

# Spain & France: The Judgment of Palafrugell – 1947 Rioja & Bordeaux

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## Spain: The Rioja Part

By Luis Gutiérrez

The idea of this tasting was born many years ago, even before I joined *Robert Parker Wine Advocate*. In fact, it started after an amazing tasting of Rioja wines back to 1929 in London in 2011. A couple of Spaniards and some prestigious British writers tasted many amazing wines for *The World of Fine Wines* magazine.

After the tasting, we had the chance to drink the leftovers and discuss the wines. And a comment from Jancis Robinson was the seed in my brain. She said something like “many of these wines have nothing to envy of the Bordeaux from the same vintages.” So, the idea of a comparative tasting started.

It was later when I joined *Robert Parker Wine Advocate* that I fine-tuned the idea to compare 1947s, because 1947 is Robert Parker’s birth year and also one of the most revered vintages of the century. So, I hoped we could do a tasting for their 70th birthday. Nice idea, but not so easy to do it. The Rioja wineries might be all for it and even provide bottles for it, but what did the best châteaux from Bordeaux have to win from such tasting? We’d have to buy the wines... and they were not especially cheap.

So, time went by, but the idea got stuck with me. And I mentioned it whenever it was relevant just in case it might miraculously happen one day. Until I explained the idea to the owners of Grau, a big wine shop in the village of Palafrugell, the heart of the Costa Brava in Spain. They wanted to do a big tasting but didn’t know exactly what. And they loved the idea and the challenge!



*Palafrugell has one of the most spectacular landscapes of the Costa Brava.*

Said and done! Well, it took them some time to source the bottles, but in a few months, they had two each of all the top Bordeaux! So, we agreed on a date and invited some people. Unfortunately, Bob was now traveling to Europe and declined the invitation, but we had a decent guest list, even some born in 1947. Then, as with many other things, a virus got in the way and made us reschedule a couple of times...

And then it finally happened at the end of last year. By then, William Kelley was ready to take over as reviewer for Bordeaux, so I got him invited, as it was a unique occasion for both of us to taste the best wines from Bordeaux and Rioja together!

We decided to pen a joint article together and write about the event and the wines, so... *voilà!* I'm going to talk about the wines from Rioja, and William is doing the same about Bordeaux.

*(Note: Only the Rioja wines are connected to this article. To view the Bordeaux wine reviews by William Kelley, click **here** (<https://www.robertparker.com/articles/6jdvrU45FPDSXntgn>).)*





*Decanting and checking the wines (left to right): Luis Gutiérrez, William Kelley and Audrey Doré from Celler de Can Roca (Photo courtesy of Estanis Nuñez)*

Curiously enough, Marqués de Murrieta didn't bottle the Castillo Ygay from the 1947 vintage, and they only released the 1942 red and the 1946 white from that entire decade.

Spain had a relatively different history than the majority of Europe at that time. We did not participate in the Second World War, as we had our own Civil War between 1936 and 1939. So, by 1947, we were not in the same situation as France right after a war. In France, there had been no fertilization of the vineyard for at least a couple of years, and that called for a short and concentrated crop. Spain was a poor country, and I'm sure there was little fertilization anyway; but what marked the 1947 harvest in Rioja was the climate from the previous years.

### **Weather Report**

1947 was dry and warm across Europe, which were perfect conditions for ripe and concentrated grapes. But in Rioja, the vintage was marked by one of the worst frosts ever, that of May 1945. It was the 1st and 2nd of May, and it came back on the 25th and caused the loss of 80% of the 1945 crop. Furthermore, there was some hail in early May too, and these conditions affected the crop of the following two years. 1946 was a dry year, and yields were very low. So, they were expecting a good crop in 1947. It's a good thing they like to keep records of everything at López de Heredia, so they have more information about the vintage than anybody else in Rioja.



*María José López de Heredia from Viña Tondonia also attended the tasting. (Photo courtesy of Estanis Nuñez)*

The minutes from their meeting on July 27, 1947, show that the poor setting of Garnacha and also, but more limited, in the Graciano and Mazuelo are going to result in yields probably lower than in 1946. On September 21, they foresee excellent quality, and on October 19, while harvest was ongoing, they inform of a normal harvest with very healthy grapes. At the end of November, they confirm 10% less grapes than the previous year, because of the poor fruit setting and the drought from the last couple of years, but very high quality.





*La Semana Vitivinícola, Spain's oldest wine journal, gave a forecast about the 1947 harvest in its issue number 60.*

At the end of March 1948, they had a general meeting where they informed about the excellent quality of the 1947 harvest of perfectly ripe and healthy grapes. They started harvesting quite early, on September 29, a constant in low-yielding years, and finished on October 17 for the white grapes and on October 21 for the reds. They picked 202,424 kilograms of grapes, and a little more than half of it white grapes!

1948 and 1949 were also very dry and with up to 40% less grapes, and the next “good” harvest was not until 1954. So, the wines from 1947 were always held in very high esteem and demand. The top wines from 1947, the equivalent of Gran Reserva (which at the time was still called Reserva), were released in 1967, still a tough period, but the wines had good commercial success.



*Some of the highlights from Rioja (Photo courtesy of Estanis Nuñez)*

This information is specific to López de Heredia, and there are some contradicting data elsewhere; but the reality is that there's very little good information about 1947 in Rioja... CVNE keeps records of older vintages, and what they have for 1947 was that it had a hot summer with relatively low aggregate annual rainfall, a year of drought throughout the growing season. At Marqués de Riscal, they have records of 1947 being a year of long vegetative cycle because of a cold winter. Despite the scarce rain, August was not dry, and September was quite wet. It was a short but high-quality crop.

## Barrel Aging

When it comes to the winemaking, I believe the main difference from address to address was the time the wines spent in barrel. At one end of the extreme was Marqués de Riscal, which had the wines in barrel for a shorter amount of time, following the Bordeaux style more (but still 47 months for the stunning 1947). And the other extreme, with an unusually long time in barrel, was Marqués de Murrieta, which didn't produce a Castillo Ygay in 1947. But their 1950 was bottled in 1970, the 1952 in 1986, and the 1925 was not bottled until 1964, almost 40 years after the harvest! The wines from CVNE had a fairly long élevage, 13 years in the case of the Imperial and 16 years for the Viña Real.

Time in barrel has been shortened in most of the wineries over the years, and even Marqués de Murrieta now bottles its top red much earlier, four or five years after the harvest. Perhaps López de Heredia, which is famous for being against change, is the one that keeps doing the same, aging their



Gran Reserva wines for 10 years in barrel, plus 10 years in bottle and releasing them 20 years after the harvest.




*Everybody took detailed notes about the wines. (Photo courtesy of Estanis Nuñez)*

What I found fascinating was that from the wineries where we could compare the fine wine in the Bordeaux bottle and the more powerful wine in the Burgundy bottle (the ones with more Garnacha and more white grapes), it was these last ones that showed better, livelier and fresher. It was very good to compare the more austere, Haro style of the Imperial with the more powerful Rioja Alavesa profile of the Viña Real, something that I also saw at Tondonia with the Viña Tondonia and the Viña Bosconia, respectively.

It's a small sample and it's difficult to generalize, but it's clear that 1947 was a great Rioja vintage, and many wines are still drinking nicely today. At the end of the day, at age 75, there are not great wines anymore, there are only great bottles!

## France, Bordeaux: The 1947 Vintage Turns 75

By William Kelley

The torrid, dry 1947 vintage produced some of the 20th century's most iconic wines in Bordeaux, and this fascinating tasting offered an opportunity to look at a number of the vintage's most celebrated wine in a comparative setting. I've also taken the opportunity to add a few  **SopORTE**

on other 1947s that I have drunk since then. The best 1947s remain magical wines of striking concentration, texture and sweetness and often still drink well today, but at this stage, bottle variation can be significant—not just because the wines are now closing in on their 75th birthday, but also because this vintage has been extensively traded. So, it's important to remember that the accompanying notes describe how individual bottles performed on one occasion. It's testimony both to the wines' robustness and to the diligence with which they were sourced that, as a set, they showed so well.



The most extreme vintage of the 20th century, one has to go back to 1893 (when harvest began on August 21) or look forward to 2003 to find comparable growing seasons. After a cold winter, with temperatures falling as low as 10 degrees Fahrenheit (-12 degrees Celsius) in January, budbreak began in early April, and by late May, temperatures already exceeded 90 degrees Fahrenheit (30 degrees Celsius), hitting 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) in the end of June under the influence of a Sirocco from the Sahara: sunburned grapes, an unfamiliar sight, were noted. In August, the mercury climbed even higher, hitting 102 degrees Fahrenheit (39 degrees Celsius) in the Médoc and 104 degrees Fahrenheit (40 degrees Celsius) in Saint-Émilion. September was cooler, but still very warm, and with the exception of some scattered showers, there was little rain until the night of September 19-20. By then, harvest was already underway, having commenced on September 15, and the crop was abundant: fully twice the size of the small 1945 vintage, showing that the vineyards were recovering from wartime neglect.



The warm fruit, with elevated sugar levels, was a challenge to ferment, as temperature control could only be achieved by resorting to dropping blocks of ice in the vats. In the circumstances, it's no surprise that many suffered from stuck fermentations and concomitantly elevated levels of volatile acidity: the famous Cheval Blanc 1947, for example, contains more than one gram per liter. Yet while a slightly balsamic, high-toned quality, combined with huge sweetness and concentration of fruit, is certainly one of the vintage's calling cards, it is often less distracting than the numbers would suggest. Some of the Right Bank wines attained what were for the time historically high alcohol levels, with Cheval Blanc, for example, checking in at 14.5%, and some seem to show a little residual sugar: again, Cheval Blanc contains 0.5 grams per liter. The Left Bank, however, was less extreme, with Mouton Rothschild landing at 12.5% alcohol, totally dry, and Haut-Brion, a ripe site, falling below 13% alcohol.



*Petrus was one of the highlights from Bordeaux.*

If the vintage's extreme conditions make it one of a kind, it also derives from a different era. Modernization would soon be under way in Bordeaux, with mechanized viticulture, new agrochemicals and, by the 1960s, stainless steel and a new conception of enology. In

maturation in barrel was longer, with multiple rackings and egg white finings, and the wines would have been bottled by hand. While new oak has a long history in Bordeaux, this was not a period of prosperity, so new barrels were less common than they had been in the interwar years and less common than they would once again become by the 1980s.



*So... what do you think, William? (Photo courtesy of Estanis Nuñez)*

If anything, however, differences in the vineyards were even more profound: in 1956, much of Bordeaux was ravished by a devastating frost, and in its aftermath, huge swathes of vineyards were replanted. Many estates replanted with a higher proportion of Merlot (encouraged by the authorities), sometimes at wider spacing and often favoring more productive selections of the various varieties. In 1947, however, that was still in the future. What's more, while 1947 did produce a good crop, yields were nonetheless far lower than what would become common later in the century. During the war, labor was in short supply and copper and sulfur for treatments against disease were often unobtainable, so the vineyards were far from vigorous. Taken together, the combination of heritage vine genetics, low yields and the historically warm, dry vintage help to account for the singular style of the 1947 wines.





*The happy participants of the tasting (Photo courtesy of Estanis Nuñez)*

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Vintage	Wines	RP
1947	Marqués de Riscal Gran Reserva	100
1947	López de Heredia Viña Bosconia Gran Reserva	100
1947	CVNE Viña Real Reserva Especial	100
1947	López de Heredia Viña Tondonia Gran Reserva	97
1947	CVNE Imperial Gran Reserva	96

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