

Report: Spain's 2020 Wine Harvest

Multiple challenges along the way but optimism over quality as the vintage progressed



The year 2020 will stand out in the memory for Spanish growers and bodegas for two main challenges: one related directly to the vineyard – mildew; the second related to Covid-19 and its impact on every aspect of the working life of a wine producer from the vineyard through to marketing.

The weather brought many challenges over the year with very few regions getting off lightly.

It was a much wetter year, especially for coastal regions, and generous spring rains coincided with warmer temperatures than usual. This provided the ideal conditions for mildew which required intense work in the vineyard but ultimately this impacted more on yield than quality. Finally drier weather and higher summer temperatures saw mildew retreat.

Every stage of vine development took place earlier than usual and harvest dates were generally up to 14 days earlier compared to a typical year. A few days of rain favoured the last stages of the ripening period for many regions without disrupting the harvest. One exception to this was Ribera del Duero where rain caused frequent breaks in the harvest and difficult decisions over whether to pick or wait.

Given the difficult market for wine in both Spain's domestic market and abroad, authorities in some regions acted to avoid excessive stock. In Rioja yields were limited to 90% of the potential production and new plantings were put on hold.

So what kind of wines can we expect? Most winemakers describe a more restrained style in reds and whites with good freshness and lively fruit character and possibly more potential for ageing than the richer 2019 wines.

Spain's crop in 2020 (estimate): 43.2 million hectolitres, wine and must. The harvest was more generous than last year and close to the average of recent years. (Source: Observatorio Español del Mercado del Vino, www.oemv.es).

Around the regions:

• Galicia:



For growers in Rías Baixas

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017737418.html>) the spring period was particularly challenging. There was a lot of rain and spring temperatures were higher than usual which brought on early budding and provided ideal conditions for mildew and black rot. The problems began early, often catching growers by surprise and in some cases up to 50% of the crop was lost.

Eulogio Pomares at Bodegas Zárata

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/doing-business/exporters/exporter-detail/index.html?id=0015800000YPTsoAAH>) said: "Winter was not very cold and the first attacks came early, before flowering – we're more used to problems at a later date." Then it was all change: "The summer was dry, quite hot at times for this Atlantic region, and we had some concerns over the lack of water."



Discover Spanish Food&Wines Exporters in our map



(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/business/exporters/index.html>)

There was rain at the end of August, heavy rain: "We were worried about botrytis at that point but the rest of September was fine and we could harvest without interruption," he added.

"As we harvested quite early the wines have slightly lower alcohol compared to last year – 2019 was around half a degree higher and riper. I like the quality and the ripeness of 2020; wines are showing good balance. I think this vintage will be more for earlier drinking," he concludes.

In terms of yield, the total Rías Baixas harvest is slightly up on the modest 2019.

Monterrei (<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017737410.html>) recorded its highest crop to date thanks to favourable weather over late August and September. This allowed the harvest to take place at a steady pace and for each variety to reach optimum ripeness across white and red varieties.

The location of Ribeira Sacra

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017737419.html>)'s vineyards, typically on steep slopes and further inland, saved this region from the ravages of mildew that other regions experienced, at least in early spring. Appropriately titled "La Vendimia del Vertigo", the regional report states that the harvest yield was in line with expectations for Ribeira Sacra where red wines are the main focus, notably Mencía.

For inland Valdeorras

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017737452.html>), while yields were somewhat lower than 2019, there is excitement over quality. Godello ripened well with potential alcohol levels of 13-14° while acidity was a touch higher than recent years, all boding well for high quality wines which typically undergo ageing on the lees.

Rías Baixas: 34.5 million kg, almost exclusively Albariño
Monterrei: 5.7 million kg, mostly Godello and Treixadura
Ribeiro: 9.4 million kg
Ribeira Sacra: 5.2 million kg (Mencía 4.3 million kg)
Valdeorras: 5.5 million kg (Godello 3.5 million kg)

• Castilla y León:

For Bierzo (<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017737099.html>) stormy weather in June and July occasionally brought hail and there were outbreaks of mildew in some vineyards. Most significantly there was very hot weather in mid-July leading to an early fruitset, around two weeks earlier than 2019. By August 24th the harvest was already underway and continued through to mid-October.

Fine weather over the final stages of ripening resulted in high quality grapes with the 2020 wines expected to be "well-balanced with plenty of fruit and strong varietal profiles".

The 2020 vintage also sees a number of changes aiming to add diversity and recognise superior wine quality: the municipalities of Sobrado, Torre del Biero and Tereno will be indicated on DO Bierzo wine labels for the first time, the traditional varieties Estaladiña and Merenzao can now be used in winemaking and Bierzo's traditional light red 'Clarete' has also gained the stamp of approval.

Growers were satisfied with a more generous crop in Cigales

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017737107.html>) after modest yields due to the dry summer in 2019. As in the case of other regions, it took intensive work in the vineyards – treating the vines where required, ensuring air circulation to maintain vine health and green pruning - to ensure that grape quality was achieved at the time of harvest. Whites and rosados are expected to offer good fruit character and structure while Cigales reds are showing strong potential for oak ageing.

Ribera del Duero

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017737113.html>)'s harvest was particularly challenging. Rain forced pickers to break off at points from the beginning to the end which extended the harvest until the first week of November. This led to difficult choices over whether to pick early or wait in the hope of riper fruit or a bit of both... The region's broad range of soils and altitudes meant that some were more affected by adverse weather than others.

At the family-run Sei Soto at Quintanilla de Arriba (Roa de Duero) Javier Zaccagnini has known years with more extreme weather: "We had enough rain in the spring to keep the vines going during the hot months of the summer and we escaped spring frosts by just a few degrees. What was different in relation to recent years is that the summer was not excessively hot with only a week of high temperatures and that there was rain during the harvest." The rain during harvest was the key difference compared to other years and was "really heavy, over 80 litres in two days – and complicated things a lot".

A minority of bodegas harvested before the rains, including Sei Soto. “My son took a big risk in deciding to harvest before the rains... light rain would have been beneficial to the quality while heavy rains were not.” Zaccagnini described the quality of Sei Soto's grapes as “fantastic” and he has high hopes for the bodega's 2020 reds.

Others were convinced that it was worth waiting, at least for part of their harvest, and unusually cold weather over the harvest meant that there was no problem with rot. At Garmón Continental (Tutela de Duero) 40% of the vineyards had been harvested before the rains of 17-19th September according to Mariano García who has overseen many vintages in the region. After that rainy period the grapes were brought in from Anguix where the fruit was “fleshy and with great depth of flavour” and others including Moradillo de Roa all with “excellent ripeness”.

In terms of overall yield, Ribera del Duero's crop is the third largest in the region's history, more generous than the 2019 and with white varieties now part of the picture.



Moving west to Toro

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017737251.html>), the crop was considerably more generous than last year and over the average size of recent years for the red Tinta de Toro (a regional take on Tempranillo). This was thanks to higher rainfall and no major setbacks related to the weather over the spring period – there was no frost but, much like elsewhere, intense work was required in the vineyard to keep diseases at bay. Some stormy weather in May caused minor damage in some vineyards. Describing the challenge at the point of harvest at Bodegas Mauro (San Román), in mid November Mariano García said: “We wanted good aromatic ripeness and fresh fruit extraction. To achieve that, we picked early and gave the wines light extraction and short macerations”. Early signs were looking very promising with the young wines “showing elegance, finesse and great potential for ageing”, he concluded.

In neighbouring Rueda the focus turns almost entirely to the white variety Verdejo. At Bodegas Menade organic viticulture is now well established and the usual “strict control” was crucial during a particularly rainy spring. According to Marco Sanz yields here were fairly typical this year and Verdejo in the early stages of vinification showed good acidity and offering the potential for wines with structure and longevity.

Belondrade y Lurtón, La Seca, Jean Belondrade said that the amount of rain was unusual for the region and that it was critical to adapt to the conditions and to act in good time in their vineyards which are under organic viticulture. Summer temperatures were also quite high leading to an early start to harvest. He sees a more restrained style emerging after the “generous” character of the 2019 vintage. “The [2020] musts are impressively fresh with balanced alcohol and aromas. The wines remind me of the 2013 vintage, they have a more Atlantic style and good prospects for ageing”.

The 2020 vintage in Rueda

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017737118.html>) will see the first wines carrying the description Gran Vino de Rueda, a new category of wines from vineyards which are 30 or more years old. The move is designed to protect older vineyards and enhance the region's reputation for higher quality wines.

Bierzo: 10.8 million kg (Mencia 8.6 million kg)
Cigales: 8.2 million kg, mostly Tempranillo
León: 2.8 million, mostly Prieto Picudo
Ribera del Duero: 123 million kg (whites: 1.5 million kg including Albillo Mayor)
Rueda: 112.8 million kg (Verdejo 98.2 million kg)
Tierra del Vino de Zamora; 717.582 kg
Toro: 20.6 million kg (mostly Tinta de Toro)

• **The North:**

Navarra (<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017737496.html>) was spared the severe fungal diseases that struck other regions which contributed to the harvest being more generous than in 2019.

Adriana Ochoa at Bodegas Ochoa

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/doing-business/exporters/exporter-detail/index.html?id=0015800000YPLauAAH>) (Olite) said: "We didn't have much rain from April to October – and it was the same for most of the region – it was quite dry and hot. There wasn't much concern about disease but there were some outbreaks of mildew in June due to rain at the wrong time."

She was quite concerned over the speed of ripeness over the early summer but then it slowed down ahead of a prompt start to harvest on August 24th. With the exception of one very hot week in September temperatures were relatively cool over the harvest period with no problematic rain.

She believes that 2020 is a "strong year for traditional varieties" with "amazing, complex and aromatic Tempranillo" and "very bright Garnacha". By mid-November Ochoa's late-harvest Moscatel grapes were being picked in dry, cold weather with no botrytis in sight.

Rioja (<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017735543.html>) witnessed an extremely difficult year with adverse weather across the entire region and little respite until the second half of the vintage when cooler temperatures arrived.

María José López de Heredia describes probably one of the most difficult years in the history of her family bodega which dates back to 1877 in the Rioja Alta. As she explained: "The problems started in the spring with very strong and frequent storms – three of them with hail – which led to mildew which severely affected the quantity of the production – such 'perfect' weather for mildew hasn't been seen here since 1941!"

By mid-summer things were looking a lot better in the vineyard helped by the arrival of hotter weather. But this also accelerated growth, which was already quite rapid. She continued: "In the second week of September there was a second heatwave which caused raisining in vines which were very exposed to the sun – in areas where we'd done green pruning to ventilate and avoid mildew – so higher alcohol levels forced us to start picking very early on September 17th and that is very unusual for us."

Finally things looked up when night-time temperatures dropped considerably and there was some rain: "Normally rain isn't welcome during harvest but this year it helped to slow down the rate of the sugar concentration allowing very good phenolic development... the level and balance of acidity improved through harvest, especially in the grape varieties of longer cycle." She concluded: "Our harvest yield has been average – mildew caused damage during pollination but it didn't affect the berry once it had formed. Our harvest was good and in certain parcels very good with rich, aromatic fruit and with strong flavours."

At Bodegas Palacios (<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/doing-business/exporters/exporter-detail/index.html?id=0015800000YPUAnAAP>) in Álvaro in Rioja Oriental mildew set in after constant rain and warm spring temperatures led to high humidity. This left the team wrestling with the fungal pest in organic vineyards, a battle which they finally won. Álvaro Palacios said: "I've never known mildew so bad. We had to work very hard in the vineyard but we could work organically." By mid-June the rain had stopped and hot, dry conditions favoured ripening for various plots of Garnacha which is now grown almost exclusively here following a return to the area's traditional varieties. Palacios was pleased with 2020 harvest despite the difficulties: "We got really healthy fruit – the wines look amazing with great freshness... they are very concentrated with lots of flavour."

Navarra: 74 million kg

Rioja: 409.9 million kg (363.7 million kg red; 46.3 million kg white)

• Aragón:



Fortunes were quite mixed across the vineyards of Aragón in terms of yield with northern Somontano

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product->

detail/PRG2017736014.html)'s volumes hit by adverse weather far more than other areas. Here white varieties, including Gewürztraminer and Chardonnay weathered the storm while rain, spring frosts and early summer hail took their toll on red varieties including Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

Meanwhile in Campo de Borja

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017735983.html>) the flowering period was described as "exceptional and very even" across all varieties including the main grape – Garnacha – and boding well for decent final yields which were significantly higher than last year at the point of harvest.

Yields were also well up in Cariñena

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017736002.html>) this year while fruit quality was described as "excellent" for main varieties Garnacha, Tempranillo and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Calatayud: 12.5 million kg

Campo de Borja: 35.5 million kg

Cariñena: 91.8 million kg; 60% more than last year

Somontano: 15.2 million kg

• Vinos de Madrid and Castilla-La Mancha

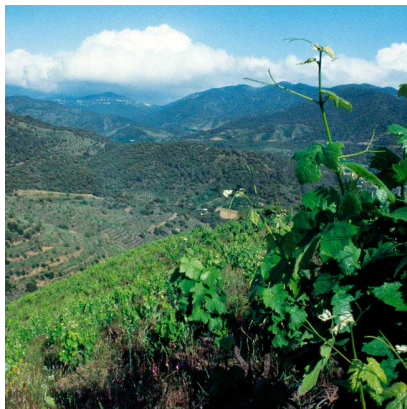
Spring temperatures were lower than other areas in Vinos de Madrid

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017737453.html>) and spring frosts damaged early varieties in some areas. But there was plenty of rain in the spring and again in August. There were lighter rains than usual and fresh temperatures over the harvest period and as a result the fruit showed well-balanced acidity and alcohol levels without excessive ripeness. In 2020 the DO expanded to incorporate 11 municipalities to the north of the capital within El Molar sub-zone. The main grape varieties for growers here are Garnacha for red wines and Malvar for whites and sparkling wines are part of the offering.

Meanwhile this year's harvest across Castilla-La Mancha is reported to be 23 million hectolitres (wine and must), slightly below the average of recent years and representing just over half of Spain's total for 2020.

Vinos de Madrid: 11 million kg (estimate)

• Catalonia and the South-East



More rain was welcome in the Catalan regions but the intensity took its toll. Falset in Montsant had 622mm of rain in 2020 compared to 194mm in 2019. Here and elsewhere mildew was a common problem and responsible for significant losses. It was the main cause of low yields in Montsant where the crop was the smallest to date while Priorat's crop was also significantly lower than 2019.

Fredi Torres is based at Gratallops in both Priorat and Montsant. "Montsant is flatter and the soils retain water more than those of

Priorat which is more protected. The conditions were worse for Montsant," he said. Torres described summer in the area as "perfect – temperatures were lower [than 2019] and water reserves helped. 2019 was a great vintage but 2020 is fresher, there is more acidity and really good balance. I think it will be better for ageing." Of the two leading grapes, Garnacha and Cariñena, the former responded better to the conditions while Cariñena was "more sensitive". "Garnacha is perfect for the extreme Mediterranean climate," he concluded.

For the wider DO Catalunya

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/subproducts/PRG2019824911.html>), yields were also modest after a series of challenges throughout the growing season. Mildew made life particularly difficult for organic production while early varieties in inland areas fell victim to spring frosts in some cases and the summer drought caused problems for vineyards with sandy soils and poor water retention. Yields across all red varieties were down significantly, especially Merlot and Tempranillo while white varieties fared better, especially local varieties such as Garnacha Blanca, Macabeo (Viura) and Parellada, a late variety which benefited from rainfall on 18-19 September.

Despite low yields, fruit quality was good with balanced alcohol and acidity and generous fruit character. The 2020 vintage also marked a first for the Xarel·lo Rosado grape variety which is now one of the wide variety of grapes grown in Catalunya.

For growers in Mayorca (DO Binissalem

(<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017736231.html>)) there was some concern over mildew due to rain in May and

June and fairly typical high temperatures at the end of June and July respectively led to a prompt start to the harvest with the local red variety Mantonegro representing almost half the crop this year.

In Valencia higher rainfall was welcome after the extremely dry conditions of recent years. There was favourable weather over the harvest period resulting in good yields, around 5% higher than 2019, and "exceptional quality".

The case was very similar for Jumilla where the local Monastrell grape, a late variety, was well-suited to the weather over the growing period. Here yields were around 15% up on 2019 which led to a higher proportion of high-yielding vineyards not making the grade for DO Jumilla (<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/subproducts/PRG2019824911.html>)wines this year. The quality of the grapes was described as "magnificent" – for many this harvest was the best for many years.

Catalunya: 32.3 million kg.

Montsant: 5.5 million kg

Priorat: 4.1 million kg

Binissalem (Mayorca): 1 million kg, 26% less than 2019. Local varieties such as the red Callet fared better.

Valencia: 70 million kg (estimate)

Jumilla: yields were generous; total crop figure unavailable for this report (see above)

• Jerez:

For Jerez (<https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spanishfoodwine/global/wine/do/product-detail/PRG2017735965.html>) the 2020 harvest was low-yielding and a little lower than last year which was also modest. This was due to a very dry autumn and winter before abundant spring rains. Here too growers had to work intensely in the vineyard against mildew and oidium. Vine development continued to advance rapidly in the early part of summer which featured "extremely hot weather" and it was noted that fruit ripeness could vary quite significantly, even in the same plot. The first Palomino grapes were gathered in the Macharnudo area on August 5th with cooler temperatures keeping alcohol to favourable levels as the month progressed.

Jerez: 53.4 million kg

Text: Patricia Langton