

# CUNE IMPERIAL: A BENCHMARK RIOJA

**W**hat should Rioja taste like? There is a vigorous debate going on, both in the region's bodegas and in the international press, pitting the supple, elegant "traditional" style that flourished after World War II against the richer, more structured *vinos de alta expresión* that emerged in the 1990s.

There are a handful of producers, however, that have found a middle ground at once rooted in history yet open to innovation. Among them, the benchmark bottling, for its pedigree and consistency, may be Cune Imperial.

The modern history of Rioja, Spain's most prestigious wine region, begins in the mid-19th century with the establishment of Marqués de Riscal and Marqués de Murrieta. Both estates adopted the basic methods used in Bordeaux: They grew several grape varieties (predominantly Tempranillo), fermented and blended

the wines in large wooden (or concrete) vats, then matured them in barrel before release.

These pioneers were joined by brothers Eusebio and Raimundo Real de Asúa, who founded the Compañía Vinícola del Norte de España (Cune) in 1879. Their descendants still own the company, which now possesses more than 1,000 acres of vineyards and operates two other Rioja wineries: Viña Real (founded in 1920) and Viñedos del Contino (1973).

Cune was one of the first bodegas to bottle and export its wines, and one of its earliest labels, which gained renown in the 1920s, was called Imperial. Intended for the English market, the wine was bottled in the size of an "Imperial pint" (about 50 cl).

There are actually two Imperial bottlings, the Reserva and Gran Reserva. In general, the Gran Reserva is made with fruit from older



The winemaking team at Rioja's historic Cune winery is led by Maria Larrea (center). The style of Cune Imperial, the top red, has been impressively consistent over the past century.

vines and spends extra time in barrel; it is not made in every vintage. But these differences have been neither systematic nor consistent over time, and the Imperial bottlings in older vintages were not always clearly labeled.

The grapes for the wine have come primarily from a 50-acre parcel in Villalba in Rioja Alta, not far from the railway town of Haro, where the bodega is located. Alta typically produces lighter, more elegant wines than the two other subregions, Rioja Alavesa (where Riscal is located) and Rioja Baja (home to Murrieta).

Yet Imperial has evolved over time. The vineyards, once traditionally head-pruned, are now trained in rows on wires, as in Bordeaux. The percentage of Tempranillo has increased, from around 75 percent of the blend to 85 percent, while the white grape Viura has been abandoned.

Through most of the 20th century, all the barrels were made from American oak, and maturation extended for 10 to 12 years. Today, about 30 percent of the barrel stock is French oak, and the wine is bottled after about three years. (The wines, however, have never been chaptalized or acid-adjusted and are always fermented with native yeasts, according to the bodega.)

Despite these changes, the wine itself has maintained a consistent character. As current CEO Victor Urrutia puts it, "I feel Imperial falls in the middle of the traditional-modern divide."



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**—VICTOR URRUTIA**

I agree. Imperial is rarely aggressive or musclebound, but it doesn't lack structure or grip. New oak never protrudes, nor the oxidation that can result from excessive barrel aging. There is ripe fruit, but it is framed by spice and mineral notes. The wine never seems too young or too old.

"I think Rioja reaches full maturity much quicker than Bordeaux," observes Urrutia, "but has the virtue of staying on its plateau for a very long time."

To test this assertion—and to show the wine's character—Urrutia and his importer, Christopher Cnaan of Europvin, set up a tasting for me in New York that they called "A Century of Imperial." It consisted of 10 wines from 10 different decades, from 2004 back to 1917. All wines were tasted non-blind.

My notes and scores for the wines are listed in the accompanying chart. In general, I found them harmonious and graceful. They might not be the loudest voices in a crowded room, but an attentive ear would stop to listen to what they had to say. As Urrutia confesses, "I don't know if Imperial is the best wine that Cune makes. But it's the one that's closest to my heart."

I think many lovers of Rioja would agree.

—Thomas Matthews

## A Cune Retrospective



**2004 Imperial Gran Reserva 91 points**  
Still young and fresh, with plum and toast notes that show a lovely floral accent. Light, firm tannins are balanced by very bright acidity. Youthful.

**1995 Imperial Gran Reserva 89 points**  
From a ripe vintage, this red is round and soft on the palate, almost clumsy for Imperial, with sweet, generous dried cherry and cocoa flavors kept in focus by good acidity. Maturing.

**1987 Imperial Gran Reserva 91 points**  
From a light vintage, this is holding very well. Perfumed and elegant, with a silky core of cherry and vanilla kept lively by bright acidity. Mature.

**1970 Imperial 92 points**  
A bigger style, yet this is still graceful. Flavors of plum, chocolate and earth mingle in a round, soft texture, supported by well-integrated tannins, with just enough acidity for focus. Mature.

**1968 Imperial 93 points**  
Supple yet expressive, this is fragrant with tobacco, cedar and spice notes that give way to dried cherry, brown sugar and orange peel flavors. Shows great focus and harmony. Still very lively. Mature.

**1953 Imperial 87 points**  
An excellent effort from a vintage officially judged by Rioja as "below average." Light and soft, offering modest cherry, mushroom and spice flavors, but turns a bit leathery on the finish. Past prime.

**1947 Imperial 94 points**  
Big and powerful, not unlike Riscal and Murrieta vintages from the era. Full-bodied and quite dark in color, with grippy tannins that support currant, licorice, raisin, spice and earth flavors. Still has plenty of life. Mature.

**1939 Imperial Gran Reserva 88 points**  
Very light in color, this is fragrant but fragile, offering a supple texture that shows hints of raisin and tea, with rather sharp acidity. Still enjoyable, but past prime.

**1928 Imperial Special Reserve 92 points**  
It's almost shocking how lively and generous this is, with youthful color and muscular tannins. Plum, fig, chocolate and floral notes are expressive, though the finish lacks a bit of focus. Mature.

**1917 Imperial Reserva Especial 84 points**  
An old wine, displaying a muddy mix of herbal, leather and spice notes, with the dry tannins and sharp acidity starting to pull apart. It's drinkable, but more from interest than pleasure. Past prime.