

# Bodegas Beronia Rioja: The Magic of Oak

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A study in oak influence on Rioja wine, the same 2013 Tempranillo Reserva, aged in three different barrels, French, American, and mixed oak.

Patricia Decker

Spain's [Rioja wine](#), a blend of mostly Tempranillo, with small amounts of Graciano, Mazuelo, Garnacha, and Viura, is one of the great pleasures of life. One of the iconic wines of Europe, it combines the cherry fruit and ethereal nuances of Burgundy with the structure and age-worthiness of Bordeaux. It's layered and complex, a savory fruity delight that is made all the more intriguing by its time in oak barrels, adding coffee, spice, and tobacco notes, among others, to the glass.

**Bodegas Beronia** is one of the top Rioja wineries in Spain's La Rioja Alta region. Producing [Rioja wine](#) for over 40 years, Beronia starts with the highest quality grapes. The winery is surrounded by its own 20 hectares of pre-phylloxera [vineyards](#), which are over 100 years old. **Beronia** purchases additional fruit from hundreds of small growers in the region, over 870 hectares of vines within a 10 kilometer radius of the winery. Closely supervised by Beronia's winemaker, Matías Calleja, these



vineyards are sustainably farmed, and some are certified organic. This grower-winery relationship results in the best quality fruit for Beronia's various Rioja wines. *Patricia Decker*

**Matías Calleja** has been with Bodegas Beronia since the beginning, shaping and infusing the wines with his vision of a “**house style**”. Weaving together tradition and innovation, Calleja is always experimenting with winemaking techniques, especially the all important aspect of **oak aging** for Rioja wines. Traditionally, Rioja red wine was aged in American oak, permeating it with some of its intense flavors of vanilla, coconut, and baking spices. The modern trend has been to return to French oak, with its subtle spicy flavors of vanilla, black pepper, and clove. Not only is the type of oak used in the barrel important, but the length of time spent aging in the barrels is also key. Rioja red wine is classified by their aging requirements. Basic Rioja spends only a short amount of time in oak, usually just a few months, and then is bottled and sold, meant to be drunk young. Crianza defines a wine that is aged for at least two years, with at least one year in oak; Reserva stands for at least three years aging, with one year in oak; and Gran Reserva requires a minimum of five years aging, of which two years are in oak. These are the minimum aging requirements for the label, often the wines are aged much longer.

Calleja recently traveled to Los Angeles, to get out the word, that Bodegas Beronia makes refined, balanced Rioja wines that embody the magic of oak aging. Calleja doesn't speak English, but through a translator and passionate body language, was able to convey how special their wines are. He notes that the importance of the barrel is paramount to the wine's development. According to Calleja, the wines are naturally stabilized in the barrel, and it improves their quality. But most important, he says, is that “you must master oak treatments to get the nuances of aroma from the barrels, there are many variations and variables to the barrel.”

Calleja has extensively studied the effects of oak variables on the wines, and at Beronia, has pioneered the use of mixed oak barrels, a barrel that has French oak ends, and American oak staves, combining the best of both worlds. In fact, this mixed oak barrel is dubbed the “Beronia barrel”. To demonstrate the differences, Calleja offered a 2013 Tempranillo Reserva, aged three ways, one in French oak, one in American oak, and one from the mixed oak barrel. How fascinating to compare the same wine, aged three different ways! The American oak version was sweeter, with vanilla and chocolate overtones. The French oak one had more noticeable tannins and spice. The mixed oak bottle offered a nice balance of the two. Obviously, many factors affect wines aged in oak, such as the toast level and whether they are new or used barrels. But the case was made for oak influence in wine.

Over a luncheon at **BOA Steakhouse**, Calleja emphasized how important managing oak is to Rioja wine. He notes that it's important to “respect the wine in barrel” and that, “The house style of Bodegas Beronia is never masked by oak, it's respected by but not covered by oak.” Beronia's commitment is undeniable, almost 30,000 barrels are nestled in an underground cellar, whose constant temperature and humidity coddle the slumbering wines, providing the ideal environment for their slow evolution in barrel. Five red Rioja wines were compared, different oak aging regimens, classifications, and vintages, really bringing to life how oak adds its own personality to

the wine.

The **Beronia Rioja Tempranillo** 2012, 100% Tempranillo, is a young wine, with red fruit and sweet spice, accented with chocolate and almond notes. This wine was aged for 9 months in mixed oak barrels, and an additional 6 months in bottle before release. Well integrated, sweet tannins make this juicy and balanced wine an easy match for pasta and light red meat dishes. The fruit notes stand out in the long and persistent finish.

The **Beronia Rioja Crianza** 2012, a blend of 88% Tempranillo, 10% Graciano, and 2% Mazuelo, is full of raspberry and blackberry fruit, sweet and balanced with notes of coffee and cocoa, and more structured tannins. Aged for 12 months in mixed oak barrels, with an extra 3 months in bottle, the Crianza is perfect with roast meats and Spanish charcuterie.

The **Beronia Rioja Reserva** 2011, a blend of 93% Tempranillo, 5% Graciano, and 2% Mazuelo, is elegant, with a nose of plum jam, candied fruit, chocolate, and cinnamon spice. Smooth and flavorful, the palate is both fruity and savory, with cherry and strawberry fruit, accented by notes of licorice, spice, cocoa and toffee, this wine has a lot going on! Aged for 20 months in mixed oak barrels, and rested for an additional 18 months in bottle before release, this is a perfect example of the blended oak aging, the American oak imparting a sweet character, while the French oak adds the spice. The Reserva is a good pair for red meats, game, and roasts.

The **Beronia Rioja Gran Reserva** 2006, a blend of 92% Tempranillo, 4% Graciano, and 4% Mazuela, is intense and complex. Aromas of black and dried fruit, chocolate, and sweet spice bring the palate to life, fruit with hints of tobacco, cocoa, and mint. Silky tannins and a meaty presence flesh out the wine, elegant and well balanced. The Gran Reserva is aged for 26 months in French oak only, and an additional 36 months in bottle. Calleja observed, "It's a delicate balancing act so that Gran Reserva wines don't get too much oak", looking to the aging requirements for the Gran Reserva. Good with red meats, game, cheeses, and chocolate desserts, this is a beautiful wine.

And finally, to show the power of aging, and the long life of Rioja wine, Calleja brought a Beronia library wine, the 1973 Rioja Gran Reserva. A holy smokes moment! A blend of Tempranillo, Graciano, Mazuela, and Viura (a white grape!), it had a definite aged profile, with plum and cherry fruit, sweet and warm, yet bold and spicy, concentrated and pure, lower in alcohol than the younger version, but still delightful. Aged for 54 months in Oak, and an additional 36 months in bottle before it was released, even though it may be slightly over its peak, it still has life and lift.

And while 95% of Beronia wines are red, a **Beronia Rueda Verdejo** was poured, an aromatic white with an intense nose of ripe stone fruit, fennel, and cut grass. Fruity yet dry, full and balanced, it finishes long with a nicely bitter tinge, which is normal for Verdejo.

If you're enchanted with Rioja, Bodegas Beronia has so much to offer, besides the beautiful balance of mixed oak barrel aging, the wines are so well priced. The younger wines, the Tempranillo and Crianza, retail for \$15-16, the Reserva \$24, and the Gran Reserva \$35, all of these wines are from the Classic Range. Beronia is part of the **González Byass** family of wines, that

exports its wines worldwide. This is traditional Rioja spun with Beronia style, stock up your home wine cellar with these food-friendly beauties!

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