



A TASTE OF VEGA SICILIA

2000 Unico (\$400) Ripe, rich and plush, with savory flavors

1995 Unico (\$400) Graceful and elegant, with long licorice flavors

1970 Unico (\$750) Lush textured, ripe and concentrated

1968 Unico (\$1,350) Powerful and structured; one of the world's greats

Unico Reserva Especial (\$365) The 2010-release blend of the 1991, 1994 and 1995 vintages. A spicy aroma and a superlong finish

2005 Valbuena 5° (\$180) Earthy, layered and chocolaty **E.Mc.**



Spain's Iconic Reds

Vega Sicilia's Unicos, the country's first collectible wines, are sought by connoisseurs worldwide.

BY ELIN MCCOY

► PABLO ALVAREZ PULLS his black SUV up to an electrified fence that guards an almost bare area next to an old vineyard. Underneath that square patch, he says in a soft voice, is where his family's wine estate, Vega Sicilia, keeps bottles of its iconic *cuvée*, Unico, safely entombed.

Spain's first collectible wine, and its most famous one, Unico is coveted by aficionados from New York to Singapore. It's certainly one of the most compelling reds I've ever had: powerful and complex, with leather and cedar aromas, savory flavors and a rich, silky texture. King Juan Carlos is among its fans, and in 2009, a South American auction bidder paid \$66,550 for six magnums of the legendary 1968 vintage.

On our tour, Alvarez, 56, fills me in on Vega Sicilia's history. The estate—which consists of 200 hectares (490 acres) of vineyards in the rugged, windblown Ribera del Duero region of north-central

Spain—dates to 1864, when the first owner brought cabernet sauvignon, merlot and malbec vines back from Bordeaux and planted them alongside local grape tempranillo. The earliest Vega Sicilia blends were made only for friends, but by the 1940s, they were winning medals. Even in the 1970s, all of the other wines of this remote area were simple roses.

In 1982, David Alvarez Diez, founder of Madrid-based business services company Grupo Eulen, bought the property, putting Alvarez, then 27, in charge. There are now three *cuvées*: the Valbuena 5°, made from younger vines and aged for 5 years; the Unico Gran Reserva, which is aged for 10 years or more and is known and labeled as just Unico; and Unico Reserva Especial, a blend of three top older vintages. “To stay in this business, it's necessary to be in love with it,” Alvarez says. “You have to be very patient.”

Back in his office, Alvarez says he has seen a few fake Unicos, such as the one that had a 1942 label and a cork stamped 1982. Today, bottles are engraved with a crest, numbered and tracked.

Later, winemaker Xavier Ausas pours several vintages in the teahouse located in the property's Japanese garden. Unico has two styles, he says. Those from difficult years are more subtle and graceful, while those from stellar years, like 1968, are more powerful and exuberant.

Either way, says Los Angeles physicist and megacollector Bipin Desai, who once staged a three-day tasting of Unico vintages dating back to the 1940s, all have amazing longevity.

And unlike the best Bordeaux and Burgundies, most older vintages can still be had for under \$500 a bottle. That's cheap for such greatness.

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