

FOOD & WINE BEST WINE
2002 AMERICAN WINE AWARDS IMPORTER

JAMES BEARD
SEMI-FINALIST
2008 & 2009



Spain's Time Travellers

The Hidden Glory of Old-School Rioja

THE RARE WINE CO.
NEWSLETTER

10/16/12
ISSUE NO. 312

THE RARE WINE CO.

21481 EIGHTH STREET EAST

SONOMA, CA 95476 800-999-4342/707-996-4484

[email us at sales@rarewineco.com](mailto:sales@rarewineco.com)

October 16, 2012 - ONLINE EDITION

The Hidden Glory of Old-School Rioja

The world of wine is increasingly united in the belief that—by using common grapes like Cabernet, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir—and guided by common winemaking principles, everyone can make world-class wine.

The good news is that wine quality has never been higher. The bad news is that individuality is suffering, as too many young winemakers are convinced that the ways of their parents and grandparents were wrong.

And so those of us who do prize individuality have had to search a bit harder for wines of distinctive character. Over the years, we've found what we've been looking for among the traditionalists of Côte Rôtie and Cornas, in Piedmont's Old School, in the ancient lodges of Madeira, and even in some of the old wineries of Northern California.

But the region that offers, by far, the most *undiscovered* possibilities is Rioja.

A Glorious Epoch

From the 1870s to the 1990s, winemaking in the Rioja region of Northern Spain changed little. The classic school was defined by the Tempranillo grape, gentle extractions and long, slow aging in old barrels of American oak. It was a style of winemaking created by Riojans with experts from Bordeaux, who'd travelled the 200 miles to escape Phylloxera in the 1870s.

The cornerstone of this tradition was patience, and a belief that to make great wine took time. Wines were classified by quality—*crianza*, *reserva*, *gran reserva*, *reserva especial*—and the higher the grade, the longer the time spent in old barrels. Six to 8 years in wood not only endowed the top wines with surreal texture and perfume, it also enabled their effortless evolution.

These wines were unique in the world when they were made. And they're even more unique today.



These wines were unique in the world when they were made. And they're even more unique today.

Last Bargains Standing

Yet, astonishingly, the great red wines Rioja made during its Golden Age can still be acquired at **prices that are by far the lowest among the world's great mature red wines.**

This is possible for two reasons: longevity and scale of production. Classic Rioja winemaking guaranteed long life—up to a half century or more—for the best wines. And many more bottles of each wine were made than was ever the case in Burgundy or Barolo.

Consequently, wealthy Spanish families—and restaurants from San Sebastian to Madrid—were able to lay in large quantities of their favorite wines from the best producers. These cellars are a treasure trove.

The Door's Open—Have a Look Inside

Several years ago, it became clear to us that Riojas would be the next great traditional wines to catch fire. The triumph of López de Heredia—a house we've so long admired—proved to the world the beauty of traditional Rioja, yet a sea of fabulous traditional Riojas lay undiscovered in Spain.

And so we began visiting Rioja again, meeting the old winemakers, to learn what made their wines so beautiful and capable of defying old age. And we began buying. Through our ties in Spain, we've unearthed several epic cellars full of treasures.

Rioja is where Old-School Barolo was 20 years ago: just waiting to take off. We helped lead Barolo's U.S. awakening—as early RWC customers can tell you—and we hope to play a similar role with Rioja.

We begin with this small introduction to one of the world's great wine traditions, along with a sampling of the great wines that emerged from it.

Cune

Old Rioja Royalty

Cune is among Rioja's most venerable houses, founded in 1879 as Compañía Vinícola del Norte de España—abbreviated as C.V.N.E. or *Cune*.

Like other early bodegas, Cune had French connections—to Champagne producers in Reims as well as to the Cognac house Remy Martin. From the beginning it was based in Haro's famed Barrio de la Estación, taking advantage of the railway line as a convenient means of transporting their wines.

A Regal Pair

Cune's greatest wines—**Imperial** and **Viña Real**—are towering blue chips in Spain, once spoken in the same breadth as Vega Sicilia Unico.

Imperial has been made since 1928, named from the *pinta imperial*, or imperial pint, a size exported to the UK in the early years. A wine of great perfume and supple texture, it is considered one of the most elegant of all Riojas. It is also a wine of *terroir*, largely sourced from vineyards in the Rioja Alta subzone.

Viña Real tends to be more robust, reflecting its emphasis on Rioja Alavesa fruit. It gets its name from the fact its vineyards are clustered around the Camino Real (“Royal Road”) in Alavesa's Elciego.

The bottle shapes of Imperial and Viña Real reflect a classic Riojan ideal: that wines of bigger body are in Burgundy-shaped bottles, while more elegant wines are in Bordeaux shaped bottles.

The Prototypical Great Riojas

In fact, with the possible exception of López de Heredia's Tondonia and Bosconia, Imperial and Viña Real are *the* prototypes for this dichotomy. In its Bordeaux bottle, Imperial is the very definition of Rioja Alta elegance, while Viña Real exemplifies the more powerful style of Rioja Alavesa.

Both wines are revered by Rioja connoisseurs for their velvety texture and kaleidoscopic complexity. And both age with ease for decades.

There are no greater examples of Rioja's glory than mature bottles of Imperial and Viña Real. And even bottles 20 to 30 years old can sell for hundreds of dollars. Here's your chance to acquire some of the greats at truly give-away prices.

1994 Cune Imperial Gran Reserva

93+ Richard Jennings

\$54.95 *bt.* **\$295** *six-pack*



From arguably the greatest Rioja (and Cune) vintage between 1981 and 2004. Nearly infinite aging potential. Richard Jennings: “... cedar, dried cherry, floral, black raspberry nose; tasty, rich, youthful, cherry, tart black raspberry palate with firm, sweet tannins; should go 40 years; long finish.”

1991 Cune Imperial Reserva

94 Richard Jennings

\$49.95 *bt.* **\$270** *six-pack*

Richard Jennings: “... lovely, Barolo-like, dried berry, dried cherry, spice box nose; tasty, maturing, delicate, dried cherry, dried berry, strawberry, delightfully spicy palate with medium acidity; should go 30+ years ...”

1985 Cune Viña Real Reserva

\$69.95 *bt.* **\$399** *six-pack*

Jancis Robinson: “... at a lovely stage of maturity with a really developed bouquet, nice integrated acidity and a good core of fruit”

Richard Jennings: “... reminiscent of a mature St. Julien ...”

1970 Cune Viña Real Gran Reserva

94+ John Gilman

\$149.95 *bottle*

John Gilman: “The deep, complex and very classy nose jumps from the glass in a classic mélange of cassis, cloves, smoke, fresh nutmeg, toasted coconut, coffee and a fine base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, fullbodied and beautifully balanced ... lovely mid-palate depth, a bit of melting tannin ... a classic vintage of Viña Real Gran Reserva.”

Bodegas Riojanas

Traditional Rioja at Its Best

One of the grand old names of Rioja, Riojanas has produced heroic wines since its founding in 1890. And today it is one of the few houses still committed to the classic methods that gave us one of the world's most distinctive and long-lived styles of wine.

Riojanas' classic winemaking and fabulous quality are exemplified by the opulent Monte Real and beautifully refined Viña Albina Gran Reservas. These cuvees place Riojanas squarely in the traditional Rioja elite, but it has always stood apart from its peers.

The Soul of Cenicero

Rather than being founded in the commercial hub of Haro—as many prominent bodegas were—Riojanas is in the very heart of Rioja at Cenicero where its owners, the Artacho family, have been growers for generations.

Cenicero's *terroir* has long been revered as the source of some of the very best Riojas, complete wines that combine the elegant structure of Rioja Alta with the



A 1931 Riojanas ad featuring Monte Real & Viña Albina.

full body of Rioja Alavesa.

For its top wines, Riojanas relies heavily on Cenicero fruit, bottling them in the classic Rioja tradition: a Burgundy shaped bottle for the powerful Monte Real and the slender Bordeaux bottle for the elegant Viña Albina.

Old Monte Real and Albina are textbook examples of Rioja's Old School. The blend is classic: Tempranillo enhanced by Mazuelo and Graciano and, for Monte Real, Garnacha. Fermentation was in large upright wood *tinajas*, with long aging in American oak *barrica* and bottle before release.

And the approach created wines that age easily for a half century or more.

Our search for perfectly stored Riojanas in Spain has been hugely successful, finding our sweet spot in four great vintages between 1964 and 1991—all now hitting their prime. And we can offer them at prices that place them at the top of the planet's greatest wine bargains.

1987 Riojanas Monte Real Gran Reserva

\$54.95 *bt.* **\$295** *six-pack*

Gerry Dawes (in Tanzer's IWC): "95 rating. Mature blackberry. Warm, mature vanilla and cherry nose opens after 15 minutes. Soft, velvety entry ... carries its aged notes like a great mature Pommard."

Richard Jennings: "94 rating ... cedar, light tobacco nose; tasty, poised, cigar box, light tobacco, cedar, dried cherry, tart plum, spice palate; should go 25 years...."

1991 Riojanas Monte Real Reserva

\$39.95 *bt.* **\$235** *six-pack*

Richard Jennings: "93+ rating ... mature, cigar box, spice, cedar, baked plum, anise nose; tasty, maturing, spicy, dried berry, baked plum, dried orange palate ... should go 30+ years; long finish."



1987 Riojanas Viña Albina Gran Reserva

95 *Richard Jennings*

\$49.95 *bt.* **\$275** *six-pack*

Richard Jennings: "... mature, elegant, mushroom, tobacco, baked plum, ethereal nose; tasty, youthful yet, baked plum, fig, cedar, cigar box palate with medium acidity; should go 30 years; long finish."

1975 Riojanas Viña Albina Reserva69.95

Richard Jennings: "93 rating ... autumnal, chicory nose; intriguing, complex, elegant, dried cherry, blood orange palate; long finish."

1964 Riojanas Viña Albina *very limited*125.00

Richard Jennings: "93 rating. Lovely, lifted, ginger cake, lightly smoky, dried berry, dried cherry, autumnal nose; poised, dried berry, tart ginger cake, mineral, iodine, earthy palate ..."

An Old Rioja Primer

Having cut our teeth on old Barolo, we find it relatively easy to appreciate old Riojas. The philosophy of winemaking is similar, with extensive barrel aging leading to astonishingly ageworthy wines. The two wines are also similar in that both respond well to decanting and to air.

Decanting

But while an old Barolo can require an hour or two of breathing to really open up, old Riojas frequently are singing within a few minutes. The bottles also tend to have less sediment, which makes for easier handling.

If anything, old Riojas are even more durable than Barolo. Despite their lighter color, lower alcohol and greater delicacy, they can glide through four or five decades effortlessly.

Pulling the Cork

Because of their age, the corks in old Riojas can be hard to remove in one piece with a normal corkscrew. We highly recommend **The Durand** (see page 6), which is the best device ever invented for getting *all* the cork out of an old bottle.

Classifications

Today's Riojas resemble other modern wines: deep color, with dense, sweet fruit kissed by French oak. Aging is seen as having little to do with wine quality.

In the past, however, it was all about age: the better the wine, the longer it was kept in barrel. And bodegas produced a dizzying array of wines, largely based on these classifications:

Crianza: Wines aged the least amount of time in wood. In the past, even *crianzas* sometimes saw two years in barrel and a year or two more in bottle.

Reserva: Next up the quality and age ladder, a selection of the best wines of each vintage and aged for 3 to 5 years in wood.

Gran Reservas: A selection of the best wines and not made every year. *Gran reservas* were once kept in barrel for 6, 8, 10 years or even longer.

Reserva Especial: A less common designation but equivalent to Gran Reserva.

The Consejo Back Labels

Starting in the 1980s the *Consejo Regulador*, which controls Rioja's wines and

their labeling, began to require an official back label on each bottle, designating the classification of *crianza*, *reserva*, etc.

The presence of one of these labels on the back of an old Rioja tells you it left the bodega in the 1980s or later. No label: it was released before the 1980s.

But these *consejo* back labels can also create confusion for old wines. It is not uncommon to see a *gran reserva* back label on a wine whose front label says *reserva*. Or vice versa. We've even seen fabulous *gran reservas* with *crianza* back labels!

Based on extensive tasting experience and long discussions with the producers, we find that wines almost invariably deserve the highest designation on the bottle, whether it was given by the producer or the *consejo*.

Vintages

Over the past half century, these are generally regarded as the greatest mature vintages in Rioja: 1962, 1964, 1968, 1970, 1975, 1976, 1978, 1981, 1982, 1987, 1991, 1994 and 1995.

But vintage reputations are not absolute. Even average years have produced startlingly long-lived wines. And it was not uncommon in the past for Rioja's producers to compensate for vintage variations by blending a small amount of wine from neighboring years.

In fact, Cune has published a fascinating chart contrasting its vintage assessments—based on its wines—against the *consejo's* “official” vintage ratings, which presumably are based on the quality of the harvest. Both use the same 5-point scale. (5 is the best.)

Between 1947 and 1959, the *Consejo* rated four vintages just 1 or 2 points, while Cune doesn't rate a single year in that period less than 3. The greatest disagreement is over 1953; the *Consejo* rates it 1, Cune rates it 5! Having had Cune's Viña Real and Imperial from '53, we side with Cune.

Also, you should trust the judgment of great producers like Cune, López de Heredia, Bilbainas and Riojanas. Wines that were good enough to be classified as *gran reserva* or *reserva especial*, and often even *reserva*, were selected by their producers for both quality and ageworthiness—regardless of the vintage.

So explore with an open mind to the greatness of these wines.

Bilbainas

The Magical Terroir Expressions of Pomal & Zaco

Bodegas Bilbainas, though known today mainly by insiders, was historically one of Rioja's greatest traditional houses, their sterling reputation built on the stunning richness and age-worthiness of their flagship wines Viña Pomal and Viña Zaco.



clarete that is the essence of Rioja Alta finesse. And in keeping with the traditional Riojan practice of fashioning two prestige cuvées in defining bottle shapes, Viña Zaco is in the high-shouldered Bordeaux bottle connoting elegance, while Viña Pomal is in the Burgundy-style bottle that indicates more richness and power.

The brilliance of these elite cuvées was not limited to the reserva bottlings, a fact made strikingly clear to all attending our August Rioja dinner at Piperade in San Francisco, where a glorious 1964 Viña Zaco crianza easily held its own among the reservas and gran reservas of such heavyweights as López de Heredia, CUNE, Riojanas and La Rioja Alta.

Two Special Terroirs

The key to the glory of Viña Pomal and Viña Zaco are their great *terroirs*. Viña Pomal is one of the finest sites in all of Rioja, a plateau of gravel lying at the confluence of the Ebro and Tirón rivers which produces complete wines of great depth and power.

As for Viña Zaco, its classic Haro alluvial silt and calcareous clay soil results in a

That Bilbainas owns both of these revered sites is due to the desire of Bilbainas' founder, Santiago Ugarte, to secure his own nearby sources of supply for the bodega he established in Haro's Barrio de la Estación in 1901.

While the firm continued to acquire land, the fine Pomal and Zaco *terroirs* were kept separate, ensuring that their special character was captured in their own special bottlings.

For most of the twentieth century Bilbainas made traditional Riojas that rivaled the best, but today's wines straddle the line between traditional and modern.

We enjoyed only modest success in rounding up old Bilbainas, but what we have secured is priceless. Be sure to grab some of all of these.

1955 Bilbainas Viña Pomal Reserva Especial

93+ Richard Jennings

\$95.00



Richard Jennings: "... redolent, appealing, cigar box, dried fig, black tobacco nose; tasty, mature, tart black fruit, cigar box, dried fig palate; should go 8-10 years; long finish."

1955 Bilbainas Vendimia Especial69.95

"Vendimia Especial" means "Special Vintage," so no surprise this is a special wine. Exotic nose of gardenias with a vanilla bean overlay. The palate is firm, with sweet fruit and a slight dryness on the finish. Delicious.

Richard Jennings: "92+ rating."

1964 Bilbainas Viña Zaco

94+ Richard Jennings

\$69.95



Richard Jennings: "... appealing, mature, baked plum, licorice, dried berry nose; tasty, rich, dried berry, baked black fruit, licorice, spice, fig palate; should go 20+ years; long finish."

1981 Bilbainas Viña Zaco Reserva59.95

From one of the great modern vintages, this is a classic Zaco, pristine in its refinement, with lush, autumnal fruit with vanilla overtones and terrific texture. In its prime but with years to burn.

Pure Old School

The Iconic 1994 Ygay Reserva from Marqués de Murrieta

For more than 150 years, Marqués de Murrieta has been a traditional Rioja giant. Murrieta's founder, Don Luciano de Murrieta, essentially created Rioja as it came to be known. Until he started his firm in 1852, Rioja was primitively made and short-lived.

Murrieta changed all of that. He spent four years in Bordeaux studying winemaking, where he learned to destem the fruit, ferment in oak vats and, most importantly, age in 225-liter oak barricas. The result was the first great, long-keeping Rioja, 50 barrels of which were exported to Havana. Marqués de Murrieta's fame spread rapidly and the archetype for noble Rioja was born.

Marqués de Murrieta came into its own, however, with the acquisition of the Ygay estate near Logroño in 1878, giving Luciano complete control over the quality of his wine from vineyard to bottle. Ygay's limestone, sand and gravel slopes produce rich fruit of great complexity and structure with the concentration to benefit from long aging in *barrica*.

Murrieta continues to make their top wines by methods little changed from those of the past. A case in point is the Ygay Reserva from the great 1994 vintage. Having received the requisite long aging in American oak *barrica* and bottle, it is a stunning example of Ygay—packed with Murrieta's hallmark expression of rich fruit and exquisitely balanced, this one is built for the long haul. Don't miss it.

1994 Marqués de Murrieta Ygay Reserva

93+ Richard Jennings

\$42.50 *bt.* \$240.00 *six pack*



Richard Jennings: “maturing, dried cherry, floral, raspberry, black raspberry, dill, vanilla oak nose; tasty, rich fruit, tart cherry, tart raspberry, strawberry puree, dill palate with less acidity than other traditional Riojas; should go 30 years; long finish.”

The Durand

The Essential Tool for Old Riojas & Other Aged Wines



If you receive our emails, you should have seen our offer of **The Durand** a couple weeks ago. But if you didn't see it, or need some nudging, pay close attention.

This Spring, we discovered that an Atlanta collector, Mark Taylor, had invented—and was producing to exacting standards—a corkscrew designed for old wines. We've now used it scores of times on 30- to 70-year-old red wines, many of them Riojas. For old wine lovers, this is the greatest discovery since the cork itself.

There is virtually no cork it can't master. We've gotten out even the most disintegrated cork in one piece, thanks to The Durand's ingenious design. It combines an old-fashioned screw—which holds the cork together like a skewer—and two blades.

Extraction is simple. The screw is inserted. And then the blades go in. Once in, they form a cross and lock themselves together. You then gently and carefully pull while turning the entire device counterclockwise until the cork comes out in one piece.

No more picking pieces of cork out of the wine ... or worse, having to pour it through a filter.

To see The Durand in action, you can view a quick 90-second video at www.rarewineco.com/durand.

The Durand is easily worth its \$125 price and more. It will pay for itself the first time you open an expensive old bottle.

The Rare Wine Co. is thrilled to be one of the few national retailers to be chosen to market The Durand. We urge you to include one with your Rioja order.

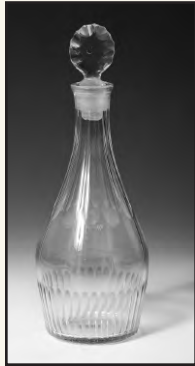
The Durand \$125

Antique Wine Decanters

Each holiday season since 1993, we have offered a range of antique English and Irish wine decanters from the 18th and 19th centuries. As a direct result of this tradition, beautiful and rare decanters now grace the tables of many of our customers and their friends, enhancing their enjoyment of fine food and wine.

As always, each item is an original antique, representing one of the classic styles of the 18th or 19th centuries. Each decanter is accompanied by a letter of authentication signed

by Andrew Burne, one of England's foremost experts on early English and Irish glass. The decanters shown here are just ten of thirty decanters or pairs available for delivery the week of December 10th. Photographs of the others are available on our website www.rarewineco.com/decanter, or by fax or email on request. Decanters are 750ml bottle size unless noted.



12-157 George III decanter, club, lunar faceted disc stopper, flat finger flutes at neck to shoulder, fine finger flutes. Eng. c.1780. **\$750**



12-161 George III decanter, club, bull's-eye stopper, 3 neck rings, classic flat finger flutes to shoulder, comb flutes at base. Eng. c.1790. **\$725**



12-162 Geo. III decanter, prism cut bull's-eye stopper, 3 neck rings, flat flutes, diamonds and swags at shoulder, graduated comb flutes. Eng. c.1790. **\$775**



12-163 Geo. III decanter, club, moulded mushroom stopper, 3 neck rings, flat finger flutes to shoulder, comb flutes to base, diamond medallions & prism swags. Waterford pattern, Irish, c.1800. **\$775**



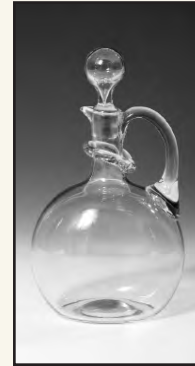
12-166 Geo. IV decanter, barrel, fine diamond leaf mushroom stopper, 3 plain flat bands at neck, flat flutes, diamonds above fine diamond pattern, Irish, c.1820. **\$695**



12-172 Victorian onion, faceted hollow blown ball stopper, tall faceted neck, body with 2 alternating rows of windows and cross cut lozenges. Eng. c.1860. **\$395**



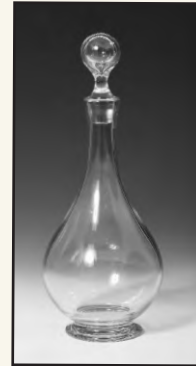
12-177 Victorian Claret Jug, ball stopper, everted lip with spout and celery loop handle, flattened ovoid body engraved with lily of the valley and ferns (denoting 'return to happiness'), on a star-cut foot. Eng. c.1870. **\$750**



12-178 Vic. Claret Jug, hollow blown ball stopper, short neck with slanting 'return drip' neck ring, plain loop handle, plain flattened ball body. Eng. c.1870. **\$630**



12-182 Vic. decanter, faceted solid pinnacle stopper, tall nitch fluted neck onto an ovoid body diamond cut, broad vertical prisms, radially prism cut foot. Webb marked, Eng. c.1900. **\$395**



12-184 PAIR Baccarat decanters and hollow blown pear shaped stoppers, tall necked plain pear shaped bodies on plain flanged round feet. Baccarat mark on bases. French, c.1930. **\$945/pr**

Attention California residents. Proposition 65 WARNING: Consuming foods or beverages that have been kept or served in leaded crystal products will expose you to lead, a chemical known to the State of California to cause birth defects or other reproductive harm.

62 Years Young

Berberana's Astonishing 1950 Gran Reserva

Among the most exciting discoveries from our search for aged Rioja in Spain has been uncovering gems from forgotten bodegas like Berberana.

Berberana's 1950 Gran Reserva was a highlight of our August Rioja dinner in San Francisco, holding its own alongside two iconic Gran Reservas of the same era: 1955 Bilbainas Viña Pomal and 1950 CUNE Viña Real.

But Neal Martin puts '50 Berberana on an even higher pedestal. In January, on erobertparker.com, he wrote about a 1950/52 dinner in London featuring, among other rarities, 1952 Latour, 1950 La Mission Haut Brion and '50 Berberana.

Martin wrote that the Berberana "... looked the aristocratic First Growths in the eye and whispered in their ears: I am just as good. It had everyone round the table smitten by its delectable, mature Burgundy-like bouquet of great delineation and complexity and a palate that was so effortlessly balanced. You would be hard pressed to find a Bordeaux from the same vintage that offers such delight unless you fork out a fortune for Pomerol."

He also noted that '50 Berberana proved a) how gracefully Rioja can age and b) that today's more commercial wineries could have produced absolute gems in yesteryear.



... a window into a time when Rioja's greatest producers—many of whom are now largely forgotten, used traditional methods to express the soul of their region.

The family that made the 1950 was in control of its eponymous winery from 1877 until 1967. Today Berberana is owned by an international drinks group, ending its legacy of artisanal winemaking.

The 1950 Berberana Gran Reserva is therefore not only a brilliant example of mature Rioja, it's a window into a time when Rioja's greatest producers—many of whom are now largely forgotten—used traditional methods to express the soul of their region.

**1950 Berberana
Gran Reserva
94 Neal Martin
\$145.00**



Neal Martin: "... a beautiful, delicate bouquet of rose petals, wild strawberries, leather and a touch of vanilla. It possesses wonderful definition and is utterly seductive. The palate has a slight gaminess on the entry and smooth, Burgundy-like texture. Poised, fresh and refined ... superb definition"

THE RARE WINE CO.

21481 EIGHTH STREET EAST SONOMA, CA 95476 800-999-4342/707-996-4484 [email us at sales@rarewineco.com](mailto:sales@rarewineco.com)

October 16, 2012 - ONLINE EDITION