



Bodegas R. López de Heredia in 1887

Roundtrip Haro–Bordeaux The Bodegas of el Barrio de la Estación

By Cristina Alcalá

When it comes to centenarian wineries, Haro's Barrio de la Estación district is one of the most densely populated in the world.

SEVEN CENTURY-OLD RIOJA BODEGAS AND TWO NEWER WINERIES COME TOGETHER IN LESS THAN ONE SQUARE KILOMETER.

But how did this unassuming neighborhood become the wine capital of La Rioja? It was the work of a humble insect with devastating effects, and a railway station.

W e must be in Haro; you can see the lights." It was a popular saying among train passengers during the late 19th century, after Haro, in Rioja Alta, became the first town in Spain to use electric street lighting in 1890. Two years later, Haro was granted city status. It was at the center of the socioeconomic boom Rioja was experiencing at the time; it also became one of the few non-capital provincial cities to boast a branch of the Bank of Spain.

What ensued was a period of development in which industry and engineering as well as cultural, political and artistic movements led the region into the 20th century. During that time, the Barrio de la Estación became the backbone of the Rioja wine industry.

Transport and technological

advancements have influenced the course of societies throughout history. And the wine sector is no stranger to its effects.

After phylloxera devastated the vineyards of France, many French wine wholesalers and négociants came to Haro to stock up on wine, taking advantage of the railway that connected Tudela, Castejón, Logroño, Haro and Miranda de Ebro.

According to Luis Vicente Elías, an anthropologist, "Before 1877, there were around forty French entrepreneurs such as H. Savignon, Armand Heff, Alphonse Mas, François Blondeau...and half were in the Barrio and had warehouses full of wine waiting to be sent to France." At least six négociants shared what is now the current

bodega for R. López de Heredia. These shippers sent barrels of wine via the railway to France, where they had it bottled.

Then, in 1877, Rafael López de Heredia y Landeta founded Haro's first winery, Bodegas R. López de Heredia Viña Tondonia. His dream was to create a universal quality La Rioja wine brand that would be identified with château-style French wines. "While not forgetting other Rioja bodegas, the importance of the Barrio has been and still is immense," says María José López de Heredia, a member of



Estación Raphen 1890



the current generation of the family. “Probably because it’s near the vineyards and the railroad and also because even today the bodegas still produce well-known brands that have withstood the test of time; brands with their own unique style strongly influenced by France, especially Bordeaux.”

A couple of years later, in 1879, brothers Raimundo and Eusebio Real de Asúa created the Compañía Vinícola del Norte de España (CVNE). The same family, now in its fifth generation, runs the bodega today, working out of some of the original buildings—the main building constructed around a typical La Rioja stone-work courtyard, and the barrel room, designed by Alexandre Gustave Eiffel’s design studio, soaring to 800 meters high with no column supports. As might be expected, the first wine the brothers produced was designed for the French market, presented in the style of a claret from the Médoc. Its renowned third, fourth and fifth vintages followed

in what would become an ongoing legend.

During these formative years, the rural environment of Rioja coexisted with the beginnings of industrialization. The bodegas transitioned from stone fermentation tanks to vats, destemmers and Bordeaux barrels. They hired French master coopers, adopted French vineyard techniques, began harvesting by grape variety and designed bodegas with separate areas for vinification and aging. The resulting wines were a far cry from the traditional table wines the area had put out—wines that were drunk young, without oak aging.

At the same time, Haro became more universally well known, its wines featured at the World’s Fairs in Paris and Chicago. The city staged its own Wine Fair in 1884 to showcase modern machinery and new trends from France. Later, agricultural unions and a cooperative group were founded in La Rioja Alta; they banded together to demand the creation of a collective brand to

guarantee their products against fraud. This was the predecessor of the Rioja D.O., officially recognized in 1925.

In the meantime, bodegas continued to establish themselves in the Barrio de la Estación. Consider the Duke of Moctezuma, Luis Marcilla Teruel y Linan, who took over the Gómez Cruzado bodega in 1886. His father was steward to Isabel II of Spain, who made him a noble. The duke married the daughter of Angel María Gómez de Arceche, an entrepreneur who founded the bodega as a dowry for his heir. This venture lasted until 1916, when the Gómez Cruzado brothers bought the property. Today, the 19th-century building belongs to Roda, with a modern underground cellar that runs parallel to R. Lopez de Heredia’s.

Another classic bodega, La Rioja Alta, settled in the neighborhood in 1890, a year it commemorates on each one of its Gran Reserva 890 bottlings. According to Guillermo de Aranzabal, the bodega’s current president, “The [Barrio] has strong links to Rioja’s winemaking origins and represents the heart and idiosyncrasies of Rioja.” La Rioja Alta’s five founders decided to make fine wines right from the very begin-

ning; they appointed Saturnina García Cid, as their first president and she, in turn, worked with a French enologist, one M. Vigier, as technical director, and bought their first 3,500 Bordeaux barrels. Although this was not the first time Bordeaux barrels had been used in Rioja, it was the first time they had been used on a regular basis and given so much importance in the winemaking process. Throughout its history this bodega has marked turning points in winemaking, pioneering ideals that subsequent generations have sustained.



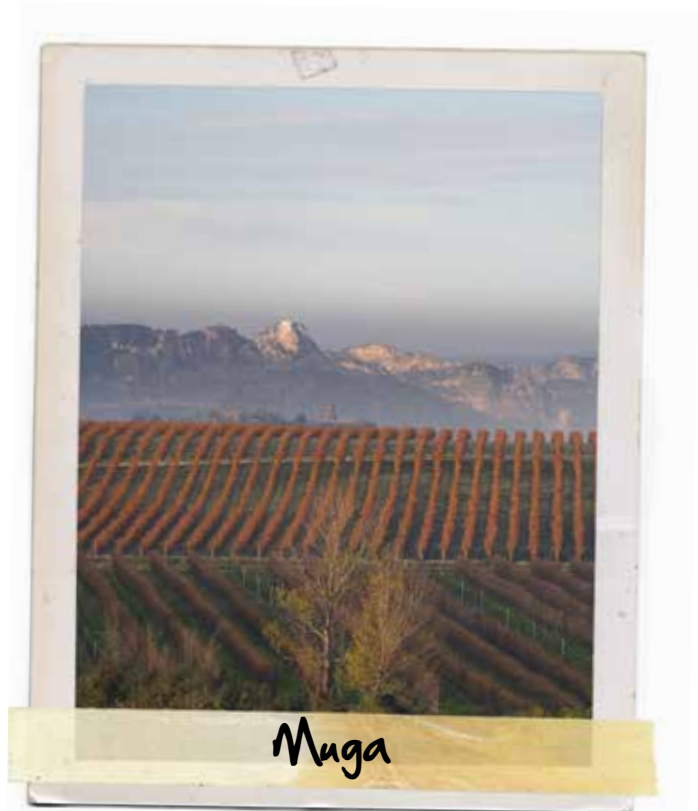
La Rioja Alta

Almost directly after the founding of the region’s enological research station in 1892, phylloxera arrived in La Rioja, lasting through 1915 with dire consequences. It precipitated several changes of ownership; after phylloxera, many bodegas that had been focused on purchasing grapes from local growers began to purchase estates and plant their own vineyards on American rootstock.

The Barrio was brought into the 20th century under the wing of Bodegas Bilbaínas (1901), created by Savignon Frères, producers from Bordeaux. That original

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—María José López de Heredia



winery building passed through several hands until it was bought by one of the most emblematic Rioja producers to come on the scene: Muga. Although Isaac Muga and Aurora Caño founded their bodega in 1932, they came from a long line of viticulturists dating as far back as 1791, when Víctor Muga y Junquera and María Josefa Fernández Tochuelo began to cultivate grapes in Vil-

grandfather, Isaac, still remembers the old steam trains and the big oak casks that were used to move the wine around the station." To honor the importance of the train station in the development of the Barrio, they have just unveiled what they call a "monument to phylloxera:" a vintage train commemorating the era.

In the end, the response to phylloxera forced the Haro bode-

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alba de Rioja, near Haro. When they outgrew their bodega in the center of Haro, they decided to move to an old building in the Barrio that, incidentally, belonged to María José López de Heredia's grandmother. The first Muga Crianza was a 1968 vintage.

“Haro is the wine center of Spain,” says Juan Muga, of the family's current generation. “My

gas to look beyond the local train shipments and create a global market for their wines. Contemporary visitors to the Barrio can take a tourist train, part of a program that will run through this October. The 60-seat train sets off from Haro for a 45-minute tour of the Barrio de la Estación and the enological research station. ■

Born In Haro

R. López de Heredia may be the most lauded Haro winery in the pages of *Wine & Spirits*. Their cellars sustain what may be the most productive black mold anywhere, blanketing the damp walls with thriving populations of yeast. The extraordinary wines those yeasts ferment have a delicacy and lasting power that defines classic Rioja. The family's tradition of aging their wine in bottle for years before release allows them to sell vintages like the 1991 Gran Reserva Viña Tondonia, both red and white, with two decades of age. Viña Tondonia refers to the family's oldest vineyard in Haro, perched on a wide meander of the Ebro river. Look for the 1993 or '96 if the '91s are sold out. Or the 2001 Reserva Viña Tondonia, which is equally elegant and complex (and, at \$53, half the price of the Gran Reservas). (Imported by Think Global, Santa Barbara, CA)

The **Muga** family, based across the street from R. López de Heredia, look to high-elevation vineyards in the Rioja Alta town of Sajazarra for their Prado Enea Gran Reserva; the 2001 (\$75) is a vibrant wine with resonant scents of earth and flowers. It's one of the most aristocratic reds you'll find in Rioja. For more of an *alta expresión* wine, look to Torre Muga (\$60), from the family's oldest vineyards in Villalba. (Imported by Tempranillo, New Rochelle, NY)

CVNE uses cool, mountain-grown fruit from Villalba for their top wine, Imperial Gran Reserva. Vintages going back to the 1950s were still fresh at a tasting in NYC this past spring. The 2001, in current release, is a classic Imperial, plump with meaty currant and *fraise de bois* flavor, brisk in its mineral-driven tannins. (\$64; Imported by Europvin USA, Van Nuys, CA)

La Rioja Alta, another Haro producer noted for their long-aged reds, recently released their 2001 Viña Ardanza Reserva, fully mature with the silken texture of great Rioja (\$30, imported by Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, NY).

For a more modern take on Rioja born in Haro, check out Cirsion from **Roda**. The 2009 is supercharged with the energy of a wine that's been carefully grown on vines more than 50 years old. It's pure, voluptuous grand cru pleasure, whether you open it now or age it. (\$250) The 2009 Sela, from younger, head-pruned vines, is more accessible both in its flavor trajectory—cranberries, roses, mushrooms and violets—as well as in price. (\$33. Both imported by Kobrand, Purchase, NY) —Joshua Greene