

# RICHES OF • *Rioja*

WHEN ANDY WASLEY CAME  
OUT IT WAS THE START OF  
A LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE FINE  
WINES OF THE RIOJA REGION OF  
SPAIN'S BASQUE COUNTRY





I came out to my Dad in 2005 over a bottle of Rioja whose premium price, I hoped, might soften the blow of my announcement. As it was, I could have come out over a cup of tea, such was Dad’s nonplussed reaction (“I know...”).

Still, the wine – a gran reserva whose name eludes me – proved itself worth every penny. Its spicy, leathery aroma and smooth, classy flavour left me with a taste for Rioja and a desire to visit the region. In September my fiancé and I finally made the journey.

We started our trip in Bilbao, the largest city in the Basque Country (of which La Rioja is the principal winemaking region). Basques are a famously independent people, and around Bilbao it’s hard to escape outward signs of the region’s

autonomy. As cultural as it is political, autonomy is reflected in the widespread use of the Basque language and the Union Jack-like orange, white and green ikurrina flag. When we visited, saltires fluttered alongside the ikurrinas, a reminder of our own country’s debate over independence and identity. Bilbao’s medieval old town, Casco Viejo (or Alde Zaharra in the Basque language), is crowded with bright ikurrinas, ancient church portals and countless bric-à-brac shops, reminders of the city’s religious and mercantile history. On Sundays you can pick up pieces of history in the handsome Plaza Nueva, a mid-19th-century square, as it plays host to a bustling flea market heavy with the musky smell of antique books and furniture.

But Bilbao isn’t all about history. Outside the old town there’s an obvious and prominent reminder of the city’s modern regeneration: Frank Gehry’s visionary Guggenheim Bilbao, an architectural superstar. An early morning walk down to the Nervión River in the small hours repaid me with a vision of the museum’s swooping and swirling titanium walls shimmering beneath cobalt skies. Later risers will find the museum’s vast collection of contemporary art well worth their time.

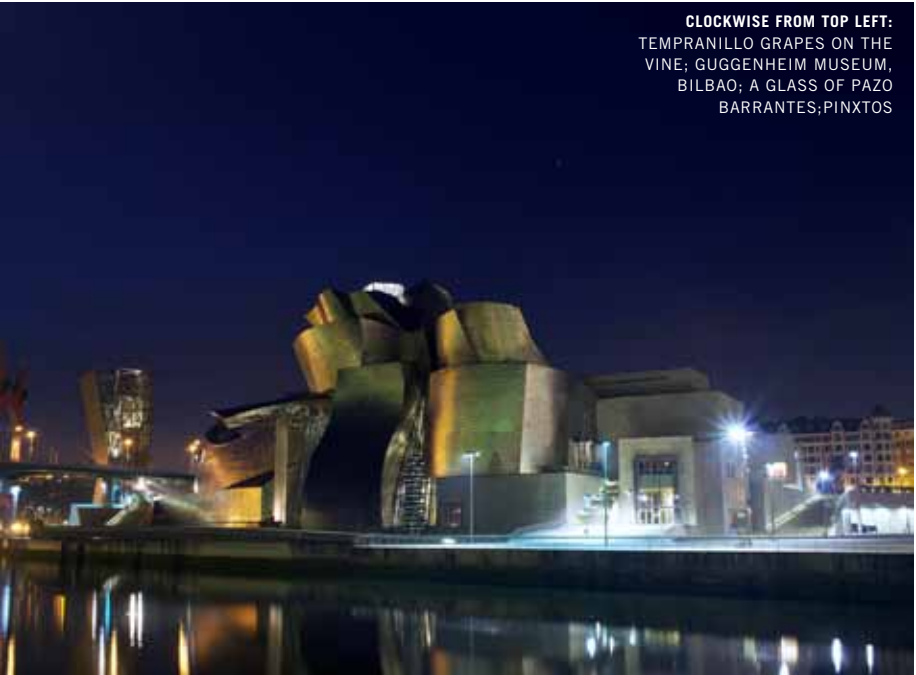
From Bilbao we struck south for Logroño, the historic capital of Rioja. Here the density of



taverns, restaurants and cafés seems calculated to whip foodies into an excess of joy. Basque cuisine is dominated by pinxtos (or pinchos), dishes rather like large tapas. It is, we learned, something of a Basque tradition to wander from tavern to tavern, sampling pinxtos with small glasses of Rioja – a tradition that puts my comparatively dowdy pub crawls (real ale and pork scratchings) to shame.

It’s hard to pick one restaurant or tavern from the next, and a couple of days’ exploring can easily turn into a trawl for the most attractive places to eat. We chose El Rincón de Alberto – a tiny restaurant with a huge reputation (according, at least, to TripAdvisor). Owner Alberto Andres took us through the menu: full-flavoured anchovy toast, lusciously creamy ham croquettes and toothsome lamb’s trotters, all accompanied perfectly by a bottle of fruity Fos crianza. Such a

*“The estate’s setting is almost stereotypically Basque: pale earth baking beneath expansive skies, and everywhere the aroma of Tempranillo grapes ripening in neat rows”*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TEMPRANILLO GRAPES ON THE VINE; GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, BILBAO; A GLASS OF PAZO BARRANTES; PINXTOS



feast demanded a dessert: we chose a cheeseboard adorned with cabrales, the region’s famous blue cheese. Crunchy, salty and with an intense savoury finish, this was a worthy sparring partner for a dark, plummy Nocturna crianza.

Logroño is a perfect starting point for visits to La Rioja’s famous wineries (bodegas). There’s a great diversity of bodegas to choose from, varying from bland, chrome-plated consumer palaces to crumbling old châteaux with chilly stone cellars. Bodegas Dinastía Vivanco is firmly in the former category. A tour around its bells-and-whistles museum found its nadir in phallic corkscrews placed awkwardly alongside artwork by Miro, Picasso and Juan Gris. The museum’s grim insipidity seemed to have permeated the winery’s barrels; even an amateur like me could find little merit in the bloodless offerings in the tasting room.

Perhaps the finest winery, on the other hand, is the Bodegas Marques de Murrieta. The estate is named for one of the founders of Rioja winemaking, Luciano de Murrieta, whose descendants continue to run the winery today. The estate’s setting is almost stereotypically Basque: pale earth baking beneath expansive

## WINE NOTES

**Rioja** is the youngest class of Rioja wine, with less than a year aging in an oak barrel.

**Crianza** is aged for at least two years, at least one of which is in oak.

**Reserva** is aged for at least three years, at least one of which is in oak.

**Gran Reserva** is aged for at least two years in oak and three in bottle.

skies, and everywhere the aroma of Tempranillo grapes ripening in neat rows. Below the château, in darkened cellars, lie precious bottles of ancient wine, some dating back to 1852 – the year the Marques founded the estate. To tour these cellars, and the estate’s tasteful museum, is to walk back through winemaking history.

Following a tour of the museum and vineyard we enjoyed a tasting of three of the estate’s wines. The white Pazo Barrantes 2013 was powerfully fruity on the nose and tasted clean and citrusy with a lingering salty finish. Marques de Murrieta 2008 Reserva had classic Rioja notes of strawberries and vanilla on the nose and a silky, peppery flavour dominated by liquorice and bramble fruits. We finished with the excellent Dalman 2009 Reserva, whose mineral, minty aroma gave way to a luscious plummy flavour and a long, fruity finish. Suitably armed with tasting notes and tipsiness we finished our trip by sinking our spending money into a couple of bottles of the winery’s iconic Castillo Ygay Gran Reserva, which will be opened at our wedding breakfast.

After a visit to the ancient hilltop fort of La Guardia – whose Torre Abacial tower commands spectacular views of the region – we rounded off our visit with a couple of days in San Sebastian, a superlatively beautiful seaside resort on the Biscay coast. San Sebastian is preparing to be the European City of Culture in 2016 and already hosts one of the world’s classier film festivals every year. It’s worth a visit by itself if time is short, but is best enjoyed as a suitably lazy conclusion to a

## WAY TO GO

### HOTELS

**Sercotel Coliseo Bilbao**  
Urkixo Zumarkalea, 13, 48008 Bilbao  
+34 946 79 29 31  
sercotelhotels.co.uk/Bilbao

**Hotel Codina, San Sebastian**  
Av de Zumalakarregi, 21, 20008 Donostia  
+34 943 21 22 00  
hotelcodina.es

In Logroño we hired an apartment via [rentalia.com](#)

### FOOD

**BILBAO**  
**Café Ekain (pinxtos)**  
Plaza Nueva, Bilbao  
[facebook.com/ekain.plazanueva](#)

**LOGROÑO**  
**El Rincón de Alberto (pinxtos)**  
Calle San Agustín, 11, 26001 Logroño

**La Abuela Encarna (paella)**  
Calle San Agustín 9, Zona Laurel, 26001 Logroño  
+34 941 100 700

**SAN SEBASTIAN**  
**La Fábrica (Spanish/European)**  
Calle del Puerto, 17, 20003 Donostia  
+34 943 43 21 10  
[restaurantelafabrica.es](#)

**Morgan C’est Moi (Basque)**  
Narrika Kalea, 7, 20003 Donostia  
+34 943 42 46 61  
[morgandonostia.com](#)

**BODEGAS**  
**Museo Vivanco de la Cultura del Vino**  
N-232, 26330 Briones, La Rioja, Spain  
+34 902 32 00 01  
[vivancoculturadevino.es](#)

**Bodegas Marques de Murrieta**  
Carretera Logroño-Zaragoza, Km 5, 26006 Logroño  
+34 941 27 13 70  
[marquesdemurrieta.com](#)

### TOURIST INFO

[lariojaturismo.com](#)  
[sansebastianturismo.com](#)

### GAY INFO

Information about next year’s Pride in San Sebastian will be available through the website of Gehitu, the Basque LGBT organisation, in due course: [gehitu.net](#)  
An interactive Google map of gay bars, saunas and hotels in Bilbao is available at [bit.ly/11jlmfn](#)

leisurely tour of the region. For food, San Sebastian outclasses even Logroño in the range of restaurants and pinxto taverns that crowd its pristine streets.

Our journey ended in La Fábrica, a San Sebastian restaurant whose almost anonymous exterior belies a truly outstanding menu. Its mushroom ravioli in foie gras cream – pungent, indulgent and sumptuous – might be the best thing I ate last year.