



AT FIRST GLANCE, THE SPANISH TOWN OF ARANDA DE DUERO LOOKS LIKE ANY OTHER. BUT BENEATH IT AND ITS SURROUNDINGS YOU'LL FIND UNDERGROUND WINERIES SERVING REDS, WHITES AND TEMPTING LOCAL CUISINE

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# BELOW THE SURFACE





Afternoon sun bathes the Plaza Mayor in Aranda de Duero

Below, from left: five- and 15-litre bottles of wine at Bodegas Valduero; rosado (a local take on rosé) is poured at El 51 Del Sol, Aranda de Duero



If there's a trick to eating chuletillas, I haven't learned it. I toss the sizzling lamb cutlet from one hand to the other, my skin turning pink from the hot fat running down my fingers and onto my palm. Unable to withstand the heat any longer, I let the chop hit my plate and wave my hands in defeat.

"You have to pick up the chuletilla from the two bony ends," says my guide, Sara Garcia, plucking the meat from a heap of burning vine wood as easily as if she were picking grapes. Before making a second attempt at the cutlet, I look around at the labyrinth of candle-lit stone passageways and brick arches spreading out in every direction around us.

At street level, Aranda de Duero — the capital of the Ribera del Duero wine region, which spans Castile and León's Burgos, Segovia, Soria and Valladolid provinces — looks much like any other provincial town in northern Spain. Queues form at clay-roofed butchers' shops selling morcilla (blood sausage) and chorizo; unassuming bakeries display their flattened olive oil bread in the windows like trophies; and chalkboards

announce a 'menú del día' of garlic soup and salt cod. On the pastel-hued Plaza Mayor, where the air smells of fire-roasted lamb and brewing coffee, grey-haired men sip cortados and families sit around wooden barrels laden with oily sheep's cheese and cherry-red tempranillo.

Yet, beneath Aranda de Duero's carnicerías (butchers), panaderías (bakeries) and asadores (grill houses) lies a different world. Deep below the town centre is a five-mile network of hundreds of interconnected bodegas — medieval wineries that transformed Ribera del Duero into the respected wine country it is today. While many of the town's bodegas are closed to the public, a handful of entrepreneurial families and passionate winemakers are striving for change.

Sara and I are eating chuletillas at Don Carlos, a 15th-century wine cellar 45ft below Calle del Trigo, one of the oldest and busiest streets in town. To get here, we'd entered through an ordinary wine shop, and before I'd had time to browse bottles of tempranillo, a native red variety that's the most widely grown in Ribera del Duero, Sara had opened a door at the back of the shop,

revealing a steep stone staircase snaking into the darkness. With the help of a twisted rope, we'd descended, pools of condensation soaking my toes with each treacherous step. Dust-covered light bulbs, clinging to the mould-speckled ceiling like sleeping bats, couldn't compete with the thick, creeping darkness. With goosebumps spreading across my arms, I felt my way down until, suddenly, the floor levelled out and the cloak of darkness began to lift.

**Subterranean tastings**

In the belly of the bodega, my stomach full of chuletillas, I run my hand along the crumbling sandstone walls, feeling the deep scars made long ago by pickaxes. "As you can see, our bodegas were dug out entirely by hand," says Sara, as we explore the winery's deep, narrow vaults, where dust-covered bottles and wooden barrels the size of plane engines are stored. "Renovations have made this bodega safe for visitors," she adds. "But it remains much as it was 600 years ago."

It's in one of these vaults, at a long wooden table lit by a chandelier, that I get my first taste of Ribera del Duero wine.



Sara Garcia

Previous spread: historic bodegas clustered on a hillside near Atauta





Sara opens a 2016 bottle of Lara O, Territorio Luthier’s award-winning tempranillo. The pop of the cork reverberates on the scarred sandstone walls around us, and I slowly swirl the violet-red liquid, releasing scents of forest fruits and fresh wood into the bodega’s damp air. It’s the bittersweetness of red berries I taste first, followed by the light smokiness of toasted leather.

The next bottle, an oak-aged tempranillo named Hispania, is opened by Fernando Ortiz, owner of the Don Carlos bodega and co-owner of Territorio Luthier winery. The colour is a deeper red than Lara O, and its flavour fuller and earthier, with notes of cinnamon and black cherry. “Ribera del Duero wines are very much like the Ribera del Duero people,” says Fernando, as I chase the Hispania with a slice of morcilla de Burgos, a heavenly blood sausage spiced with paprika, cloves and thyme. “They’re serious and profound, and always improve over time.”

In 2000, Fernando and his family were among the first in Aranda de Duero to offer wine and food tastings in the winery beneath their home. “There wasn’t much appreciation for bodegas back then,” Fernando tells me, as a plate of roasted red peppers and another glass of red — this time a blend of tempranillo, merlot and grenache — appear in front of me. “Most Arandinos [residents of Aranda] either have a bodega under their house or know

someone who does. But they’re expensive to maintain and people don’t know what to do with them.”

For hundreds of years, the town’s underground cellars, which were built with direct access to winemakers’ homes, were used for every part of the winemaking process, from crushing and pressing to decanting and ageing. “Despite our hot summers and freezing winters, bodegas stay at around 12-13C throughout the year,” says Sara, between mouthfuls of mollejas de lechazo (suckling lamb gizzards coated in breadcrumbs and deep-fried). “It was the perfect solution to making wine in the Middle Ages.”

While Ribera del Duero’s winemaking history dates back at least as far as the Roman period, underground wineries only began to appear in Aranda de Duero after Burgundian monks increased wine production in the area in the 12th century.

The bodegas’ ability to maintain a constant temperature, as well as their interconnectedness and their proximity to winemakers’ homes, allowed Ribera del Duero to prosper as a winemaking area. By the 14th century, underground wineries had begun popping up across the region, and, in 1345, production was so important to the local economy that an ordinance was passed to limit the entry of foreign wines.



Bodega Tierra Aranda, some 15 metres below street level in Aranda de Duero

Above, from left: Fernando Ortiz, owner of the Don Carlos bodega and co-owner of Territorio Luthier winery, samples a glass of Lara O, one of Territorio Luthier’s signature wines; ancient vines, some more than 180 years old, supply the grapes for the wine produced at the Bodega Dominio de Atauta

WINE TOURS

Ribera del Duero Day Tour, Wine Tourism Spain

This day trip offers an introduction to tempranillo wines from Peñafiel, Roa de Duero and Aranda de Duero. You’ll explore winemaking methods at three wineries, and learn to identify aromas and flavours. [winetourismspain.com](http://winetourismspain.com)

Classical Wines Gourmet Tour, Vintage Spain

This four-day tour takes in wineries across the Ribera del Duero and Rioja region. In the former, you’ll visit wineries in Burgos, Valladolid and Segovia, including Isamel Arroyo, Pradorey and Bodegas Briego, followed by a tour of Aranda del Duero’s underground wineries or the fortress town of Peñaranda. The trip continues to Bilbao and Segovia before finishing in Madrid. [vintagespain.com](http://vintagespain.com)

Individual vineyard visits

Many vineyards across the Ribera del Duero region offer guided tours for both individuals and groups, including the historic Dominio de Atauta. Located 3,200ft above sea level, in the province of Soria, it’s home some of the region’s oldest vines. Tours last 2h30m, or 3h when combined with a cheese tasting. [dominiodeatauta.com](http://dominiodeatauta.com)





Yet in the mid-20th century, as modern machinery evolved and Ribera del Duero saw the formation of wine cooperatives (groups of vineyard owners making and selling wine in bulk under one name in order to cut marketing and bottling costs), underground bodegas began to decline. “The grapes were collected and sent straight to the cooperatives,” says Fernando, filling the room with pineapple and pomegranate with a swirl of his albillo, the only authorised white variety in Ribera del Duero. “Suddenly, there was little use for underground bodegas. Some families used them to store wine, but most bodegas were left to deteriorate.”

Our subterranean tasting ends with a slice of torta de uva, a grape-filled pastry sold only during the wine harvest, and a final glass of sweet merlot. We emerge back onto a sun-drenched Calle del Trigo, and a man smiles from across the street, waving us over to a tiny wooden door. Sunk slightly below street level, it's decorated with two metal engravings: one of a man playing the flute and the other of the words ‘Tierra Aranda’.

Moments later, I'm once again descending a steep stone staircase, gripping a rope and sidestepping puddles. Inside, the space is like Don Carlos, only bigger and grander: enormous banqueting tables run through every arched vault, embroidered shields and coats of arms decorate cobweb-strewn walls

and pictures of men in black waistcoats holding wind instruments gather dust in glass cabinets.

“This is our peña's traje (costume),” says Enrique, the man who let us in, pointing at a photo. “We wear it when we celebrate our fiestas.”

Peñas, or wine clubs, have been operating in a handful of the town's bodegas since the early 1970s, towards the end of the Franco administration. “Peñas were born out of a need for somewhere private to drink cheap wine and talk freely,” says Enrique, who's been a member of the Tierra Aranda peña since 2008.

Over time, these underground wine clubs became more than just somewhere to socialise and talk politics. “Many of Aranda's fiestas were disappearing [in the 1970s],” Enrique says. “Our role as peñistas is to keep our bodegas from ruin, but also to keep Aranda's cultural traditions alive.” He shows me another black and white photo, this one of Tierra Aranda musicians performing a pasodoble in the street that runs above us.

These days, Aranda de Duero's eight remaining peñas are heavily involved in organising the town's yearly harvest and various saint day festivals. As well as street parades and performances of charanga (traditional music played by peña members), the festival season also sees wine tastings and music rehearsals for non-peñistas, held in the underground wineries.

## What to eat

### LECHAZO

PDO-protected lechazo lamb also gives its name to Aranda de Duero's signature dish. The leg is seasoned with a touch of salt, slow-roasted in a wood-fired oven and served sizzling in its own juices. For the best lechazo in town, visit Casa Florencio.

### CHULETILLAS

Also made with lechazo lamb, chuletillas are small lamb chops traditionally cooked over vine wood. In most of Aranda de Duero's asadores, they'll come served on a mini grill, so you can cook them at the table to your liking.

### MORCILLA DE BURGOS

Spain has several varieties of blood sausage, but perhaps its most popular is the one made in the city of Burgos. Morcilla de Burgos is laced with buttery onions, lard and rice, then lightly spiced with paprika and black pepper. It's delicious pan-fried and topped with piquillo peppers.

### TORTA DE ARANDA

This flat, round bread has been served in Aranda de Duero since the Middle Ages. The best loaves are crisp and golden-brown on the outside (achieved with a drizzle of olive oil and a sprinkling of salt before baking), but doughy inside.



“Peñas have a membership system, but we want the bodega to be for everyone,” says Enrique.

When I ask why it’s important that peñas continue to operate underground, despite the costs involved in maintaining them, he responds, “Like our fiestas, bodegas are part of our heritage — and we believe that’s worth saving.”

## Preserving history

Another man who believes in Ribera del Duero’s bodegas is wine producer Roberto Aragón. Sara and I set off to see him, following the Douro River out of town, driving alongside beetroot fields and dozens of stone chimneys sprouting from the grass like mushrooms. “Those are zarcas; they keep the bodegas ventilated,” Sara explains.

We arrive at Dominio del Pidio, Roberto’s family winery on the outskirts of Aranda de Duero. When he ushers us in, I expect to see another staircase snaking down into darkness. But what I find instead is a hub of activity: cement vats bubbling with fermenting grapes, rubber tubes rattling with discarded pulp and bottles of cherry-red liquid, clinking as they’re transported 60ft below ground for storage.

Unlike the other bodegas I’ve visited in the area, Dominio Del Pidio is actually used for winemaking. “With climate change, producing wine where the temperature is naturally stable is becoming more important,” says Roberto,

whose family spent almost 10 years and thousands of euros restoring these seven interconnected cellars in Quintana del Pidio, a winemaking village nine miles north of Aranda de Duero. “We’ve found our wines age very well underground,” he adds, passing me a fresh, fragrant 2014 crianza.

Dominio del Pidio currently only produces around 50,000 bottles per year (considered a small number in Ribera del Duero), but Roberto and his family hope to increase production as more of the winery is restored, including the 16th-century wooden barrels, beam wine presses and concrete vats. “People say we’ve returned to an ancient way of making wine, but I tell them it’s the future,” says Roberto. When I ask why he feels so passionate about a form of winemaking that many gave up on long ago, he replies, “Winemaking isn’t just about the product. It’s about the preservation of history.”

Heading back to Aranda de Duero, past vineyards dotted with crumbling chimneys that once puffed furiously with life, I consider the fragility of Spain’s underground bodegas — with ever-more practical methods available, will these expensive and hard-to-maintain underground wineries stand the test of time? Later, as I sip a 2014 Dominio del Pidio tempranillo, one of the first wines to be produced underground in Ribera del Duero for several decades, I can’t help but have a little hope. ●

Above: Roberto Aragon, owner of the Domino del Pidio bodega, photographed outside his new project — a restoration of a labyrinthine network of bodega tunnels on the edge of Quintana del Pidio

Previous page: Chef Juan Pablo Rincon removes a ‘lechazo’ from the oven at Casa Florencio, one of Aranda’s best spots for enjoying the regional delicacy

## ESSENTIALS

### GETTING THERE

Iberia, Ryanair and EasyJet fly from the UK to Madrid. From there, it’s a 1h45m drive to Aranda de Duero. There are also four daily Alsa buses from Madrid. [iberia.com](http://iberia.com) [ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com) [easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com) [alsa.es](http://alsa.es)

### WHERE TO STAY

El Lagar de Isilla winery in La Vid offers wine-themed rooms. Doubles from €103 (£89), B&B. [lagarisilla.es](http://lagarisilla.es)

### HOW TO DO IT

Grape Escapes has three-day trips from Madrid from £529 per person, including transport, B&B and winery visits. [grapeescapes.net](http://grapeescapes.net)

### MORE INFO

[rutadelvino](http://rutadelvino) [riberadelduero.es](http://riberadelduero.es) [spain.info](http://spain.info)