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THE POUR

Txakolina, a Tongue-Twisting Name for Simple Pleasure



Denis Doyle for The New York Times

Workers trim grapevines at the Ameztot Txakolina vineyard in Getaria, Spain. [More Photos »](#)

By ERIC ASIMOV

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Correction Appended

GETARIA, Spain

Multimedia



Two Basque Country Vineyards

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 Denis Doyle for The New York Times
 Basque wines at the Uriondo vineyard in Zaratamo, Spain. [More Photos »](#)

Basque country, they drink it year-round. They drink it with meat, too. That's the culture."

The vast proportion of Txakolina is consumed in Basque country. You find it virtually nowhere else in Spain, except in Basque restaurants, and very little is exported around the world, with one major exception: the United States.

Surprisingly, given its tongue-twisting name, this wine — made from virtually unknown grapes in a light, simple, low-alcohol style — is becoming more and more popular in the

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United States. As recently as 2001, barely 1,000 cases, or 12,000 bottles, of Txakolina were exported to the United States, according to Wines From Spain, a trade organization. By 2006, that figure had shot up to 76,000 bottles, and by 2009, it was more than 111,000 bottles. Almost all of it is drunk in the summer months, mostly in restaurants where enthusiastic sommeliers preach the culinary benefits of zesty, high-acid whites.

"They're simple, they're fresh, they're easy, and I think that people are starved for something like that," said André Tamers of De Maison Selections, the leading American importer of Txakolina.

Yet, as with so many things Basque, Txakolina is nowhere near as simple as it may seem, beginning with the identity of the wine itself. In Basque it is mostly rendered as Txakolina (pronounced chock-oh-LEE-nah), but almost as often it shows up as Txakoli (CHOCK-oh-lee). Sometimes you'll see both words on the same wine label. You might even see it referred to by its Castilian guise, Chacolí.

The fresh, lightly fizzy wine made in the Getaria region of northern Spain — the appellation is Getariako Txakolina — is the most familiar expression, but other Txakolinas are made as well, all worth exploring. In the neighboring appellation of Bizkaiko Txakolina, centered on Bilbao, the wines are less fizzy and a bit fuller and rounder. Bizkaiko Txakolina has many variations, even a little bit of delicious red, made by Doniene Gorrondona, from vines more than 100 years old in the town of Bakio. A third, tiny appellation, Arabako Txakolina, was established in 2003 in the inland region around Álava.

But it is the lightly carbonated Getariako Txakolina that forms the impression many people have of the wine. Txomin Etxaniz, officially established in 1930, but with records dating to 1649, is the granddaddy of Txakolina producers. With nearly 100 acres of vines, it is also the biggest.

Ninety percent of its vines are hondarrabi zuri, a white grape grown virtually nowhere else but in Basque country. The rest are hondarrabi beltza, a red grape that is blended into the wine. The grapes that are grown on terraces overlooking the ocean benefit from the sea breeze, a natural ventilation that helps to prevent mildew and disease in this humid, rainy environment. The vines on flatter areas are trained high on overhead pergolas, and workers constantly trim the vigorous foliage so the grapes will be exposed to the air.

"The grapes have to see the vista," said Ernesto Txueka, whose family has run Txomin for generations.

Txomin and Ameztoui, and most Txakolina producers, for that matter, are surprisingly high-tech operations. At Txomin, the grapes are hand-harvested and delivered to the winery, where they are immediately chilled down nearly to freezing and blanketed with nitrogen, an inert gas that prevents oxidation, a process that preserves freshness, juiciness and tangy acidity.

The wines are then fermented with native yeasts in steel tanks, also kept cold and blanketed to capture carbon dioxide, which accounts for the fizziness. The carbonation is entirely natural, though it is widely suspected that less scrupulous Txakolina producers illegally inject their wines with carbon dioxide.

Standing on a catwalk in the spotless Txomin winery, one person can monitor the progress of the wines by way of a computer screen. A visitor in July, though, had to use the imagination. After the fall harvest, the first wines are ready to ship by December, and by June, the entire production of 300,000 bottles is sold out. For wine tourists accustomed to seeing last year's production aging in barrels and the previous year's settling in bottles, it's a remarkably swift process, and profitable as well.

The 2009 Txomin Etxaniz is fresh and tangy, with a slightly chalky mineral and lemon flavor. It goes beautifully with the ubiquitous Basque snacks of anchovies and preserved tuna.

If it's not exactly the image of Old World artisanal craftsmanship, that's because the Txakolina industry is a relatively recent phenomenon. Wine production was a way of life for centuries in Basque country through the end of the 19th century. Much of the wine back then was red, with some rosés. But phylloxera wiped out the vines around the turn



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of the 20th century, and the industry was slow to recover.

Not until the 1960s did [winemaking](#) stage a comeback, said Andoni Sarratea, one of the principals at Doniene Gorronadona.

“The Basque government encouraged planting vineyards as a way of keeping people from leaving for the cities,” he said. “They pushed for white wines so as not to compete with Rioja.”

While the vast majority of Txakolina today is white, some producers are experimenting with reds and rosés. Gorronadona’s old-vine red, Mr. Sarratea said, was inspired by his study of history. “The real Txakolina of the region is red,” he said. “The old people drink it because it’s what they remember.”

Perhaps. But almost all of the deliciously spicy, herbal, raspberry-scented red goes to the United States, where Mr. Tamers, of De Maison, parcels it out in small quantities around the country.

Similarly, Ameztoui revived the tradition of making a Txakolina rosé a few years ago. This gorgeously zingy, fruity wine was met with indifference in Basque country.

“This is a town that doesn’t like rosé,” Mr. Ameztoui said. “We sell it all to New York.” Mr. Tamers got 14,000 bottles this year, yet the crushing demand for it means he can allocate only a few bottles to a customer.

Despite the output at places like Ameztoui and Txomin, Txakolina has a few artisanal producers as well, like Roberto Ibarretxe Zorriketa of Uriondo, which made about 15,000 bottles of Bizkaiko Txakolina last year in a valley south of Bilbao. Here, on an idyllic south-facing slope amid apple trees and conifers, Mr. Ibarretxe grows not only hondarrabi zuri but txori mahatsa and mune mahatsa, the local names for sauvignon blanc and folle blanche respectively.

The apples distract the wild pigs from the grapes, but do little to dissuade foxes from threatening the vines, said Mr. Ibarretxe, a gentle, precise man dressed in a pale blue shirt and dark blue pants. He wears a Panama hat and has a blue cheesecloth scarf around his neck. A pair of white leather gloves poke out just so from a rear pocket.

“Even if I lose a few vines, I have to let the magic of the forest happen,” he said, speaking quietly but intently. “You can’t treat a vineyard for tomorrow, you have to treat it for the day after tomorrow.”

In his winemaking facility, really just an expanded garage next to his house, he chills the grapes just a bit, not nearly as much as at Txomin or Ameztoui, and he handles them “tranquilo, tranquilo,” as gently as possible.

The wine itself is smooth and mellow — fresh, of course, as Txakolina must be — but tranquilo, like the man, lovely and dry with tangy, long-lasting citrus and mineral flavors.

Txakolina has come a long way in the United States since 1989, when the importer Jorge Ordoñez introduced the wine, bringing in 200 cases of Txomin Etxaniz. Even four years ago, Ron Miller, general manager of Solera, a Spanish restaurant on the East Side of Manhattan, spelled the wine phonetically on his list so people could order it.

Mr. Tamers occasionally fears that American demand for the wine will have to wane. Mr. Ameztoui, however, has no such doubts.

“We’re confident that anybody who tries this will enjoy it,” he said. “A lot of white wines use the same grapes and the same style, and they’re all the same. This is distinctive.”

Can You Say Txakolina?

HERE are some recommended txakolinas. The [wines](#) are at their best when young and fresh — stick with the 2009 vintage except for experimental purposes.

AMEZTOI GETARIAKO TXAKOLINA Tart, tangy white (\$19); superb rosé, called Rubentis (\$20). (De Maison Selections, Chapel Hill, N.C.)

DONIENE GORRONDONA BIZKAIKO TXAKOLINA Spicy Tinto is a rare red txakolina (\$28). (De Maison Selections)

GURRUTXAGA BIZKAIKO TXAKOLINA Crisp white (\$19) and floral rosé (\$19). (De Maison Selections)

TALAI BERRI GETARIAKO TXAKOLINA Pleasing, lingering white (\$21). (Spain Wine Collection, Congers, N.Y.)

TXOMIN ETXANIZ GETARIAKO TXAKOLINA The crisp, refreshing archetype (\$24). (Fine Estates From Spain, Dedham, Mass.)

ULACIA TXAKOLINA GETARIAKO TXAKOLINA Apple- and citrus-scented (\$17). (Europvin U.S.A., Van Nuys, Calif.)

URIONDO BIZKAIKO TXAKOLINA A mellow, thoughtful wine (\$17). (De Maison Selections)

XARMANT ARABAKO TXAKOLINA Lovely, light and delicious (\$15). (De Maison Selections)

Correction: August 18, 2010

An article last Wednesday about the Basque white wine Txakolina rendered incorrectly the name of a region, and town, where the wine is made. It is Getaria, not Getaría.

A version of this article appeared in print on August 11, 2010, on page D1 of the New York edition.



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