

The new Spanish red wines

The rapid rise of the Spanish red grape variety mencia has taken Britain by storm



Best of three: the new Spanish wines now becoming popular here.

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Pizarras de Otero Bierzo, Spain 2013 (£9.99, or £6.66 if you buy two bottles, Majestic) It's rare for a grape variety to break through to the mainstream as rapidly as Spanish red grape mencia has. Just five years ago it was hard to find any at all in the UK. Now most retailers stock at least one example. Bierzo, just across the border from Galicia, is where it's most widely planted, with Galician winemaking co-operative Martín Códax - better known for their textbook, sea-fresh Rías Baixas albariño whites - here conjuring up one of the best-value examples of the variety in its light and juicy easy-drinking mode: all crunchy berry fruit and floral freshness.

Dominio de Tares Cepas Viejas, Bierzo, Spain 2009 (£19.50, Swig; Lay & Wheeler) One of the reasons for mencia's popularity is that it sits so well with the current preference for fresher reds: certainly the Pizarras, as well as Asda's vibrant Pájaro Rojo Bierzo 2013 or the vivid, spicy El Castro de Valtuille Mencia Joven 2013. It has a direct, racy quality similar to Beaujolais, and responds well to an hour or two in the fridge. But mencia is also capable of being made into more serious wines that improve with age: Dominio de Tares' old-vines bottling, for example, retains the cherry-freshness, but adds darker fruit, spicy oak and savoury, earthy bass notes.

Dominio do Bibei Lalama Ribeira Sacra, Spain 2010 (£19.95, Caviste; Berry Bros & Rudd) Although Bierzo has been the name most immediately associated with mencia so far, the rugged, remote Ribeira Sacra in Galicia is, for many, the region with the most potential. There's a pinot noir-like quality to the silky red fruit of Guimaro Mencia 2013, while Franck Massard Licis Mencia 2011 gives full rein to mencia's floral side. Both those qualities are also apparent in the gorgeous Lalama, where raspberry fruit is matched with elegant tannins, the mencia character shining through in a recipe that also includes garnacha and the local varieties mouraton and brancellao.