

Vintage report for Spain 2015

A hot summer influences the harvest for the Spanish wine regions

Across Spain the weather pattern was remarkably similar with temperatures rising at the end of June, a very hot July and then relief for the vineyards as cooler weather came in August. Harvest dates were generally a little earlier than usual and most regions were able to bring in the fruit in good weather.

Favourable weather generally kept vineyard diseases at bay in 2015 however intense heat brings different challenges and how the vines coped with it depended on many factors including altitude, vine age, exposure, soil type and grape variety.

There is plenty of talk of high quality from this vintage – whites with intense flavours and aromas and reds with great complexity and good ageing potential.

Industry forecast for Spain's 2015 harvest: 40-42 million hl.

This report of Spain's 2015 harvest is divided into the following regional sections:

1. Galicia: Rías Baixas, Monterrei, Ribeiro, Ribeira Sacra and Valdeorras
2. The Duero Valley and the north-west: Ribera del Duero, Toro, Rueda, Bierzo, Cigales and Tierra de León
3. The north: Rioja, Navarra and the Basque Country
4. Aragón: Campo de Borja, Calatayud, Cariñena and Somontano
5. North-central regions: La Mancha and Vinos de Madrid
6. Catalonia, Majorca and the south-east
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Galicia

DO Rías Baixas

The growing season was far from typical in the coastal DO of Rías Baixas: the winter period saw less rain than in a typical year, spring followed suit and mild temperatures in the first two weeks of March resulted in an early budbreak starting in Condado do Tea and O Rosal. More warm weather and gentle winds led to a good flowering period and expectations rose among growers for a healthy crop.

After an unusually dry and sunny early summer, temperatures became fresher in the run-up to harvest and some rain was welcome in the second half of August.

By early September, with sunny weather and temperatures in the low 20s, thoughts were turning towards harvest dates. The weather forecast predicted unsettled weather and on 15th September a 36 hour storm blew in from the Atlantic.

Andrew McCarthy at Bodegas Castro Martin (Salnés Valley) took the decision to pick most of the bodega's fruit before the storm, fearing that grapes would be more diluted after it together with the risk of rot. "We started picking, quickly, on 10th September and 90% of our fruit was in by the time the storm hit. With one more week, I think we would have been talking about the perfect harvest." McCarthy sees quite a difference between the wine made from fruit picked before the storm and after the storm, the latter being "more watery".

At Bodegas Fillaboa (Condado do Tea), the approach was similar and the opinions are shared. Here picking of the "best parcels" started on September 5th and fruit harvested ahead of the storm is described by enologist Isabel Salgado as "superb" with high acidity and 12.5° potential alcohol. Harvest resumed on Sept 17th and she also notes a difference in the wine made from fruit picked later which is "a bit more diluted with lower acidity and sugars". She concludes: "It's been a very strange year, totally atypical, but the harvest was much easier than in 2014".

2015: 31.9 million kg 2014: 24.2 million kg

DO Monterrei

The climatic conditions were similarly atypical in DO Monterrei. Less rain throughout the growing season favoured grape quality and resulted in the harvest starting five days earlier than last year. A combination of fresh night-time temperatures and dry conditions resulted in smaller berries with intense flavour and aromas.

This year 61 growers joined the DO which, along with favourable weather, explains a much higher crop, up 67.6% in 2015:

2015: 4.7 million kg 2014: 2.8 million kg

White varieties: 3.2 million kg (mostly Godello and Treixadura)

Red varieties: 1.5 million kg (mostly Mencía)

DO Ribeiro

Everything points to an outstanding year for DO Ribeiro, which focuses on white blends made from Albariño, Treixadura and Torrontés. Mild weather resulted in the growing season starting earlier than usual and while summer temperatures were higher than usual, especially in July, cool nights favoured the development of aromas and acidity in grapes, according to Pablo Vidal Rodríguez, technical director at the Consejo Regulador. He adds: "Scarce rainfall kept disease down so we didn't need to treat the vines. We could also approach the vintage calmly and choose the ideal time to harvest the grapes. In August and September the temperatures were cooler and there was just enough rain to allow the vines to reach optimum ripeness retaining the desired freshness and aromas – the balanced Atlantic character that we look for in our wines." The harvest started 10 days earlier than usual, on August 28th, and was complete by October 2nd. He concludes: "The wines are showing fabulous quality: they are elegant with complex aromas and ripe fruit; this could be one of the best years for quite some time."

Xose Luis Sebio, enologist at Coto Gomariz, is very pleased with the harvest this year. He talks of "exceptionally good phenolic ripeness, alcohol levels that are not too high, complex aromas and high acidity thanks to cooler temperatures in August and chilly September nights." He adds that occasionally grapes were a little dehydrated and vine development slowed on lighter soils until the September rains came." Overall he agrees that 2015 will be memorable year and possibly similar to 2004.

The size of this year's crop reflects a typical year and follows smaller yields in 2014 and 2013.

2015: 14.1 million kg (white varieties: 13.2 MKG) 2014: 11.4 million kg

DO Ribeira Sacra

Harvest started as early as August 28th for some bodegas in Ribeira Sacra and continued until mid-October for this region where red grapes are the focus and notably Mencía. Grapes were picked in favourable conditions with only light rain at times resulting in a generous crop and high fruit quality.

2015: 6.2 million kg (Mencía dominates; others include Brancellao and Merenzao)

2014: 4.8 million kg

DO Valdeorras

Moving inland to Valdeorras there is also talk of an excellent vintage despite some concerns during the very hot summer spell.

After a typically cold winter there was plenty of spring rain and no frost with mild weather allowing the growing season to get off to a good start. Then the weather became more challenging as Jorge Mazaira, technical director at the Consejo explains: “Summer was hot, sometimes too hot and dry, which made us worried as the bunches were looking small. But in the first week of September there was heavy rain however it didn’t damage the fruit and helped the grapes to ripen.”

Harvest started earlier than it has done for many years for Godeval Bodegas due to the hot, dry summer – by August 24th the Godello grapes were coming in. “The grapes were small but a few days of rain helped the last stages of development. The wines are showing typical Godello character,” said enologist José Luis Bartolomé.

2015: 6.6 million kg. Godello and Mencía account for around 75% of the crop this year.

2014: 6.4 million kg.

The Duero Valley and the north-west

DO Ribera del Duero

For Ribera del Duero, it was the hottest and driest year for decades and this has been the most influential factor for both yield and grape quality. There were some isolated incidences of spring frost and hail while a combination of wind and heavy rain caused issues in some vineyards at budbreak.

As a result of the dry conditions, harvest took place around a week earlier than usual with minimal interruption due to favourable weather. “Vineyards planted on clay soils with north-facing exposures and located at higher altitude were picked later and benefited from a more gradual and even ripening process,” notes Vicente Marco, the region’s technical director.

He adds: “Berry sizes have been smaller than usual and this bodes well for aged wines. Potential alcohol levels were quite high, but the fruit showed good acidity with generous colour and tannins.”

Peter Sisseck at Dominio de Pingus has some concern over the dry conditions which, he says, “puts a lot of importance on the age of the vineyards and where they are planted... deep rooted, well-balanced vines did best of course”. He adds: “I expect 2015 to be a year where again the region’s wines will be very varied. Some wines will be truly great.”

Others are very enthusiastic about prospects for Ribera del Duero. Torres reports “excellent quality in the grapes with optimum ripeness, great concentration in the musts though significantly lower yields this year” and “extraordinary quality” from the older vines.

Julio Sáenz, head enologist for La Rioja Alta group (Áster) believes that 2015 could be one of the best vintages in the history of the DO and sees “an excellent vintage” based on wines with great balance, phenolic ripeness and good typicity of both the grape and the region.

2015: 88 million kg

DO Toro

It was an exceptionally dry year for Toro: just 127mm of rain fell from October 2014 to March 2015 compared to the 199mm average of the last decade. There was little rain during flowering and over the summer with the exception of some storms in August.

Yields were well down on 2014 in view of the dry conditions but there was an almost complete absence of fungal disease. Small bunches generally yielded excellent quality and concentrated flavours and high phenolic ripeness according to the region’s authorities.

2015: 18 million kg

DO Rueda

High temperatures in June and July and the correspondingly dry conditions in the vineyards have resulted in a more modest crop for Rueda this year. Berry sizes were smaller and the average weight of bunches was lower than recent years, especially for Verdejo. But this bodes well for the character of the wines according to Jesús Díez de Íscar, technical director for DO Rueda who believes that “the wines will generally have more structure thanks to more concentration in the fruit. Hopefully Verdejo will show its strong personality”.

2015: 89 million kg, 9.4% less than 2014; Verdejo accounts for 85% of the crop in 2015

DO Bierzo

The harvest report for Bierzo predicts wines of “magnificent quality” with good complexity and ageing capacity from 2015. Harvest started a little earlier than usual due to the hot summer – picking started on August 22nd for Godello and just a few days later. Around 65mm of rain between September 15th and 16th helped some vineyards where the grapes had not reached optimum ripeness. Alcohol levels will be slightly higher than in 2014 on the whole.

2015: 14.6 million kg (Mencía, 11 million kg)

DO Cigales

Harvest started on September 11th with the first white and red grapes for white and rosé wines. Towards the end of September red (Tempranillo) grapes were picked for red wines. Here too berry sizes and bunches were smaller than usual due to the dry summer but high quality wines are expected.

2015: 7.5 million kg 2014: 8.2 million kg

DO Tierra de León

The growing season advanced by 10-15 days compared to last year in Tierra de León. After a very hot July temperatures were more moderate allowing for gradual ripening in the lead up to harvest. Favourable weather during harvest enabled growers to choose the best time to pick for whites, rosé and red wines. (Red varieties Prieto Picudo and Mencía are the main grapes for the region).

2015: 4 million kg

Aragón

DO Campo de Borja

Generous winter rains replenished the water reserves in Campo de Borja and provided the vines, especially those at higher altitude, with sufficient moisture for the entire growing season. Weather conditions were generally favourable with no serious incidences of spring frost or hail. Prospects for the region's main grape – Garnacha – looked good after an excellent flowering period (critical for this variety) in May and June. Indeed the mild weather at this point favoured all varieties. Hot summer temperatures led to harvest starting early – Moscatel grapes were picked from August 14th - and continued gradually as low rainfall and favourable weather allowed the vines to achieve well balanced ripeness. The last Garnacha grapes were picked by mid-November.

Incidences of mildew, oidium or botrytis were few and far between thanks to the dry weather. Viticulturalists are also winning their battle against the European grapevine moth thanks to a programme which has started across 2,700 hectares in the DO and is likely to be extended.

This year's crop is one of the highest in recent years with all varieties having performed well. (The region focuses on red varieties: Garnacha (45%), Tempranillo, Syrah, Cabernet and Merlot mainly; whites include Macabeo, Moscatel and Chardonnay).

2015: 38.4 million kg 2014: 29.9 million kg

DO Calatayud

The crop has also been more generous than last year in Calatayud despite a relatively dry winter and spring. A “spectacular” flowering period and a good budbreak followed for most varieties – notably Garnacha, Tempranillo and Syrah. The early summer featured high temperatures during the day and night. By mid-August it was cooler and occasional storms brought much needed rain for the vineyards at this point and in early October.

Grapes ripened at a steady pace and at the point of harvest bunches were healthy and loose with medium sized berries promising wines with good colour, structure, plenty of tannin and aroma.

As in most years the harvest was getting under way by Sept 21st. Given that Calatayud’s vineyards are located at high altitude and that Garnacha has a long ripening cycle, this variety was harvested from early October through to the first week of November.

2015: 13 million kg 2014: 11.4 million kg

DO Cariñena

Early spring temperatures were low in Cariñena, but not cold enough for frost, and rainfall was less than usual. The first burst of hot weather came in late May allowing excellent flowering across all varieties and notably for Garnacha and Merlot. Although summer temperatures were very high, reaching 40°C or even more, there was also reasonable rain allowing for adequate canopy growth and steady ripening. A problem-free harvest lasted for two months ending on October 30th with fruit quality described generally as “very good”.

2015: 109 million kg, 27.95% more than in 2014.

DO Somontano

The weather pattern was atypical for Somontano and kept wine producers on their toes right to the end of harvest. Waves of “African heat” in the early summer advanced vine development but then vines shut down due to the lack of water. Rain finally came and continued during the harvest which required considerable effort to ensure that each variety and vineyard had reached optimum ripeness. Producers have been rewarded with rich flavours and great complexity with each variety showing plenty of character. (Red varieties account for 73% led by Cabernet and Merlot followed by Tempranillo, Syrah, Garnacha, Moristel, Parraleta and Pinot Noir. Chardonnay and Gewürztraminer are the leading white varieties).

2015: 18 million kg 2014: 15 million kg

The north: Rioja, Navarra and the Basque Country

DOCa Rioja

This year was very different in Rioja. Prompted by a hot summer and rain in September, picking started in some areas in mid-September and the harvest was complete by October 13th. In a typical year it starts in the earlier eastern areas and continues gradually over two months ending in the highest altitudes.

While the early summer was hot, temperatures were more moderate from mid-July with September's daytime temperature reaching a comfortable 22-24°C accompanied by fresh nights. Drier and sunny weather from the end of September was particularly favourable for vineyards which had not yet been harvested. The grapes harvested later were often of a higher calibre with potential for high quality wines.

According to the region's Consejo Regulador "Quality was particularly outstanding in vineyards located in cooler areas with moderate vigour and limited production, often yielding considerably less than the maximum allowable kg/ha rates." Lower berry weight due to a dry spell during the last part of the growing cycle also had a very positive impact with a better skin-to-pulp ratio – a key quality factor." Alcohol levels are slightly higher than those of an average year.

Jorge Muga of Bodegas Muga (Rioja Alta) is very satisfied with this year's harvest for both red and white wines and particularly for fruit from older vineyards which "ripened perfectly" He describes his young wines as "elegant, with lots of structure and good balance" and reminiscent of the excellent 2005 vintage. "Usually heat destroys acidity but this vintage shows good acidity and ripeness," he concludes.



Some adverse weather at the point of flowering means that the yields were on the low side for the Rioja Alta area.

The team at Bodegas Remírez de Ganuza (Samaniego, Alavesa) was particularly pleased with fruit from vines at 600m and Graciano and Garnacha at 400m. Luis Alberto Martínez sees a "Mediterranean style, similar to 2003". "The best fruit is excellent," he concludes.

At Barón de Ley in the Rioja Baja 2015 is described a "record vintage" in both quality and quantity and reminiscent of 2001 or 2011 according to Mayte Calvo, enologist.

How did Garnacha and the heat-loving Graciano fare? "Graciano ripened particularly well this year giving us the possibility of making some great wines both as a varietal and as a blend with Tempranillo. This variety – a later ripening variety – benefitted from the favourable weather that we had – especially in September."

As for Garnacha: “Due to the heat, Garnacha is showing higher alcohol levels that in previous years but that gives it a valuable role in blends with Tempranillo.”

2015: 427 million kg approved for winemaking

DO Navarra

Harvest in Navarra started in the warmer Ribera Baja area in late August, a little earlier than usual and lasted around two months as is the norm. It started with earlier ripening whites such as Chardonnay, Viura and Sauvignon Blanc followed by reds – Pinot Noir, Merlot, Tempranillo, Cabernet, Mazuelo, Graciano, Syrah and Garnacha.

By early November just a few parcels of late-harvest Moscatel de Grano Menudo were still on the vine. The region’s harvest report describes the harvest as “exceptional” with cool but sunny weather in September proving to be particularly beneficial for the final stages of ripening. The mood in the region is decidedly upbeat as regards both quality and quantity for the wide range of grape varieties grown in the DO.

2015: 84 million kg, 10% up on 2014

The Basque Country: Chacolí wines

A very damp spring and early summer didn’t bode well for harvest prospects in the coastal Guetaria region, according to Iñaki Txueka at Txomin Etxaniz Txakoli. The team had to work hard in the vineyard, deleafing by hand to allow good air circulation and exposure to the sun. But a “fantastic summer” resulted in a much better harvest than expected. Wines will be light (11°), very typical and characteristic of the grape and region, says Txueka.

Garikoitz Rios at Bodegas Itsamendi (Vizcaya) also found this year challenging, especially the unsettled weather in September with lower temperatures and more rain than usual. He describes the bodega’s fruit quality as “slightly inferior to 2014” but with some “very interesting parcels, especially from vineyards nearer the coast”. Alcohol levels are a little lower than last year (12-12.5° vs 12.5-13° in 2014) for Itsamendi’s young Chacolí wines. Most producers in the region picked early to avoid botrytis so 11.5-12° will be more typical this year, says Rios.

DO Chacolí de Vizcaya 2015: 2.5 million kg; 13% more than 2014

North-central regions: La Mancha and Vinos de Madrid

DO La Mancha

The crop is slightly lower than usual in La Mancha but the dry conditions resulted in “very healthy grapes”. Whites such as Chardonnay, Moscatel and Sauvignon Blanc show particularly strong aromas while Tempranillo has performed particularly well for red varieties. Exact quantities were not yet available from the authorities.

DO Vinos de Madrid

The crop was healthy for the vineyards to the south of the capital for a variety of grapes including Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Garnacha and Syrah and the white variety Albillo. Most varieties showed better balance between acidity and sugar than usual.

2015: 15 million kg

Catalonia, Majorca and the south-east

DO Penedès

The consejo regulador in Penedès reports higher quality in 2015 compared to last year and a modest decrease in the overall volume of 3.3%. Alcohol levels are around half a degree higher for all varieties: Xarello wines are 11.5°, Chardonnay 12°, and Macabeo 10.7° while for reds: Tempranillo wines are 12°, Merlot 13.5° and Cabernet Sauvignon 13.9°. Overall quality is described as “excellent”.

DOCa Priorat

Generous spring rains helped to offset the hot summer in Priorat. The harvest report from Torres states: “The start of summer was very hot with extremely high temperatures in June. July and August were also very hot and dry however rain at the end of August and early September alleviated the drought ahead of the harvest. From September 10th there was no significant rain until the end of the harvest.”

It continues: “The climatic conditions of 2015 have favoured the health of the grapes which was excellent – there was very good phenolic ripeness, especially in the cooler areas, and a slightly lower yield. On the other hand, the excessive heat in June and July may mean that

phenolic ripeness was affected in vineyards with high sun exposure including those in Bellmunt or El Molar, but not to a significant extent.” Torres sees great potential for ageing in its Priorat wines from 2015.”

The 2015 harvest is one of the largest of recent years:

2015: 6.3 million kg 2014: 5.9 million kg

DO Catalunya

Initial expectations were for a low crop, possibly 30% down on last year, due to spring frosts in early April, some isolated cases of hail and, like nearly everywhere, a very hot early summer. Fortunately there was some rain in late July and August ahead of harvest which started 10-15 days earlier than usual. Fruit was generally in excellent condition with good sugar levels but acidity levels may be a little low in some wines.

2015: 50.9 million kg, 12.7% more than 2014

DO Binissalem-Mallorca

Here too low rainfall and high temperatures will be remembered in 2015. In mid-August rain arrived relieving the drought and allowing the growing season to progress. Harvest started on August 7th with Chardonnay, followed by the main reds – Manto Negro and Moll - and ending on October 6th with Gorgollassa. A “very good” vintage is expected.

2015: 2 million kg (around 15% more than in 2014).

DO Utiel-Requena

There was adequate rain over the winter period in Utiel-Requena which came as a relief after the extremely dry conditions of 2014. This was followed by particularly high temperatures in both spring and summer – May temperatures hit 40°C at times. A small amount of the crop was lost due to hail storms in May, July and September in the north-east and centre of the region. Other areas to the north-west and west experienced milder and more stable weather and as a result some of the best “exceptional” fruit was harvested in these areas.

The rainfall at the beginning of September swelled bunches and production levels. Reporting back from growers in the region, Bruno Murciano of London-based De Vinos says: “Bobal, which behaves like a camel, absorbed a lot of water which increased berry size but diluted acidity and concentration. Once again the quality of old (bush vine) vineyards with poor soils was superior to the mediocre young trellised vines.”

2015: 189 million kg 2014: 153 million kg

DO Jumilla

Harvest started at the end of August for earlier ripening varieties – whites along with Syrah and Merlot – with Monastrell, the region’s main grape, following from mid-September. Incidences of disease were few and far between enabling growers to keep treatments to a minimum. As in Utiel-Requena hail was an issue and largely responsible for the total yield falling below an average year. The grapes showed good balance and quality.



2015: 80 million kg, slightly lower than a typical year

DO Jerez

The outcome for the harvest in Jerez is very positive thanks to favourable weather throughout the year. There was ample and even rain over the winter period allowing the region’s typical albariza soils to gradually absorb water and build up reserves ahead of the summer growing season. Here too it was hotter than usual bringing the start of harvest forward to August 3rd. Cooler temperatures during the second half of August allowed grapes to ripen at a more gradual pace favouring balanced acidity and sugar in the fruit. The Levant wind was, unusually, almost absent during this period which was another bonus for harvest conditions and fruit quality. The crop is more generous than expected with healthy fruit of high calibre.

2015: 76.3 million kg, 14% more than 2014

(Patricia Langton, January 2016)