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# JUMILLA

## DIVERSE AND BURSTING WITH STYLE

by Gerry Dawes

Jumilla, a region whose powerful wines produced from the indigenous Monastrell grape have historically been used for blending, has now come into its own. No longer the rustic country bumpkin, Jumilla now produces wines that are finding a growing audience for fans of ripe, fruity, full-flavored wines that are reasonably priced and compare favorably to those from warm-country growing areas such as California and Australia.

Located in an arid mountain valley, some 50 miles inland from the Mediterranean Coast of Alicante, southwest of Valencia in the province of Murcia, Jumilla's 100,000-plus acres of vineyards are planted at altitudes that range from 1,300 to nearly 3,000 feet above sea level. Temperatures here can be extreme, soaring to more than 100 degrees on summer days and dropping to well below freezing in winter. Jumilla gets some 3,000 hours of sun per year and only about 16 inches of annual rainfall, but roots of traditional old vines burrow deep in search of moisture and now most modern vineyards are fed by drip irrigation. The brownish soil (with underlying chalk) and arid conditions in Jumilla are inhospitable to the phylloxera bug that devastated Europe in the late-19th century. So inhospitable that many old Monastrell vineyards in Jumilla are planted on *pie franco*, or ungrafted French rootstock. In contrast, the vast majority of vineyards in Europe had to be grafted long ago onto American, phylloxera-resistant rootstock.

But don't be fooled by the climatic conditions in Jumilla. Like many other regions in Spain (the second most

mountainous country in Europe), the secret behind making successful, balanced wines in areas that would seem to be too warm to make seriously good wines, is altitude. The vineyards' thermostats may be cranked up during the daylight hours in summer, but at night temperatures at these altitudes cool down dramatically. This allows the vines a good night's rest to buttress themselves for the coming day and is the secret behind Jumilla's emergence from near obscurity. The grapes get properly ripe, but still have enough acids because of the cool nights to carry the hefty weight of the wines they produce.

Monastrell is derived from an indigenous grape variety, sometimes called *Mataró* or *Murviedro* in Spain, but known to the rest of the world by the French name *Mourvèdre*. In Jumilla, Monastrell is the most important authorized grape variety and accounts for 90% of the wine produced there. To be labelled 'Monastrell,' a Jumilla wine must contain at least 85% of the variety. Other red varieties authorized in the Jumilla *denominación de origen (D.O.)* are *Garnacha Tintorera*, which makes a powerful, deeply colored blending wine; *Garnacha*, the great grape of Navarra, Aragón and Priorat; *Cencibel-Tempranillo*, the main grape of neighboring La Mancha; *Cabernet Sauvignon*; *Merlot*; the exceptionally promising French *Syrah*; and *Petit Verdot*, authorized since 2003, which also shows great promise (Casa de la Ermita makes an exceptional example).

Though white grapes are insignificant at this stage, these varieties are also authorized: *Airén* (widely planted in La Mancha); *Macabeo*, known as *Viura* in



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La Rioja; Pedro Ximénez of Montilla-Moriles fame; the ancient Mediterranean white variety, Malvasía; and Moscatel Grano Menudo (small berry Moscatel, an important grape of neighboring Alicante and Valencia). This last grape was approved in 2003, along with Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. While not yet officially approved, Viognier may have promise in Jumilla as well, though few bodegas make wines from it.

A number of Jumilla bodegas have had considerable success in the American market, most notably Bodegas Agapito Rico, which is widely distributed by Classical Wines of Seattle, WA [www.classicalwines.com](http://www.classicalwines.com). Agapito Rico's Carchelo Monastrell, a very reasonably-priced wine made from old vines Monastrell, blended with small amounts of Syrah and Merlot, has enjoyed steady sales for many years in the U.S. Carchelo Monastrell is an unoaked, bright, full-flavored, balanced wine with delightful ripe red fruit—plums, cherries, red currants—that is a good match for grilled meats, pizza, paella and pasta. Agapito Rico makes just over a thousand cases of Canalizo, an intense 100% Syrah wine that spends 18 months in oak and needs several years in bottle to fully develop. They also produce Allico Monastrell-Syrah, a powerhouse blend that is aged for ten months in French oak.

Mayoral, from Bodegas 1890 (founded in 1890), has also had considerable success in the U.S. with their balanced, richly flavored, inexpensive Jumilla wines. Wines from this bodega include the unoaked Mayoral, a blend of 60% Monastrell and 40% Tempranillo; a crianza (12 months in oak), which contains 70% Monastrell; and a reserva with Monastrell, Tempranillo and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon. They also make a Cabernet Sauvignon (100%), Syrah (100%), and Mayoral Selección (a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Monastrell and Tempranillo), all of which spend just four months in oak.

One of the most successful bodegas in Jumilla, Bodegas Bleda, produces the well-known Castillo de Jumilla brand and exports 85% of its production. These relatively inexpensive wines are well-made and show attractive, easy-drinking peppery, black currant, blackberry and chocolate flavors. All these well-made, balanced wines — even their bright, fruity rosado — are made with a minimum of 55%-60% Monastrell, 40% Tempranillo, and sometimes 5% Merlot. There is also a Castillo de Jumilla Monastrell (100%) and the first-rate Divus, made with 90-95% Monastrell and 5-10% Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot.

Finca Luzón is an impressive estate vineyard planted en espaldera (on wires), which is surrounded by stark, grey mountains. They produce well-made wines, including several Monastrell-based (50%) blends of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Tempranillo that are aged in new French and American oak. They also make a delicious Monastrell rosado; a rich, sweet 80% Monastrell Finca Luzón; Castillo de Luzón, a crianza (aged one year in oak) with 75% Monastrell; and their top-of-the-line Altos de Luzón, a blend of Monastrell from 50-year-old vines, Cabernet Sauvignon and Tempranillo.

Casa de la Ermita, another impressive small winery that overlooks a vast valley of vines, is drawing attention with their 100% Viognier; a young red that is a blend of Monastrell, Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah; a crianza with a predominance of Monastrell and Tempranillo, laced with Cabernet

Sauvignon; an organically farmed Ecológico Monastrell (100%); and a set of Monasterio de Santa Ana monovarietals — Merlot, Monastrell, and Syrah — all of which spend three months in oak. However, the Casa de la Ermita wine that is drawing attention from Spanish wine aficionados is their 100% Petit Verdot, aged 12 months in new American (75%) and French oak.

The Jumilla winery that has earned the most kudos from both the Spanish and international press is Julia Roch e Hijos Casa Castillo. Their success is based on some splendid old vines vineyards, some of which are well over 50 years old, planted on ungrafted French rootstock in soils that show pronounced terroir. Many of the Casa Castillo wines contain some of the best Monastrell in the Jumilla D.O. The Casa Castilla 2001, blend of 50% monastrell and 50% tempranillo, was a rich mélange of sweet blackberry, currant, chocolate and licorice with a graphite mineral finish. The Casa Castillo Monastrell (85%) was sweet and rich with blackberry and currant flavors. The Casa Castillo Crianza, a Monastrell with 10% Syrah, showed even more of those rich blackberry, currant, chocolate and licorice flavors, again laced with an intriguing mineral finish. Their Las Gravas, a concentrated blend of 70% Monastrell, 15% Cabernet Sauvignon and 15% Syrah, was a tannic wine crammed with cherry, currant and blackberry flavors. The now legendary Pie Franco, a 100% Monastrell wine made from vines planted in 1941 on ungrafted rootstock, is another towering powerhouse that is loaded with soft fruit and has an engaging silky finish. Casa Castillo also produces limited quantities of a top-notch, well-balanced, sweet, late harvest Moscatel de Grano Menudo.

Olivares makes the big, ripe Altos de la Hoya Monastrell table wines from ungrafted old vines. Their red table wines are intense and mineral-laced, but still a bit rustic. However, it is their Monastrell-based sweet wines that are some of the most exciting in the emerging genre of Spanish dessert wines. Olivares can't make these late harvest wines every year, but when they do the results are superb. Olivares Monastrell Dulce, made from low-yield, old vines fruit, is a deep, black wine with currants and exotic spices in the nose and rich, sweet blackberry, coffee and chocolate flavors on the palate. The Olivares Viejísimo 1930 is a very dry Fondillón, an unusual, compelling rancio wine with a cornucopia of flavors — coffee, tobacco, dates, dried citrus peel. But these magnificent, once nearly extinct wines from Murcia and Alicante are a subject deserving of an entire article to themselves.

Many of the better wines of Jumilla are exported. Indeed, some bodegas export 90% of their wines and new wineries like Hijos de Juan Gil with their new brand, Wrongo Dongo, made by an Australian winemaker, are almost entirely aimed at the American market. Aficionados of Spanish wines are discovering the joys of Jumilla wines, and, given the excellent price-quality ratio of many of these Monastrell-based wines, those who are looking for wines that deliver a lot of bang of their buck may find their nirvana in these flavor-packed wines.

**Gerry Dawes** was awarded Spain's prestigious Premio Nacional de Gastronomía (National Gastronomy Award) in 2003. He writes and speaks frequently on Spanish cheeses, wine and gastronomy. He was a finalist for the 2001 James Beard Foundation's Journalism Award for Best Magazine Writing on Wine.



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# Alicante



Located in the Autonomous Community of Valencia, down Spain's Mediterranean east coast, D.O. Alicante produces elegant warm country wines, predominantly dry reds from Monastrell and sweet whites from Moscatel. Vines were introduced to the area by the Phoenicians around 1000BC, and a further influx of vines and wine culture came with the Romans. The region has long benefitted from the manifold Phoenician-Roman gifts of wheat, oil, wine and amphorae.

Alicante is the driest Spanish wine region, with 300mm or so rainfall per year. The winters are short and the summers are long, hot and nearly rainless. High altitude, however, with its dramatic diurnal temperature range, facilitates retention of acidity and the ability to maintain relative delicacy, definition and finesse.

The Alicante D.O. of around 10,000 hectares (just 55 producers) is divided into two sub-regions: coastal La Marina, just inland from the area's popular beach towns such as Benidorm is home to Moscatel del Mar. Alicante subzone (northwest, inland from the capital, Alicante) is where the Monastrell is grown. The main red wine growing area is the Vinalopó valley at up to 700 metres' altitude. Crop limits are 9.5 tonnes/ha.

Alicante, along with Yecla and Jumilla (D.O.s further inland) is home to Monastrell (aka Mourvedre in Southern France, where a rather tougher derivative of the variety is grown). Yecla and Jumilla have tertiary soils yielding a sweet, strong, creamy Monastrell. Alicante has several advantages over these. Its poor quaternary soils, its freshening breezes from the sea during summer, and its overall mountainous nature promote fruit with depth of flavour, freshness and finesse at lower alcohol degree than its neighbours. Long, slow ripening, with harvest in mid-to-late October and slow, careful winery elaboration can yield Monastrell wines with great structure and freshness.

Grape varieties in production include:

White: Merseguera, Airen, Macabeo, Verdil, Chardonnay, Moscatel and others.

Red: Monastrell, Garnacha, Garnacha Tintoreira, Tempranillo, Bobal (blech!), Cabernet, Syrah and others.

Moscatel del Mar, or Moscatel Romano

Elsewhere known as: Muscat of Alexandria, Moscatel de Málaga, Gordo Blanco, Lexia, Moscatel Gordo, and Zibbibo. Moscatel Romano is the common name in the Levante, including D.O. Alicante, where you may also see it referred to as 'Moscatel del Mar' (as it is predominantly a coastal variety). Throughout history, this variety's affinity with the Mediterranean, combined with the importance of the coastline as a trade route, and the durability of such wines (thanks to their rich inner fortification via sugar), has made these Moscatels among history's most widely drunk and most important wines.

Monastrell

Known also as Mourvedre or Mataro, Monastrell is native to the south-east of Spain, in regions like Alicante, Jumilla and Yecla. Old plantings on poor-soiled slopes feature the meat, tar, berry, floral and muscular tannin typical of Mourvedre. It is rather a more successful straight varietal on home turf, however – often showing plentiful red/black berry juiciness which the variety rarely achieves elsewhere.

You will see plenty of skins and tannin in these wines. Their IPT (indication of total polyphenol) is in the 45-60 range, compared to Rioja at around 30). Monastrell has not long been held in high regard, even locally. Once seen (in large part, no doubt, due to the privations and perverse effects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on Spanish regional confidence, economy and outlook) as rustic, oxidative, short-lived and un-special, it is undergoing a significant renaissance. Vigour management is critical, as Monastrell can be cropped at up to 4kg/vine, yielding unexceptional wine. While some have taken an industrial approach to improving quality with technical yeasts, enzyme treatments and so on, reduction of yields is the first and best strategy.

It is rumoured that Monastrell was brought to the area from a mission against the Greeks in 12-13<sup>th</sup> centuries by Corona Aragon (the Aragonese king), who returned to Camp de Morvedre, near Valencia and from here it migrated to the southern Rhone, where it makes rather tougher wines.

### Fondillón

An unfortified local specialty wine style. For many years, the local wine, known simply as Alicante, was a radical style, now called Fondillón, a Monastrell-based rancio wine - purposely oxidized and very slightly sweet. It had nearly become extinct but the style has been preserved by half a dozen small family bodegas, particularly Primitivo Quiles. Enrique Mendoza have a new Fondillón solera in development right now. Fondillón is unfortified and barrel-aged at least ten years and often more than twenty before release.

## YECLA

Yecla, once a farming town and today a furniture-making centre, is surrounded by nearly 13,500 hectares of vineyards. Of these, one-third are classified for making DO wines.

The quiet, slow revolution, pioneered by small private wineries and cooperatives here in the mid-1980s, has allowed the area to start producing red wines made with temperature-controlled stainless steel equipment. Thanks to this special effort, those fortified wines of the past have now become much more balanced, and have gained enormously in aromatic complexity.

The low yields give concentrated wines with great potential. The number of vineyards registered with the Regulatory Council is steadily increasing, a clear indication of local producers' interest in quality. Some wines have already won their place among the most prestigious in the Spanish winemaking world, and one of Spain's largest cooperatives is located here.

Although there are no subzones, the Campo Arriba district is outstanding for producing grapes with a higher extract than other DO areas.