

2 T W E N T Y I M P O R T S



PHOTO: JOCK WULFFSON

R I O J A 2 0 1

WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT RIOJA
IN MY SOPHOMORE YEAR AS AN IMPORTER
BY DALE SPARKS

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VIEJO VIÑAS

RIOJA HAS THE MOST BONA FIDE OLD VINES OF ANY FINE WINE REGION ON EARTH. THESE AMAZING, UBIQUITOUS, ANCIENT VINEYARDS ARE THE REASON NO WINE REGION IS ABLE TO MATCH THE POTENTIAL OF RIOJA.



This is a 100+ year old vineyard in Rioja's *Sonsierra* (see below) near San Vicente. It is typical. Every vineyard you see in this photo is head trained, Goblet style, old vine, primarily tended and picked by hand. Mechanical harvesting only became legal in 1985, only newer vineyards are *Espaldera* (trellised). The *Sonsierra* has most of the older plantings and very few newer, trellised vineyards, in fact, less than half of all plantings are trellised. Rioja has the most bona fide old vines of any fine wine region on earth. These amazing, ubiquitous, ancient vineyards are the reason no wine region is able to match the potential of Rioja.

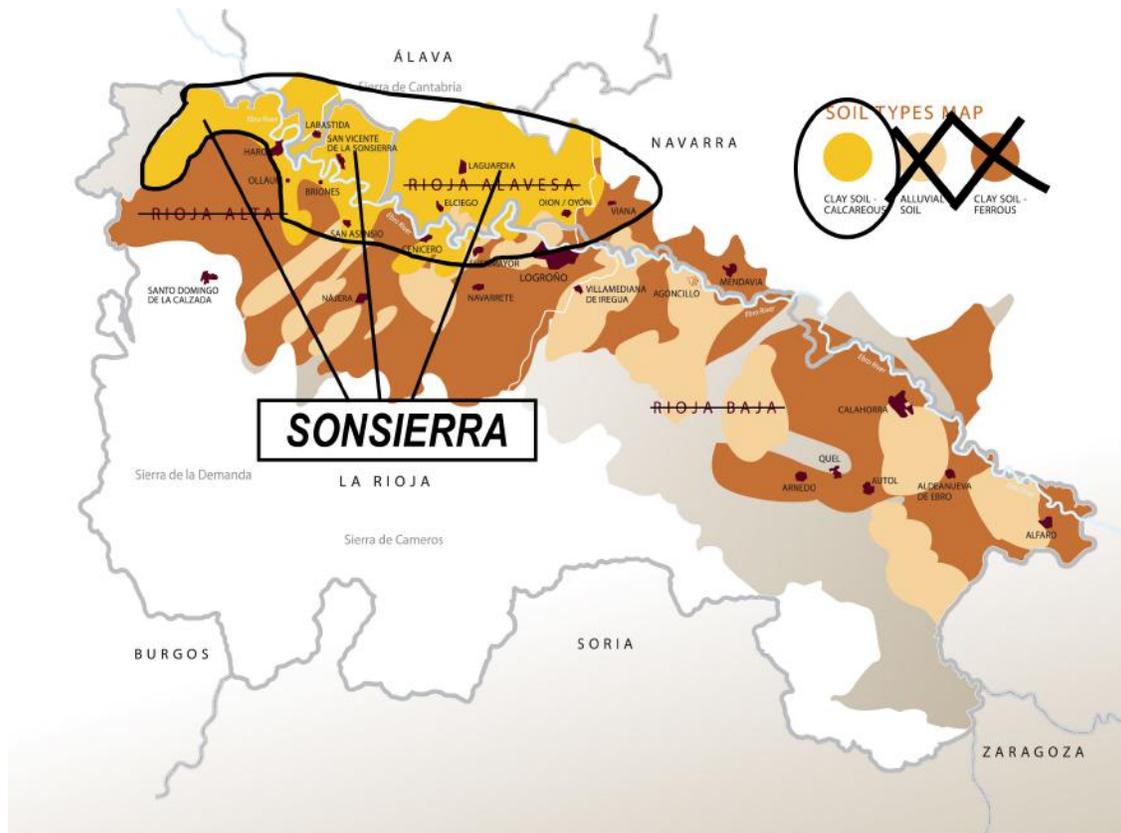
REGION	DELIMITATION (hA)	PRODUCERS	9L CASES PER YEAR
Bordeaux	120,000	10,000	55,000,000
Rioja	60,0000	381 ¹	30,000,000
Burgundy	30,000	3,200	16,000,000
Napa	15,000	~700	8,000,000
Barolo/Barbaresco	2,500	~300	830,000

Even if only 5% of Rioja's 60,000 hectares and 120,000 registered parcels are truly great, that would be a greater land mass than all of the Grand Cru and Premier Cru vineyards of Burgundy, PLUS every classified growth Bordeaux PLUS every named vineyard labeled Barolo or Barbaresco. You could probably throw the best spots from Napa and Australia in there, too. Combined, ALL of the world's greatest red wine vineyards do not total 5% of the area under vine in Rioja and Rioja has much more than just 5% that could be considered truly great by world standards.

THE SONSIERRA

IT IS NOT AN EXAGGERATION OR OVERSIMPLIFICATION TO SAY THAT VIRTUALLY EVERY GREAT RIOJA EVER MADE WAS PRIMARILY SOURCED FROM THIS AREA.

You may be familiar with the map of Rioja showing three regions; Alavesa, Alta and Baja. If you own a copy, go rip it up, burn it or make a paper airplane out of it², it is useless. The map below of Calcareous Clay soil found along the foothills of the Obarenes and Sierra Cantabria Mountains is what matters. It is not an exaggeration or oversimplification to say that virtually every great Rioja ever made was primarily sourced from this area. Rioja's best vineyards are in the foothills of the Obarenes Mountains, west of the gap that lets both the Ebro River and the cold Atlantic airflow in, and in the foothills of the Sierra Cantabrias, east of the gap. This area is known collectively as the **Sonsierra**. It includes all of Alavesa, as well as the part of Alta that borders it, north of the Ebro. South of the Ebro, Alta becomes incredibly varied, in fact, much of it is planted to other crops. It varies in elevation, soil types, rainfall and topography. It is a large, diverse area, so the term 'Alta' on a bottle would not mean much, if it were officially recognized. Alavesa is all within the **Sonsierra** and therefore is meaningful, but not all of the **Sonsierra** is Alavesa. Some producers use 'Alavesa' on their labels but as it is not officially recognized by the Consejo Regulador or the Spanish government, it is not regulated. While Alta and Alavesa are indistinguishable in the **Sonsierra**, Baja is dramatically different from either. **Good** quality wine can be made throughout Rioja and one of the more interesting aspects of Rioja are all of the little pockets, valleys, extreme elevations...but what really matters for **great** wine is the critical mass of great, old vine Tempranillo vineyards planted on calcareous clay soils, and the cooler climate and higher elevation that defines the **Sonsierra**. That's the good news. No one disputes this, now on to the controversial stuff.



PROCESS-HONOR TRADITION

Rioja began a voluntary Denominación de Origen (D.O.) label program in 1925, predating any A.O.C. laws in France. The Consejo Regulador, a self-governing body for the region, makes the rules and enforces quality standards. It was formed in 1926, pre dating any such organization in Europe. Spain, as a nation, passed their first mandatory D.O. laws for wine regions in 1970, and in 1991 Rioja became the first Denominación de Origen Calificada (D.O.Ca.³). These are some of the most honest and reliable wine laws on the planet. They are strictly enforced and violations are zealously prosecuted. We learned of a winery (although we do not know which) recently that had to destroy more than 20,000 bottles of a Reserva wine because it could not verify the barrel ageing requirements. Not declassify, sell off in bulk or re-label – the wine had to be destroyed. Rioja's Consejo Regulador is a model organization for it's type, their efforts result in Rioja having the highest *fundamental* quality of any major red wine region in the world. Possessing better vineyards, better or equal cultivars, stricter quality standards, and wise ageing requirements sends young Rioja into the market several years after it's cousins from Bordeaux, Barolo and Burgundy. Here is a great link to an official video that explains Rioja, it's history and the role of the Consejo Regulador, all wrapped up in sensuous, lurid, enthralling imagery⁴:

RIOJA CONSEJO REGULADOR VIDEO ENGLISH

[HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=6CV0WBRAJQW](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Cv0WBRAJQW)

The Consejo is, of course, political and controversial, and they have an impossible task to please 400 wineries, appease 16,500 growers, and monitor 120,000 vineyards. Rioja is the second largest wine region on earth, so I cut them some slack. One of the most important things to understand about Rioja is that tradition rules the Consejo and almost all of the rules the Consejo create and enforce cater to tradition. Various representatives of trade organizations, bodegas and consortiums fill seats on the Consejo, and their votes are not all equal, they are weighted based on the number of bottles their respective entity sells. There is a serious rift in Rioja and the large producers who dominate the Consejo seem to be either intentionally trying to sabotage the entire region and every producer in Rioja (including themselves) or are incredibly short sighted, stubborn and frankly, stupid. 'Stupid' is not too strong of a word for the critical mass of votes that prevent Rioja from joining the rest of the world's great wine regions in esteem, respect and especially, price. It is rather mind boggling that the traditional Rioja process, related solely to time in oak, is thought so valuable and worth preserving that no other ideas can be accommodated even as Rioja commands ever lower prices on the world stage in relation to other great red wine regions. There is, however, historically proven value and legitimacy in the time honored process, it does have merit. So before I get ahead of myself, here are the virtues of that tradition.

An 'ageing' bodega (Criadores) purchases grapes from dozens of small growers – virtually every bodega does, almost no wineries own their own vineyards and most who do, own a tiny percentage of their grape sources. Larger Bodegas can work with literally hundreds of growers. The grapes are combined, crushed and put in stainless steel tank, large oak foudres or concrete. Fermented wine is then moved to 225L oak barrels. Criadores wine can become one of only three types: Crianza (1 year in oak), Reserva (1 year in oak, 1 year in bottle and a third in oak, bottle or tank) or Gran Reserva (3 years in oak, 2 years in bottle).

There is a lot of selection and hedging at each step in the process, which ultimately assures quality in the final product. Luis Pasteur published his findings about yeast and fermentation in 1858. This was the dawn of the *modern* age and mechanical processing was a new idea. Applying actual science and technology to production was an essential development for commercial wine production, representing a leap forward in quality and

reliability. Rioja became the most important, largest and most vibrant wine region on earth for decades, as Bordeaux slowly recovered from Phylloxera and then fought to regain market share. Most 19th century vineyards were not identified by cultivar, different varieties were planted as hedge in each vineyard and vineyards were blended for consistency. Although not as widely planted then, this is a nearly perfect situation for the immensely tannic Tempranillo and Graciano. Garnacha, Mazuelo, Maturana Tinta, Albillo, and several other cultivars figured in as well. Field blends or winery blending gave winemakers the best chance to make something special. Rioja, eventually, honed in on a handful of cultivars that perform well, and by the mid 20th century, Tempranillo led the way. This is because of the symbiotic requirements of both the process needing tannic grapes and the grape needing process to mitigate those tannins.

The Criadores system sets parameters designed to also ensure long life in the bottle. Better producers release Crianza at about 5 years, Reservas are often 7-10 years old before they are released and the only Gran Reservas you see with the first decade of their lives come from very large wineries who have grocery store shelves to stock. Well aged, resolved, tertiary wines at release is where Rioja shines in comparison to any other commercial wine region. The proof of the wisdom of the Criadores system is in the fact that Rioja (Tempranillo) produces some of the most age worthy wines anywhere, and the 'traditionalists' have no intent on changing this, nor would I or any good wine person want them to.

I went to Rioja to find Criadores wines to import. I buy them, drink them and cellar them. Two of my cornerstone producers are centered on these types of wines. In 2015, 381 wineries were registered as Criadores producers, down from 403 the year before. I believe that future wineries opening are much more likely to be small, vineyard driven projects (like Tentenublo) and that many Criadores wineries will follow Gomez Cruzado's lead and develop wines independent of the Criadores system along side their traditional wines. As wonderful, traditional and proven as the Criadores system is, it is NOT the future for Rioja.

PROCESS OVER PLACE

I HAD TO COME TO TERMS WITH THE FACT THAT THE CRIADORES SYSTEM, BY DESIGN, GREATLY DIMINISHES OR OBIVIATES ANY DIFFERENCES OF; TERROIR, VINEYARD & CULTIVAR.

I've tried for years to parse this, to suggest the *modern* 'old' style (Criadores) and *post-modern* 'new' style (Cosecheros) were equals, just different. But in every measurable way that matters, they are not. After four years of rigorous study, drinking, reading, listening, drinking, interviewing, visiting dozens of wineries, tasting, drinking, drinking more, meeting with growers and winemakers, my tastebuds and I are now picking a side. Being somewhat conservative and a traditionalist, my conclusions are not at all what I expected when I started exploring Rioja. Like all great wine, I found the answers not in rhetoric, dogma, legal classifications, regulations, belief systems, IRI or Nielson data, and definitely not in self-loathing vitipoliti-correctness⁵ or even in science and technology. The answers are in the vineyards, and the evidence is in the bottles.

My belief system, like most American sommeliers, falls squarely in the camp that wants wines true to their source. 'Vineyard driven' or 'terroir driven' are terms that I hear a lot. I enjoy wines most when they transmit their place of origin, and most of the greatest wines I have had do that. Part of this may be self-fulfilling. From an intellectually objective view, there is no specific reason to think that wines that reflect their place are inherently better quality or more hedonistically pleasurable than wines that do not. You know, like when you find out in a blind tasting of second growth Bordeaux, the second best wine on the table is actually the Mount Eden Cabernet, the 'ringer'. This 'sense of place' is an intellectual construct only and in a world with no absolutes, rather silly to follow such an idea so dogmatically. But nonetheless, I am an old dog and unable to learn new tricks and I enjoy the intellectual exercise of identifying a place with my palate⁶.

I expected the world's norms to be present in Rioja. I expected wrong. I assumed I'd come down on the side of 'traditional' producers, after all, in every other great wine region of the world, they are the ones who best transmit a sense of place. You know; Noel Verset, Mount Eden Vineyards, Armand Rousseau, Donnhoff, San Leonardo, Cristom, Peby Faugeres, Mascarello, Mount Mary...just look on any truly great wine list. Surely the old guard Rioja contemporaries of these icons belong in this context? Closer examination and cases worth of disappointment, bottle by bottle, revealed otherwise. I felt like a traitor, what was wrong with me? Why did RODA, a new wave outlier, outshine everyone so consistently? How is it that Altos Lanzaga (not my brand) tastes like Rioja but has the structure and complexity of classified growth Bordeaux? Gomez Cruzado's Honorable outshines most any Gran Reserva (I hate to say it, but even their own from the same vineyard sources). Why? How is it that Sierra de Tolono (not my brand) and Tentenublo's Cosecha wines have so much complexity compared to any traditional producers Reserva's which start to all taste the same after a while? Why is Juan Carlos Sancha's varietal Garnacha the single greatest expression of the grape I have ever tasted? Why does Montes Obarenes, a single varietal, single vineyard Viura from Gomez Cruzado genuinely remind multiple people I've tasted with of Grand Cru White Burgundy? None of these wines are traditional, they are ALL post-modern and they are all singular in some way. Hint: It's the vineyards, stupid.

These wines (and many others) translate their vineyards, their terroir⁷, with beauty, grace and world class precision. They are made to showcase the complexity and quality of the fruit, to reflect the soil and microclimate they were grown in, not the oak they are aged in or the concrete, steel or wood they were fermented in and especially not the bacteria, spiders, and mold in the winery. I had to come to terms with the fact that the Criadores system, by design, greatly diminishes or obviates any differences of terroir, vineyard, and cultivar. An entire category of Rioja (and the vast majority of production) is identified exclusively by how it is made rather than where it comes from. Now that these 'new' wines exist, no one in their right mind would blend the amazing raw material back into a Criadores wine. That would be a total waste. But there are still thousands of vineyards, the vast majority, being wasted in just that way, as they have always been, vintage after vintage, by the 'traditionalists'. Just wait until those vineyards are liberated – we're talking about premier cru and grand cru hectareage in the Cote d'Or times about 20!

In tasting after tasting, the 'vineyard driven' wines were more complex, more interesting. They evolve more after being opened. They ask questions rather than make statements. They send me fetching to the bottom of the bottle to better understand them⁸. The traditional Criadores wines, while initially thrilling, sexy and exotic; fatigue the palate with oak (or worse, Brettanomyces and Volatile Acidity) after a few sips and they often reveal sameness across vintages and producers. In 1885, the Criadores system was a great idea. In 1985 it was a novelty that an entire region had not changed in one hundred years. But 1985 was more than thirty years ago. What has happened in Barolo or Napa or even Burgundy in thirty years? The way forward for Rioja is NOT rooted in the Criadores system. It is rooted, literally, in great, old vineyards and the greatest amount of privileged terroir being translated directly into the bottle.

Everyone, including me, wants the Criadores tradition honored and preserved. They are unique experiences in the world of wine, like Space Mountain, in the pitch black, is unique in the world of roller coasters. If you are obsessive like I am, and you ride it 15 times on one day, you start to remember, 'curve, dip, climb, bump, dip, big dip, curve, climb...' and the magic sort of disappears. Despite my stubborn resistance and previous inherent bias, the intrinsic quality, diversity and fidelity to the source of the 'new' wines won me over. They will win you over too, sooner or later⁹. This is the end of your Rioja innocence but it is the beginning of a world full of amazing, unique, special and great wines. 2Twenty welcomes you.

‘ MODERN ’ & ‘ POST MODERN ’

THE IMPRESSIONISTS HAD BEGUN PAINTING AT THE TIME AND THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN ART MOVEMENT COINCIDES, ALMOST EXACTLY, WITH THE MODERN RIOJA MOVEMENT.

Jon Radford, who wrote the (then) definitive English language book on Rioja almost 20 years ago, uses the 'modern' and 'post-modern' monikers and they capture best the reality of Rioja's two primary categories (or styles). Rioja's viticultural history is long and uninspiring until the mid 19th century as Frenchmen from Bordeaux came and started making a new style of wine. The Impressionists had begun painting at the time and the birth of the modern art movement coincides almost exactly with modern Rioja movement. Post-modern art begins in the mid 20th century, again coinciding with Rioja vignerons starting to question their modern practices. By the 1970s Marques de Caceras was using stainless steel. RODA, and to a lesser degree, a handful of other producers, started to recognize the value of owning their own vineyards, implementing sorting tables and reducing chemical use in the vineyards. These are formulas for quality worldwide. Suddenly a light goes on for the region and Abel Mendoza, Contino, Allende, Valenciso, Benjamin Romeo, Artadi, Ramirez de Ganuza and many others start to innovate and re-think Rioja and write a different history. In Barolo or Napa, these producers would be getting \$150/bottle (or more) for their wines! These producers generally use better quality (and less) new oak and/or kept their wines less time in oak while still meeting minimum legal requirements. They openly questioned the Criadores system and continue to do so. Their wines translate the terroir of their amazing vineyards.

What Radford called 'modern' is often called 'old school', 'traditional', or 'classic'. I know it's confusing to call old ideas 'modern'...but as I age, I like that idea a little more! Volatile acidity and Brettanomyces by any other name are still just as fragrant and putrid¹⁰. Whatever you want to call the producers in Rioja making *that* style of wine, it must be recognized that they specifically ignore terroir, ignore vineyard character and even cultivar. What is not apparent when first learning about Rioja is that these producers, using a Bordeaux model, blend dozens, or even hundreds of small parcels together and are doing so with the goal of *sameness*, same as last year, same as always. Then they slap 2 years of new American Oak on the wine and age the bottle for a few years and suddenly you have Gran Reserva selling at the local grocery store for \$15.99. You know those names. Truth be told, they are probably the most interesting wines at the big chain grocery stores – but modern Rioja is NOT the best quality category from Rioja any longer.

The high tide floats all boats¹¹. These innovative producers are raising the tide in Rioja, while no 'traditional' producer is doing so. I went to Rioja because of the modern style of wine, because of its uniqueness. I buy those wines, I drink those wines and I enjoy those wines. I honor the tradition of the Criadores and I want it to continue. I sell some of those wines. But the modern category of producer, dominant now, is slowly giving way to vineyard driven producers. The really big producers are no longer the vanguard of quality (or the vanguard of anything other than the big chain grocery store wine shelves). If you have them on your playlist, keep them, but don't kid yourself that you have the best wines from Rioja, because you don't. Catch up with what is happening in the second largest classic red wine region in Europe. Ultimately and correctly, this style of producer, this genre of winery - call it 'modern' or 'Criadores' to 'traditional' or 'old school'...whatever - is not procreating.

PLACE OVER PROCESS

AGAIN, IT IS COUNTERINTUITIVE, BUT UNLIKE THE REST OF THE WORLD, IT IS THE MODERN (MEANING: OLD SCHOOL, TRADITIONAL) PRODUCERS THAT IGNORE TERROIR, CREATE BLAND SAMENESS, AND OBLITERATE THEIR WINES WITH OAK AND SOMETIMES VA, BRETT AND OTHER MALADIES, WHILE THE POST-MODERN (MEANING: UPDATED, CURRENT, NEW) PRODUCERS WHO ARE EXPRESS TERROIR, VARIETAL CHARACTER AND GREATNESS.

I don't know all 400+ producers in Rioja, but would estimate that fewer than 5% of the producers have a true 'place over process' mindset. The ones who do, however, are now a who's who of truly great Rioja producers. This is the change in mentality that Champagne had 30-40 years ago and it is happening, slowly, (like geologically slowly), in Rioja. But it is happening. The vineyard driven producers in Rioja stand toe to toe with the greatest wines from the world's greatest regions, and they do so without qualifications like "*well, you know, it's supposed to have Brettanomyces and Volatile acidity*" or "*this is how wine was made 100 years ago*". That does not make it taste good. Sorry. Remelluri, Artadi, Contino, Benjamin Romeo, Valenciso, Abel Mendoza, David Sampedro Gil (DSG), Finca Allende, Ramirez de Ganuza, Gomez Cruzado's Honorable and Single Village wines, Artuke, Telmo Rodriguez at Lanzaga, and more recently, projects like Tentenublo, Hazienda El Ternero & Sierra de Toloño¹²...and others, all produce wines that show intrinsic greatness, terroir, expressions of the vineyards...all of the things that great Barolo or great Napa Valley Cabernet or great Burgundy have. They purchased their own vineyards, cleaned up the winemaking process, innovated equipment and processes in the winery, vinified lots separately and, most importantly, sought to express the greatness of Tempranillo and their vineyards, NOT oak. Old vines from great vineyards translating their detail and nuance into wine is the result. Cultivar typicity and clean, sound winemaking are hallmarks of this vanguard of Rioja's new wave. This is Rioja's BEST way forward and it is the future. To that end, check out the prices the top wines from these producers are fetching. You cannot name a Gran Reserva from a traditional producer that is even half the price RODA's Cirsion or Romeo's Contador. Abel Mendoza's Grano a Grano wines, Altos Lanzaga...all outpace most Gran Reservas. These are the wines commanding higher prices among the world's best palates – but they are still flat out cheap¹³ when compared to their quality peers from anywhere else!

IF YOU APPLIED AN 1855 BORDEAUX STYLE CLASSIFICATION, BASED ON ECONOMICS, NO GRAN RESERVA PRODUCER WOULD BE A 'FIRST GROWTH'...NOT A SINGLE ONE. POST-MODERN RIOJA IS THE VERY BEST VALUE AMONG THE CLASSIC RED WINE REGIONS ON EARTH. AND THAT IS MY RIOJA 201 DISSERTATION, A LESSON THAT TOOK ME SEVERAL YEARS AND I SUSPECT ONE THAT WILL CONTINUE TO TEACH ME WELL INTO THE FUTURE.

¹ Annual Report of the Consejo Regulador de Rioja DOCa, 2015. These are the ‘ageing’ wineries – actual facilities. There are 594 labels total in Rioja, as of 2015, so about 200 are duplicated or ‘virtual’ labels.

² Here is a basic paper airplane design: <http://www.foldnfly.com/1.html#Basic-Dart>

³ Officially they want everyone to use ‘D.O.C.’ and drop the small ‘a’ – but that is stupid and confusing because of Italy’s huge and rather crappy ‘D.O.C.’ category. No wonder an otherwise intelligent, well educated and high functioning consumer asked me where exactly in Italy that Rioja was located.

⁴ Vittorio Storaro filmed Apocolypse Now and that may be the last thing I saw this visually lurid.

⁵ Alice Feiring, 'Natural Wines', Bigfoot, Rudolph Steiner’s 'Biodynamics', Flying Spaghetti Monster, Tooth Fairy, Lochness Monster, Santa Claus...oh wait ...Santa Claus might actually be a legitimate belief system.

⁶ Or trying, anyway...

⁷ a French term that often means that you are a pretentious jerk and because the counseling failed, you are insecure and need to identify yourself as a knowledgeable wine person to make others feel inadequate and ignorant. I suspect it was invented by brewers and distillers - because it draws a lot of people away from wine. The alternate and much less often used definition, is legit, however. It's a landmine of a word, the merde has been spread by sooo many who really don't use it appropriately, be careful where you step!

⁸ this is a paraphrase of something Terry Theise wrote more beautifully and more eloquently than I ever could.

⁹ It will be sooner for anyone who starts tasting through my portfolio and is intellectually honest with themselves. Face facts: many ideas about 'traditional Rioja' are antithetical to what you believe about great wine from anywhere else and to what most anyone knowledgeable about wine, generally believes. Anyone who can separate their palate from demagoguery and ego will end up here, on the side of sound winemaking from individual, great vineyard sources. These are ‘Terroir driven wines’, which ‘traditional’ Rioja just aint.

¹⁰ Billy Shakespeare.

¹¹ Ronald Reagan, 38th president of the United States, but also; Greenspan, Rand, Hayek, Emerson, deTocqueville, Adam Smith, Locke, Rousseau...social contract, classic liberalism...

¹² There is no way to write about the styles of Rioja and not name names. Despite the nature of competition, I encourage a thorough exploration of Rioja and if a name appears in one of my documents or on my website it is done so as an endorsement and as a compliment. I respect everyone who makes wine. Theose names are used in reverence. I will happily remove any name from our website at the request of the producer.

¹³ ‘Cheap’ used for affect... like any good wine person knows, ‘inexpensive’ is the more proper word.