



Spain's Hidden Cherry Valley

Lynn E. Long, 2000

Having previously traveled to Spain to learn about the Spanish Bush training system I was surprised to discover that there was a large Spanish production region that I knew nothing about. As it turns out, the Jerte Valley is the largest cherry production area in Spain, and, not only the earliest, but also the latest production region in the country.

The Jerte Valley, located several hours southwest of Madrid, near the Portuguese border, is a 40 mile long valley surrounded by steep walls. As I drove into the valley from the north I left the snow capped mountains behind and looked out over a valley that was lush with cultivated orchards. What I didn't realize at the time was that almost every cultivated tree was a cherry. I used to think that The Dalles area was the most densely planted cherry production area in the world. However, I soon learned that this distinction belongs to the Jerte Valley of Spain where 15,000 acres of cherries are grown.

Originally a chestnut production area, cherries became the dominant crop at the beginning of the 20th century when the chestnut blight disease destroyed that industry. Cherry trees are now planted on terraces. These rock terraces extend from the valley floor at 1100 feet elevation up to 3600 feet elevation and help to make this one of the most beautiful cherry production areas that I have ever seen. The sense of beauty was heightened when I saw waterfalls rushing

through cherry orchards. An element of quaintness was added when I saw an orchardist plowing his orchard with a horse drawn plow.

Planting a multitude of varieties at different elevations contributes to a huge harvest window. The cherry harvest generally begins within the first two weeks of April and doesn't finish until late July.



Burlat and Van, early and mid-season cherries, make up a sizable percentage of the 35,000 ton annual production. However, the really interesting cherries are harvested late. Sixty percent of the total production is comprised of a group of four varieties collectively called "Picota". The earliest of these four varieties is harvested after Sweetheart. That is notable in itself, but what makes this group of cherries really interesting is that they are all harvested and sold as stemless cherries.

England and Germany make up 60% of the market for these cherries. I purchased a pound of Picota cherries while in England. They were packaged in a clam-shell container with a cellophane cover and a large Picota label. Despite the fact that they lacked a stem they were quite attractive. The market price for the Picota cherries was \$1.50 per pound. The growers generally received \$0.53 per pound for Picota cherries as opposed to \$1.06 per pound for Burlat and \$0.80 per pound for Van. Three of the Picota varieties are relatively small cherries, but the fourth, called Ambrunes, is the variety I purchased and is a nice 10 row size. It was very firm and sweet but lacked the punch of a freshly harvested Bing.

In many ways the Jerte Valley seemed to be entering the 20th and 21st centuries all at the same time. Horse drawn plows, small farms utilizing family labor, and large, open vase trees contrasted with the first two cherry lines in all of Spain. In addition, new training system and rootstock trials and a radio network system linking all 5,500 growers in the region to coordinate sprays and harvest timing showed that great strides were being made by scientists and packing houses.



This contrast made the Jerte Valley an interesting, as well as beautiful place to visit. However, perhaps the most important lesson that I learned was that stemless cherries could indeed compete in the same markets as Northwest cherries.