

In new monastrells, monster is subdued

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Even if you've been to Murcia, the region on Spain's southeastern Mediterranean coast from Granada to Valencia, chances are you just zipped through on Route N340. I know I did.

And even if you've tasted monastrell, the grape of Murcia, chances are it was called mourvèdre, grown in France, Australia or California and combined with syrah and grenache in a so-called Rhone-style blend.

But as it turns out, Spaniards have been planting monastrell since about 1500, when grape-growing became legal again with the expulsion of the Moors. It thrives in Murcia's warm, dry mountains.

We haven't seen much Spanish monastrell in the States until recently because, when grown by traditional methods, the grapes are small and thick-skinned, producing wines with monstrous tannins and alcohol.

Today, however, the winemakers of Murcia are putting out a new kind of monastrell that allows the underlying flavors of black raspberries and chocolate to come through. In some cases, it's by modern, even organic methods and cutting-edge fermentation that produce better 100 percent monastrell wines. In others, it's by blending it with such New World grapes as cabernet sauvignon, syrah, merlot and tempranillo.

Still muscular, still averaging a hefty 14 percent alcohol, but now displaying fruit and subtlety, these are wines for rare-grilled steaks, roast lamb, hearty stews and hard cheeses like the Spanish manchego.

They're reasonably priced, too. And worth a try.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

- **2004 Trapío**, by Bodegas La Purísima, Yecla (100 percent monastrell), 14 percent alcohol: aromas of tar and roses; flavors of black plums, licorice and black coffee; sturdy tannins; powerful fruit; \$29.

