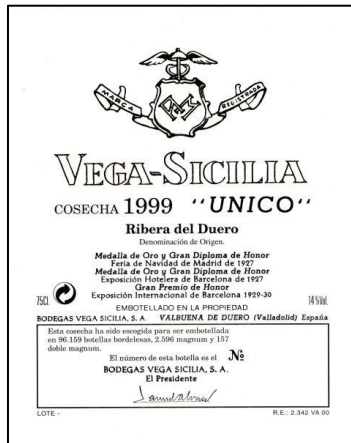


Vega Sicilia



These notes reflect three separate tastings spread over 16 years, the last of which took place in February 2013. On this last occasion, I learned from Pablo Alvarez that they had traced the origins of the property to a farm and village of the 9th century AD where a church had been dedicated to Saint Cecilia. The name evolved to become "Sicilia." "Vega" means the land next to the river.

Vega Sicilia is a Spanish national treasure, and their wines are true, original classics. Their most famous wine is Unico. It resembles other Duero wines but possesses distinctive features, including its impressive longevity, owing to the property's terroir, atypical mix of grape varieties, and aging regime.

I first tasted an extensive range of the wines at an extraordinary vertical tasting with owner Pablo Alvarez in 1996, and then experienced a smaller version in New York in 2013. Vega Sicilia was established in 1864 but was first mentioned under that name in 1697. The property is situated at 2,560 ft. above sea level and is quite large, covering 250 hectares (over 600 acres). 19 soil types have been identified, mainly calcareous clay with some alluvial locations. There are 40 distinct vineyard parcels.

The proximity of the Duero River favors morning mists and fog, and there is a very wide daily range of temperature; for example, in September the variation may be from 85 to 100° F during the day to the low 40's F at night. These conditions contribute to the high levels of tannin and acidity in the wines. Five or six times per decade, there is a serious threat of damaging frost in May and sometimes in September. Yields for Unico are extremely meager (15 to 25 hl/ha). Production of Unico varies widely from 40,000 to 130,000 bottles.

Tasting Notes of Roger C. Bohmrich, MW

Unico's blend relies primarily on Tempranillo (from 75% to over 90% depending on the year) combined with Cabernet Sauvignon and a small admixture of Merlot and/or Malbec in years past. Traditionally, Unico was fermented and held in large wood vats for one year (before 1985, up to 5 years), then transferred to new barriques for 4 to 8 months, and is subsequently refined in used barrels for 5 to 11 years (a minimum of 7 in all until very recently). The aging regime has been modified over the years, with a longer period in new barriques during the past two decades. The wine's innate concentration seems to absorb the wood even though the influences of the wine's very particular maturation in oak are clearly discernible in its taste profile.

The wines which follow were tasted in New York in January 2012 and February 2013. Pintia and Alion are separate operations belonging to the Vega Sicilia group. They are both of a very high standard and perhaps more "modern" in their taste profiles.

Pintia Toro 2007 (owned by Vega Sicilia) ****

*Dense dark garnet red with purple rim. Ripe, pure, high-caliber red fruits to the nose. Youthful and undeveloped with evident reserve. Perfectly ripe and carefully calibrated with beautiful integration. Medium to full. Complex, fresh finish with dark red fruits and well-handled, complementary oak. A fine example of Toro from 100% Tempranillo (½ from ungrafted vines) aged in new French and American oak. **Tasted 1/12***

Alion Ribera del Duero 2007 (owned by Vega Sicilia) ****

*Dense dark garnet. The aroma is very focused, concentrated and held back, clearly in need of bottle age. Reserved on attack with a concentrated core. The long "peacock tail" of dark red fruits and well-married, high-quality oak shows the real potential of this excellent wine. Powerful and muscular but balanced with a harmonious structure. 100% Tempranillo, matured 13-15 months in new French oak. **Tasted 1/12***

Valbuena 5 Año 2008 *(*) – for release in 2013**

Nearly dense blackish red with pronounced purple at rim. The aroma is pure, concentrated and notably deep, revealing dark fruits (crushed black cherry and ripe cranberry) together with vanilla and new oak notes. There is a reserved, youthful intensity. In the mouth, the concentration is evident but the wine is tightly held in and very young, with an undercurrent of sweet dark fruit. The aftertaste is marked by a firm spinal column of acidity and a touch of grip. Elegant and restrained. Aged in vats and new barrels, both American & French. **Tasted 2/13**

Valbuena 5 Año 2006 **(+)**

Dense dark garnet with brick rim. To the nose, intensely focused and concentrated with an amalgam of small red fruits and oak accents. Very concentrated yet has an elegant feel on the palate. Perfectly mature red fruit undertone married with flattering oak. This shows tremendous cellaring potential. A classy and distinctive wine blended from 80% Tempranillo, 20% Merlot & Malbec aged 3 years in French and American casks. **Tasted 1/12**

Valbuena 5 Año 1998 *(+)**

Nearly dense dark garnet. The aroma is concentrated with penetrating dark red fruits and spice highlights, with slight evolution, and faint toasty and mentholated notes. The wine is direct and incisive from entry. The 1998 has strength and virility along with an angular feel. There is a suggestion of dried cherry and dry leaves in the finish. A leaner and not at all viscous Valbuena. **Tasted 2/13**

Vega Sicilia Ribera del Duero Unico 2004 **(*) – for release in 2014**

Dense very dark red garnet with thin purple rim. The aroma initially reveals a sweet, controlled fragrance suggestive of cherry jam. There is tremendous intensity, reserve and innate concentration indicating an undeveloped wine with considerable aging potential. The attack is dominated by ripe fruit and there is a sweet undercurrent. There are layered dark red fruits, notable strength and a muscular quality. The finish is still constrained. Very young with an excellent future. 15 months in vat, 25 months in new oak, 17 months in used oak and 26 months in large vats. **Tasted 2/13**

Vega Sicilia Ribera del Duero Unico 1999 **(*)**

*Nearly dense brick red. Very pure concentrated fruit notes with pronounced oak at first in the aroma, then complex inflections of spices, menthol and secondary accents. The nose reveals limited evolution and underlying strength. The palate delivers great intensity and precision together with a very concentrated core. Long though still firm, not fully developed finish with fruit and oak highlights and a mentholated note. The 1999 shows only modest development and has a long future ahead. **Tasted 1/12***

Vega Sicilia Ribera del Duero Unico 1994 **(*)**

*Dense very dark garnet. The nose is superb and has great class and authority. Despite being nearly twenty years old, the 1994 has remarkable intensity, with dark red fruits and the beginnings of evolution in its leafy, leathery highlights. The palate delivers fantastic cut and intensity. There is exceptional depth and a certain noble austerity that sets it apart. There are early signs of development, but the 1994 is still a long way from full maturity. The wine is starting to soften and offers a sense of a long finish to come. 24 months in vats, 22 months in new oak, 30 months in used oak and 30 months in large vats. Released 2005/2006. **Tasted 2/13***

Vega Sicilia Ribera del Duero Unico 1981 ****

*Moderately dense very dark brick-garnet with brick rim, just beginning to lighten. The bouquet shows impressive strength at this age although the aromatics now reveal tertiary qualities such as faint dried spice, leather and old wood. There are red fruits receding into the background. The palate is still concentrated and strictly defined. The 1981 offers a subtle sweetness across the palate and then finishes with a bracing backbone of acidity. Somewhat hard tannin lingers, drying the mouth at the conclusion, although the finish is also opening. My question is whether the tannins will soften and resolve. Bottled March 1998. **Tasted 2/13***

Vega Sicilia Reserva Especial non-vintage ***
(a blend of 1990, 1994 & 1996)**

*Dense very dark garnet with brick cast. The nose is impressively large-scaled and imposing with noteworthy complexity. The bouquet marries dark red fruit and wood in a warm, powerful scent. In the mouth, the wine first delivers a marked richness and sweet dark red fruit. It is fat and ample. There are striking aromatic accents of spice, menthol and oak in the aftertaste. The well-integrated acid spine become more evident in the finish, and there are firm, gripping tannins at the very end. This is magnificent and complete, offering perhaps more flesh on the frame than Unico itself. **Tasted 2/13***

Here are my selected notes from the 1996 Vega Sicilia tasting at the Great Wine Seminar in Florida:

Vega Sicilia Unico 1985 (released April 1996) **(*)**

*Dense dark garnet. In the aroma, a deceptively subtle mix of red fruits and used oak. Quite closed in. The taste exhibits much more volume of flavor. The wine is rich but matched by acidity and tannin. Clearly still youthful, fresh and capable of long development. **Tasted 3/96***

Vega Sicilia Unico 1982 *****

*Moderately dense brick-garnet. Very fragrant, complex bouquet with a deep, evolving profile. The palate displays fabulous depth without any heaviness. The wine is very expansive and maturing but not at all advanced. The finish is well-defined by an acid frame. **Tasted 3/96***

Vega Sicilia Unico 1975 *+**

*Paling brick-garnet. The nose of the 1975 is much more evolved and reveals a warm, leathery tone. In the mouth, the wine is maturing and thinning. It shows less concentration and a somewhat dry tannic ending. This seems to have peaked and is more mature than the 1970. **Tasted 3/96***

Vega Sicilia Unico 1970 **+**

*Moderately dense brick-garnet. The 1970 offers a warm, rich, and mature vanilla-nut bouquet. The taste is rich and also resolved, and the wine has a round, textured feel. The finish possesses that signature point of acidity. A beautiful example of Unico when it is mature. **Tasted 3/96***

Vega Sicilia Unico 1962 ****

Pale brick to the eye. The nose is open and revealing with nutty and leafy overtones. The palate indicates the 1962 is clearly mature. There is a nutty-woody undertone. The finish is long and dry with elevated acidity. Drink now. Tasted 3/96

Vega Sicilia 1942 *****

Dark tawny brick. Profound and lifted: a beautiful bouquet of a mature wine, with roasted nuts and a rancio tone. The palate delivers a great wealth of flavors and is clearly very mature, but certainly not tired. Rich and very impressive, the 1942 finishes with fine supporting acidity. This is a great wine at its apogee. [NB. Over 50 years old at the time of this tasting.] Tasted 3/96

Vega Sicilia Reserva Especial non-vintage ***
(a blend of 50% 1985 with 1968 & 1979)**

Surprisingly dark, youthful garnet. Aromatically, this blend of vintages is ripe and full with markedly youthful red fruit qualities and a woody background. In the mouth, it is very, very rich, full and lasting. A solid, firm backbone leaves a dry finale. This is a very generous, mouth-filling and assertive wine with real personality. Tasted 3/96