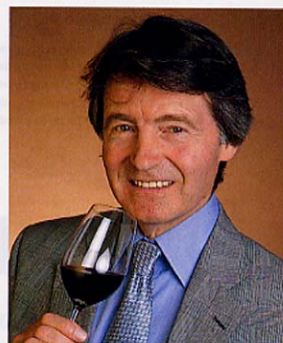


STEVEN SPURRIER

Superior Spanish wines



PHOTOGRAPH © DEBBIE RYAN

DESPITE ITS LOWLY status at seventh place in the wine exporter's league to Britain, I am of the opinion that Spain is the most interesting wine country in the world at this moment. In volume terms, even Torres' ubiquitous Sangre de Toro is no Jacob's Creek, Blossom Hill or Kumala, so Spain may not make much progress in the UK's brand-dominated market. And yet her top-of-the-range wines deserve close attention – they are less influenced by international varieties than Italy, more consistent than most wines from France and avoid the high, food-unfriendly

alcohol of much of the New World. They are not copying, but creating and – if The Spanish Wine Experience tasting I recently attended in Madrid is anything to go by – they are strongly positioned from every point of view.

The two grandest and most central hotels in Madrid are the Palace and the Ritz, so when an online/mail order group called *TodoVino* contacted me to suggest that I stay in the former and attend their annual tasting at the latter, the invitation was easy to accept.

TodoVino is a young company that has been very successful by tapping into

the current passion of well-off Spaniards for their country's wines. Each year the company brings out *La Guía*, a handsome boxed hardback book of over 1,000 pages covering around 650 wines that they have chosen from thousands more, complete with labels, detailed historical and technical data, tasting notes and drink-by dates. The best of these – 240 in the 2004 guide – are awarded red seals of approval and it is those that receive three seals (compared with Gambero Rosso's *Tre Bicchieri*, but less influenced by global winemaking) that are featured at the annual tasting in

SPURRIER'S CHOICE

BEST OLD WORLD WHITE

■ **Château des Rontets, Pierrefolle, £16.99**
Pouilly-Fuissé, France 2002

From a small vineyard of 30-year-old vines, farmed and vinified organically, this is one of the finest Pouilly-Fuissés I've ever tasted. Superb oak fermentation puts a sheen of buttery Côte d'Or class over the ripe, complex, long Mâconnais fruit. Stunning for up to five years.

Wai



BEST OLD WORLD RED

■ **Prieler, Ried Goldberg, £25**
Blaufränkisch, Austria 2000

This was, for me, the stand-out from 12 excellent Austrian red wines tasted in September. The Prieler family, in Burgenland, have produced a deep-coloured wine with Pinot Noir hints, whose terrific texture and weight from time in new French oak complements the pure vineyard quality.

FWW



BEST NEW WORLD WHITE

■ **Cape Point, Semillon, £17**
South Africa 2003

From a tiny vineyard at Fish Hoek, South Africa's most southern region, comes this lively Semillon, whose white pepper and dry spice nose is lifted with 11% elderflower Sauvignon. More wines like this and Australia will have to look over its Semillon shoulder.

Yeo



BEST NEW WORLD RED

■ **Swartland, Columella, £40**
South Africa 2001

Mostly very old-vine Syrah with a little Mourvèdre, this has a dense, almost black colour yet a marvellous freshness that sets it apart from overripe, raisiny blockbusters, and superb Chave Hermitage-like purity of extraction. A cult wine – the label is in Latin – and deservedly so.

Wai



BEST SPARKLING WINE

■ **Veuve Clicquot, Rich Reserve, £41.95**
France 1998

This blend of 58% Pinot Noir, 31% Chardonnay and 11% Pinot Meunier has a nose of white peaches and dried apricots, preceding an exotic, creamy palate where Champagne's natural acidity provides the perfect foil to the added richness from 28 g/l of sugar added at disgorgement.

Har



BEST FORTIFIED WINE

■ **Vos, Valdespino, Oloroso, £11.99**
Solera, Spain 1842 (half)

A Very Old Sherry that has to be tasted to be believed, this has a brown amber colour with green rancio tints, concentrated old oak nose, varnishy and ethereal, superbly nutty length and a tight acidity despite the richness. A truly great wine.

Wai

