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Meeting José Andrés, and the Wines of Spain's Ribeiro Region

Chef José Andrés comes across as bright and lively; approachable, yet a bit dazzling—in short, the life of any party—and the same could be said for the Spanish wines he introduced me to last week.

"Spain is so funny, because historically, or at least when I grew up, people consider the best white to be a good red," joked Andrés, who was born in the northern region of Asturias and was named today as a semifinalist for the prestigious James Beard Foundation Award for Outstanding Chef. "But I'm a big fan of whites. As a chef, I look for wines that tend to enlighten you; wake you up, almost like a sunny day."

When I met Andrés at Jaleo, one of seven restaurants he owns in and around Washington, D.C., he was hosting a mid-day wine tasting to celebrate the launch of several Ribeiro wines in the U.S. market.

Never heard of Ribeiro, the "denomination of origin" (DO) wine region in Spain's northwest corner? Don't feel bad; neither had I. But it's a drop worth drinking.



Ribeiro wines at Jaleo, courtesy Deussen.

Whites are Ribeiro's signature, representing over 80 percent of the region's average annual production, which totals 16 million kilograms from 119 wineries or bodegas. Seven of those were represented at the Jaleo tasting, including Casal de Arman, Viña Mein, Sanclodio, Nairoa, Coto de Gomariz, Docampo and Viña Costeira. (I only sampled the first three, since it was the middle of a work day and I'm not very skilled at spitting.) Most retail for less than \$20 a bottle—a bargain, if you can find them over here. A few U.S. importers of Ribeiro include P.R. Grisley, Eric Solomon and De Maison

Selections, though that's certainly not a comprehensive list.

I enjoyed everything I sampled, but my personal favorite was Sanclodio, owned by acclaimed Spanish filmmaker José Luis Cuerda. His 2008 Ribeiro Blanco, a blend of five native grapes (treixadura, godello, loureira, torrónés and albariño) is lovely. Its soft, peachy flavors flirt with sharper citrus and mineral notes, wrapped in a whiff of honeysuckle—exactly what my imagination expected from the man behind a film titled "Butterfly's Tongue."

Andrés said he especially admires Cuerda and other Ribeiro winemakers who have helped revive the cultivation of some of the region's lesser-known native varieties, like godello.

"When it's a grape that has been in the area for centuries, maybe it's the one that's able to interpret the story of the earth better than any other one," he mused. "And I think protecting the integrity of our history is the only way to preserve who we are. A grape might not change humanity all of a sudden—but it means something."