



THE FINEST WINES OF
RIOJA
AND NORTHWEST SPAIN

A Regional Guide to the Best Producers and Their Wines

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Foreword by Hugh Johnson | Photography by Jon Wyant

"The Finest Wines of Rioja" pertenece a la colección de guías editadas por la revista. Los aficionados las consideran entre las mejores guías del mundo. Acaba de salir la de Rioja, tras haberse publicado en los últimos años las de Burdeos, Toscana, Champagne y California. Se fija en "los vinos de los que más merece hablar", y no sólo como saben, sino lo que hay bajo la cepa y detrás de los vinos: el porqué saben así, y cómo reflejan el terreno, el tiempo y la gente que los crea. Por eso tienen tanto prestigio entre los aficionados anglosajones. VALENCISO es una de las pocas bodegas seleccionadas para aparecer en la guía y además es uno de los vinos que figuran en el "Top Ten Values in Rioja", los 10 vinos que ofrecen el mejor valor, precio en relación a su calidad.

Ten Best Values in Rioja

- Aldonia
- Allende Tinto
- Artadi Viñas de Gain Tinto
- Luberrri Maceración Carbónica
- Muga Crianza
- Sierra Cantabria Crianza
- Valenciso**
- Viña Alberdi
- Viña Real Reserva
- Viña Tondonia Reserva Blanco

ULLAQUI, BRUNER, AND SAN VICENTE DE LA SORDIERRA

Compañía Bodeguera de Valenciso

It is seldom a good idea to play *acronyms* with producers' names in order to christen a business, because the results (even when they may seem... are more often than not unpleasant to the ear. But there are exceptions—like Valenciso, a winemaking company with a explosive and re-sounding name deriving from the surnames of its founding partners, Luis Valenciso and Carmen Enciso. Both partners had worked together for 25 years when, in 1998, they finally decided to embark on a joint venture of their own, leaving behind brilliant careers at Bodega Palacios in Laguarda, just months after its owner don Gervasio sold it to a large Spanish business. Carmen and Luis speak warmly of Gervasio. "He taught us a great deal of what we know in every field," they say.

"We work vines with someone's culture, vine is that character out of tonight's full perfume. May call this a 'producer's wine'... What do you?" Luis Valenciso

At the beginning it was just the two of them on their own, ten oak barrels in a rental warehouse, and enough grapes (all bought) for the 20,000 bottles of the inaugural 1998 vintage. Of that Valenciso Reserva 1998 and the following '99, we were able to sample a few bottles labeled Crianza, which were exceptionally released a few months before the legal aging period required to deserve the reserva label. Understandably, a venture starting in 1998 may have lacked the financial resources to wait until 2004 before releasing its reserves and taking the revenue resulting from the first sale. But ever since the 2000 vintage the wine has always been bottled as Reserva.

Thanks to the reasonable success enjoyed by the house today, six people are working these hillside plots and others hired for specific seasonal

work (pruning, harvesting and so on). It is indeed a small company but also certainly one of those that contribute to the weaving of a solid business fabric in any country.

The most ambitious step in the venture has been the building of their own cellar facilities in Ullaqui. This was carried out one step at a time, avoiding excessive debt. In 2002, the grounds were purchased, and the works started one year later (not to be finished until 2005)—though the facilities were ready for the 2007 vintage. The building has been designed for a production of 30,000 bottles per year, allowing for future growth.

Valenciso-controlled vines are about 70 percent Tempranillo (averaging 27 years of age, some head-pruned and some on trellises with double canopies, all hand harvested). The one exception is a small vineyard planted to white grapes (two thirds Yema and one third Garnacha Blanca). Valenciso grapes come from Bruner, Ullaqui, Bruner, Bero, and Villalba (all of them in Rioja Alta), divided in 11 plots ruled by a strict work protocol that follows the French guidelines for viticulture raisonnée, with yield limited to 15,000 kg/ha.

Valenciso Reserva is the only red produced yearly. The concept roughly corresponds with what the wine contains in the glass. In the words of Luis Valenciso: "We are not classicists, we prefer oak above oak, and we use French, not American, oak barrels. We are not radically modern, either we are not after deeply colored or extracted wines. We work vines with aromatic volume, vines that show out out of weight but perfume. May call this a 'fantastic' wine. What do you?"

The different plots are vinified separately, after destemming and no pressing. Extraction is by traditional pumping, without breaking or submerging the cap. Maceration periods depend on volume and vintage characteristics and range from under 30 days to well over 35. After riddling, the wine goes into barrels—generally in May, June



Below: The co-founders of our interviewee, Carmen Enciso, and Luis Valenciso, smiling their idea of wine culture (space for reader).

The Valenciso team has broad experience in French oak aging (dating back to 1986), and it certainly shows in the fine structure of their wines. Every third is reserved yearly, so each barrel ages three vintages, for an average of 15 months. Again, the French influence shows in the subsequent transfer of wine to cement vats for blending and settling for about a year prior to bottling (and/or

achieved). Through an in-depth yearly assessment the excellent Valenciso Reserva 2006 is a wine with a marked red-berry character, good acidity and length, pleasant balance between freshness and concentration, and an overall impression of depth. Valenciso Blanco is an austere, finely focused wine of small production (roughly 1,000 bottles). Fermented and briefly aged in Cava-style oak barrels, it welcomes prolonged oxidation during its first years of life.

FINEST WINES

Valenciso [V]

High quality and consistency in price, vintage variation not withstanding, the only vintage not released under the brand name Valenciso since 1998 has been 2003. From our perspective, the goal is being satisfactorily

Compañía Bodeguera de Valenciso
Area under vine: 370 (62 acres)
Average production: 100,000 bottles
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