

A Journey to the Moon and Back

Exploring Lanzarote's unique wines and vineyards can feel like wandering into another world.

by Robin Goldsmith

The Canary Islands are a favorite vacation destination and cruise ships regularly head there. Yet not many visitors know that this sun-kissed archipelago with its beautiful beaches, volcanic landscapes, and busy bars, 60 miles west of the coast of Morocco, is also a haven for wine lovers.



Wines of the Canary Islands

Wine has been made in the Canaries since the 15th century, when Europeans conquered the islands. For many years after, British merchant and Royal Navy ships carried sweet, fortified Canary wine to mainland Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Australia. Millions of gallons of sack or malmsey, as it was called, were exported to the UK each year during the 16th and 17th centuries and enjoyed by royalty, aristocrats, and writers, including Shakespeare.

As desire for French and Portuguese wines began to grow in the 18th century, demand for Canary wine declined and most of the islands' industry collapsed. Now, with interest growing in more unusual, fresh, and savory styles, the islands' vineyards offer something new for the modern wine lover. They are completely different from anywhere else on Earth and none moreso than those found on the moon-like island of Lanzarote.



“ In 1730, a series of volcanic eruptions began which lasted six years...and created the lunar landscape we see today. ”



Literally Erupting onto the Wine Scene

Lanzarote is the oldest and the furthest northeast of the seven major Canary Islands. It is thought to owe its name to a Genoese sailor, Lancelotto Malocello, who arrived there in the 14th century.

In 1730, a series of volcanic eruptions began which lasted six years. They destroyed the crop-producing central plains and created the lunar landscape we see today. Around one third of the island (77 square miles) became covered with lava and ash, called *picón*.

Despite this devastation, the volcanic debris was found to have special properties. It proved particularly good for growing wine grapes.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BODEGAS LOS BERMEJIOS; VALLEY/STOCK.ADOBE.COM; ROBIN GOULDSMITH/BODEGAS LOS BERMEJIOS; SONG_ABOUT_SUMMER/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Rock meets sea at Papagayo Beach.



Harsh Climate, Ingenious Solutions

Lanzarote has a subtropical, semi-arid climate. There is very little rainfall and no bodies of fresh water either. However, moist Atlantic trade winds (*alisios*) blowing in from the northeast keep humidity levels on the island high, except during the occasional *calima*, a hot, dry wind blowing over from the Sahara. The nutrient-rich picón is great at absorbing this scarce moisture, so can feed growing vines in otherwise impossible conditions. Consequently, the islanders devised ingenious methods of viticulture, which remain to this day.

Many vines are planted in the center of crater-like pits called *hoyos*. These are dug deep into the soil, past the thick layers of picón and solidified volcanic lava. The hoyos are surrounded by semi-circular stone walls called *socos*. These protect the vines from wind and daytime heat while trapping humidity.

Alternatively, some growers use *zanjas* — rows of vines dug in trenches, protected by long stone walls — and some vines are planted in *chabocos*, naturally occurring volcanic fissures in the lava.

Native Grapes

There are five native grapes on the island. The main one is malvasía volcánica, typically making white wines with tropical and citrus fruit notes; mineral, saline freshness; and bright acidity. Diego also produces wines with high levels of acidity, but the fruit character is more like green apple, pear, and citrus with some herbaceous notes. Listán blanco is mostly found in blends, while moscatel de Alexandria is used almost exclusively for floral, sweet wines.

The only indigenous red grape is listán negro, which is also grown throughout the Canaries. Wines made from this are typically dry, aromatic, and light-to-medium bodied. They are low in tannins and can show red and black fruit notes with a mineral, smoky character.



Visiting Vineyards

MANY VINEYARDS
ARE OPEN TO VISITORS.
HERE ARE A FEW SUGGESTIONS:

El Grifo is the oldest bodega in the Canaries, making wine since 1775. It's also the location of the Lanzarote Wine Museum. Their wide selection of wines includes the famous sweet, fortified malvasía Canari.

Los Bermejos is also worth a visit. Their Diego seco goes fantastically well with the local fish and seafood!

El Tablero is the definition of a boutique winery, producing just a few thousand bottles a year, sold only from the on-site shop. Their malvasía seco is a superb, pure example of malvasía volcánica, while their listán negro tinto is a delicious example of a fresh red wine.

Vulcano Lanzarote has a stylish little shop off the main road in Tías with wines produced next door. Try their malvasía volcánica robele for a richer expression of the grape with a more rounded, slightly buttery mouthfeel.

If you don't manage to visit any vineyards, then you can find many superb-value wines in supermarkets, often costing under €10 (\$10.50) a bottle, and in restaurants. Vega de Yuco's yaiza blanco seco (100 percent malvasía volcánica) in its iconic blue-glass bottle, for example, is widely available.

For more information on the island's wines and visiting vineyards there, Wine Tours Lanzarote is highly recommended. ●

Los Bermejos dry volcanic malvasía, or malvasía volcánica seco

