

Rioja – Land of Wine, Art, History and Passion

Maria Jose Lopez de Heredia, is petite in stature and was dressed in plain winery worker's attire when Carol and I met her, but I instantly felt the force of her personality. She is the fourth generation, caretaker of Spain's legendary and iconic R. Lopez de Heredia wine dynasty. We had just finished a tour and tasting at her family's iconic winery estate (bodega) in Rioja.

To my surprise, she was waiting at a picnic table when we finished our tour, and our tour guide told us she had requested that we meet. She told me that she had researched the visitors that day, looked up Revel's website, and wanted to meet me to thank me for coming by and also to tell me that she thought the wine cellars we design and build are very beautiful.

I don't know that I have ever met a more gracious and friendly person. She wanted to hear about our trip, how long we would be there, where we would go next, and then offered some suggestions for places to visit, sights to see, etc. Then she asked her assistant to help us with some reservations and other arrangements for the remainder of our trip.



1 Maria Jose Lopez de Heredia, right and James Cash, seated, left.

The Lopez de Heredia family has been making wine on this property since the mid 1800's. They still make the wine in the same way they did back then. We saw no modern technology in the vineyards, in the crushing and fermentation vats, or in the cellar where they age hundreds of thousands of barrels and millions of bottles – prior to our visit I read that a tour today would be indistinguishable from a tour a hundred years ago if not for the clothing of the tour guide.

Their wines are uniquely long-lived. They age their flagship Vina Tondonia Gran Reserva for ten years in the barrel before bottling and then age in bottle – the next “new” release will be the 2004 vintage.

The red wines are made primarily with Tempranillo grapes, along with Garnacha and small amounts of other varieties, all grown in family-owned vineyards. For aging, they use barrels made from American Oak – used because its tighter grain reduces evaporation which is important considering the length of time the wine ages inside. They do not use the oak to impart flavor or tannins.

If you've ever wondered how coopers make barrels, it's actually a very interesting process. Barrel slats come in different widths, and the way they assemble the slats to ensure that the barrel ends up holding the exact requisite amount of wine is they lay them side by side until the collectively add up to the right length across the widest portion of the slats. Nothing is wasted here. Everything is used, re-used, maintained, repaired or repurposed.



2 Wine Barrel Making Room

They are an original, natural, organic winery. A friend gifted them a windmill to pump water in the early 1900's, and they still use it today to provide irrigation to their gardens. There is a pervasive sense of patient permanence here, that everyone is a caretaker.

I could go on forever about the wines, but this is a blog not a book! I have collected them over the years and known them to be exceptional, but the story of wine is also the story of people, place and time. Everybody talks about terroir when they talk about wine, but there is an added dimension here -- time. The respect for the history here is truly unique. If you close your eyes when you sip, you can literally taste time in a bottle.

While I hold this winery in particularly high esteem, to be fair there are several others that belong in the same class. Perhaps more importantly, it shares many important attributes with many other wineries in the region.

I was fascinated to see some of the architectural masterpieces that are part of the wine industry here. Zaha Hadid designed tasting room at Lopez de Heredia, Frank Gehry designed visitor center at Marques de Riscal, Santiago Calatrava designed winery at Bodegas Ysios to name a few. All of them contemporary works superimposed on to the historic countryside. I don't think this is because the wineries are more prosperous, lucrative, or arrogant. I see these buildings as vessels, designed to serve a very specific purpose, which is to further the expression of the art form of winemaking.

We strive to do for the collector what these great architects do for the winemaker, and that is to create a vessel that serves a very specific purpose, which is to enhance the overall experience of appreciating great wine.



3 Zaha Hadid Stand at Bodegas Lopez de Heredia Vina Tondonia.

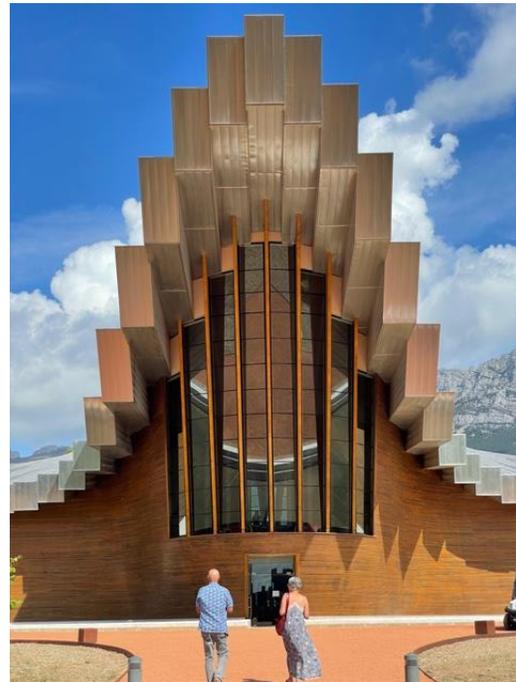


4 Frank Gehry's City of Wine Complex at Marques de Riscal Winery in Northern Spain

My trip to Rioja reminded me of a quote by Robert Mondavi, "Wine to me is passion. It's family and friends. It's warmth of heart and generosity of spirit. Wine is art. It's culture. It is the essence of civilization and the art of living."

This was our seventh trip to Europe together, and the third time we have visited Spain. We don't intend for it to be our last.

If you have not yet had the opportunity to visit this wonderful part of the world, I highly recommend that you do. I think you will be very glad you did.



5 Santiago Calatrava designed winery at Bodegas Ysios, Laquardia, Spain