

The Balearic Islands

Port de Soller, Mallorca

Introduction

The Balearic Islands (officially Illes Balears) is an archipelago of four main islands in the Mediterranean sea—Mallorca, Menorca, Ibiza and Formentera—each offering a unique blend of cultural heritage and natural beauty. The islands have been shaped by centuries of conquest and occupation by different peoples, with castles, watchtowers, churches and ancient towns reflecting a rich and varied past.

As in many Spanish regions, tradition and modernity coexist. Mallorca is known for its mountains, coastline and cultural scene; Menorca for its UNESCO-designated biosphere reserve; Ibiza for its legendary nightlife; and Formentera for its laid-back, Mediterranean lifestyle.

The islands also boast a distinctive culinary identity, with local specialties such as the *ensaimada* (a spiral-shaped pastry), *sobrassada* (a soft, cured pork sausage) and an abundance of fresh seafood—each pairing beautifully with the region's wines.

History

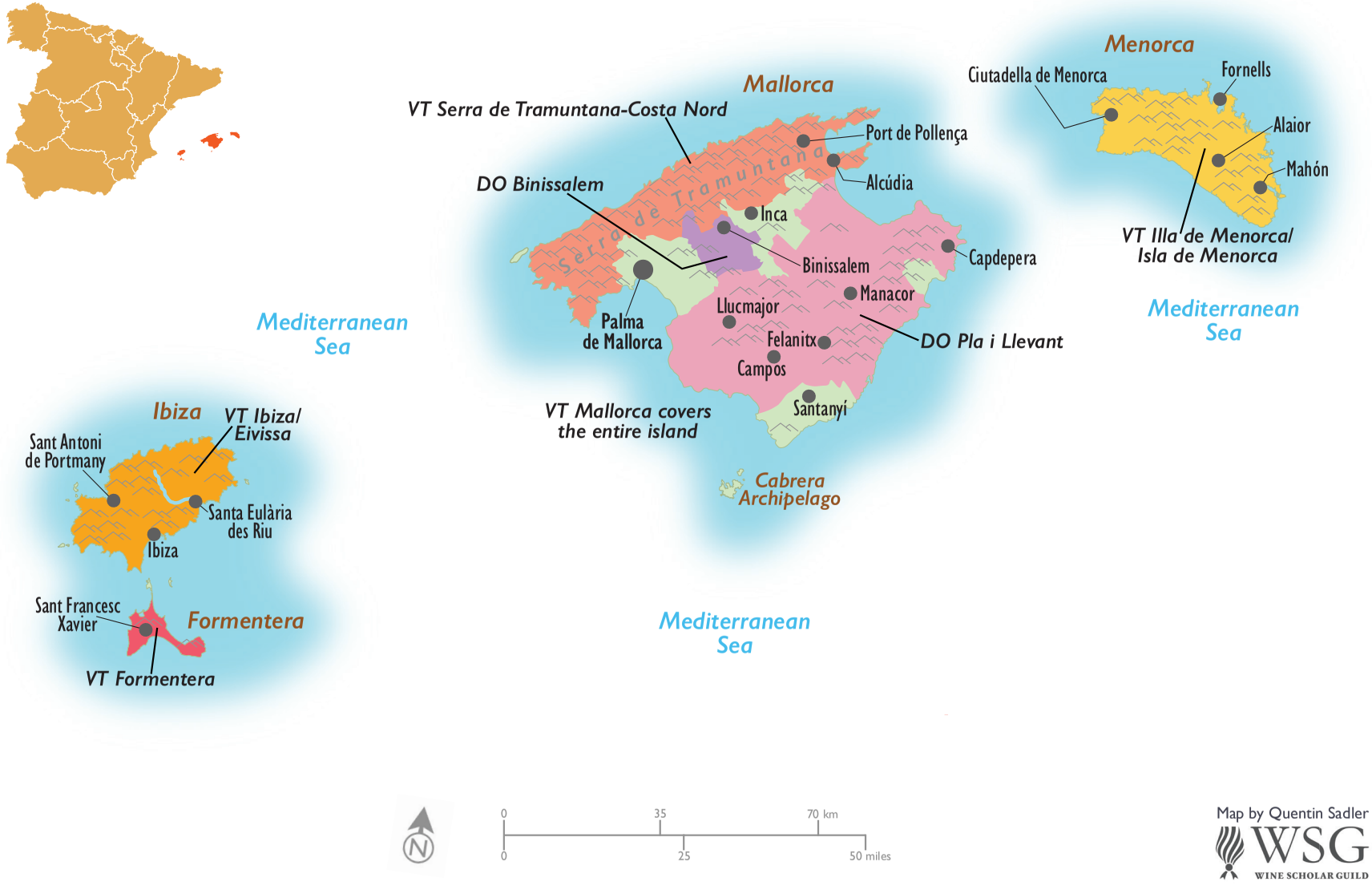
The earliest recorded history of the Balearic Islands is attributed to the Greek poet, Lycophron, who chronicled a shipwreck in which Greek sailors washed up upon the islands without clothing. They then lived alongside the local inhabitants who were said to go naked or were scantily clad. For this reason, the Greeks labeled the primary islands—Mallorca and Menorca—the *Illes Gimnèsies* (Gymnesic or "Naked" Islands). The smaller islands—Ibiza and Formentera—were also named by the Greeks and referred to as *Illes Pitiüses* (Pityusic or "Pine" Islands), as these islands were covered in pine trees.

The Phoenicians occupied the islands during the 7th century BCE and introduced vines and winemaking knowhow. Several centuries later, the Romans conquered Mallorca and Menorca, and winemaking flourished. In 73 CE, the Roman naturalist and author Pliny the Elder commented in his *Historiae Naturalis*, Book XIV that the wines of these islands could rival the best wines of Italy.



Roman ruins of Pollentia, Alcúdia, Mallorca

The Balearic Islands



Map by Quentin Sadler

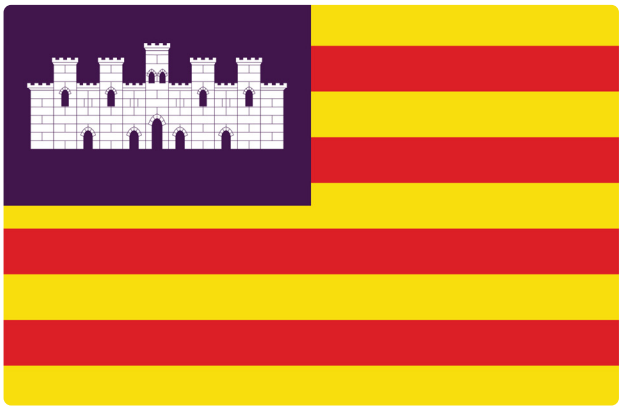
WSG
WINE SCHOLAR GUILD

Control of the islands changed hands multiple times—from the Vandals to the Byzantines to the Moors—each ruling for extended periods. King Jaime I of Aragón conquered the islands in 1229, and winemaking quickly became a focal point. Monastic orders, especially on Mallorca, played a key role in the industry's growth. The islands' strategic location in the Mediterranean enabled exports to Cataluña and southern France.

When phylloxera devastated French vineyards in the 1860s, demand for Balearic wine soared—until the pest reached the islands themselves in 1891. Many vineyards were replaced with almond and olive trees rather than replanted to vines and the wine industry struggled well into the 20th century.

A revival began in the late 20th century with the approval of two DOs—Binissalem and Pla i Llevant—both located on Mallorca. Today, the Balearics have a thriving wine industry, with strong local demand fueled by tourism and a growing export market.

Location & Climate



Flag of Illes Balears

The Balearic Islands lie in the western Mediterranean Sea, approximately 80-300 km/50-186 mi off the eastern coast of Spain. The archipelago is made up of two groups of islands.

The eastern and larger group, sometimes referred to as the Balearics proper, includes Mallorca, Menorca and the small island of Cabrera. The smaller western group, comprising Ibiza and Formentera, is known as the Pityusas.

The Balearic Islands is the smallest autonomous community in Spain by land area and consists of a single province with the same name. The capital is Palma de Mallorca, located on the largest island, Mallorca. It has a population of more than 430,000—nearly 35% of the total population of the Balearics.



La Seu Cathedral, Mallorca

The islands have a Mediterranean climate, with warm summers and mild winters. Average temperatures in the eastern islands (Mallorca and Menorca) tend to be higher, ranging from 4-37°C/39-99°F. The western islands (Ibiza and Formentera) experience a more moderate range of 12-26°C/54-79°F. The Serra de Tramuntana mountains in northwestern Mallorca have the coolest temperatures in the region.

Annual rainfall throughout the islands ranges from 300-650 mm/12-26 in, with most precipitation occurring in autumn and winter. The Serra de Tramuntana is again the exception, receiving as much as 1,500 mm/59 in per year.

Mallorca and Menorca are occasionally affected by the Tramontana, a cold, dry wind that originates between the Pyrenees and France's Massif Central. It blows across the Gulf of Lion and can surge across the islands. Menorca is most affected, while Mallorca is partially protected by the Serra de Tramuntana range.

Mallorca also experiences a localized thermal breeze called the **Embat**. This soft, humid sea wind arises during the summer, typically around midday, peaks in the afternoon and dies down at sunset.

Topography & Soils

The archipelago of the Balearic Islands is a geological extension of the Sistema Bético, a mountain system that originates in Andalucía, extends through southern Valencia and reemerges in Mallorca as the Serra de Tramuntana. Most of the islands are relatively flat, with the exception of Mallorca.

The Serra de Tramuntana runs southwest to northeast for approximately 90 km/56 mi, forming the island's northern backbone. Its highest peak, Puig Major, rises to 1,445 m/4,741 ft. Rainfall is greater and temperatures lower in the mountains, where snow is not uncommon. In 2011, the Serra de Tramuntana was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its exceptional natural landscape.



Serra de Tramuntana mountains, Mallorca

The islands are virtually devoid of rivers. The exception is the Santa Eulalia River on Ibiza, though it is more of a stream—except during storms. The river stretches just 17 km/11 mi and flows into the Mediterranean on the northeastern coast of the island.

Water is sourced from freshwater lakes or desalination plants, and vineyard irrigation is common. However, growers must also contend with violent autumn downpours and occasional hailstorms. Despite the islands' beauty, their weather can be challenging.

Topsoils in many areas are generally nutrient-poor and calcareous in nature with a limestone subsoil high in calcium and magnesium carbonate. Its capacity to hold water is crucial to island agriculture as there is relatively low rainfall. In many areas of Mallorca, the limestone-rich soils form hardpans which must be broken to allow vine roots to penetrate.



Terraced vineyards in Banyalbufar, VT Mallorca

The soils of Menorca largely consist of marl atop limestone and sandstone. Ibiza has clay-loam soils atop limestone, while the island of Formentera is predominantly limestone and sand. In central and eastern Mallorca, DO Pla i Llevant is home to a unique topsoil known as ***call vermell***—a reddish clay often mixed with limestone gravels or stones. This soil is free-draining and well-suited to viticulture on the island. Mallorca also has pockets of loamy-clay.

Grape Varieties

The majority of vineyards were decimated by the phylloxera epidemic. Following replanting, several indigenous varieties were revived alongside the introduction of popular international grapes. Today, these coexist successfully: indigenous varieties include the white Prensal Blanc (also known as Moll) and the black varieties Manto Negro, Callet

and Fogoneu, while Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay are the most widely planted international grapes. In the Serra de Tramuntana production zone on Mallorca, Malvasía holds particular importance.



Manto Negro grapes

The remaining islands primarily focus on black varieties. Menorca favors Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, while Ibiza and Formentera champion Monastrell.

Viticulture & Winemaking

Vines were traditionally trained *en vaso*, but as vineyards are replanted, growers are switching over to *espaldera*. Given the relatively flat landscape, mechanization is widespread throughout the islands. The primary exception are those vineyards planted in the northwestern parts of Mallorca where the terrain near the Serra de Tramuntana mountains makes mechanization more difficult.

Current wine production is significantly lower than in the 19th century, when the industry reached its historic peak exporting wine to phylloxera-ravaged France. As noted earlier, the islands' vineyards eventually succumbed to the pest as well, and many were replaced with almond and olive trees. In the 1980s, European Economic Community subsidies further reduced the vineyard acreage, as growers were paid to remove vines in favor of other agricultural crops.

Today, most industry growth and investment is concentrated on Mallorca. White, rosé, red and sparkling wines are all produced, and the majority of the bottlings are intended for early consumption. However, a number of producers are experimenting with extended lees aging and barrel aging of whites—particularly Prensal Blanc. High-quality, age-worthy red wines, predominantly made from the indigenous Manto Negro and Callet, are also making their mark in both domestic and export markets.

DOs of The Balearic Islands

DO Binissalem

DO Awarded: 1990
Wine Styles: *Blanco, Rosado, Tinto, Espumoso, Dulce*
Grape Varieties:

- **White** [P] Prensal Blanc/Moll, Moscatel de Alejandría, Moscatel de Grano Menudo [S] Parellada, Macabeo, Chardonnay, Giró Ros
- **Black** [P] Manto Negro [S] Callet, Tempranillo, Monastrell, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Gorgollassa, Escursac

DO Binissalem has a long history of wine production, which peaked during the initial outbreak of phylloxera in France. Unfortunately, when the louse reached Mallorca in 1891, it devastated the island's vineyards. Over the last few decades, however, wine production has grown alongside the rise of tourism. Considerable investment in both vineyards and wineries has resulted in widespread success for Binissalem wines, both locally and internationally.

The wine region is relatively small—just 155 km²/ 60 mi²—and is located in west-central Mallorca near the foothills of the Serra de Tramuntana. These mountains shield the vineyards from the harsh Tramontana winds. Most vineyards are planted from 70-140 m/230-459 ft in elevation, in limestone soils topped with large limestone gravel.



DO Binissalem vineyard (Photo by Rick Fisher)

Black varieties represent 72% of total plantings. Among these, Manto Negro and Cabernet Sauvignon are the most widely planted, representing 41% and 14% of the black plantings, respectively. Prensal Blanc (also known as Moll) makes up 50% of all white grape plantings.

Red wines must contain a minimum 30% of Manto Negro and no more than 30% of Gorgollassa. These wines may carry the *Crianza*, *Reserva* and *Gran Reserva* designations. Manto Negro-based wines are typically pale in color, with floral and berry notes. They tend to be light-bodied, low in tannin and high in alcohol. The grape is often blended with international varieties to enhance color and structure.

White wines require at least 50% Prensal Blanc or Moscatel. The wines are known for their fresh, easy-drinking style with notes of citrus and white fruit such as apple and pear. Rosé wines have few restrictions but limit Gorgollassa to a maximum 30% of the blend.

DO Pla i Llevant

DO Awarded: 1999
Wine Styles: *Blanco, Rosado, Tinto, Espumoso, Licor*
Grape Varieties:

- **White** [P] Prensal Blanco/Moll, Giró Ros [S] Chardonnay, Macabeo, Moscatel de Grano Menudo, Moscatel de Alejandría, Parellada, Riesling, Viognier
- **Black** [P] Callet, Fogoneu, Gorgollassa, Manto Negro [S] Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Monastrell, Pinot Noir, Syrah, Tempranillo

DO Pla i Llevant means "plain and east coast" in Catalan, which perfectly describes the flat landscape stretching across Mallorca's eastern half. This is the warmer, drier side of the island, though its climate is tempered by Embat sea breezes, which bring moisture during the summer and can impart saline notes to the wines.

Vineyards range from sea level to 100 m/328 ft and are rooted in *call vermell*, the reddish clay-limestone soils typical of the region. These soils help to retain moisture—crucial in the hot, dry climate—and their red color absorbs heat, aiding in the ripening process and contributing to robust, structured wines.



Fermentation tanks at Vinyes i Bodegues Miquel Oliver (Photo by Rick Fisher)

Black and white varieties account for 64% and 36% of plantings, with international varieties representing approximately 60% overall. Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Callet dominate black plantings (44% combined), while Prensal Blanc, Chardonnay and Giró Ros top the white (28%).

Most wines from DO Pla i Llevant are blends, while varietal wines are primarily made from international varieties. There are no restrictions regarding the specified usage of primary or secondary grape varieties.

VTs of The Balearic Islands

VT Mallorca

VT Awarded: 1999
Wine Styles: *Blanco, Rosado, Tinto, Dulce*
Grape Varieties:

- **White** [P] Prensal, Chardonnay [S] Macabeo, Malvasía Aromática, Moscatel de Alejandría, Moscatel de Grano Menudo, Parellada, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Giró Ros, Viognier
- **Black** [P] Callet, Manto Negro, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Tempranillo, Syrah [S] Fogoneu, Monastrell, Pinot Noir, Gorgollassa

VT Mallorca, established in 1999, is the oldest of the Balearic Islands' VT classifications. It covers the entire island, offering producers within DO boundaries greater flexibility and creativity, while providing oversight to those outside DO zones. Red, white, rosé and sweet wines are all produced under the VT Mallorca designation.

VT Illes Balears

VT Awarded: 2004
Wine Styles: *Blanco, Rosado, Tinto, Dulce*
Grape Varieties:

- **White** [P] Prensal Blanc, Chardonnay, Malvasía Aromática [S] Macabeo, Moscatel de Alejandría, Moscatel de Grano Menudo, Parellada, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier
- **Black** [P] Manto Negro, Cabernet Sauvignon, Callet, Merlot, Monastrell, Syrah, Tempranillo [S] Fogoneu, Pinot Noir

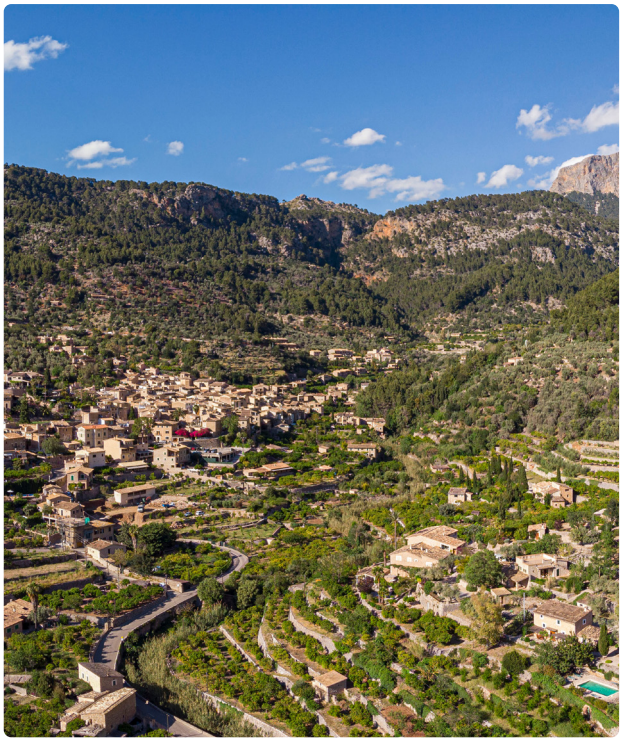
VT Illes Balears is an umbrella appellation covering all islands in the archipelago. Grapes may be sourced from any island and blended—even across islands—for use in varietal wines or blends. While uncommon, this practice is permitted. Most production under this designation is red, with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Callet as the primary black varieties. Only a handful of producers use VT Illes Balears, among them Ànima Negra—one of Mallorca's best-known wineries—even though all of their grapes are grown on the island.

VT Serra de Tramuntana-Costa Nord

VT Awarded: 2004
Wine Styles: *Blanco, Rosado, Tinto, Dulce*
Grape Varieties:

- **White** [P] Malvasía [S] Chardonnay, Macabeo, Moscatel de Alejandría, Moscatel de Grano Menudo, Parellada, Prensal Blanca, Sauvignon Blanc
- **Black** [P] Callet, Manto Negro, Syrah [S] Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Monastrell, Tempranillo

VT Serra de Tramuntana–Costa Nord is located in the northwestern third of Mallorca and includes the highest-elevation vineyards in the archipelago, with plantings reaching 800 m/2,625 ft. Wine has been cultivated here since Roman times, and the terraces still used for vineyards today date back to the Moorish occupation. The region is especially known for its Malvasía wines, introduced around the 15th or 16th centuries. These wines were highly prized and once graced the tables of nobles, ecclesiastics and wealthy Mallorquins. Malvasía remains the region's primary grape today.



Historic village of Fornalutx

VT Illa de Menorca/Isla de Menorca

VT Awarded: 2011
Wine Styles: *Blanco, Rosado, Tinto, Dulce*
Grape Varieties:

- **White** [P] Chardonnay, Macabeo, Malvasía [S] Moscatel de Alejandría, Parellada, Moll/ Prensal Blanca, Garnacha Blanca
- **Black** [P] Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Tempranillo [S] Monastrell, Syrah, Garnacha Tinta

VT Illa de Menorca/Isla de Menorca (Catalan/ Spanish) covers the entire island of Menorca. While the Phoenicians and Romans contributed to the island's early viticultural history, wine production expanded significantly during the British occupation (1708-1802), when the population grew dramatically. Menorca is the northernmost and windiest of the Balearic Islands, heavily influenced by the powerful Tramontana wind. Malvasía, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot are the dominant grapes on the island. Most of Menorca's wines are consumed locally or elsewhere within the Balearic Islands, with less than 5% reaching mainland Spain or export markets.

VT Ibiza/Eivissa

VT Awarded: 2004
Wine Styles: *Blanco, Rosado, Tinto*
Grape Varieties:

- **White** [P] Macabeo, Malvasía [S] Chardonnay, Moscatel de Alejandría, Moscatel de Grano Menudo, Parellada
- **Black**: [P] Monastrell, Tempranillo [S] Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah

VT Ibiza/Eivissa (Spanish/Catalan) encompasses the island of Ibiza. Although relatively unknown for wine production today, Ibiza has a long viticultural history. The Phoenicians established the island as a key hub in the Mediterranean, as evidenced by drinking vessels and amphoras dating back to the 7th century BCE. Vineyards are planted on gentle slopes in valleys between two low-lying mountain ranges, neither of which rises above 500 m/1,640 ft. Black grapes account for 73% of all plantings, with Monastrell as the dominant variety.



Vineyard planted en vaso, Ibiza

VT Formentera

VT Awarded: 2006
Wine Styles: *Blanco, Rosado, Tinto, Dulce*
Grape Varieties:

- **White** [P] Malvasía Aromática, Prensal [S] Chardonnay, Viognier, Garnacha Blanca, Moscatel de Grano Menudo
- **Black** [P] Monastrell, Fogoneu, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot [S] Tempranillo, Syrah

VT Formentera covers the entire island of Formentera. The island has a long viticultural history, which came to a standstill in the 14th century when the Black Death (bubonic plague) wiped out the entire population. Repopulation did not begin until the 18th century, slowly restoring vine cultivation to the island. Today, viticulture is one of Formentera's primary industries, and Monastrell, accounting for nearly 45% of plantings, is the dominant grape variety.