jammy style. The excellence of these more delicate, fresh styles was really surprising and not something you find in other wine regions.'

Tempranillo, by contrast, came in for a bashing. 'I didn't see anything that told me Tempranillo from Navarra could be great – it was often tough and stewed, dark and unappealing,' criticised Sarah Jane Evans MW. 'If it's going to work at all, it could possibly work as a single varietal, but here it is usually blended with Cabernet, Merlot or Syrah.' She added: 'I'd have liked a distinctive style – to be able to

'Garnacha: this is what Navarra should be championing' Christine Parkinson

pin something down and say: "This is Navarra Tempranillo and this is how it differs from Rioja, Ribera del Duero and Toro". If there is a USP, it's that it's blended with international varieties and lends a green edge to what is already a rather stewed and baked component. It's just not very nice.'

So why, if Garnacha is so successful and Tempranillo so dire, is the latter so widely planted? It's all a result of central planning and bureaucracy, explained Ballesteros Torres. 'There were massive waves of plantings after the authorities urged plantings of Tempranillo. "You must plant this grape as it is selling well all over the world," they said. What they failed to realise is that the Tempranillo that was selling so well was good Rioja, not Tempranillo planted at high yields with irrigation, which gives something bland, even vulgar.'

Harsh words. And surprising that Tempranillo was described as stewed and baked while the Garnacha was delicate and fresh. 'There are social and historical reasons for this,' said Ballesteros. 'Most of the traditional vineyards,

The scores

77 wines tasted

1

Outstanding

6

Highly recommended

35

Recommended

34

Fair

1

Poor

0

Faulty

which have older, lower-yielding vines on less fertile soils, have been abandoned in favour of irrigated, fertile, large-scale vineyards. There's a desperate quest for good Garnacha right now, but you can't get there without a lot of hard work.' 'It was almost like Napa,' said Parkinson, 'with the contrast between valley-floor and hillside fruit.'

On a more positive note, there seems to have been an improvement in oak handling in recent vintages. 'We found a lot of dried-out wines, and wines with burnt or green flavours,' said Evans. 'It's amazing how much damage six months in oak can do. Yet, these overoaked wines seemed to be in vintages up to 2010.' Ballesteros Torres agreed, adding that 'winemakers are reacting after several years of criticism on overuse of oak. They are getting the message now and using oak in a much better way. This is partly because the domestic market has collapsed too, and they are having to cater for international tastes.'

Of the international varieties planted, Merlot impressed the panel most when made as a varietal wine. But the overriding message was – it's Garnacha all the way. Drink it young, and enjoy the purity of fruit. 'This is what Navarra should be championing,' said a frustrated Parkinson. 'It's a pity that there so few single-varietal Garnachas in that style. It's such a USP for the region: cranberry, cherry, floral and strawberry notes – elegant, delicate and fresh.'

Entry criteria:
Producers and UK agents were invited to submit their latest-release wines from Navarra. Two wines per producer were permitted.

Outstanding 18.5–20pts (95–100pts)



La Calandria, Cienruenos Garnacha 2011

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

Individual judges' scores: Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW 18.5

Sarah Jane Evans MW 18.75 Christine Parkinson 19

£13.45 Berry Bros & Rudd

Javier Continente, Luis Fernández and Luis Remacha think life is too short to drink bad wine. 'In fact, we dislike it so much we decided to make our own wines. With them we make our mark.' Their focus is purely on the dwindling number of Navarra's old-vine Garnacha plantings (hence their website www.puragarnacha.com), revived and farmed with minimum intervention. The Pura Garnacha project is just six years old but already a star of the grape's revival in Spain. Cienruenos means 'a hundred peals of thunder'. It's a twist on Cintruénigo – the name of the village in the far south-east of Navarra, on the Rioja Baja border, that's home to the Los Portillos vineyard that produces the grapes for this exceptional-value wine.

Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW Oak aromas are slightly dominant at first but then the Garnacha fruit characters open up vibrantly. A very original wine that shows a real sense of place. This vineyard has potential for greatness.

Sarah Jane Evans MW Expressive bramble and fine oak aromas on the nose. The palate is rich and full bodied with a dense expression of fruit, lively acidity, and a firmly etched peppery finish with fine tannin. Long and concentrated. This is Garnacha to a T.

Christine Parkinson Lifted strawberry compote aromas with cranberry and fresh strawberry flavours on the palate and very subtle use of oak. Juicy and fleshy with refreshing acidity, supple tannins and a very persistent finish.

Drink 2014–2018 Alcohol 14.5%

The tasters' verdicts

Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW



Ballesteros Torres is a columnist at Spain's PlanetaVino and Vino y Gastronomía magazines, as well as Vino! magazine in Belgium. He is active in wine promotion and education and is also on the governing board of the Spanish Tasters' Union. Ballesteros Torres has studied in Jerez, Beaune, Napa and Bordeaux, and holds a degree in Agrofood Engineering and a Masters in Viticulture & Oenology among his qualifications.

Ballesteros Torres's verdict

'Navarra is searching for its wine identity. The diversity of styles among the reds we tasted is proof of that: many grape varieties, varied winemaking and oak management practices but, quite often, no clear sense of place.

'Many winemakers seemed to be trying hard to make wines that copied successful wines produced elsewhere. This can be a great money spinner, but limits you if you want to step up the quality and price ladder, as your wines lack distinctiveness and personality. This can be improved. Navarra is a large appellation with many unique terroirs. If Navarra believed more in itself instead of imitating others, many genuine, quality wines could be made.

'Most wines in this tasting were Tempranillo blends, showing Navarra's obsession with emulating its Rioja neighbours – with little success. Other wines were Merlot- and Cabernet Sauvignon-based. Again, commendable in commercial terms but not very exciting. The clear winner is Garnacha – the one providing for a sense of terroir and a unique expression. Old-vine Navarra Garnachas are delicate, complex and subtle. They sing their origin!

'Navarra is already a safe bet on supermarket shelves. But to be seen as a quality wine region it needs to focus on its native varieties and its own USP.'

Sarah Jane Evans MW



Evans started drinking Spanish wine at university, starting a lifelong love affair with the country's wines, food and culture, leading to her appointment as a member of the Gran Orden de Caballeros de Vino for services to Spanish wine. Vice-chairman of the Institute of Masters of Wine, Evans also divides her time between contributing to leading reference books, judging wines internationally, and writing about wine, fine chocolate, coffee, tea and cheese.

Evans' verdict

'The outstanding result of this tasting was for Garnacha, which time and again proved its excellence. The wines made from old vines showed vivacity and glorious fruit. These wines were additionally blessed by having been handled by winemakers who did not choose to drown them in oak, or eschewed oak altogether. Those who think Garnacha is a rustic variety should try the high-scoring wines in this tasting and think again. Navarra should certainly be building its profile as a fine origin for Garnacha in Spain.

'Results for other varieties were less encouraging. Many Tempranillos did not show a sense of place. Given that Rioja and Ribera del Duero make such a strong case for Tempranillo, Navarra is at a disadvantage. The international varieties – except Merlot – also fared poorly. A number were also overoaked.

On the positive side, Navarra showed that it can produce fresh reds, with balanced alcohols. It is a region where it pays to explore and get to know the producers. Navarra also produces Chardonnay, and some interesting sweet and sparkling Moscatel, in addition to its rosados and reds. Clearly it's time to discover the individuals behind the diversity.'

Christine Parkinson



Parkinson was first a chef, then moved into restaurant management and finally decided to follow her passion and focus on wine. In 2001 she created the first wine list for Hakkasan, and then became wine buyer for the group's restaurants including Sake No Hana, HKK and Yauatcha, with sites worldwide. She is a regular judge at wine competitions and has won several industry awards.

Parkinson's verdict

'Navarra is well-known for international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, so I was expecting polished winemaking and vibrant fruit. I certainly found these traits, but not from the Cabernets.

'Garnacha, a variety often overlooked unless it is in rosé form, was the star: fresh, with vibrant fruit, a pretty floral perfume, and in some cases a surprising delicacy. Equally unexpected was the charm of the few single-varietal Merlots on offer. I'd like to see more of those in future. By contrast, the region's many blends, generally including Cabernet and/or Tempranillo, were disappointing: the Cabernets were green, frequently too oaky, and simply lacking the enjoyment factor Spain does so well. Tempranillo was no better, seeming tough, baked and dried-out.

'Vintage variation was negligible, with no evidence of the wines ageing well. I'd hoped to find attractive crianzas and reservas, but the *roble* wines, and young, unoaked styles were the best. I'd recommend drinking Navarra reds at no more than two years from their vintage date, and head straight for the delicious young Garnachas and Merlots, as that's where all the drinking pleasure is to be had.'

Highly Recommended

17–18.25pts (90–94pts)



Odipus, Old Vines Grenache 2008

18.25 (94) PBT 18 SJE 18 CP 18.5

N/A UK www.rafaelverte.es

Delicate, complex and subtle floral and strawberry aromas. The palate has power, offering a finish with various nuances of violet, fresh red berries and gentle oak. A light and elegant style. Drink 2014–2020 Alc 14% ➤

Navarra reds

Highly Recommended 17-18.25pts (90-94pts)



Jardín de Lúculo, Garnachas

Atlánticas 2012 17.75 (92)

PBT 18 SJE 17.5 CP 17.5

£13.25 Adnams

Elegant red fruit and savoury aromas give way to a vivid, fleshy palate with plenty of fruit and a nice spiciness. Lovely expression of high-quality Grenache from a cooler climate. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 13.5%



Artazu, Artazuri Tinto 2012

17.5 (91)

PBT 17.5 SJE 17.5 CP 17.5

£8-£11 Berry Bros & Rudd, Imperial Wine Co

Earthy aromas matched by bright blueberry fruit. Lovely ripe strawberry flavours - bright, crunchy palate with vivid acidity and great aromatic definition. A spicy finish with a touch of warmth. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 14.5%



Azul y Garanza, Seis 2011

17.25 (90+)

PBT 18 SJE 17 CP 17

£13.50 Vintage Roots

Ripe blackberries and leafy herbal notes finishing with dark molasses and liquorice flavours. Palate shows rich, ripe fruits with a long, dense finish and smooth, fine tannins. Very ambitious style, which is very good. **Drink** 2014-2020 **Alc** 14%



Bodegas Urabain, Prado de Chica

2010 17.25 (90+) PBT 18 SJE 17.5 CP 16.5

N/A UK www.bodegasurabain.com

Lifted, vibrant red fruit aromas with an oaky note. It opens up to blueberry and blackberry fruit on a palate that is solid and deep with finely grained tannins. A fine, leathery core with a long finish. **Drink** 2014-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

'The Garnacha gave us everything: a sense of place, quality, expression and balance'

Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW



Marco Real, Pequeñas

Producciones Garnacha 2011 17 (90)

PBT 17.5 SJE 17 CP 16.5

N/A UK www.familiasbelasco.com

Bold and rustic with red fruit aromas and a hint of vanilla. Nicely integrated palate, keeping its freshness with raspberry and plum flavours, leading to a persistent, spicy finish. This is a high-quality wine. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 15%

Recommended 15-16.75pts (83-89pts)

Wine	Score	PBT	SJE	CP	Tasting note	Alc	Drink	Price	Stockists
Pago de Larrainzar, Raso 2008	16.75 (89)	17	16.5	16.5	Sage and floral aromas with a dark and spicy palate. This is an ambitious wine with elegant fruit and a long finish.	14%	2014-2018	£10.68	Georges Barbier
Viña Zorzal, Graciano 2011	16.75 (89)	16	17	17	Violet, liquorice and white truffle aromas flow through to a full-bodied palate of dense blackcurrant and black pepper. Good acidity with tannic grip.	13.5%	2014-2016	£6.75-£8.99	Indigo Wine, SH Jones, Slurp, The Solent Cellar, The Wine Society
Pago de Cirsus, Vendimia Seleccionada 2010	16.25 (87)	15	17	17	Damson, black cherry and floral notes with a supple palate that is bursting with primary fruit. Long and very spicy.	14%	2014-2016	N/A UK	www.pagodecirsus.com
Palacio de La Vega, Tempranillo-Garnacha 2011	16.25 (87)	16	17	15.5	Very classic style with a brisk palate that is full of smoky flavours and a note of citrus freshness. Persistent fruit and a peppery finish.	13.5%	2014-2016	£7.79	Ellis of Richmond
Señorio de Andión, 2008	16.25 (87)	17	15.5	16	A great Tempranillo with lots of concentration, a citrus grip and chewy tannins. Long, with a slick of oak on the finish.	14.5%	2014-2022	N/A UK	www.familiasbelasco.com
Altos de la Condesa, Tempranillo-Garnacha 2011	15.75 (85+)	15	16.5	16	Dried herb and mint aromas with toasty, black plum and mushroom flavours. Intense, very ripe fruit and a long, liquorice finish.	13.5%	2014-2015	N/A UK	comunicacion@navarrawine.com
Alzania, 21 del 10 2010	15.75 (85+)	15	15.5	17	Peony, bramble and dark leather aromas flow into a very spicy palate of incense and cinnamon. Full bodied and rich with a leathery finish.	14%	2014-2016	N/A UK	www.alzania.es
Bodegas Alconde, Edición Especial, Cabernet Sauvignon 2011	15.75 (85+)	15	17	15	Dense, complex aromas of black fruit, green pepper and cassis. Well-balanced palate with fine-grained tannins and a long finish.	13.5%	2014-2015	N/A UK	www.bodegasalconde.com
Gran Feudo, Viñas Viejas, Reserva 2008	15.75 (85+)	15	16.5	15.5	Autumnal fruit on the nose, with blackberry crumble, clotted cream and earthy notes on the palate. Suave, balanced and supple.	13.5%	2014-2016	£15	PLB
Laderas de Montejurra, Emilio Valerio, Amburza 2010	15.75 (85+)	15	17	15	Sweet black cherry fruit with grassy, tobacco notes. Savoury grip of tannin that finishes boldly with black pepper and a lick of warmth from the alcohol.	14.5%	2014-2016	N/A UK	www.laderasdemontejurra.com
Magaña, Merlot 2011	15.75 (85+)	15	15.5	16.5	Sloe, vanilla and bay leaf notes on the nose with an intensely plummy palate. Savoury and refreshing, with good weight and solid, chewy tannins.	14.5%	2014-2018	£23.27 (2009)	SpaNiche Wines
Reverte, Cistum 2009	15.75 (85+)	15	15.5	16.5	Spicy, salty and earthy flavours underpinned by rich summer pudding notes and a very expressive, sharp finish.	14%	2014-2017	N/A UK	www.rafaelreverte.es
Señorio de Sarriá, Crianza 2010	15.75 (85+)	15	16	16.5	Bramble and hedgerow nose followed by a lively, strawberry-fruited palate. Supple and smooth, with a grip of tannin.	13.5%	2014-2016	£8.99	Bentley's Wine Merchants, Best Cellars, D Byrne & Co, Jolly Vintner, Noble Green

Recommended (continued) 15–16.75pts (83–89pts)

Wine	Score	PBT	SJE	CP	Tasting note	Alc	Drink	Price	Stockists
Vega del Castillo, Finca El Espartal Merlot, Roble 2011	15.75 (85+)	15	15	17	Citrus pith, blackcurrant and sloe berries on the nose with a palate that is laden with ripe, sweet, red fruits. Nice concentration with a smoky finish.	13.5%	2014-2016	N/A UK	www.vegadecastillo.com
Albret, Estate Selection Cabernet-Merlot-Tempranillo, Crianza 2008	15.5 (85)	16	15.5	15	Roasted red fruits and ripe blackberry aromas. Expressive and concentrated palate with juicy fruit and vanilla. Well-defined cassis notes on the finish.	13.5%	2014-2018	POA	Castang Wines
Alzania, Finca La Moneda 2009	15.5 (85)	16	16	14.5	Herbal aromas, sharp black plum and cocoa overtones. Tightly built, with soft tannins. Good example of a spicy warm-climate wine.	13.5%	2014-2018	N/A UK	www.alzania.es
Otazu, Premium Cuvée 2010	15.5 (85)	15	16.5	15	Lively aromas of black fruits and cedar. Long, chewy and fresh with peppery oak. A modern, international style.	14%	2014-2015	N/A UK	www.otazu.com
Viña Zorzal, Garnacha 2012	15.5 (85)	15	15	16.5	Somewhat subdued nose but when you search you find lilac and fresh raspberry notes. Medium body with refreshing acidity.	13.5%	2014-2015	£9.95	Caviste, Indigo Wine
Bodegas Alconde, Edición Especial, Selección 3 2011	15.25 (84)	15	16	14.9	Blackcurrant compote and woodsmoke aromas with a hint of pepper. Solid structure on the palate with a certain crispness and a liquorice finish.	13.5%	2014-2016	N/A UK	www.bodegasalconde.com
Bodegas Orvalaiz, Cabernet Sauvignon, Roble 2011	15.25 (84)	14	15.5	16	Red-fruit charm with notes of dried herbs and earth. A restrained palate with exuberant fruit held back by the oak.	13.5%	2014-2015	£7.99	C&D Wines
La Calandria, Tierga Garnacha 2010	15.25 (84)	16	15.5	14.5	Typical Garnacha aromas that are lifted by citrus acidity, fine tannins and a bold finish.	15%	2014-2020	£31.95	Berry Bros & Rudd
Laderas de Montejurra, Emilio Valerio 2011	15.25 (84)	15	16	14.5	Vivid blackberry and blackcurrant fruit that develops spicy notes with a firm grip of tannin. Good oak integration and a long finish.	14%	2014-2015	£11-£13.95	Harvey Nichols, Park & Bridge, Prohibition, Street Vin, The Good Wine Shop, Roberson, The Sampler, Wholefoods, Wine Utopia
Marco Real, Colección Privada, Crianza 2010	15.25 (84)	15	14.5	16	Black fruit and thyme aromas with a slight minty character. Earthy, leathery palate, with bold notes from the oak and a clean finish.	14.5%	2014-2017	N/A UK	www.familabelasco.com
Ochoa, Single Vineyard, Reserva 2007	15.25 (84)	15	14.5	16	Classic, with lots of sweet spice, baked plum and dried black cherry characters. Firm and grippy this would be a great food wine.	14%	2014-2017	£10.50	The Vintage House
Piedemonte, Reserva 2007	15.25 (84)	16	15	14.5	Good, complex aromas of cassis and oak. Concentrated palate with fine-grained tannins, good balance and freshness.	14%	2014-2020	£13.50	Spirited Wines
Príncipe de Viana, 1423, Reserva 2008	15.25 (84)	15	15.5	15	Sweet blackberry notes on the nose and palate, which has a nice concentration and grippy tannins.	14.5%	2014-2016	POA	Castang Wines
Señorio de Sarría, Viñedo Sotés, Crianza 2010	15.25 (84)	14	15.5	16	Integrated aromas of red fruits and cedar. Juicy cassis and vanilla flavours with firm tannins and citrus hints to balance.	14%	2014-2017	£9.75	Boutinot
Vega del Castillo, Garnacha Cepas Viejas 2011	15.25 (84)	15	16.5	14	Delicate black fruits and flowers on the nose, while the palate is supple and warm with soft tannins and lots of red fruit. Classic.	13.5%	2014-2014	£5.75	The Wine Society
Viña Aliaga, Antonio Corpus 2002	15.25 (84)	16	15.5	14.5	Sweet strawberry character with a suave and original expression. The palate is well sustained with an open finish.	14%	2014-2018	£34.50	Peter Watts
Albret, La Viña de Mi Madre, Reserva 2008	15 (83)	15	14.5	15.5	Autumn notes of brambles and bonfires on the nose and palate. Nice tannic structure with a persistent finish and a medium body.	14%	2014-2017	POA	Castang Wines
Bodegas Maximo Abete, Guerinda Graciano 2008	15 (83)	16	14.5	14.5	Oak gives character of roasted coffee beans and other savoury notes, such as soy sauce on the nose. Nice balance on the palate.	14.5%	2014-2018	N/A UK	www.bodegasmaximoabete.com
Magaña, Calchetas 2010	15 (83)	15	14	16	Intense damson and blueberry characters with minty overtones. This wine needs food as it has chewy tannins but it is still balanced.	14.5%	2014-2016	£28.05	SpaNiche Wines
Nekeas, Crianza 2010	15 (83)	15	14.5	15.5	Smoky, subdued aromas with tart black fruit overlaid by woody notes on the palate. This is concentrated and dense.	14%	2014-2016	£12	Origin Wine
Príncipe de Viana, Crianza 2010	15 (83)	15	15	15	Muted aromas, but bold tobacco, fresh blackberries and leafy notes on the palate. A long, cooked-fruit finish.	13.5%	2014-2016	£6.40-£11.95	Castang Wines, Coe Vintners
Tandem, Mácula 2006	15 (83)	16	14.5	14.5	Earthy, gravelly black fruit and black tea flavours. Dense and concentrated – a bit too alcoholic but has great definition.	15%	2014-2025	£18.99	Great Wines Direct, Wineman

Fair 13-14.75

■ Aroa, Mutiko 2012 14.75 (82) ■ Bodegas Orvalaiz, Tempranillo, Roble 2011 14.75 (82) ■ Bodegas San Martín, Señorío de Unx Garnacha 2012 14.75 (82) ■ Castillo Monjardín, Tempranillo Clásico 2012 14.75 (82) ■ Castillo Monjardín, Coupage Selección, Crianza 2010 14.75 (82) ■ El Chaparral de Vega Sindoa, Old Vines Garnacha 2011 14.75 (82) ■ Gran Feudo, Crianza 2009 14.75 (82) ■ Inurrieta, Norte, Roble 2011 14.75 (82) ■ Javier Asensio, Crianza 2008 14.75 (82) ■ Magaña, Torcas 2009 14.75 (82) ■ Otazu, Altar, Reserva 2005 14.75 (82) ■ Pago de Larraizar, 2007 14.75 (82) ■ Palacio de Sada, Garnacha 2012 14.75 (82) ■ Tandem, Ars Nova 2007 14.75 (82) ■ Viña Aliaga, Cuvée 2006 14.75 (82) ■ Azul y Garanja, Abril 2012 14.5 (81) ■ Bodegas Valcarlos, Fortius Merlot, Crianza 2008 14.5 (81) ■ Lezaun, Reserva 2009 14.5 (81) ■ Magaña, Barón

de Magaña 2009 14.5 (81) ■ Ochoa, Tempranillo, Finca Santa Cruz, Crianza 2010 14.5 (81) ■ Ontinar, 14 Barricas Selección 2010 14.5 (81) ■ Palacio de La Vega, Cabernet Sauvignon-Tempranillo, Crianza 2009 14.5 (81) ■ Príncipe de Viana, Edición Limitada, Crianza 2009 14.5 (81) ■ Príncipe de Viana, Garnacha, Roble 2012 14.5 (81) ■ Príncipe de Viana, Tempranillo, Roble 2012 14.5 (81) ■ Viñedos de Calidad, Alex, Crianza 2010 14.5 (81) ■ Inurrieta, Cuatrocientos, Crianza 2011 14.25 (80+) ■ Palacio de Sada, Viñas Viejas Garnacha, Crianza 2010 14.25 (80+) ■ Bodegas Valcarlos, Fortius Tempranillo, Roble 2010 14 (80) ■ Jardín de Lúculo, Los Bohemios 2012 13.75 (79) ■ Magaña, Dignus 2009 13.75 (79) ■ Piedemonte, Crianza 2009 13.75 (79) ■ Bodegas Irache, Gran Irache, Crianza 2010 13 (76) ■ Lezaun, Tempranillo 2012 13 (76)

Poor 11–12.75pts

■ Bodegas San Martín, Alma de Unx Garnacha 2010 12.75 (75+)

For full UK stockist details, see p86

Next month's panel tastings
Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2011 and Fino & Manzanilla Sherry

My top three Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW

■ **Artazu, Artazuri Tinto 2012** Deliciously open, juicy, clean and precise aromas. Absolutely captivating in its fresh unpretentiousness – a wine to enjoy by the glass in bars. And don't bother to keep it – it's for drinking during the year. **17.5/20 (91/100) Drink** 2014–2015

■ **La Calandria, Cienruenos Garnacha 2011** Vibrant red berry fruit with nice floral and spicy aromas. The wine is round and suave on the palate, with a long, precise finish. But its most important trait is the definite sense of place – a real Navarra-ness. A great wine. **18.5 (95) Drink** 2014–2018

■ **Jardín de Lúculo, Garnachas Atlánticas 2012** Cool-climate Grenache of great delicacy, fine balance and amazing complexity, which is also juicy and fleshy. This is a wine of small details rather than overall impressions, the antithesis of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, but equally as good. **18 (93) Drink** 2014–2018

My top three Sarah Jane Evans MW

■ **Artazu, Artazuri Tinto 2012** Outstanding Rioja producer Artadi shows what can be achieved in Navarra with old-vine Garnacha. This simple *tinto* is anything but simple, with a fine blend of crisp, fresh acidity, bright fruit and a warm spicy finish. **17.5/20 (91/100) Drink** 2014–2015

■ **Viña Zorzal, Graciano 2011** A lovely expression of Graciano – the grape variety that appears in Rioja in small doses for blending but is not often seen standing alone. Aromatic, full-bodied and with liquorice, black fruits and pepper notes. Lively and out of the ordinary in this line-up. **17 (90) Drink** 2014–2016

■ **La Calandria, Cienruenos Garnacha 2011** Gloriously fruity Garnacha. A great expression of the variety at its most seductive: dense and silky, with bramble and blueberry fruit and a long, concentrated finish. Reveals the quality of Navarra's remaining old-vine Garnachas. **18.75 (95+) Drink** 2014–2018

My top three Christine Parkinson

■ **Odipus, Old Vines Grenache 2008** The epitome of what good Navarra should be: old-vine Garnacha fruit giving wonderfully intense violet, raspberry and strawberry notes, easily wearing the lightly handled oak. Aromatic and elegant, with a freshness and delicacy rarely achieved by Garnacha. A rare example of a Navarra ageing well. **18.5/20 (95/100) Drink** 2014–2020

■ **Artazu, Artazuri Tinto 2012** The pure strawberry Garnacha fruit won me over at first sip. Although young and not very complex, it has a joyfulness that's a pleasure to taste. Pretty floral aromas plus that lovely fruit, with only a hint of warmth on the finish. I suspect this would drink beautifully if chilled. **17.5 (91) Drink** 2014–2015

■ **Vega del Castillo, Finca El Espartal Merlot, Roble 2011** The surprise of the tasting! Pure, vibrant Merlot: blackcurrant, sloe berries and a lovely note of citrus pith offsetting the sweetness. Lighter and leaner than some Merlots, the oak is noticeable, but not overwhelming. Long, smoky finish. Not the best wine of the tasting, but very drinkable. **17 (90) Drink** 2014–2016

NB: the tasters' top wines are not necessarily their top-scoring, rather those which, on learning the wines' identity, they feel are the most notable given their provenance, price or other factors

Expert summary: Sarah Jane Evans MW

Navarra can be pleased with its Garnacha and its value pricing, but needs to curb excess oak, reduce its focus on international grapes and improve sense of place



Sarah Jane Evans MW is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional co-Chair for Spain and Sherry

THIS WAS THE first tasting of Navarra wines at *Decanter* for some years, so it was a great chance to assess the changes. Looking at the results there are plenty of good things to say.

First, Navarra wines are excellent value for money. Of the 23 recommended wines available in the UK, 18 are £15 or less – including our Outstanding wine. This is an uncommon result for what was not a 'budget' tasting. Second, Navarra is clearly an outstanding origin for old-vine Garnacha. There were a few notable producers who did not submit wines to the tasting, but nevertheless the Garnachas fared admirably. Priorat, Madrid and Rioja may rightfully proclaim their Garnachas, but Navarra deserves to be seen at the top, too. As this is a relatively recent trend, we can expect more in future, though the supply of old-vine fruit is limited. Third, in a time of rich, alcoholic reds, Navarra is a place to go for refreshment. There was a consistent thread of freshness.

What about the downside? Well, it was disappointing for the growers and the producers that in this tasting only the Garnachas came out on top, however heavenly these wines were. Tempranillo fared reasonably, gaining a number of solid scores at the Recommended level. But notably these two native grapes did not suffer from the faults of some of the international varieties. Cabernet Sauvignon, for instance, was inclined to be a little green, and Merlot was

(with a couple of surprisingly good exceptions) little better. It's not surprising, because the vines are grown at the edge of their comfort zone, with climatic extremes.

Unexpectedly, many wines still suffered from an excess of oak. Producers often ease back on expensive oak in an economic crisis, but this does not seem to be the case here. Consequently some potentially good wines were ruined. Some of that accounts for the exceptionally high number of wines that scored 'Fair'. This too was entirely unexpected. It cannot be put down to one particular vintage either, as there were a good range of vintages submitted. In general, our view was to drink these Navarra reds now or soon.

Navarra is a region that has a variety of different terroirs. One of the surprises of this tasting is that most wines that could claim regional identity did not express their origin clearly. In these tastings we look for a sense of place, and were not given a strong sense of terroir here. In all, Navarra has plenty to offer – and plenty of potential still to fulfill. **D**

'Of the 23 recommended wines available in the UK, 18 are £15 or less – excellent value'