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Monastrell according to a Master of Wine

Pedro Ballesteros MW gives us 8 keys to this grape variety at the recent International Conference on Monastrell.



Spanish variety Monastrell. Patricia R. Soto/©ICEX.

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The image and prestige of the Monastrell grape variety has undergone a complete revolution over the past several years. From being used to make bulk wines, to being considered a noble grape variety, Monastrell can be used in blends, or express all of its aromatic potential in single-variety wines. What's more, it is appreciated in both Spanish and international markets. Monastrell is an authorized grape in 24 Spanish denominations of origins, but it takes on special protagonism in the regions of DO Jumilla, DO Alicante, DO Yecla, DO Almansa and DO Valencia, all of which have a profoundly Mediterranean influence. In an effort to increase this grape's international reach, Master of Wine Pedro Ballesteros presented his personal list of tips about Monastrell this past November in Alicante, at a conference dedicated to this red Spanish grape. The following are eight keys to understanding (and loving) Monastrell.



1) Pay attention to the young wines

Monastrell's versatility can be seen in aged wines, but also, according to MW Pedro Ballesteros, in its fantastic young wines. These sweet and balanced wines have around 14% alcohol and excellent body.

2) Looking for terroir

Spain's only Master of Wine extols the virtue of young wines, but he also underlines the importance of relaying the landscape, terroir, and climate through the wines. He particularly likes Monastrell wines that are made with grapes grown at high altitudes, in areas with somewhat extreme climatic conditions in both winter and summer. For him, the resulting wines are elegant, with a pleasant level of complexity. Ballesteros champions the land, and identifies wines not only by their denomination of origin, but also by the plots of land where they are grown.

3) DO Jumilla, the most characteristic area

Of the main areas where Monastrell is cultivated, Pedro Ballesteros makes particular mention of Denomination of Origin Jumilla. It has a *"very marked style and personality, and wines from here have an authenticity that is very easy for consumers to appreciate"*. This authenticity is characterized by their *"warmth, fruitiness, crispness and certain amount of body"*.

4) Single-variety wines, yes, but also some blends

Monastrell grapes don't require blending with any other varieties. They can stand up on their own and even present a surprisingly bold personality. However, Ballesteros admits that there is one blend that he finds very attractive: that of Monastrell and Garnacha, two decidedly Mediterranean grapes. The Garnacha lends an extra level of crispness and acidity, and therefore roundness to the wine, while intensifying the fruity notes of the Monastrell.

5) Dependability

The great Monastrell wines boast an alluring silkiness, range of aromas and deep connection to the terroir, but they have also proved themselves to be very dependable from year to year in terms of both previous purchases and new vintages. Lots of Spanish wineries that work so well with Monastrell that they have managed to create an asset for any wine lover.

6) Steer clear of super concentrated wines

Pedro Ballesteros believes that super concentrated, high alcohol wines have their public, but that they represent a very small niche market. Spanish wine makers who make Monastrell wines should seek to capture the widest group of consumers; those who seek pleasant wines with agreeable complexity that capture the essence of the Mediterranean: warmth, balance and fruity notes.



7) Go easy on the aging

Ballesteros recommends that producers take special care with the duration and intensity of barrel-aging Monastrell wines. In his opinion, wood aging is very appropriate for wines that have medium-high to high acidity levels, and this is not the case with the wines made from this grape variety. They can handle a certain amount of aging, but it should be very carefully monitored.

8) Avoid over-ripening

The only thing missing was a recommendation on the harvest. Taking into account the soaring summer temperatures in Spain's main Monastrell production areas, Pedro Ballesteros suggests, "*selecting the harvest dates very carefully, making an effort not to start too late*". The goal of moving up the traditional harvest dates in the Spanish Levante (east) is to avoid hitting 15% alcohol and an excess of notes in the wines.

MW Pedro Ballesteros reached the aforementioned conclusions after participating in a special Monastrell wine tasting for the British magazine Decanter, which will be published imminently. He was accompanied at the tasting by MW Sarah Jane Evans and Pierre Mansour (Wine Society). These three experts tasted a total of 83 Spanish wines made with primarily Monastrell grapes, the most Mediterranean grape out to conquer the palates of international consumers.