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Wines of Spain – 1

History. The abundance of native grape varieties fostered an early start to viticulture with evidence that grapes were first cultivated sometime between 4000 and 3000 BC, long before the wine-growing culture of the Phoenicians founded the trading post of Cádiz around 1100 BC. Following the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians introduced new advances to the region. Carthage would wage a series of wars with the emerging Roman Republic that would lead to the Roman conquest of the Spanish mainland, known as Hispania.

From Roman Rule to the Reconquista. Under Roman rule, Spanish wine was widely exported and traded throughout the Roman empire. The two largest wine producing regions at the time were modern day Tarragona in the north and modern day Andalusia in the south. During this period more Spanish wine was exported into Gaul than Italian wine, with amphorae being found in ruins of Roman settlements in Normandy, the Loire Valley, Brittany, Provence and Bordeaux. The quality of Spanish wine during Roman times was varied, with Pliny the Elder and Martial noting the high quality associated with some wines while Ovid noting that one Spanish wine sold in Rome was merely good for getting your mistress drunk.

Following the decline of the Roman Empire, Spain was invaded by various barbaric tribes—including the Suebi and the Visigoths. Little is known about progress of viticulture and winemaking during this period, but there is evidence that some viable form of wine industry was present when the Moors conquered the land during the early 8th century AD. While the Moors were Muslim and subjected to Islamic dietary laws that forbid the use of alcohol, the Moorish rulers held an ambiguous stance on wine and winemaking during their rule. Several caliphs and emirs owned vineyards and drank wine.

While there were laws written that outlawed the sale of wine, it was included on lists of items that were subject to taxation in Moorish territories. The Spanish Reconquista reopened the possibility of exporting Spanish wine. Bilbao emerged as a large trading port; introducing Spanish wines to the English wine markets in Bristol, London, and Southampton. The quality of some of these exported Spanish wines appears to have been high. In 1364, the court of Edward III established the maximum price of wine sold in England with the Spanish wines being priced at the same level as wines from Gascony and higher than those from La Rochelle. The full bodied and high alcohol in most Spanish wines made them favored blending partners for the "weaker" wines from the cooler climate regions of France and Germany though there were laws that explicitly outlawed this practice.

Colonization of the New World. After the Spanish Reconquista, Christopher Columbus discovered the New World under the sponsorship of the Spanish crown. This opened up a new export market as well as new opportunity for wine production. Spanish missionaries and conquistadors brought European grape vines with them as they colonized the new lands. During this period Spanish exports to England began to wane as Spanish-English relations steadily deteriorated following the divorce of Henry VIII of England from his Spanish wife Catherine of Aragon. English merchants from the Sherry producing regions of Jerez and Sanlúcar de Barrameda as well as Málaga fled the area due to the fear of the Spanish Inquisition.

The defeat of the Spanish Armada by Elizabeth I of England greatly reduced the strength of the Spanish navy and contributed to the country's debt incurred during the reign of Philip II. Spain became more dependent on the income from its Spanish colonies, including the exportation of Spanish wine to the Americas. The emergence of growing wine industries in Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Argentina were a threat to this income with Philip III and successive monarchs issuing decrees and declarations ordering the uprooting of New World vineyards and halting the production of wine by the colonies. In some countries, like Chile, these orders were largely ignored but in other regions, like Argentina, they served to stunt growth and development till they gained independence from Spanish rule.

Source: Adapted from Wikipedia