



History of Spain & Wine

"Spain, the beautiful country of wine and songs"

~ von Goethe

The history of Spain is entwined with the history of wine. Viticulture has been a part of Spain since prehistoric times. There is evidence to prove that vines were planted in the Peninsula as far back as the Tertiary period (65 million to 2.6 million years ago!), long before the Phoenicians founded Cadiz and established it as a trading post, around 1100 BC. The Carthaginians improved the wine making techniques of the Phoenicians when they arrived in the Peninsula, but the real wine history and culture began after the Romans won the Punic Wars against the Carthaginians and the Peninsula became part of the Roman Empire, and named the land Hispania.

Spanish Wine History from the Romans to the Reconquest

The time Hispania spent under the Roman rule was a golden age for Spanish wine. The level of exportations never ceased to climb, and soon it was a product coveted by everyone. The two main production areas were Tarraconensis near Barcelona in the north and Baetica in the south (which is now called Tarragona and Andalusia). After the decline of the Roman Empire, the barbaric tribes from the north of Europe invaded the Peninsula, and there is little information that accounts for the viticulture and wine history during these times. Most probably, these tribes drank some kind of rustic beer, and any wine they had, came from trades or loots.

Things picked up again when the Muslims moved in. Even though the Quranic laws forbid them from drinking any kind of alcohol, wine culture improved in the Peninsula during their stay, probably because Christians were not prevented from producing their own wines. The Muslims liked to eat the grapes that grew on the vines, and to dry them out to consume them as raisins.

The Middle Ages brought monks of different orders from all over the world to Spain. They played a very important role in the establishment of the better places to produce wine. In fact, many of the current DO's (Designation of Origin) had their beginnings with the monasteries establishing wineries and wine cellars. The monks also brought new types of vines and new techniques. The Reconquest also reopened the wine exportation business and the city of Bilbao positioned itself at the head of it. Most of the wines sold at this time went to the English markets, where they were as highly valued as French wines. All in all, it was a great time for wine history in Spain.

Spanish Wines in the New World

Columbus's expeditions and Spanish colonization opened up wine exportation in the Americas. The Conquistadors took Spanish vines with them in order to start wine production in the new Spanish colonies. This was the beginning of wine history in the New World. Wine production in the colonies was so common that it started to affect Spanish exportation. King Felipe III banned the expansion of vineyards in Chile, a decree that was mostly ignored. The 15th and 16th centuries saw a huge rise in the popularity of Spanish wines due to their excellent quality, which were being produced in almost every area of the Iberian Peninsula. Spanish wines had reached such worldly fame that some cities, like Cadiz, were being sacked for their wine.

The Phylloxera and Wars: The Destruction of Spanish Wines

With the arrival of the Industrial Revolution in northern Europe, came better machines for wine making. Lagging behind, Spain saw a decline in the exportation of its wines. There was a brief respite when the phylloxera destroyed most of the European vineyards during the 19th century. It was a dire time for European wine, and Spain was its salvation. The plague hadn't yet reached the Spanish vineyards, so there was plenty of wine to export. During this time, Spanish wines reached every corner of Europe, and they acquired far-reaching fame.

Luck didn't last long, however, as the phylloxera arrived in Spain later that century. But due to the country's mountainous terrain and slow pace of travel, the plague took longer to spread. For this reason, when things started to look really dire, the cure had already been discovered. It consisted of grafting tougher vines, the ones that could resist the bug, to weaker vines to create a hybrid that could stand against the epidemic. This saved the Spanish vineyards, and the first Designation of Origin was established in La Rioja in 1926. If it weren't for this remedy, it is probable that wine tradition in Spain wouldn't be as important now.

The wine making industry would still go through more problems before getting to its modern-day prestige. World War I paralyzed the European trade market, which made exporting anything almost impossible. Then the Spanish Civil War froze the country. While the different sides were fighting each other, the vines were left unattended, and some of them were even torn up to plant wheat and other cereals used in basic human foods. But even when the war was over, the tragedies didn't stop. World War II immobilized the European market again and made it impossible for the industry to take off until the 50's. It was at this time that some of the vineyards were replanted and the wine tradition began to be restored in some parts of Spain.

Democracy and Spanish Wines Make History

The 60's saw the revival of the wine tradition in Spain and the international rediscovery of Jerez and Rioja; but the real resurgence arrived when Franco died in 1975 and the transition to democracy began. The economic freedom gave way to a growth of this market among the Spanish middle classes and the revolution came to the wine industry at the beginning of the 80's. Things were going well, and they got even better when Spain became a part of the European Union in 1986, which brought economic aid to the Spanish wine sector. The 90's gave way to the acceptance in the use of international varieties of grapes like the Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, and the ban on watering (which had been imposed during a drought period) was lifted in 1996. This meant new places to plant, more grape varieties and more profitable ways of production. The golden age of Spanish wine had started.

Spain is still one of the main wine-producing regions in the world, with wines that are highly revered by international connoisseurs. Spanish wine production forms a vital part of the country's economy, both in terms of exportation and tourism. With such an old and venerable wine tradition, who can resist quality Spanish wines? The best place to keep this great history alive is by enjoying a glass of fine Spanish wine in Spain! Better still, take a tour of a Spanish winery so that you can experience this history yourself.

Source: Spanish Wines 2011

