

Ep 163: The wines of Rioja with Master of Wine Tim Atkin (Part 1)



Janina Doyle 00:00:07 Welcome to Eat Sleep Wine Repeat, a podcast for all you wine lovers, who, if you're like me, just cannot get enough of the good stuff. I'm Janina Doyle, your host, Brand Ambassador, Wine Educator, and Sommelier. So, stick with me as we dive deeper into this ever evolving, wonderful world of wine and wherever you are listening to this, cheers to you!

Hello, wine friends! And welcome back to another episode. Now my guest today really does not need an introduction. I am sure every single one of you knows who Master of Wine Tim Atkin is, whether you have read one of his articles, whether you follow him on Instagram and see some of his beautiful photography and all of his adventures around the world.

He is one of The Three Wine men. So, you may have met him at one of his events with Jolly Olly and Oz Clark. If you are in the wine industry and maybe you judge at The International Wine Challenge, you will know that he is a co-chairman. Tim is hilarious. He is knowledgeable. He's really great fun.

It's only taken Tim and I, I don't know, about two years perhaps to organise an actual date for this podcast. So honestly, I'm so excited we have finally done it. Tim spends much of his time travelling to places like Chile, South Africa, Ribera del Duero in Spain and Rioja, so that he can write these incredibly detailed and knowledgeable and informative reports on what's going on and what wineries and winemakers or wines are doing really, really well.

And so, in February, February the 13th, he is bringing a whole load of winemakers from Rioja with all of his favourite wines. And there is a tasting for the trade during the day and for consumers in the evening. So, anybody who is around London on February the 13th, if that interests you, go to TimAtkin.com and you'll be able to buy tickets, but do it quickly before they sell out. And so, for this reason, today's episode is all about Rioja. So, not just about the grapes, the villages, but his own opinions, thoughts and inside scoop.

Now, before we get to the episode, may I give a big shout out to my sponsor of this season, Wickham's Wine, an incredible online retailer. One of you just hit me up recently to say you tried some of their wines and loved it. I told you guys, it's not just me. Amazing quality. And remember, first order, if you use the code 'EATSLEEP10', you'll get 10% off. But I know you're all raring to go and ready to hear what Tim has to say. So, let's go talk to Tim now all about Rioja.

Janina Doyle 00:02:57 Okay, it's finally happened. When did you finally say that you were going to be on this podcast? I don't know if it was two, three years ago.

Tim Atkin 00:03:07 Oh, I don't know. I've been playing hard to get. It's made you want me even more.

Janina Doyle 00:03:10 It's made me want you more!

Tim Atkin 00:03:11 Oh, darling!

Janina Doyle 00:03:12 Absolutely. Oh, dearie me. Anyway, we finally got you here. You're in the hot seat and I get to ask you a million questions.

Tim Atkin 00:03:19 Ask away, far away.

Janina Doyle 00:03:20 Oh, are you ready? Okay. Most people, I would hope, who are passionate about wine, who've listened to this podcast, who've been drinking for a while, should know who you are, right? So, they're going to all be wanting to know, actually more than most people, did you ever have a wine moment? Was there a wine experience? What happened? How? How did you get into the wine industry?

Tim Atkin 00:03:44 It was actually a bit complete by chance, really. When I was at university, I ran a magazine with two friends. And one of the friends did a three year degree and I did a four year degree because I studied French with Spanish.

And so, in the year between me coming back to do my fourth year and him going into the wider world of work, he got a job with a magazine company. And he said to me, when I finished my degree, he said that there's a job on a wine magazine. Why don't you apply? And I had already written to this magazine company, a big company and said, this is stuff I've written at university.

And they said, when you finish your degree, get in contact. And there was a job on a wine magazine and it could have been anything because this magazine company had magazines about dentistry. It had magazines about cars and vans and all sorts of things.

And so, I got a job at a wine magazine and I was not a wine expert at all. And I think they took me on basically because I'd done some okay journalism at university but more because I spoke languages. So, that was it. I mean, it was lucky, complete fluke.

Janina Doyle 00:04:43 Do you remember your first ever wine article published in that magazine?

Tim Atkin 00:04:48 Yeah, I absolutely do. It was not a wine article. So, I was what was then called an editorial assistant. This was so long ago that we had typewriters. This is before even the Amstrad. In my first year, I bought an Amstrad. Typewriters, and then we used to cut out pieces of paper and stick them onto a galley sheet and then turn the lines over at the bottom. And that's how long it was. My first ever article in Wine and Spirit, as it was then, was about cream liqueurs.

Janina Doyle 00:05:13 Obviously, when this episode comes out, it's going to be January. We are recording during Christmas, you and I. Will you be having any cream liqueurs or any cream sherries?

Tim Atkin 00:05:26 I quite like cream sherries. Cream liqueur, it used to be one of my little secret vices. When I was at university, a friend of mine had a theory that we all had a secret food vice and hers was the wagon wheel. Do you remember the wagon wheel, which was a chocolate wheel?

Janina Doyle 00:05:41 Oh, my God! Yeah, with the marshmallow and jam inside, wasn't it?

Tim Atkin 00:05:48 Mine was sorted, Baileys Irish Cream Liqueur for a bit. But I said that I haven't had one for 20 years. But that was my first ever published article in Wine & Spirit was about the cream liqueur market.

Janina Doyle 00:06:00 Wow. Okay. Listen, after this podcast, you need to go and get a Baileys, right? Sit down...

Tim Atkin 00:06:03 Will do.

Janina Doyle 00:06:05 And just take it back a few decades. Oh, my God! I absolutely love it. Anyway, so you fell into the wine world, which actually many of us did. You obviously started taking it very seriously. You have now got your Master of Wine. Was it just after 2000? I can't remember.

Tim Atkin 00:06:20 I passed that in 2001.

Janina Doyle 00:06:22 Yes. Okay. Cause I did do some research.

Tim Atkin 00:06:25 I'm very impressed with the amount of work you've done.

Janina Doyle 00:06:27 Well, yeah, but then Christmas came along and then I completely forgot everything. But okay. So, I wanted what I love about finding out when people have passed their Master of Wine, you can go onto the website, the Institute of Masters of Wine and you can see if it was in the last, almost like just the last decade, what the research paper they did was, which I think is fascinating and you can download it and you can read it and it's brilliant seeing these amazing minds and what they've done because they focused on something so specific.

But because you were 2001, they didn't back then put up the research papers or they haven't done it now. I don't know, but I can't find your research paper. So, this is why I have to ask you, what did you choose to focus on?

Tim Atkin 00:07:08 Interesting. I wrote mine about Tokaj. It was about tradition and innovation in the Tokaj region. So, when I wrote it, Tokaj was not that long after the fall of the Berlin Wall and Hungary becoming a non-communist country, as it were. And it was just a fascinating place. And I went there on a press trip. I thought, this is amazing.

And so, journalistically, it appealed to me to write about this place that had been a very historic wine region and then kind of gone into the doldrums under the communist rule from, you know, I don't know, 48 to 1990 or so, and was then reborn. And so, I wrote about it.

And I think then a lot of the dissertations these days are unbelievably boring, I think, because they've made them very statistical or statistics based. And I don't know why that's happened, because I think in a way, a Master of Wine dissertation should be a lot of it should be about good writing and research and history. And I suppose I approach it as a journalist and historian. And this was pretty then making it increasingly, unbelievably statistics based.

And I think they've kind of missed a trick really. I mean, some of the modern ones are interesting, but others, I think people just get way too hung up on all this data. And I don't know who reads all the data. Some scientists somewhere has told the Institute that they need to include lots of data. And it's just boring. I think that there'd be much more interesting if, as mine was, I think, I can send it to you if you want...

Janina Doyle 00:08:25 Yes!

Tim Atkin 00:08:27 It was a good read, you know? I mean, funnily enough, they originally referred to the four of us passed first time and when we did it, we used to do the dissertation before, it's now the research paper. We used to do it before the exam and we were the first year that wrote it after the exam and of the three of us who passed first time, not three of us passed first time, we were all referred.

And they said that mine was too journalistic and I kind of had a bit of a fight with them and said, "Why is it too journalistic? Because it's too well written?" But anyway, in the end they passed it and there we go. But anyway it was fun.

Janina Doyle 00:09:00 Oh, I love that.

Tim Atkin 00:09:00 I'll send it to you. It's out.

Janina Doyle 00:09:02 You have to. And it's a perfect time because actually, funny enough, literally a few episodes before, I spoke with the winery director of Royal Tokaji. So, one of my latest episodes is on Tokaji. I just think it's such a phenomenal product and especially the sweets, but it's so exciting that now they're going into such amazing. They've got the dry still Furmint.

The last few episodes, it's really interesting that you've done that. Yes, send it to me and then I'll judge you and I'll let you know if you deserve to have passed. Yes, I love it. So, when you were doing your Master of Wine, what was the hardest thing back then? Was it something like the research paper? Was it certain exams? Was it the blind tasting? For you, what did you struggle with the most?

Tim Atkin 00:09:41 The research paper I really enjoyed doing. The tasting, I enjoyed doing a lot because I think I'm a good taster and I was lucky as a journalist, I had access to lots of bottles, not just tastings, but free samples and things like that.

The bit that I really struggled with was what was then paper two, which was kind of the science of wine. It was much more about things like bottling. I was absolutely crap at science at school. I got a C in what was then physics with chemistry O level. I was in that kind of art stream. So, I did history in languages and English and stuff like that.

And I found it really hard doing the scientific bit, like, the difference between all the gases and so I learned all this stuff and I forgot it the minute I walked out of the exam room but why do people use nitrogen as opposed to carbon dioxide as opposed to this and that.

And so, that was the bit that was hard for me. I thought the marketing paper and business of wine was what I was doing anyway. The viticulture was not too bad because it was less scientific in a way. It was the winemaking bit, particularly the post production, bottling. I even went to Felling. Have you been to Felling?

Janina Doyle 00:10:45 No!

Tim Atkin 00:10:46 I went to a bottling plant in Felling. I spent a day at Felling just talking to the production manager saying, "Why do you do this? Why do you do that?" Anyway, that was the bit I found hard.

Janina Doyle 00:10:55 So, basically, yeah, you would recommend anyone going to a bottling plant for the day. That's not one of your wine experiences that sticks in your head. Not so magical.

Tim Atkin 00:11:02 If they're doing the Master of Wine, I would, because it's actually very boring, but essential. You need to know about shipping wine and stuff like that. I mean, it's part of being in the Master of Wine. As I said, I've never used it again, but I'm glad I learnt it.

Janina Doyle 00:11:18 Well, now you talk about the boring part of wine. Is that why you are so well known for wearing such spectacular, colourful shirts, because you refuse that people will find wine boring. Is this part of it?

Tim Atkin 00:11:33 I think it probably is. I've always liked shirts. I've always liked colours. I've always liked dressing up. A bit of me likes not conforming, I suppose. So, it's my way of expressing. A bit of colour, a bit of fun and I like wearing striped trousers and loud shirts and loud suits and I think it's fun, why not? And so, yeah, I think it's a bit of that.

Janina Doyle 00:11:54 How many shirts with colour? We don't care about the white ones. How many shirts do you own?

Tim Atkin 00:11:59 That's a very good question and it's very germane to what I'm going to do today when we finish this podcast which is I'm going to have a bit of a shirt clear out and I'm going to take some to offset. Because I reckon I've probably got a hundred.

I've got a very good friend, John Higgarty, the advertising guy, and he has a rule which is one in, one out. So, if he buys a new shirt, he throws another one away. If he buys a new book, he recycles a book. And I think that's very good advice. So, I think I may lose 20 or so today to Oxfam.

Janina Doyle 00:12:27 Well, the good thing is you're giving them to charity, but I don't know, you know, you could do like a shirt sale online on Instagram for the wine community and then the proceeds, which I bet you could get more money. It's not a lot of work. It's a lot of effort though. It could then go to a charity.

Tim Atkin 00:12:45 Well, let's discuss.

Janina Doyle 00:12:46 What? Well, I don't know.

Tim Atkin 00:12:48 Maybe choose the shirts first. Get with the shirts first.

Janina Doyle 00:12:50 Well, I don't know. A Tim special and then people could wear your old wine colourful T-shirts or shirts, shall they say, to wine tastings. You could start this whole crazy trend.

Tim Atkin 00:13:02 They could turn up as clones of me. Yeah, I quite like that.

Janina Doyle 00:14:05 Well, I mean, you like that. Okay. Yeah. Maybe, maybe I'm going a little bit too far. Well, you're not the only one, are you, to wear the colourful shirts? Of course, you've got, Olly, you've got Oz, The Three Wine Men. Many, many people may have discovered you personally from, from the three wine men. And I've never asked you, how did that happen? Was that a coincidence? Did you just sit down over a very tasty glass of wine and go, hey, we should put on some nice shirts and talk about wine in a fun way?

Tim Atkin 00:13:35 It's actually a shirt sponsor for Three Wine Men, which is called Gresham Blake, which is not the only place I buy my shirts from. But Olly knew Gresham Blake, who was a bloke called Gresham, because they have a shop in Brighton and Olly lives in Lewes and they sponsored us.

So, when we wear shirts to Three Wine Men, they are Gresham Blake shirts, but my own personal shirts I buy from various people, including Gresham Blake, but I've mostly bought my shirts from a place called Emmett, which is a place in the King, they have a branch in the King's Road and one in German street. And so, that's it really it. I mean, Olly likes the loud shirts. Oz wears anything that's free basically.

Janina Doyle 00:14:08 No, I mean, he is the quirkiest by far. I think you've got to hand it to him.

Tim Atkin 00:14:18 He is. You've got to interview him.

Janina Doyle 00:14:20 Oh, do you know what? At some point if I can pin him... No, no, no. Do you know what? It was hard enough getting you down? And so, it's like, you know, you've got to choose one person to like stalk for years now. I'll tell you what, next one we'll work on Oz. We'll work on Oz, because he's always busy. He's always gallivanting around somewhere or other.

How did the three of you decide to come together? You've obviously got the sponsor, you explained that, but just to start doing wine events and...

Tim Atkin 00:14:44 Olly and I were in something called the Wine Gang. And Olly and I decided that we didn't wanna do that anymore for various reasons. And so, we said, well, why don't we do something together? And Oz is a very old friend of mine. And I said to Oz, "Oz, do you fancy joining us?"

We slightly have some doubts about the name now, about Three Wine Men, and so we're thinking about whether we wanna rebrand it. We are rebranding it. Watch the space, partly because it's a bit too male-focused. I mean, we're blokes, obviously, but, and...

Janina Doyle 00:15:11 You did let Susie in.

Tim Atkin 00:15:12 Susie Atkins is part of it, and we're looking to expand the franchise a bit more and get other people in, particularly some more younger women. I think it's a good idea. I mean, you know, we just call it Three Wine Men because of Three Wine Men, ho, ho, ho. And it was fun and we had fun doing it. And I think that's amazing.

Janina Doyle 00:15:27 And it's still fun.

Tim Atkin 00:15:27 Yeah, we're all reasonably extroverted people. We like meeting consumers and we like talking to people and they're fun events really. And it was a bit sad during lockdown that we had to stop doing them obviously, but we kept it going by doing lots of online tastings and that worked really.

Janina Doyle 00:15:45 Oh, I love it. Well, we're talking about events. You personally have an event coming up...

Tim Atkin 00:15:50 I do.

Janina Doyle 00:15:51 Which I'm sure, hopefully there'll be a few tickets left for anybody who's listening. Tell me about the event, when it is, where it is, and why people have to be at this event?

Tim Atkin 00:16:01 I will tell you, it's on February the 13th, and it's called "The Best of Rioja." Now, I have to stress that this is the best of Rioja according to me, right? But it's a region that I know a reasonable amount of. It was very frustrating for me that Rioja is a very corporate place in terms of the people who run it and they always tend to promote the biggest rather than the best.

And there'd never been a tasting ever, either in Spain or in England or anywhere else, where the best producers were all together in one room pouring their wine. So, I thought, well, I'm going to get the best 50 producers all to come. And they're nearly all coming. They're nearly all pouring their wines. And it's on February the 13th at One Great George Street, which is very close to Westminster tube and Houses of Commons is a lovely, lovely, lovely venue and it's going to be a trade tasting during the day. And then in the evening from 5.30 to 8.30, it is a consumer tasting so-called the best of Rioja.

They're all going to be there. I mean, some places you'll never have heard of, some bodegas are incredibly famous, you know, the Marquis de Murrietas of this world, the Cvnes of this world, Rioja Alta, people like that. They'll all be there, all pouring their own wines. But there are also lots of small people that you may not be familiar with. Even if you think you know about Rioja, this is a unique opportunity for a mere 50 quid, a ticket to spend three hours tasting some unbelievable bottles of wine. And if you're very nice to me, I'll say hello. It'll be a lot of fun.

Janina Doyle 00:17:25 And there's lots of the winemakers personally who are going to be there.

Tim Doyle 00:17:27 All the winemakers are coming. There are people coming. There are consumers coming from Madrid to enjoy this tasting. This is, the word unique is overused, but it is a unique tasting. This has never happened before anywhere in the world. There are 250 tickets. And I think the last time I looked, I think we've got about 30 left. So, if you want to come, snap them up.

Janina Doyle 00:17:46 Love it. So, in terms of like when you put all these wineries out in the room, would you be putting them out in the three provinces, in the La Rioja Alta area, in the Rioja Oriental area – is that how you do it?

Tim Atkin 00:18:01 We haven't done that. We can, I think we're gonna do it in alphabetical order. There are some people who are sharing tables with their friends and they're small people, rather than having a table, they've got three wines each. And so, they're coming. But the idea is that people will talk to them. The other thing about Rioja Alta, Alavesa and Oriental is that there are some wines, obviously, historically in Rioja, which are blends of different subregions or different villages. So that makes it a bit trickier in a way.

But I think it wouldn't be a bad idea. Maybe we'll do that in the brochure, actually to say to people, this is where this person's based and their wines are mainly or exclusively from one of these subregions. I think that's a good point.

The problem with the subregions is that, particularly Rioja Alta is very diverse and so is Rioja Oriental. Alavesa is a bit smaller and is mostly on one or a couple of soil types. So, it's a little bit easier to generalise about Alavesa. Rioja Alta and Rioja Oriental or Rioja Baka as it was known in the past, are a little bit harder to generalise about.

Janina Doyle 00:19:00 But they're very different. Would you care to explain for somebody who kind of goes, yeah I love Rioja and that is Rioja is a brand name as well for many people and they feel very comfortable and but they're not so aware of the fact that there is so much difference in terms of climate, as you've already just mentioned soils, and just the Rioja Oriental and Rioja Alta, so different,

and even the focus of the grape variety. So, from being there and going across between those two, how would you best describe the differences to somebody listening?

Tim Atkin 00:19:30 I think rather than thinking in terms of Alta, Alavesa and Oriental, is to break it down much, much, much more than that. And if you go from the northwest corner down to the southern extremity, the southern extremity would be the hottest bit. It's closest to the Mediterranean. It's in the Rioja Oriental and it's pretty flat. And hot. The northwest corner is the coolest bit of Rioja. And that's very much influenced by the Bay of Biscay and Bilbao and some pretty awful weather.

Rioja is basically a river valley and the Ebro River runs through the middle of it. Pretty much it ebbs and weaves a little bit. And it basically flows from the west down to the east and the east is obviously the Mediterranean end. And as I said, the further east you go, the warmer it gets.

But altitude is one of the complicating factors. So, even in Rioja Oriental, eastern Rioja, which is hotter, there are bits within it that are cooler and some of the highest vineyards in Rioja, in fact, the highest vineyards in Rioja are in the Rioja Oriental or Rioja Baja...

Janina Doyle 00:20:28 Oh, that just, oh, for goodness sake.

Tim Atkin 00:20:31 It's quite complicated. So, a lot of it is based on soil type. It's based on which way the vineyards face. Do they face east, south, west, north? The age of vines is a big deal. How much influence there is from the Atlantic, how much there is from the Mediterranean?

So rather than thinking in terms of the three subregions, think about maybe 10 regions. And if you buy my report, 'Plug-Plug', I talk about the subregions within it and then even break it down so you're thinking about individual villages. Where are the villages? The way we do about Burgundy. That even though Gevrey-Chambertin and Chambolle-Musigny and Vosne-Romanee are all in the Côte de Nuits. They're very different villages and they produce very different styles of wine.

And that's kind of where I want Rioja to get to. And it's also what I'm trying to do with this tasting as a first step to say this place is so complex, it's not just three sub-regions, it's not just wines that taste of American oak and then maybe Tempranillo. It's much, much, much more diverse than that.

Janina Doyle 00:21:25 But I think actually they're trying to do that, aren't they? So for the last few years, there's been that push for the Vinos de Municipios, am I pronouncing it right?

Tim Atkin 00:21:32 Municipios.

Janina Doyle 00:21:33 Municipios, isn't it? So, they are trying to push the village names. There's a single vineyard. Do you feel that they're doing this well, is there still work to make it less complicated? Because there's always that comp...

Tim Atkin 00:21:48 Unfortunately, that so often seems to happen in this region, they're doing it very badly. And the problem with Rioja as a region is that it's dominated by the interests of big bodegas. And the big bodegas resist change, really, in many cases, and these two changes were sort of dragged out of them.

Part of the reason that they did it was that Juan Carlos López de Lacalle of a Bodega called Artadi left Rioja. He basically said, I don't want any more to do with this thing because I can't put the name of my vineyard on the label. And so, he forced change upon them. And I'll come back to the single vineyard

wines, the Viñedos Singulares, in a minute. But the Municipio was, they said, okay, you can use the name of the village.

But again, they did it very badly in that if you have vineyards in more than one village, as many people in Burgundy would do and also many people in Rioja do, you can't use more than one municipio. You can only use the name of the village where your winery is based. So, you have to have a Bodega. It's illogical in the sense that you know, it's the idea is right, but it's badly applied.

The Singulares, they've made it so strict that a lot of people, they qualify one year, then the next year they don't qualify. And instead of classifying the vineyard, they classify the vineyard and then they classify the wine every year. So, you have to keep representing the wine every year. A lot of these wines keep failing the tasting commission. That's one problem.

The other problem is that most of the best single vineyard wines, many of which have been single vineyard wines for over a hundred years, and where the name of the vineyard is the brand, I don't know, something like Contino would be a good example, have not joined the group. And that's a lot of the problem, I think, is that a lot of the best vineyards, single vineyard wines, Tondonia is another one from, Lopez de Heredia, is the name of a vineyard, basically have not joined this group.

So, I think it is a good idea, but so far it hasn't quite worked. But you know, they're going in the right direction, but they need a lot of encouragement. They really do because they almost have to be forced into doing things. And I see it as part of my role to keep disagreeing with them and keep pushing them along and they don't like it.

Janina Doyle 00:23:46 Well, to be fair, I have read many of your reports, whether it be from Chile, Ribera del Duero.

Tim Atkin 00:23:52 Thank you!

Janina Doyle 00:23:53 I haven't read your Rias Baixas report yet. That's on the list, but loads of reports to read. And I do love – anyone, who hasn't read any of Tim's reports. He does seem to want to stick a spanner in the mix everywhere, don't you? It's always like, you haven't got that right yet. You probably should change that. So yeah, you've made enough friends to now try and push them that little bit further, right? You're just giving them nudges.

Tim Atkin 00:24:15 No, I think it's part of being a journalist. Somebody once said the worst kind of journalist is what a wine writer, I think it probably applies to wine writers, is what they call a fan with a laptop.

So, if you're uncritical and you don't think that part of your job is to say this could be better, or to say this is great, this is very good, this is average and this is pretty shit, frankly, you're not really doing your job. And I think that if you go into journalism to make friends, then you're in the wrong business.

I think that part of it should be, you need to offend people sometimes. You know, you do. If everything you say is so bland that nobody takes offence, what's the point of being a journalist? I don't see it. And I think people like the Rioja Consejo Regulador, they don't see that. They think of journalists as fans with laptops. And they shouldn't. I think that journalists should say good, better, best, worst, and why and how places could improve. Anyway, that's my opinion.

Janina Doyle 00:25:12 No, and what I do really appreciate about the report, again, for anyone who's not listened, is that you can go online and you can go, "Oh, teach me about Rioja," And it will say,

“Here's your three regions, these are the soils, this is the elevation and the rainfall,” or you can read and you're putting that in, but you're asking questions, aren't you? And also allowing us to actually think as well.

That is the point. So, there's a little bit more emotion, there's a little bit more feeling in your reports. There isn't so many statistics, is there, Tim?

Tim Atkin 00:25:44 No, I'm trying to avoid the statistics. I mean, the statistics are in there and I think they're important. You just know how many thousand hectares there are, blah, blah, blah. But I think it's important, as you said, to know about how climate change is affecting it? You know, has the Viñedos Singulares worked? How is this region run? Who's it run for? Is it run well? What's the future? There's always a thing in my reports where there are 10 points at the beginning, and one of them is always what next.

And so, where is this place going? And I think that a lot of regions, not just in Spain, but in South Africa, Chile, where I've just been, Chile's in a major crisis at the moment. South Africa has problems selling its wines at the prices they deserve. I mean, this is a global set of problems, is how does the wine industry, and I suppose we're both part of a broader wine industry, how do we talk about that? How do we address those problems?

Janina Doyle 00:26:30 And you just mentioned Chile, I mean, just every year it's like the next fire. The differences in their climate. As we both know, we met because I worked for a Chilean winery.

Tim Atkin 00:26:41 We did.

Janina Doyle 00:26:42 Yes, we did. And I remember even right back at the beginning when I first started, part of my spiel was a bit like, there is a little bit more consistency with the climates in Chile. So you can feel a bit more comfortable. It was almost part of my sale point for Chile. But now, I mean, actually part of the sale point is it's so interesting because it's not. Vintage variation is crazy.

Tim Atkin 00:27:-6 But that's great. That's great. Chile is such, as you know, as well as I do, it's such a long country, uniquely long. There's bound to be diversity. And again, it's one of those things where everyone says, “Oh, right, 2023 was this.” And then you talk to somebody and they say, “It wasn't like that here.” And you look at the coast of Chile, which is, I don't know if you've ever been swimming in that ocean, but it's bloody cold.

Janina Doyle 00:27:27 It's freezing! Well, no. I dipped my toe in.

Tim Atkin 00:27:31 It's a massive body of cold water, and that has an enormous impact on vineyards that are close to the ocean. On the other side, you've got the Andes, and you've got vineyards now at over 2,000 metres. And in the middle, you've got this sort of mostly hotter, fertile series of valleys. But again, those vary massively. So, I suppose, when I'm trying to do the reports and what we're trying to do generally with wine, it's more complex than you think. And that's a good thing.

Wine is very simple in a sense. It's fermented grape juice, right? And it's fun and it gets you merry. And if you drink too much of it, it gets you drunk and gives you a hangover, blah, blah, blah. It goes great with food. We know all that. That's the basics. But the thing I like about wine and it's what makes it interesting journalistically for me is that there are so many areas of it that you can dive into.

The science? I'm not that interested in science, but geology, I'm quite interested in that. The history interests me a lot. The people interest me massively. Music... All the things that I do through wine,

whether it's meeting musicians, whether it's talking to historians about stuff that was happening in the 17th century, if it's looking at soil types, you're walking through vineyards, I think it's so wonderful wine, that it's both very simple and incredibly complex. It's one of the most complex things on earth if you want to dive into it in a deep way.

Janina Doyle 00:28:48 But you know, wine, we will never ever, ever stop learning. So, just even the same way that you've talked about the villages and hopefully that will sort itself out a little bit more. But when people realise there are specific villages in Rioja that are typically producing better quality wine, they can start digging deeper. It's not just, hey, I like Rioja Crianza versus Rioja Reserva. It's like, right, actually, I want to go to Elciego. I'm assuming that would be up there as a village that you would recommend presumably.

Tim Atkin 00:29:23 Not really.

Janina Doyle 00:29:25 Oh, and see now I say that with my limited knowledge because I visited Marques de Riscal. They've got an amazing place to go to because of that ridiculously amazing iconic hotel that's right on the estate. But they make amazing wine, so I just assumed that would be kind of a big tick. Tell me, where would you recommend?

Tim Atkin 00:29:42 Elciego would not be in my list of the best villages. I mean, a lot of the best villages are basically north of the Ebro River, which is where Elciego is as well, but a bit higher up the slope and so places like Laguardia and Labastida, and historically Laguardia and Labastida were two very important fortified towns really, and had a certain degree of rivalry between them.

And those two towns are probably two of the great wine towns of Rioja. And in the middle of those two is a place called San Vicente de la Sonsierra. Now the slightly weird thing is that nearly all of the villages north of the river are in the Rioja Alavesa, right? But there's a little tongue of land that juts up from the Rioja Alta and San Vicente de la Sonsierra is in the middle of it. So, it basically sits on the northern side of the Ebro River facing south mostly, but it's in the Rioja Alta and San Vicente de la Sonsierra is there.

So, I think those villages are great. Some of the villages in the Rioja Oriental, there's a place called Quel that I like very much and Tudelilla.

Janina Doyle 00:30:38 I've never heard.

Tim Atkin 00:30:40 Oh, well, read the report again. And in the southern bit, and this is part of climate change, a lot of these villages that were in the southern bit of Rioja Alta, so very close to the Sierra de la Demanda, which is the southern border of Rioja that faced north, historically were regions that made Clarete. They made the rosé wine.

And the reason they made rosé wine is because you couldn't get the red grapes ripe. They were mostly Garnacha blended with Viura to make Clarete. And a lot of these vineyards now, which are often at 700, 800 metres facing north, Cordovin, places like that, Badarán, these are all very, very amazing villages with 100 year old natural vineyards that with climate change are coming into their own.

So, if you read the report, there are so many amazing villages. I mean Elciego, it's okay, but I wouldn't put it up there in my top 10 if I were being honest.

Janina Doyle 00:31:28 To be honest, I was like, I just know that there's a winery that I really liked there! What about Briones?

Tim Atkin 00:31:36 I put that up there.

Janina Doyle 00:31:37 Because again, I have a lot of emotion there because if I went to Vivanco, got taken care of there and they have an incredible museum. It's really, really special. I always tell people they must go to that museum because I remember this, there's a scratch and sniff in terms of getting the aromas and really getting your nose to start working. Brilliant. And then of course the history, it's very interactive. So, that's something. Where would you recommend people to go and visit?

Obviously, like Haro, is the place you must go because that's where you could just walk up one street and there's some of the most iconic wineries on either side. It's the most amazing thing. But apart from say, Haro, where would you, for somebody to base themselves or spend a few days, are there some places that you've just felt at home or are stunning and beautiful or some of the best views, what do you think?

Tim Atkin 00:32:35 I would base myself in San Vicente de la Sonsierra, because it's on the north side of the river. It's kind of more or less in the middle of the best bits, if you like. And it's quite large as a town, so lots of wine bars, lots of places to go and have breakfast in the morning. Lots of good wineries. It's very close to Briones, it's not very far from Labastida, from Laguardia, from Haro, as you said. And Haro is where the station quarter is. So what transformed Rioja really in the 19th century was the railway line, which went from Haro really, to Madrid, but also to north to Bilbao, and basically took Rioja out northwards to the ports and went overseas from there.

And as you said, a lot of these historic wineries, Rioja Alta and Lopez de Heredia, Muga's a bit more recent, but you know, a lot of these wineries and Cvné, they're all within a five minute walk. So, that's a good place to go and spend the day.

But San Vicente is a great place to base yourself. Go and see people in Laguardia. Laguardia is great, but it's a bit touristy and you can't park inside the town. And it's sometimes difficult to park, but Laguardia is a great place to even visit, but I wouldn't base myself there. I think San Vicente is a great place to be.

But Briones is very close by. As you said, you've got Vivanco, which is this amazing wine museum. You've got two or three really top producers in Briones, not Vivanco, very good, but you've also got Miguel Marino, and you've got Allende. Both of those are within two feet of each other. There's also the hotel that I always stay at in Briones, which is called the Santa Maria Briones, which is I think the best hotel in Rioja. It's not cheap, but it's worth every single penny.

Janina Doyle 00:34:06 Okay, there we go. There's a tick in the...

Tim Atkin 00:34:08 Not sponsored by them. We pay to go there, but it's just really nice.

Janina Doyle 00:34:12 Okay, it's good to know. Actually, just one thing I want to touch on from you've been going back and forth to Rioja and you've been seeing it evolving and you say how interesting the history is.

Rioja Oriental, obviously going to the east, the warmer part of the region, they actually always used to have such a reputation for 'That's the cheap stuff,' and it's changed so much. So just want to just push you a little bit on that to just talk from your opinion, just seeing it in the last decade, how you feel it's evolved and why.

Tim Atkin 00:34:45 Before I do that, I'll just say that it used to be called historically the Rioja Baja, Low Rioja, right? And it was a stupid because as I said, a lot of the highest vineyards in Rioja, the highest vineyards in Rioja are actually in the Rioja Baja, the low Rioja.

It was only called low Rioja because the river Ebro flows from the west to the east. So, the river is at its lowest in the east, right? That's all it was. That's the only reason, anyway, they changed it to eastern Rioja.

Historically, it was a source of a lot of Garnacha – and grenache was blended historically across the region with tempranillo. Tempranillo is lighter bodied, it's earlier ripening, and Garnacha was used to beef up Tempranillo, right? And so the historic blend of Rioja was Tempranillo from the Alavesa or Alta with Garnacha from the east, from the Oriental and little bits and pieces of Mazuelo and Graciano, but those were the salt and pepper, right?

The problem with the Oriental and why it's got a bad reputation is it's dominated by cooperatives, many of which are not very good. It's also dominated by large plantings of Tempranillo in the wrong place. Tempranillo is a very bad grape to plant if the Oriental is too hot. But because it's more productive than Garnacha, they pulled out a lot of the Garnacha and planted Tempranillo instead. Bad move in terms of quality.

So, a lot of Rioja's worst wines come from this particular region. Also, as you said, there's been a counter revolution, really, in the last, I would say, 10 to 15 years of small, mostly smaller producers. but really led by Alvaro Palacios, who's very famous, one of the most famous winemakers in Spain, and he's down there, and he has really championed an area called the Monte Yerga, which is a high mountain. He's got some of these vineyards at 700, 800 metres on the Monte Yerga.

And Alvaro really has relaunched the Rioja Oriental, and he's been followed by other people, Javier Arizcuren. There's another fantastic producer called Vinos En Voz Baja, in other words, vineyards that speak with a quiet voice, who have refocused on Garnacha, mostly on Garnacha, but also in Mazuelo and Graciano, but not on Tempranillo.

So, a lot of the new Rioja Oriental, if you like, is these smaller producers. I mean, Alvaro is a bit bigger than that, but smaller producers who are rediscovering what made the Garnacha great in the Rioja Oriental in the history, really. And they're not really planting Tempranillo, which is great. And I think that Rioja at the moment has got too many vineyards.

And top of the list for the stuff it should pull out should be a lot of the Tempranillo that's been planted in the last 20 years in the Rioja Oriental, which is mostly mediocre and worse. It's what it is.

Janina Doyle 00:37:11 Now, interesting. Yeah, yeah, no, no, no. That's very interesting what you're saying. It possibly should be pulled out. What's your feeling then on, you've talked about the four red grapes, on Viura or the other white grapes. Because I think, actually, about what, one in 20 of wines of Rioja is white. So, it's a very small percentage. Do you have the statistics on that?

Tim Atkin 00:37:37 I think it's about 92% red and about 8% white now. Historically, there were really two and a half, three grapes really. So, Viura, which is the main one. Malvasia, although there are different types of Malvasia, but it's a family of those. And Garnacha Blanca, so white Grenache, which is a mutation of red Grenache.

And then I think I've forgotten the exact year, was it 2008? Time moves on so fast, I can't remember, was it 2007? They allowed lots of other grapes in and some of them were rediscovered grapes that they'd found planted, in small plantings of things. One of which was Tempranillo Blanco, which is a mutation of red Tempranillo. And the other one is called Maturana Blanca.

Maturana Blanca is an amazing grape variety and very historic. It's been in Rioja since about the 16th century. So, it's a very old grape. They also, and this is another example of stupidity, allowed people to plant Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and Verdejo. Does the world need any more Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc from Rioja? It really doesn't. Does it need Verdejo when Ruedo makes Verdejo? No, it doesn't. But they, as ever, made the wrong decision and allowed crap grapes, or rather international grapes, to be planted alongside local grapes and rediscovered local ones.

All of this has meant that Rioja is very diverse and its white wines, I think, are some of the greatest in Spain. And people don't know it. They think that Rioja is a red wine region, but it's actually, I think, I put it up there in the top two or three white wine regions in Spain. And its white wines are every bit as diverse as its red wines, because you can have obviously varietal – you know, any of these things can be made as varietal wines, including Chardonnay, unfortunately, and Sauvignon Blanc, but you can also have really interesting blends. So, you have Viura with Malvasia with Tempranillo Blanco, with Torrontes, which is another, a grape that was allowed back in, historic grape.

And so, the white blends are amazing and they're undervalued. I mean, there are some white wines, particularly the white wines of Lopez de Heredia, Tondonia, which are now getting the prices they deserve, but 20 years ago you couldn't give them away. And these old, they're almost oxidative styles that have got a little bit of sort of sherry notes about them. They've now been recognized partly by me. I think there's some of the great white wines of Spain.

That's one style. There are probably 20 different styles of white wine. So, one of my tips I give you in this podcast would be buy the white wines before they go up in price because they're so brilliant. And if you come to my tasting, there'll be lots of them there, you could easily spend the evening just tasting the whites for an hour and taste those.

Janina Doyle 00:40:00 And to be honest for me, always the best whites from Rioja I've tasted as well, tend to have some oak and have been aged longer. Like you mentioned, Vina Tondonia, which gosh, anyone who doesn't know about Vina Tondonia, check out the Rose, the Red, the White, all of them fantastic. But are you finding there's a lot of beautiful examples without oak that are just showing Viura in its more classic form?

Tim Atkin 00:40:22 I mean, it's another myth of Rioja. The problem is that to be called Crianza Reserva or Gran Reserva, your wine has to be aged for a specific amount of time in 225 litre oak, right? So, they actually tell you what size of oak you can use.

Most of the best younger producers have said stuff about, I don't want to follow what they're telling me to do. I only do my own thing. So, I might want to use concrete eggs. I might want to use 500 litre barrels. I might want to use cement tanks. I might want to use Acacia. I might want to use Russian oak.

And so, the new wave, if you like, again, is just pushing the boundaries. So, this tiny little sort of redoubt of Rioja that thinks it's got to be this way, is slowly being just exploded by people saying, why do we have to do that?

That's not even historic. I mean, historically, people didn't use 225 litres. If you look at old pictures of Rioja in the 19th century, they had big foudre, enormous, great big, large, you know, several hectolitre tanks or large barrels.

So, I think what is historic and what is not historic is open to interpretation. And I think that I like the idea of anything goes. It's the iconoclast in me. And I think, again, it's what I like. As you said, a lot of them do have oak, but lots of them don't. A lot of the best wines have very little new oak. They might have big oak or older oak or all those other things I talked about, including concrete eggs and whatever really, anything goes. And that's what makes it interesting.

Janina Doyle 00:41:45 And certainly the newer generation are really stepping away from oak usage and as you said, different ageing vessels that are not going to add flavour. So, to slowly finish off this episode on Rioja, of the new generation winemakers, there are a few that come to mind that you feel happy to just mention and give people a suggestion of a few places that people might want to, in fact, even to come and see at the tasting.

Tim Atkin 00:42:11 I'm very happy to, and one of the things I do in my reports is I've nicked the 1855 classification from Bordeaux. And so, I use it for my own purposes. So, I have first growths, second growths, third growths, fourth growths, fifth growths.

Two people who are still comparably young, at least to me, who are in my first growths, and they're not very far apart. You can drive between two quite easily. One is in Briones, which would be Miguel Merino, Miguel Merino Jr., because his dad was also called Miguel Merino. And the other would be a Bodega called Artuke, who are in Baños de Rio Ebro, and they're right on the river Ebro, again in the Rioja Alavesa. And Artuke was one of only two wines from Rioja I've ever given 100 points. The other one was a white wine from Vina Tondonia.

So, Artuke La Condénada, I'd go and see those two. You also might wanna go and see Jose Gil, again, G-I-L, he's based in Briones, but has vineyards in San Vicente de la Sonsierra. A great, great, great friend of mine, he's my age, so he's not young anymore, but is Abel Mendoza, or Mendoza, I suppose, who and his wife is called Maite, and Maite and Abel, if you get a chance to go and taste with them, sit around their kitchen table. They're in San Vicente de la Sonsierra.

That is kind of the quintessential Rioja experience. So, think small, go and see the small producers and just make the best of them really.

Janina Doyle 00:21:25 I love that. Okay, right. Because wine is fun, because you don't take things seriously, we're gonna finish off this episode with a bit of a quick fire so people just know your thoughts. Right. So, tell me your thoughts on Sangria. Yeah or nah?

Tim Doyle 00:43:43 If there's nothing else to drink.

Janina Doyle 00:43:45 Stemless wine glasses?

Tim Atkin 00:43:49 Fine by me. As long as it's got a good bowl, I think the stem is not an important bit. I mean, it's slightly harder to do a bit of a swirl, that professional thing that we all do, but I think stemless is fine. I'm not a snob where it comes to glass. I like a good glass, but it needs to be a good bowl.

Janina Doyle 00:44:05 No, I'm good, because I'm always like, there's a Riedel glass, which has no stem. I love them. I'm a big fan of that. Okay, good, good. Wine in a can?

Tim Atkin 00:44:14 Why not if it brings new people into the wine industry? And I think one of the big problems we have is that people of your generation and younger than you – sorry, are there people younger than you? There are now.

Janina Doyle 00:44:25 There definitely are!

Tim Atkin 00:44:25 Exactly. They're not necessarily interested in drinking 75 centilitres of wine or sharing it with their mates. They might just want a little can. I think cans, there's some very good wines in cans now. So, I think rather than the package, it's the wine that matters. I think as long as the wine in the package is good, then who cares? Bag in box, fine. Tetra pack, fine. I'm really not a packaging snob. I don't think it has to be in a bottle to be great.

Janina Doyle 00:44:50 Okay. One kind of proof. Flavoured wine?

Tim Atkin 00:44:54 No, thank you.

Janina Doyle 00:44:58 Okay. What about this trend? Rosé wine with jalapeno in it. Have you done it?

Tim Atkin 00:45:03 No, the weirdest thing I've had was actually a Chinese wine with a dead lizard in it.

Janina Doyle 00:45:09 What!?

Tim Atkin 00:45:10 Where the lizard had actually started to flake off. The jalapeno pepper with anything sounds pretty horrible to me. That's going to be pretty hot. Chilli peppers are one of those things that they're not enemies of wine, but they make it difficult. They're a very strong flavour and I think that they make it difficult to drink. So, I think that that would be a pass.

Janina Doyle 00:45:35 And to finish off, non-alcoholic wine.

Tim Atkin 00:45:38 They always seem completely pointless to me. It really is, because I think part of the joy of wine is alcohol, that it gets you slightly merry. I do recognise that some people have to drive and things like that. Well, I just think, well, drink water or just have one glass. Non-alcoholic wine seems to me to be utterly pointless.

If you want low alcohol wine, which is different, drink Moscato d'Asti. Moscato d'Asti is a delicious drink that has five percent alcohol. I mean, five percent alcohol for a beer would be quite strong, but for a wine, that's about as light as it gets without you going into non-alcohol or low, deliberately made low alcohol wines where they remove the alcohol.

The other thing I'd recommend would be German Riesling, Mosel Riesling like a Spatlese or a Kabinett, you can get 8% Mosel Rieslings, which are absolutely delicious. And again, the alcohol is not too high. So, if you want to drink lighter wines, I'd say drink wines with lower alcohol, but not wines where the alcohol has been removed. Is that all right?

Janina Doyle 00:46:34 Perfect! Oh, God.

Tim Atkin 00:46:35 That's the end of my speech.

Janina Doyle 00:46:36 Done. Finished!

Janina Doyle 00:46:43 So, don't forget, you can go to Timatkin.com if you want to buy tickets to go to the London Rioja wine tasting event, but also from the website you can download all of his special reports whether it be on the wines of Chile, wines of South Africa, there's even one on Rias Baixas right now, there's a whole load, but one of his latest was on the wine region, Ribera del Duero.

And so, for that reason, you need to join us for part 2 next week where we'll be talking about his winemaking champions, the winemakers on his podium. We'll be talking about grape varieties like Albillo Mayor, this is a white grape variety. Tim will be telling us where to stay, what to do. So, stay tuned for next week.

Now, I did a wine quote from Louis Pasteur last week. So, you know what? I'm just going to do another one of his because I like them. And so he said:

“A bottle of wine. contains more philosophy than all the books in the world.”

Right, that's it. You know what's coming next week. Like this podcast, share this podcast with your wine loving friends. And do, if you have a few moments, leave a review and some stars on Apple Podcast or Spotify. Love to you all. May this year continue to inspire you, motivate you. I hope you're all planning that trip to Rioja. And until next week, wine friends, cheers to you!