The Spanish wine region of Ribera del Duero emerged from obscurity in the 1980s and today challenges Rioja as the country’s premier region for Tempranillo-based wines. Much credit for Ribera’s rapid ascent goes to Mariano García and his extended family of winemakers, who oversee an impressive array of winery projects.

Mariano García Fernández, 66, has been a key influence in Ribera, beginning with his long tenure as winemaker for the region’s most prestigious producer, Vega Sicilia, then with his own Bodegas Mauro. His family’s impact now extends across northern Spain. His son, Eduardo García Montaña, 32, and nephew, Isaac Fernández Montaña, 47, are two of Spain’s brightest young winemaking stars. All the family’s projects emphasize old vines over winemaking methods, and aim for wines that express their terroir.
“Mariano is a great guy and a great professional,” says Peter Sisseck, owner and winemaker at reference-point boutique bodega Pingus, in Ribera. “He also has something very important that many of us don’t have. He has been making wine in Ribera since 1968. His family has known the area for many generations, and this gives what is so often missing in new areas: the history to connect to how things were and how people used to work in the vineyards. At Vega Sicilia, he was extremely privileged to work with great vineyards at a house known for quality. He’s a very historical figure in Ribera.”

García founded Mauro in 1980 with two partners, working in a 17th-century stone building with vineyards just outside town in Tudela de Duero. Because of a quirk in the mapping of the Ribera del Duero Denominación de Origen (DO), these vineyards fall within the lesser Vino de la Tierra de Castilla y León designation.

By the mid-1990s, the winery was gaining international acclaim. A new winery was built in 2004; its sleek lines seem appropriate for display in a museum. The functional, gravity-only winery has generous, well-lighted work areas, a design resulting from Mariano’s years of experience. With his hearty laugh, the goateed Mariano is jovial greeting a visitor. He seems a warm bear of a man, like a favorite uncle who horses around with the kids.

Before Mauro, Mariano was the first degree-holding enologist at the iconic Bodegas Vega Sicilia. From 1968 to 1998, Mariano produced many legendary vintages of Unico, the flagship wine that sells for hundreds of dollars a bottle. He was a key part of a team that created Bodegas y Viñedos Alion, Vega Sicilia’s modern-style Ribera wine introduced in 1991.

Ribera del Duero and Tudela del Duero are exceptional wine-growing areas. The air is crisp and the hours of strong sunlight are many. At 700 to 1,000 meters elevation, with low rainfall, the vineyard’s frequent day-to-night temperature drops of up to 50° F help grapes develop optimal acidity and balance. Compared with Vega Sicilia’s vines in the western end of Ribera, Mauro’s old vineyards are west of this area, in a warmer, more protected microclimate, but in soils with a similarly high percentage of limestone.

“My concept of winemaking is hands-off, to respect the wine, do lots of work in the vineyard, and make wine with a very pure style which reflects the identity of the grape variety in the context of Tudela de Duero’s terroir,” says García. “Tinto Fino (Tempranillo) on the western side of the Duero valley [where the Mauro vineyards are] is perfect for producing intense and concentrated wines but also with a gentle, fresh and fine character.”

Sixty-five hectares (about 160 acres) of vineyards are mostly estate-owned, with some under long-term contract. Mauro’s basic red, Viño de la Tierra de Castilla y León (about 23,000 cases per year), is 90 percent Tinto Fino and 10 percent Syrah. García says of this wine: “[It is] always a safe bet for a clean, fresh and bright fruit character. The exotic floral note of Syrah accompanies the red fruit character of Tinto
mainly near the villages of Roa and La Horra, where one neighbor is Pingus. The soils there contain a higher percentage of clay and sand, resulting in wines that are brawnier than those from the limestone-rich soils of Tudela and Valladolid.

Since 2001 at Mauro and Maurodos, the latter in the nearby Toro DO, Mariano advises at a strategic level while Eduardo García heads day-to-day winemaking operations. Eduardo is carrying on his father’s forward-thinking with a number of high-profile projects.

Eduardo drives a visitor from the Maurodos winery, an hour west of Tudela, to vineyards near the winery. A deep reddish brown from its high iron content, the clay soil has just been tilled and lies about in large chunks the size of melons. Toro’s dense soils impart great concentration to wines that are among the most powerful Tempranillo-based reds from Spain. Well before noon, the relentless sun is already baking the flat landscape, and the cooling breeze, a constant in Tudela’s vineyards, is gone.

Scanning the scene, Eduardo reflects, “When I go on holidays, the thing I miss the most is the vineyards, more than my father, my family . . . I go to the beach one week, and after four days I’m thinking I want to go to the vineyards. It’s always a problem for my girlfriend, who tells me, ‘You love the vineyards and the wine too much!’ Maybe it’s true, but I can’t change. It’s my life.”

With degrees in viticulture and enology, Eduardo worked internships under Bruno Prats at Cos-d’Estournel in Bordeaux, Hubert
ike his cousin Eduardo, Isaac Fernández is a prolific wine- 
-maker with projects across Spain.

Though his parents were not in the wine business, Isaac 
drew inspiration from Mariano, his maternal uncle. Like 
Mariano, Isaac graduated from the Madrid School of 
Winemaking and Viticulture, among Spain’s top enology 
schools. He then worked at Bodegas Mauro from 1984 to 2005, becoming manager of wine-

making and technical organization. Today, his main area of inter-
est is Ribera del Duero.

“I’m very lucky to start my career and gain experience at a special 
winery like Mauro instead of a cooperative. The family wine-
making tradition is very important. Mariano is one of the most 
important winemakers in the world and I’m lucky to have him as 
a teacher. At Mauro, I learned how to make quality wines. As a 
winemaker, I was born rich.”

Outside Aranda de Duero, a town in the center of the Ribera 
del Duero DO, lies the new winery of Bodegas & Viñedos Neo. 
With distressed industrial surfaces and backlit signage, the bodega 
emanates an MTV-chic aura. One unusual feature is a state-of-the-

art multitrack recording studio that is booked months in advance. 
In the cellar, French barrels are adorned with notes scribbled by 
visiting celebrities.

Isaac displays an infectious creative energy as he shows a visitor 
around Neo, where he was hired as winemaker in 2000 (when the 
project was known by its former name of J.C. Conde Delgado y 
Otros). Neo El Arte de Vivir and Vivir, Vivir (10,000 and 15,000 
cases, respectively) are 100 percent Tinto Fino, made with short 
macerations and aged eight months in barrel for the former and one 
year in tank for the latter. Both have crisp, fresh dark berry charac-
ter. “People want wines that are easy to drink. Now we have younger 
consumers who want to learn about wines. The people who don’t 
like wine, it’s because they’ve never tasted a good one,” says Isaac.

Grapes for the Neo Sentido (3,750 cases), a jovell (young) wine, 
the Neo (1,850 cases) and Neo Punta Esencia (350 cases), made 
only in select vintages, come from old vineyards near Aranda de 
Duero. Isaac says, “The special thing I’m looking for is elegance.”

In 1999, Isaac started working at Bodegas Uvaguilera. Describing 
its top wine, Palomero (625 cases), from a single vineyard near

Lignier in Burgundy and California’s Paul Draper, all winemakers 

known for terroir-driven wines.

Mariano bought vineyards and land for Maurodos in 1996 and 
completed the bodega in 2000. Today, 65 hectares (160 acres) of 
estate and contract vineyards are farmed for the label. Predating 
the better-known Numantia by a vintage, Maurodos’ San Román 
1997 was arguably the first modern-style wine from Toro. San Román (6,200 cases) is 100 percent Tinta de Toro (Tempranillo). 
Prima (12,500 cases), with 10 percent Garnacha, is Eduardo’s con-
cept for a fresh, young Toro, introduced in 2003.

“I adore the vivid force of the vines in Toro” Eduardo says. “Es-
pecially from 2004, I’m trying to refine the brave character of San 
Román. I want to keep the wild side of the wine, its sincere min-
erality, opulence and explosion of licorice and black fruit flavors, 
but I like a polished texture and enticing fresh finish. Prima is more 
casual, with primary fruit but firm and deeply colored.”

Similar to Maurodos, several of Eduardo’s other projects too are 
unique expressions of old vines in distinctive terroirs.

The Romero de la Cruz family founded Bodegas Los Astrales in 
the Ribera del Duero DO in 2000. Eduardo became winemaker 
there in 2001. Astrales (3,250 cases) and Astrales Christina (150 
cases) are 100 percent Tinto Fino wines made from vineyards near 
Anguix, in the cooler, northern central part of the DO, where sand-
and clay–rich soils produce a “cooler, fresh, more sophisticated ex-
pression ... with crisp fruit, vibrant acidity, consistent and long,” 
Eduardo explains. “The Anguix terroir is not suited to a heavy, 
overripe, too tannic style.”

In 2002, Eduardo, his brother Alberto and two partners founded 
Bodegas y Viñedos Paixar in the Bierzo DO. Bierzo is northwest 
of Toro, on the edge of “green Spain,” where maritime influence from 
the Atlantic gives a cooler, wetter climate. The region was lan-
guishing in obscurity until vintner Álvaro Palacios and nephew 
Ricardo Perez-Palacios began working there in the late 1990s, but 
is now producing some of Spain’s most exciting red wines, based 
on the indigenous Mencía variety.

Paixar (420 cases) is made from 100 percent Mencía vines planted 
in high hillside soils of schist and slate, similar to the llicorella 
terroir of Priorat. “I love Mencía because it’s completely different from 
Tempranillo,” Eduardo says. “Paixar is personal, earthy, seductive, 
pure, spicy, herbaceous, more Northern Rhône in style. A very tra-
ditional kind of winemaking produces clean and bright wines, very 
fluenced by nature around the vineyards.”

Eduardo describes two other projects which, like Mauro, operate 
outside the DO system: “Bodegas Leda and Ramiro Wine Cellar are 
base on recuperating small, 0.5 hectare plots of old vines of Tinto 
Fino in the Duero Valley to extract all the character from magnificent 
raw material with less intervention. For Leda, I usually select plots 
from Cigales (a region just northwest of Ribera del Duero) and Tudela 
de Duero; for Ramiro, I only work with Toro and Ribera vines.”

In 1999, Isaac started working at Bodegas Uvaguilera. Describing 
its top wine, Palomero (625 cases), from a single vineyard near

Alberto García (right) and brother Eduardo taste with their father. The young Garcías founded Paixar estate in Bierzo in 2002, one of the many ventures the family oversees.
La Horra, Isaac says, “Traditional-style Ribera, full of concentration, elegance and ability to age.”

Isaac took on duties at Bodegas Arrocal in 2003. The basic Arrocal red (16,500 cases) “is a modern Ribera, with lots of fruit and floral aromas, easy drinking, especially for younger people,” he says. For artisanal wines Máximo (about 200 cases), Ángel (about 300 cases) and Christina (125 cases; produced in 2005 only), the number of bottles produced depends on the vintage.

Isaac explains, “Each has a unique expression, but with the identity and tradition of Ribera. Ángel is very elegant now and with aging it will be very silky and velvety. Máximo needs long aging, but will be full of complexity. Christina is between these: elegance, smoothness and complexity. A perfect wine to drink now and to cellar.”

Isaac arrived at Bodegas Valderiz in 2005. All the fruit is estate grown, from 72 hectares (178 acres) of vineyards around Roa. For its Valderiz (2,500 cases) and top wine Tomás Esteban (300 cases), Isaac seeks “balance, complexity, elegance and a long evolution in bottle. [Vineyards near Roa produce fruit that is] clean and pristine, so I don’t need to do much in the winery.”

As technical director on so many projects, Isaac works long hours. He visits “most bodegas every day, to teach, make important decisions and solve problems. The most important thing I give to the winemakers is the vineyards speak for themselves, the Garcías’ many reds.” Isaac’s expressive, elegant wines fall somewhere in-between, a balance of his extensive knowledge of both terroir and winemaking.

Isaac’s expertise helped boost the reputations of Ribera del Duero, Toro and Bierzo, and has shed light on projects outside the DO system. Together, these winemakers are helping to shape modern winemaking in Ribera del Duero and beyond. Their wines bear a family resemblance, thanks partly to their shared grape varieties and terroirs, but also differ, much like the personalities of their makers. It’s tempting to say Mariano’s wines are opulent and generous, like the man himself. Eduardo’s transmit clean, dark berry, herbal and mineral–inflected fruit, drawn from his respect for his vines. Isaac’s expressive, elegant wines fall somewhere in-between, a balance of his extensive knowledge of both terroir and winemaking.

A focus on old vineyards, an understanding of grape varieties and local terroirs and a noninterventionist approach to winemaking combine to create wines that marry power and finesse. In letting the vineyards speak for themselves, the Garcías’ many reds display a wonderfully diverse range of expression, each vineyard and wine a new chapter in the history of the García family, the wines of the region, and of Tempranillo in Spain.

Chris Fleming is a freelance wine writer and consultant; he is currently researching a book on Rioja.

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### LEGACY OF QUALITY

This chart lists selected releases from wineries where García family winemakers currently work and/or previously worked to develop the house style. Total annual case productions for the winery as a whole and start date of the individual winemakers are also indicated. Listings are not included for Vega Sicilia, where Mariano worked from 1968 to 1998, and Bodegas Museum, where Isaac became winemaker with the 2009 vintage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WINERY</th>
<th>ANNUAL CASE PRODUCTION</th>
<th>WINEMAKER; START DATE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bodegas Alto</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>Ribera del Duero PS 2004</td>
<td>Mariano; 1998</td>
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<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>Ribera del Duero 2006</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bodegas Arrocal</strong></td>
<td>11,350</td>
<td>Isaac; 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>91</td>
<td>Ribera del Duero Máximo 2005</td>
<td>$115</td>
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<tr>
<td>89</td>
<td>Ribera del Duero 2007</td>
<td>$19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87</td>
<td>Ribera del Duero Selección 2005</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3,400</td>
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<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>Ribera del Duero Christina 2006</td>
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<td>5,500</td>
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<td>91</td>
<td>Toro San Román 2005</td>
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<td>Toro Prima 2008</td>
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<td><strong>Neo</strong></td>
<td>32,175</td>
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<td>88</td>
<td>Bierzo Tercer Motivo 2007</td>
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<td>88</td>
<td>Ribera del Duero El Arte de Vivir 2008</td>
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<td>Ribera del Duero Valdehermoso Terruño Hombre 2005</td>
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