

# Spanish Wine Snapshot

A road trip around Spanish Wine - 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition

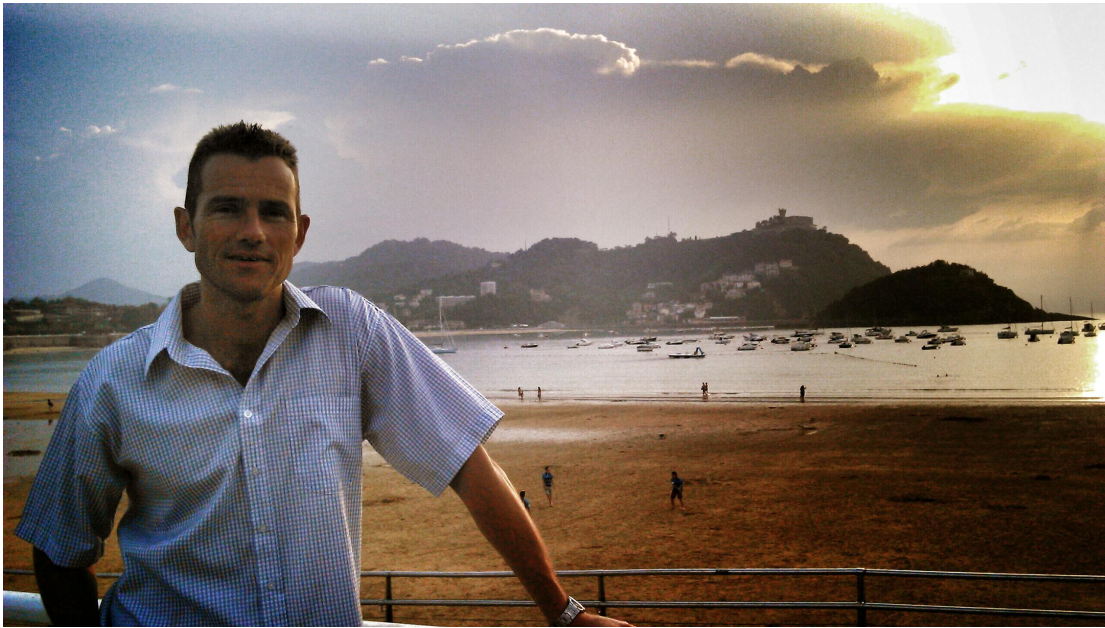


Andrew David Halliwell

**Disclaimer / Copyright / Don't Prosecute!**

All the text in this book and the photographs in the winery articles are the property of the author. However, I have used material that I have found on the internet for the maps ([wikimedia.org](http://wikimedia.org)) and in some cases for photographs in the regional summaries. Where third party photographs have been used, I have attributed their source page. If you are the author of these maps or images and would like some form of recognition, or would like them removed, or have any other related issue, then please contact me and let's resolve it, before taking me to the Old Bailey.

## ANDREW DAVID HALLIWELL - A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR



I was born in Rochdale in the UK and grew up a fairly typical northern lad. A europhile aunt and uncle first stirred my curiosity about wine, as did a family holiday to France. From the age of 15 or so, I realised that I wanted to leave the north for sunnier climes, but it was not until studying Engineering at Oxford that I first started buying and drinking wine regularly. By age 22 I was hooked and spent most of my 20s reading up on wine and travelling as much as possible, falling in love with Spain in the process.

In a now or never moment in my early 30s I studied winemaking at The University of Adelaide. I then spent the next 9 years making wine anywhere I could get a visa - ending up in Spain, Australia, India, Mexico, Chile and Canada. I loved being involved in winemaking, but I slowly became disillusioned with industrial wine production and its often cynical branding. I felt the need to return to Spain, have some fun, and regain my passion for my favourite subject.

During a two year break from winemaking, I was wine consultant to a start-up, basing myself in the attractive northern city of San Sebastián. This enabled me to taste wine from all over Spain and be on the selling end of the business for a change. Many of these wines were just fabulous and I wanted to go and see their origins and meet the people behind them. So I did a little planning, hired a car and hit the road. I liked it so much, I did it again. Everywhere I went things were happening and I came away impressed and envious. All the winegrowers I met were making the wines they wanted to make, with passion and devotion, yet always combined with humility and a yearning to learn more. It was infectious and I wanted back in - to be part of the new wave.

Before returning to winemaking, I decided to summarise these 2 years, to record what I'd found. The Spanish wine scene is so amazing these days, it pains me that it's largely overlooked. Everybody's got one book in them and this is mine: a snapshot of just some of what's going on around Spain. To the reader, I hope you enjoy it and find some inspiration amongst the pages, please send me your thoughts and comments. Lastly, I'd be nothing without my parents: Thank you for accepting my erratic career path and for your permanent support and encouragement.

Feb2017 V2.2 [www.wine-projects.com](http://www.wine-projects.com) [andrew@wine-projects.com](mailto:andrew@wine-projects.com) [www.twitter.com/ADHalliwell](https://www.twitter.com/ADHalliwell)

## 5 **INTRODUCTION**

### 8 **NORTH WEST SPAIN**

9 **Rías Baixas DO**

9 **Ribeiro DO**

10 Finca Viñoa

16 **Ribeira Sacra DO**

16 Dominio do Bibei

21 **Valdeorras DO**

21 Rafael Palacios

28 **Bierzo DO**

28 Vinos Valtuille

33 Bodegas y Viñedos Merayo

### 38 **NORTHERN SPAIN**

39 **Getariako Txakolina DO**

39 **Navarra DO**

40 **Rioja DOCa**

40 Castillo de Cuzcurrita

45 Bodegas Bilbaínas

50 **Rueda DO**

50 Garciarévalo

54 **Cigales DO**

55 **Castilla y León Vino de la Tierra**

55 **Arlanza DO**

56 Sabinas y Viñas

61 **Ribera del Duero DO**

61 Epifanio Rivera

65 Tomás Postigo

70 Carmelo Rodero

74 **Toro DO**

74 Estancia Piedra

### 79 **EASTERN SPAIN**

79 **Cava DO**

80 **Penedès DO**

80 **Costers del Segre DO**

81 **Somontano DO**

81 **Cariñena DO**

82 **Valdejalón Vino de la Tierra**

82 **Calatayud DO**

83 **Empordà DO**

83 Vinyes dels Aspres

91 **Conca de Barberà DO**

93 Mas Foraster

97 **Montsant DO**

97 Vendrell Rived

101 **Priorat DOQa**

102 Clos Figueras

110 **Terra Alta DO**

110 **Alicante DO**

111 Primitivo Quiles

118 Celler la Muntanya (non DO)

125 **Jumilla DO**

125 Casa Castillo

### 131 **CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN SPAIN AND THE CANARY ISLANDS**

132 **Castilla-La Mancha** (Regional Summary)

132 **Extremadura** (Regional Summary)

133 **Alpujarras - Barranco Oscuro**

140 **Sierras de Málaga DO**

140 Bodegas Bentomiz

146 **Jerez-Xérès-Sherry DO**

146 **Canary Islands** (Regional Summary)

147 Suertes del Marqués

### 152 **MAP**



## **INTRODUCTION**

Spain is a truly marvellous country, combining much of the best of Europe in one handy space roughly 70% the size of Texas. Strongly European, the country also has a darker side, an edge, which confuses, delights and frustrates visitors in equal measures. It's impossible to understand Spain in a couple of visits but it is at least very easy to enjoy it.

Geographically Spain got lucky. With long Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts and encompassing numerous mountain ranges, the country's diversity often surprises visitors. Spain's luck held in the island-department, having not one but two excellent archipelagos: The Balearics - beautiful beaches and quiet interiors, and the subtropical Canary Islands - Europe's Hawaii (almost). Mirroring and influenced by this range of landscapes and climates is the social diversity. Spain has four official languages, music from flamenco to bagpipes, architecture from Islamic palaces to Gaudí and food from a hearty fabada bean stew to Michelin star extremes. More or less holding this disparate land together are various layers of government, based around 17 provinces.

Despite their differences, the various regions of Spain share a lot in common. Everyone spends a lot of time in bars and cafés, everyone loves jamón (cured ham, sliced really thin), football is big all over the country and things are done later than anywhere else, with the possible exception of Argentina. Above all the Spanish love life and it shows. At set times each day they will be out and about, fussing over babies, gossiping in the park, enjoying long lunches or noisily patronising some local festivity. It's an unpredictable place but it's fun.

### **Spanish Wine in Context**

Spain has the largest vineyard plantings of any country in the world, yet strangely is not very well known or regarded. Everyone's heard of Rioja, Sherry and Cava but it seems that most serious wine drinkers tend to gravitate towards France and Italy when they grow up, retaining pockets of interest for other countries. In a way this is understandable: Sherry was the top drink for a long time but then fell on hard times and out of fashion. Rioja exploited a niche for soft, oaky wines at good prices that found favour with consumers, but then rested on its laurels and did little at the top end. Cava sold big volumes but could never shake off the concept of being "cheap Champagne". The rest of the country was mostly either rustic or mass-market.

Twenty or thirty years ago it didn't seem to matter that much. Domestic consumption in Spain was very high and additionally the country's huge and growing tourism industry created an enormous demand. Plus there was the export market, which was attracted to Spain's competitive pricing, with business access aided by Spain's accession to the European Union in 1986.

But over the last two or three decades Spanish domestic consumption progressively halved, whilst at the global level lots of excellent new competition emerged. Countries such as Australia, Chile, New Zealand, Argentina and South Africa developed their wine industries to amazing levels, whilst Spain got caught napping - literally perhaps. Part of the reason for this myopia may be down to one of Spain's defining characteristics: incredible self-belief and a general rejection of anything foreign. It's not so much that they took their eye off the ball, rather they didn't feel they needed to turn up for the match.

By the late 90s things started to stir. The country was awash with cash and in a sunny country full of money, full of vineyards and full of ebullient, regionally proud opportunists, there was no time like the present to get into the wine game. Some people did a good job and lots of exciting new

wines from “new” regions popped up. But others didn’t know what they were doing or were ill-advised and went ahead anyhow. It didn’t matter, as back then all you needed was a shiny new winery, a ripe oaky wine, a heavy bottle to package it in and success was pretty much guaranteed.

For a heady few years it seemed that you could make good wine anywhere but then reality set in. With hundreds of expensive new wines on the market, increasingly strong international competition and economic storm clouds encroaching from the west, suddenly doubts appeared and people no longer had an appetite to spend 40€ on some new-wave red from an unproven region. The industry stagnated, then crashed as the recent economic crisis roared into Spain, ravaging locals’ disposable incomes and slashing the number of foreign visitors.

### **Spanish Wine after the Crisis**

Whilst painful for many, it could be argued that the recent industry slump and subsequent reality-check was the best thing that ever happened for the quality of Spanish wine. In fact in some ways the Spanish wine industry has done surprising well out of the global economic crisis. Today exports are booming again, whilst many areas of Spain are still mired in a brutal recession. The downturn resulted in a big shake-up and the winners are the good guys at all levels and wine consumers everywhere.

Due to cheap land and labour costs and a reliable sunny climate, Spain can make wine cheaply. With the vineyards and wineries already in place, it didn’t take too much tweaking from technically savvy winemakers and internationally inspired marketeers to understand the new situation and start producing good wines at low prices in great packaging. Suddenly, forgotten regions such as Campo de Borja were in vogue as exciting new sources for fun wines which could easily be pitched to a world recovering from recession. Handily this redefinition of Spanish wine as fun was exactly what new markets wanted to hear, not least young Americans who continue to drive many of the wine trends today.

Rioja has also done very nicely despite the domestic slump, by keeping a lid on prices, whilst milking its favoured-status reputation in three ways. Firstly the big commercial blends have been cleaned up and now place a greater emphasis on fruit than in the past, enabling them to compete on their own terms against decent reds from the Southern Hemisphere and southern France. Secondly, the undisputed classics have also nudged their game and are smarter in the vineyards than before, resulting in better wines which in today’s wine market can be regarded as something of a bargain. Lastly a wave of avant-garde, generally boutique producers has swept through the region, doing things their way. This has resulted in brand new styles of Rioja and lots of press coverage. Being able to play well in the commercial, classic and modern leagues has worked well for the region, even if it hasn’t quite attained the all-star gold-plated status of Europe’s elite zones, such as Burgundy, Bordeaux and Tuscany.

Arguably, Rioja’s inability to break into the Euro-elite may in part responsible for Spain’s slightly lacklustre reputation. If the top region’s “not *that* good”, how good can the rest of the country be? This is where the error lies. Rioja represents only 6% of Spanish vineyards after all and perhaps it isn’t even the top region. What might be going on in the remaining 94%, now that the dust has settled and there has been time to think?

## Spain's "New" Wine Regions 2.0

In very recent years there has been an explosion of new, delicious and amazing wines from every corner of the Spain. The country holds four aces and now it's the last hand and Spain is all-in, playing an enormous game of catch-up with the rest of the world, presenting a huge array of breathtaking wines which deserve to change the world order. Highlighting this tidal wave of brilliant wines, which never existed before, is the motive for writing this guide.

One ace in the hand is old vines. Old vines can make concentrated, interesting wines but until recently they were often under-exploited, with just a few old-timers using them for local booze. Sometimes they had been abandoned all together. Now this situation has been turned on its head, as well-trained ambitious winegrowers are re-discovering these vineyards in forgotten regions and treating them with respect to produce spectacular new wines. It's like wandering into the Barossa or Sonoma and saying "Wow, I didn't know all this was here", then setting to work. These are not just any old vines. Spain has a lot of indigenous grapes that nobody had ever heard of or cared about until now. With a lot of hard work and a sensitive approach from winemakers in tune with the times, their stellar qualities are being unearthed for the first time and every year the case for Spanish wine being considered amongst the world's best becomes increasingly irrefutable. Two of the remaining aces are plentiful sunshine and favourable economics. Away from the famous regions, land prices can be very reasonable and labour rates remain stubbornly low, especially outside of the cities.

The last ace in Spain's hand is its fantastic range of landscapes for growing wine. Vines do well in dry rocky soils and much of Spain is dry with poor soils. Vines like slopes and Spain is the second most mountainous country in Europe. Furthermore, much of central Spain is quite high above sea level, which has the dual benefit of increasing the intensity of the solar radiation, whilst taking the edge off temperatures. More UV seems to translate into more flavour and colour, whereas relatively cool nights maintain acidity, preserving freshness. Spain is not really thought of as a high-altitude country, yet the vineyards of arguably its best region - Ribera del Duero - lie at around 850m / 2,800ft, not so different from the bulk of plantings in Mendoza, Argentina.

Despite a reputation for laziness, the Spanish are an ingenious and passionate people with flair, imagination and ambition. Having witnessed the boom and bust of 10-15 years ago, now things are very different. In fact I would argue that things now are the reverse of the excess, the swagger and the shoulder-pad *Dynasty*-like blind ambition style of the late 90s. Restraint is the new black and everyone is talking the same story: indigenous grapes, old vineyards, low yields and low intervention. Natural wines are also gaining ground. The results can be spectacular.

Of course there have been good people all along. Winemakers such as Mariano García, Antonio Flores Pedregosa, María José López de Heredia, Jesús Madrazo, Pedro Aibar and Tomás Postigo know how to make great wine and have done a lot to raise the bar for everyone else. Maybe we took our eyes off them in the peak of the pre-crisis boom, dazzled by a myriad pretenders, but they never lowered their standards and quietly went about their business, dutifully turning out excellent wines year after year - the key being a very simple recipe: good grapes and not much else. So taking this model and adapting it to the rest of the country is the key to understanding the new Spanish wine boom version 2.0. It's not about egos, or shiny wineries, it's about passionate people, tied to the land, every year going the extra mile to produce something good. Not forcing a square peg into a round hole but instead unearthing all the round holes and marvelling at just how many and how diverse they are.

## Spanish Wine Regions

The diversity of Spain is reflected in its wine regions. In this guide we are going to sweep the country from the lighter Atlantic wines of the north and north west, through the riper wines of the northern heartland, finishing off with the chunkier wines from the east and the south. There are anomalies of course and a huge number of omissions. It has never been the intention of this book to be an encyclopedia of Spanish wine, rather a magazine, a series of articles highlighting just some of what's going on. The business is changing too fast to ever reflect its entirety in a book and apologies go to the vast amount of wines, regions and people who are not highlighted in this edition. One recent change to watch is that a number of leading producers are starting to question the Denominación de Origen (DO) model and some have even voted with their feet, believing that the DOs are too generic and don't reward quality or promote sub-regionality.

### NORTH WEST SPAIN

This is the most exciting region in the guide, if not necessarily the "best". There's just so much going on here, with new and diverse wines seemingly appearing on a daily basis. Why all the excitement? In a nutshell, the area is chock-full of old vines that had been just waiting to be re-discovered, often grown on perfect slate and granite slopes. Not long back, a few pioneers unearthed this potential crafting some stunning new wines. The wine world took note and things started to snowball, forcing many locals to re-evaluate what had been under their noses all the time. The results can be just spectacular, game-changing even and show no signs of slowing down. It's as if the wine world has gained another Piedmont or another Sonoma overnight.

For the purposes of this guide, my definition of north west Spain is the part of the country which lies to the north of Portugal. In the wine world this basically means Galicia plus the Bierzo region of Castilla y León, (Asturias on the north coast is mostly cider country). Stylistically we are talking fresh wines, generally peachy and citrusy numbers from the Albariño, Treixadura and Loureira grapes or fuller-bodied mouthfilling whites from Godello. In the red department, Mencía is the undisputed star grape and tends to make perfumed, intriguing country wines to the west and more solid, chunky reds in Bierzo. Yet it is still very much work in progress. Not all the wines are brilliant yet, neither has all the potential of the region been unearthed. I just can't imagine where we'll be ten years from now.

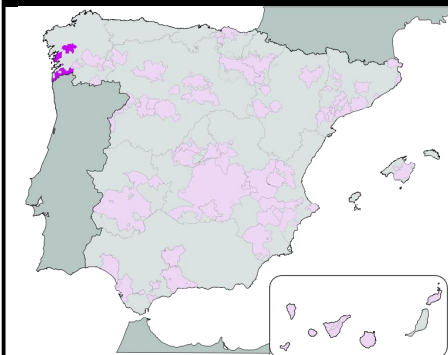


Avia Valley, Ourense



## Rías Baixas DO

photo: vinetur.com



**Where is it?** – South West Galicia is a gorgeous, verdant region where hills and forests mingle with the Atlantic in a series of *rías* (fjords). Full of beautiful old stone buildings and very famous for wine and seafood, the only downer is the weather – mild but lots of rain outside of summer, oh and the sea is freezing. There are actually 5 subregions within this DO which can give slight differences depending on mesoclimate, exposure and soils.

**What's planted?** – **Albariño** is the main grape, though there are plenty of others, including the excellent Caiño Blanco. Vines are traditionally trained high up on *parrales*, which helps combat the area's high humidity.

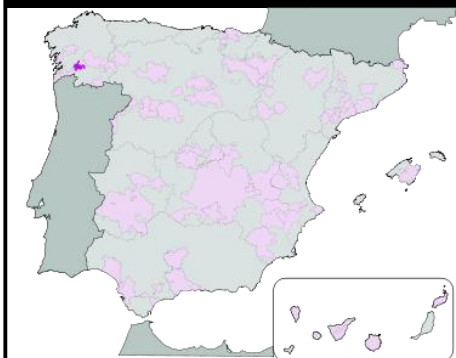
**What's the wine like?** - Albariños from Rías Baixas became very trendy about 15 years ago and are not always good value. At their best they combine zippy citrusy freshness, with more weighty **peach and apricot** notes. Sort of a cross between Riesling and Viognier. At worst they can be a bit neutral and light, too subtle / acid for their own good and too expensive (though Spain's recent crisis seems to have brought prices down a bit). A recent trend sees Albariños released after extensive lees ageing. Rave reviews but I don't like them. Cheesey & no fruit!

**Some wines & wineries** – Castro Martín, Eidosela, Fillaboa, Lagar de Cervera, Martín Codax, Paco y Lola, Palacio de Fefiñanes, Pazo de Señoráns, Quinta de Couselo, Santiago Ruíz, Terras Gauda, Valmiñor, Zárata...

**Other info** – *Alvarinho* also grows in neighbouring Portugal and is a key component in *Vinho Verde* wine.

## Ribeiro DO

photo: vinetur.com



**Where is it?** – Ribeiro sits in southern Galicia in and around the verdant valleys of the Río Miño basin.

**What's planted?** – **Ribeiro is 80% whites** and these are mostly produced from the indigenous **Treixadura** variety. But other white grapes often sneak in, including Albariño, Godello, Torrontés and Loureira. Some red is also made, from the following: Caiño, Ferrón, Sousón, Brancellao, Mencía, Garnacha Tintorera and Tempranillo.

**What's the wine like?** - The whites tend to be pretty soft, reasonably floral and perfumed. They can be a bit peachy though sometimes they are more like a gentle Riesling. They should be fresh and the alcohols are usually moderate. There are a few good reds when decent winemaking is allowed to flourish but not many yet.

**Some wines & wineries** – Antonio Montero, Bodegas Campante, Casal de Armán, Coto de Gomariz, Emilio Rojo, Finca Viñoa, Martín Escolma, Ramón do Casar, Viña Costeira, Viña Mein...

**Other info** – Obtaining its DO in 1932, for a long time Ribeiro has been content to be at the cheap and cheerful end of Galician whites, a pleasant accompaniment to the region's superb seafood. But Galician whites are now A-list and it must be a bit annoying being the ugly sister, so a few *adegas* have been concentrating on old vines, often grown on granite terraces in an interesting attempt to produce something to be proud of. One to watch.

**Finca Viñoa** (Banga, Ribeiro DO, Ourense, NW Spain) - 6<sup>th</sup> March 2015

José Manuel Martínez Juste (Winemaker and co-owner) - [info@fincavinoa.com](mailto:info@fincavinoa.com)



View down the Avia Valley from Finca Viñoa

Coming from Bierzo to Ribeiro at the start of March, it seemed like I'd also gained a month. After a dismal winter all across Northern Spain, with one village being snowed in an amazing 29 days, suddenly the sun had come out and the temperature had shot up to 25°C / 75°F. In Bierzo nothing was stirring, but dropping down the huge hill into Ourense was like heading 500km south. There was blossom everywhere, people were strolling around in pastel sweaters, birds were chirping and insects were starting up their buzzy rituals. Everywhere smelled of flowers and honey and with the tranquil Minho river winding its way through verdant pine-filled hillsides, it felt like I'd arrived in the Garden of Eden.

Being a huge Galicia fan, I've been through Ribeiro quite a few times and I've often enjoyed their simple citrus and stonefruit whites at bargain prices. But it's not an area I know much about. I had read the odd thing about old-vine Treixadura grapes but it wasn't until the *Alimentaria* trade fair in Barcelona that a wine from Ribeiro really stopped me in my tracks. That wine was Finca Viñoa. The same company also makes a couple of superb wines at Quinta Couselo in the O Rosal subzone of the Rías Baixas DO, an hour to the west. One of these was recently voted "The best white in Galicia". Three fantastic whites out of three...what could be their secret?



### **José Manuel Martínez Juste**

One thing Finca Viñoa and Quinta Couselo have in common is winemaker José Manuel Martínez Juste. Charming and unassuming, it turns out he is a leading figure in the region, having been President of the Association of Galician Winemakers for twelve years. He also co-founded and runs a successful winegrowing consultancy (Catavinos) together with acclaimed winemaker Álvaro Bueno Eléxpuru. Between them they must rack up a lot of miles on winding roads, as their services are widely employed across Galicia and into Portugal.

José Manuel was born in the attractive regional capital Ribadavia and his family owned a few vines, like everybody else. He told me his childhood memories are filled with happy times spent in the countryside, helping his family in the vineyards and being immersed in wine culture from an early age. A career in wines was a natural step and so he went off to study Winemaking in Madrid. After graduating, his first job was as Technical Director of the DO Ribeiro Experimental Winery. This involved running a large number of small-scale vinifications to assess the region's many grapes, with the aim of looking for winners. It was a dream-role for a young winemaker, one which afforded him a great opportunity to unravel the region's enormous potential.



José Manuel Martínez Juste on the terrace at Casal de Armán

## **Ribeiro DO**

It might seem strange to talk about the potential of the Ribeiro DO. Growing wine since Roman times, the region enjoyed a high reputation more than five hundred years ago and became one of the first DOs in 1932. But times change and in recent years Ribeiro has been eclipsed by its neighbours. First it was the Rías Baixas DO and the über-trendy Albariño grape. Then Valdeorras DO came along, re-discovering Godello and suddenly staking a claim for Spain's best white. About the same time the Ribeira Sacra DO came from nowhere with its perfumed light reds and interesting whites, seemingly just what everyone is looking for in these days of anti-Parker backlash. Poor Ribeiro, after years of doing all the donkey-work for the region, it found itself bottom of the heap.

Part of the problem could be the mixture of grapes. With 9 white varieties and 7 reds allowed in the DO, many with unfamiliar names, what is it trying to be? Another issue could be land ownership: there are literally thousands of small plots in Ribeiro and almost everybody makes a little wine - so who's really calling the shots? Then there's the question of yield: with wet winters and reliably hot sunny summers it's easy to grow a big tonnage - yet that's the opposite of what's required now, to steer the region along an upwards path. What is needed is a white knight, a champion for the region, with the knowledge and the know-how to set things straight. (A red knight might also be handy, though currently Ribeiro is 80-90% white varieties, so one thing at a time.)

## **Finca Viñoa**

It was a stubborn move not packing a GPS I lamented, as I navigated these wooded back roads, drawing puzzled looks from the few remaining inhabitants, average age 105. Somehow I found Finca Viñoa first time, just south of the strangely-named village of Banga. What an incredible view! Located on a dramatic promontory, a sort of a "V" between two valleys, the point of the "V" looks south and must receive wall to wall sunshine during the summer months. A couple of hundred metres above the valley floor, the location apparently enjoys a big diurnal range of temperature and handily a cooling breeze often springs up in the middle of the afternoon.

Throughout Galicia, terraced vineyards are common. In fact they are often the only way to cope with such steep slopes, Ribeira Sacra being the most famous example. Ribeiro is no exception and this tradition has been maintained at Finca Viñoa. Here a number of dramatic terraces called "socalcos" have been constructed on a grander scale than normal, to allow mechanisation. Apparently the native soil was stored during the earthworks and later put back, to avoid disturbing the land too much.

The project was started with "more passion than money" and ran steadily, maintaining a long-term vision. Along the way some like-minded backers have also become involved. Just as well: the terrace construction must have been costly and José Manuel casually pointed out that although they started planting in 2003, the first vintage was not until 2011! A long time to be haemorrhaging cash.

Before 2011 they did a few small scale ferments to try and understand the site, but sold the grapes, as they felt they weren't yet good enough to release under their own label. "Young plants are unbalanced, just like young people. We don't believe in green-harvesting (to control yields), if you need to do that, it means you pruned badly in the first place. We'd rather wait until the vines are in balance with their surroundings before using the fruit. The vineyard will tell you what it can



give, you just need to be able to listen.” Finca Viñoa seems to have a good listener in Modesto López González, their vineyard chief. Apparently he started working in vineyards at 13 years old and so far has accumulated 41 years’ experience.

In tune with the region, there are a number of different varieties planted at Finca Viñoa. As José Manuel explains, “When people ask for a wine from round here, they ask for a Ribeiro, they don’t ask for it by grape. For whites, Treixadura is always going to be the lead variety, usually accompanied by Loureiro, Albariño and Godello. We are aiming to follow what was done before us and make a blend that our grandparents would have understood.”

This seemed like a good time to get an expert’s summary on some of the myriad grapes flourishing under the Ribeiro umbrella:

#### Whites

Treixadura - Balance, elegance, freshness

Albariño - Floral aroma, freshness, liveliness

Godello - Structure, body, silkiness

Loureiro - Power, freshness (can be agreeably grassy), life

Caíño Blanco - Floral (even small %), elegance, freshness, length

#### Reds

Caíño - Complexity, aroma, structure

Brancellao - Maturity, body, liveliness

Sousón (Tintilla) - Colour, structure, life



Neatly pruned vines at Finca Viñoa

I asked about winemaking, “All our grapes are picked by hand and will all be at the winery within an hour, where we chill them in a cold room to 5°C / 41°F. Once cool, we put the grapes over a sorting table, then de-stem and crush, leaving them to macerate with skins for around 3 hours. After pressing and letting the juice settle, we rack and allow native yeasts to ferment the juice, allowing the temperature to rise to around 16-17°C. When the ferments are nearly done, we rack them off gross lees and chill slightly to around 15°C to slow down the last bit and keep the fine lees in suspension for longer. We’ll then keep these wines on these lees for around 2 months and rack again. I’m not over-keen on extended lees contact, as we’re not looking for those ‘bakery’ type aromas. Neither do the wines go through malolactic fermentation. Balance is everything: we aim to produce aromatic wines with good fruit and fresh acidity, wines which combine roundness with elegance and wines which will age for a few years, perhaps being at their best at around 3 years of age.”

Whilst the different plots are fermented separately in stainless steel tanks ranging in size from 2,500L - 10,000L, eventually they end up being combined, as Finca Viñoa only produces one wine at present. The finished wine has a pH of around 3.3 and just 1.6g/L residual sugar (ie bone dry). This last figure surprised me, as the wine is floral and round and I was starting to think that maybe it was a bit Germanic in style, with a few extra grams per litre to round things out - not the case, apparently. I asked about barrels: “You can’t use them for young wines, but if the grapes are right it is possible to make interesting balanced wines that way.”

### **Finca Viñoa - The Future**

José Manuel found out some great news the day we were chatting: their holding company (Grandes Pagos Gallegos de Viticultural Tradicional SL) had just completed a deal to buy a winery and two associated vineyards, also in the Ribeiro area! Up until now the Finca Viñoa wines had been made in rented space in a neighbouring winery. Exciting news, yet even this new purchase was primarily motivated by the two new vineyards, rather than the winery (Pazo Casanova). “I really like vineyards”, as he puts it. The new vineyards are 3 hectares and 6 hectares in size and were planted with a range of traditional white varieties some 28 and 18 years ago respectively. In the future no doubt we can look forward to two more award winning single-vineyard wines, to sit alongside Finca Viñoa: “Finca Fechos” and “Coba da Serpe”.

Over the next few years the company will aim to consolidate their vineyards and also get more life back into them, so that they are “more like traditional Ribeiro vineyards”. I asked if he meant employing biodynamic techniques. “Working ecologically is good, but I don’t believe in incorporating astrology into winegrowing. I think as a race we have progressed. To be honest I would also feel uncomfortable turning up in my air-conditioned car, whilst demanding that the vineyard workers are out in the sun all day, working the fields with oxen. I admire people who do go to the time and effort to work in a biodynamic way, but personally I think we also need to be rational.”

They are also working on a red project, (Finca do Cabildo), where they intend to plant 5 hectares of red. “I think that might be a 20 year project. With whites you can find what you are looking for with younger vines, but reds aren’t as forgiving. In fact no doubt it will be our children who will enjoy what we are laying down today.”

Red Ribeiros were a bit of a mystery to me. I’d tried a few in Ribadavia the night before and to generalise they seemed to fall into one of two camps: (i) young, fruity and acid or (ii) porty and

oxidised. José Manuel sympathised with my findings but was firm that Ribeiro didn't need to be that way. "Red varieties are currently around 10% of the DO and are on the road to recovery, but we're not there yet. At the same time, some 'nouveau-riche' have moved into the area and have tried to create blockbusters by using too much new oak. The real style for Ribeiro reds will be fruit, structure and not so much oak - balanced wines are what we should be striving for."

Ultimately José Manuel is optimistic for Ribeiro. "When you look around the valley you have to realise that the important thing is not the new buildings (I'd mentioned that I'd noticed a few smart-looking new wineries), it's the new vineyards. There's a number of people here doing things right, planting on the valley sides, not the floor. They're also respecting the local environment and the local varieties and by doing this, by producing authentic Ribeiro wines, they are respecting the consumer. I fully believe that when the locals in this area continue to re-gain their pride, this mutual respect is bound to succeed. There's a wine for every moment and if the wine put in front of the consumer is authentic, you will capture their attention and gain a loyal ambassador for life."

I asked about the locals and their character, Galicia being a rather remote region, a little apart from the rest of Spain. "A *Gallego* might always maintain some doubt, an open mind, which can be misinterpreted as weakness, a lack of commitment or even a lack of respect. For me however this openness to doubt is good as it gives us the freedom to explore a number of ways to reach our goal. People who know where they're going and aren't shy about saying so frankly scare me. As a people we've always been resilient and have been good at adapting and looking after ourselves. My grandfather emigrated to Cuba before returning later in life. We're a determined bunch and we're not scared to commit when something needs to get done." I couldn't help but agree, as I marvelled at the incredible commitment behind the impressive terraces that Finca Viñoa had constructed, just to make one wine.



Impressive terraces at Finca Viñoa



## Ribeira Sacra DO



**Where is it?** – Interior NW Spain, on steep slopes at approx 300-600m, around a series of river valleys, split into 5 subzones. The region enjoys warm summers, although the annual rainfall at approx 800mm is also quite high.

**What's planted?** – **Mencía** is the main story + Brancellao, Merenzao and a few other reds. The usual NW Spain mixed-bag for whites, including Godello, Treixadura, Doña Branca, Loureira, Albariño and Torrontés

**What's the wine like?** – The whites, walking a tightrope between simple limey citrus numbers and more full-bodied textured drops, are still a work in progress. The **reds can be insanely good**, having seemingly come out of nowhere in the last 5 years. The best exude a floral perfume and are medium-bodied, offering up surprising freshness and hard to pin down chewy flavours that are very moreish and in some way similar to Pinot Noir. However not all the wineries are good (yet) and you can find wines with some basic faults or which lack balance.

**Some wines & wineries** – Abadía da Cova, Adegas Moure, Algueira, Dominio do Bibei, Fazenda Prádio (no DO), Finca Millara, Guímaro, Losada Vinos de Finca, Rectoral de Amandi, Ronsel do Sil...

**Other info** – Planted in Roman times, this inaccessible region only got its DO in 1997. There are over 2000 grape growers here, mostly labours of love. It's so accessible, harvesting in some cases is done via boat!

### Dominio do Bibei (Ribeira Sacra DO, Ourense, NW Spain) - 4<sup>th</sup> March 2015

Suso Prieto Pérez (Head of Viticulture)

info@dominiodobibi.com

### Ribeira Sacra Introduction

Of all Spain's up and coming wine regions, this one is perhaps the most intriguing. In mainstream Spanish terms Ribeira Sacra is not at all well known, yet at the same time it's gaining a kind of cult following amongst top sommeliers and wine experts around the world. It's quite a complex region to get your head round and it's an even more complex region to drive around, due to the mountainous geography, deep gorges and winding roads. Above all Ribeira Sacra is a magical region to visit, famous for extremely steep terraced vineyards, dramatic sometimes lush scenery, sluggish rivers and numerous monasteries.

Scenery aside, what's all the fuss about? The thing is that this region is a kind of anti-Spain. Delicate reds and interesting whites are its calling cards, in a country where bold oaky reds and straightforward fruity whites are more often the norm. Usually made in small amounts from uneconomic-looking vineyards, the wines' freshness is in tune with current thinking and their scarcity and the impossibility of big business here seems to have increased their allure.

The main varieties are Mencía for reds and Godello for whites but befitting Galicia's Atlantic mists and mystical image, these wines often seem to have taken on a kind of ethereal quality that makes them less bold than their neighbours to the east. Reds can be highly perfumed yet with subtle palates - sometimes not a million miles (1.6 million km) from Pinot Noir. In this part of Iberia it's no surprise that there is also a large number of other grapes grown, including



Brancellao and Merenzao (reds) and Albariño and Treixadura (whites) - in fact seemingly just about any grape with a lot of vowels to its name gets a look-in.

Yet whilst the potential is there, this is no get-rich-quick viticultural paradise. Ribeira Sacra is an area with a humble background, a region of smallholders eeking out an existence from the land, growing all kinds of crops and making a few barrels of wine for friends and family in the process. Recent DO figures show that for a total of approximately 5000 tonnes of grapes, around 2700 growers were involved, each with their own handful of pocket-sized vineyards scratched out of these wild mountainsides.

Recently there has been some investment in the region and a few interesting new wines have appeared that never existed before, but it's still work in progress and for every exciting wine there are still quite a few also-rans and wines that don't quite deliver. "Ribera Sacra" on the label does not guarantee an exciting wine just yet. Perhaps it never will, as this is a hard area to farm and the market for the top wines is presently limited, so many locals may just stick to what they know best and make acceptable wine for local consumption. What is needed therefore is a catalyst. Somebody with unshakable belief in the land who will put their money where their mouth is, do some hard work and chisel the potential out of these granite and slate hillsides one terrace at a time, presenting the results to the world. One of the projects doing just that is Dominio do Bibei.

### **Dominio do Bibei**

In a spectacular region, this is a truly spectacular project, yet the reason I'm here is down to just one wine, their "2010 Lalama". Flagged up by Decanter Magazine, when I first got to try it I was utterly blown away! Just a sensational beguiling red, full of tea and roses and amazingly fresh and alive! Completely unlike anything I'd ever tried from Spain before. I didn't really know what to make of it, but I did know that I liked it.



First view of Dominio do Bibei's spectacular terraces

## Vineyards

Suso met me with a wave at the agreed point - a hairpin on a tiny road, about 30 minutes south west of the bright lights of A Rúa. It wasn't long before I realised why he was in a Landrover, as we ploughed through overgrown rabbit tracks in bottom gear. Soon we climbed out of the valley and I got my first view of the project, probably the picture doesn't do it justice, but you get the idea.

The area is absolutely full of terraces, originally created and planted by the Romans. Dominio do Bibei own 32 hectares (79 acres) and have painstakingly restored these terraces and vineyards for an annual crop of around 90 tonnes. The average vine age is 80-90 years and the grape varieties are the region's usual mixed bag, something the company embraces. In fact throughout the whole project things are decidedly hands-off, with the vineyards ran along organic lines and a low-intervention approach taken in the winery.



Finishing the pruning, Concrete eggs in the winery, Suso explaining the site, vine detail

**Suso Prieto Pérez** is just the kind of chap you'd like running your vineyards. A local lad from neighbouring A Pobra de Trives, he's full of knowledge and enthusiasm. After ten years on the project he certainly knows his way around and his 4x4 driving skills wouldn't be out of place on an Everest expedition - yet it still feels that things are only just beginning here. Suso told me that the harvest lasts almost a month and in 2014 they ran a total of 55 different ferments, as they explore their domain and try to better understand what they have on their hands. Away from work he tells me he's an avid skier and whilst the local Manzaneda resort can give him a handy fix, he confesses that he loves the snow so much that he probably should have been born Norwegian.

“We’re not 100% Biodynamic” Suso tells me, “but we do operate organically and we do make our own compost. In the winery they operate in accordance with the phases of the moon but we just can’t do that in the vineyard. If we followed all the timings to the letter, we’d still be pruning in June! The way I see things is that plants are like humans - if you take antibiotics every time you get a cold, then you won’t have anything left in reserve if you catch pneumonia. But if you can keep colds at bay with traditional remedies like chicken soup, then you can keep the stronger stuff back just in case you really need it. Rather than blind faith in Biodynamics, I’m conscious that we’re running a business and so my approach is to do what seems logical and what feels right.”

As we drive around these spectacular vineyards the workers are finishing off the pruning and tending small bonfires burning last year’s wood. There’s an agreeable, wholesome feeling of hard work about the place. At one point the maze-like terraces and hillside location remind me of tea plantations. It must have been an awful lot of work to get to this point and one has to commend owner Javier Domínguez for his vision, passion and drive, giving something back to these remote hillsides and creating fabulous new wines in the process.

### **Winemaking**

At the centre of the domain lies the winery, a low-key series of minimalist concrete caverns, half-buried into a north-facing spur. It doesn’t look much on the outside but once inside there is a real feeling of space and a cool, calm sensation prevails. Built on a slope, gravity is employed to help transport the grapes, juice and wine between each stage, with the wines taking around 3 years before reaching bottling at the lowest level.

Not surprisingly the grapes are hand-harvested, being picked into small crates. Upon reception at the winery, they are placed in a cool room for 24 hours. All the grapes are then sorted by hand and each parcel and grape type is kept separate at this stage. Sometimes the whites are pressed as whole bunches (ie with the stems).

The investment and approach in the vineyards is mirrored inside the winery. There are no stainless steel tanks, instead a range of expensive mid-sized wooden foudres (tanks) and eight 700L concrete eggs are employed. Suso tells me that Mencía is a reductive grape variety and so tends to work well when it has the opportunity to breathe a little. I didn’t ask about yeast types, I didn’t really need to, as no doubt they go with 100% wild. At the next level down there were a good number of high quality French oak barrels from producers including Taransaud, Saury, Adour and Boutes.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the spectacular, precipitous location and the obvious money invested, the whole project remains very low-key, the opposite of some of the brash new-money palaces you see in Rioja or Ribera. Nothing here seems out of place and no money appears to have been spent on pointless ornament, yet neither is the result unappealingly austere. Like a Buddhist monastery high in the Himalaya, Dominio do Bibei seems to float in harmony with its surroundings, quietly emanating calm from within.



## Dominio do Bibei - The wines



2010 La Pola (75% Godello + Albariño, Doña Blanca, Loureira) - Nose of orange marmalade and freshly baked cakes gives way to a very alive palate of tinned pineapple and other fruit. Alive and ripe, with candied-fruit hints but not cooked. Intriguing.

2011 Lalama (90% Mencía + Brancellao, Mouratón, Souson, Garnacha Tintorera) - Decent colour. Tea nose with a hint of roses and enjoyably sappy. “Still a baby”.

2010 Lalama *tasted April 2014* - Fresh, chewy cherries and taut. Amazing and unique!

2011 Lacima (100% old vine Mencía) - Fresh, light colour. Fairly concentrated tea and roses nose. Tight and sour at this stage, very clean, built for the long haul.

2011 “B” (100% Brancellao) - A real wine-geek wine, this one is disappearing from the range, as they now feel that Brancellao is better employed for its blending properties, rather than as a straight varietal. This unusual red has a light colour with an unexpected apricot nose. Very tannic. Good and should improve, but only aficionados are likely to understand this uncompromising style.



## Valdeorras DO



**Where is it?** – Valdeorras is in a little-visited corner of NW Spain, in and around the steep valley of the River Sil. The climate is a transition between the mild humid Rías Baixas and the continental extremes of León.

**What's planted?** – There are several grapes allowed, but the one that's got everyone excited is **Godello**, which now produces some of the most sought-after whites in Spain. Mencía is also grown, producing some decent reds.

**What's the wine like?** – Famous English wine critic Jancis Robinson raves about Godello, which “*combines the structure of white Burgundy with the finesse of a juicily mineral grape*”. Its multi-faceted personality is the reason for all the interest, being able to make clean zippy citrus styles and/or more weighty mouth-filling guava and toast numbers. The Mencía reds seem a little bit fresher and more approachable than their sometimes tannic cousins in Bierzo - reflecting the milder climate - and can be moreishly drinkable, again showing mineral notes.

**Some wines & wineries** – Rafael Palacios really put the place on the map with “As Sortes” and “Louro” but there are a number of other producers to watch, such as Godeval, Guitián, Joaquín Rebolledo, Telmo Rodríguez...

**Other info** - Valdeorras is really starting to forge its own identity as the “home of Godello” but site-selection and winemaking are still key, with the lower-yielding mountain sites favoured over the fertile valley floors.

**Rafael Palacios (A Rúa, Valdeorras DO, Galicia, NW Spain) - 4<sup>th</sup> March 2015**

Rafael Palacios (Owner and boss) / [bodega@rafaelpalacios.com](mailto:bodega@rafaelpalacios.com)

### A fantastic new adventure

To outsiders, Spain is largely regarded as a red wine country. You have refreshing Verdejo-based whites from Rueda, decent citrus/apricot Albariños from Rías Baixas, the odd good white in Catalunya and up in the Pyrenees but not much else. (Ok, ok, if you look a bit harder there's good stuff in Ribeiro, Rioja, Navarra, Canaries etc. etc. - but I'm trying to make a point.)

So there are a few good whites kicking around but the question is: “Does Spain have a white grape firmly in the A-league, as good as its red champions: Tempranillo, Garnacha, Mencía and Monastrell?” Answer - “It does now.”

Wikipedia reads “*Godello is a white variety of wine grape grown in northwestern Spain, in particular in Galicia*”. Doesn't sound that interesting, yet it's probably the most exciting thing in Spanish whites in a decade. Why? Because perhaps for the first time Spain has a textural interesting white that reflects its terroir and combines freshness with mouthfilling length! You can make it crisp and citrusy, serious and creamy, with tropical notes, with or without oak, and it can be extremely (I hate using words when I don't know what they mean, but everyone else is saying it, so here goes) “mineral”. It's Spain's Chardonnay and it's come from out of nowhere. (I know, I know, 50% of you are recoiling in horror, you “hate” Chardonnay - but to be honest you probably don't, you just think you do).

Godello's main home is the north west interior of Iberia, between Bierzo and Ribeiro and in this area the region that has come fastest out of the starting blocks is Valdeorras. There are quite a few examples to try these days but there is one winery that stands out and is largely responsible for establishing Godello in the world hall of fame, drum roll please, step forward Rafael Palacios!



Rafael Palacios explains how granite decomposes to soil in one of his vineyards in Valdeorras

### **Rafael Palacios**

I was really looking forward to my trip to NW Spain in general but the chance to meet Rafael Palacios, the man behind my favourite Spanish white had me all excited. We buy quite a bit of one of his wines, “Louro” for our shop in San Sebastián and everyone who tries it loves it. But “quite a bit” for us is not much on a world scale and I wasn’t sure how much time I’d get from a busy and famous winemaker. I kept the rest of the day free, just in case. Good decision. Lord knows what Iñigo Manso, the guy who distributes his wine in our part of Spain told him, but the red carpet was well and truly rolled out and I enjoyed an utterly fantastic superbly-organised visit which was completely unforgettable.

Rafael comes from a winemaking family in Rioja (Bodegas Palacios Remondo in Alfaro). He developed an interest in whites from an early age and being the youngest of nine siblings, had the freedom to go off and explore this passion. After studying in France, he worked in Bordeaux for a château which was part of (famous French winemaker) Christian Moueix’s empire, then worked in Australia for John Cassegrain and also at Penfolds.

Rafael returned to Spain in 1994, at a time when a new wave of Spanish white wines based on the Verdejo and Albariño grapes was starting to take off. The family had some old vine Viura but

Alfaro lies in the warm eastern limits of Rioja, an area usually associated with Garnacha-based reds. What should they do? Somehow Rafael, aged just 24, managed to persuade his father that they should keep the Viura and buy some equipment to make white wines. The resulting wine, “Placet”, went on to enjoy considerable success.

A few years later Rafael got to try a wine called “Guitián” from the little-known Valdeorras DO in Ourense, in the north west of Spain. This Godello-based wine stopped him in his tracks. Why? Because amazingly here was a wine that was full-bodied AND maintained a racy Atlantic acidity - something close to impossible in Alfaro and unknown just about anywhere else in Spain. The young Rafael was hooked and so started to think.

Soon he was regularly spending weekends up in the Valdeorras region - no small commitment, as it lies 545km (340 miles) west of Alfaro. 2002 was a cold year but 2003 was extremely hot and a disappointed Rafael noticed a lot of sunburned grapes that wouldn't be much use as raw material for the fresh, clean wines he was looking for. In Valdeorras, most of the grapes are grown close to the valley floor at around 290m (950ft) above sea level - he realised that he needed to go higher to escape the heat!

Altimeter in hand we went off exploring some wild country to the south, searching for old forgotten vineyards. At over 600m (1970ft) he felt he'd struck gold in some tumble-down terraces, quietly enjoying a commanding view. This far west, the total annual rainfall would be decent but the granite soil of the mountains would drain quickly, unlike the clay of the valley floor. With the region's long, dry summers this wouldn't work well for all varieties. However the nights would be cool up here and Rafael reckoned that if pruned properly, the thick-skinned Godello would grow well on this decomposed granite, with the old vines having deep enough roots to keep them going through the summer.

After Rafael's father José Palacios Remondo passed away in 2000, direction of the family firm passed to the safe hands of Rafael's older brothers, not least star winemaker Álvaro Palacios. With little to worry about back home, Rafael took the plunge in 2004 and decided to set up shop in Valdeorras to see just what could be done with these fantastic hillside Godello vineyards. As I'm writing this, I can hardly believe it has only been ten years. The wines we are talking about now have caught everyone's attention and are widely regarded as amongst the best in Spain. And not just “good whites for Spain” but wines that have genuinely garnered world recognition from a number of top wine critics.

## **Vineyards**

Vines were first planted in this region by the Romans, who were up here prospecting for gold. After that era, the tradition of winemaking was kept alive by the numerous monasteries that sprang up in the area. Social changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in mass emigration from the region and there were not enough people left to tend the complex legacy of terraced hillside vineyards. Valdeorras went into further decline quality-wise with the misguided introduction of high-yielding vines such as Palomino and Garnacha Tintorera along the warm valley floors.

Around the late 70s the Valdeorras DO asked the local growers which they thought was their best grape and the near-unanimous answer was Godello. Unfortunately whilst they had backed the right horse, there was no market then for high-quality low-yielding vineyards. At that time the opposite situation was the norm and the development of high-yielding valley-floor vineyards was



encouraged by mis-placed subsidies, propped up with a cocktail of chemical fertilisers and herbicides.

Fast-forward to the mid 2000s and Rafael Palacios considers himself lucky to have been able to buy some of the remaining mountain vineyards still in good enough shape to work. We're standing in one of them, 620m up on a beautiful sunny day and the view is simply stunning. It's a steep south facing slope which drops over 200m to the River Bibei, with the snowy dome of *Cabeza de Manzaneda* away to the west. As far as the eye can see, all sides of the valley are unbelievably riddled with terraces.



We carry on round the head of a side valley and come to some more of Rafael's vineyards, this time with more of a north west exposure. This is where it gets really interesting, as Rafael explains about the decomposed granite soils, getting down and picking up a handful to point out its structure in detail. We are at his main "Valverde" site where some of the vines date back to 1920 and he is in the process of incorporating adjacent vineyards into his existing one. The way he works is plain to see, in his vineyards there is grass between the rows but in the neighbouring vineyards the soil is dead. It's a great site with a great view and one day Rafael is planning to open up some kind of visitors' centre.



New land being recovered with existing vineyards in background & Virxe das Ermidas Sanctuary



Rafael takes the time to show me an amazing and impressive church, reminiscent of a mini-Santiago, hidden away in the valley bottom, before we back-track to the last vineyard. Before he told me anything about it, I could sense something was different. The air was thick with a honey-like smell, the sound of insects was in the air and there was a gentle but persistent north breeze. It just seemed so alive and “felt” different. If I ever stop being a biodynamic sceptic and become a believer, this will be the key moment. Planted in 1973 it’s not the oldest vineyard in Rafael’s portfolio but he feels it’s the best and so makes his only single-vineyard wine, “Sorte O Soro”, from this magical spot.



Rafael Palacios in his top “Sorte O Soro” vineyard

In total Rafael Palacios works around 25 hectares (62 acres), most of which the company owns. In general these vineyards lie at around 600m on decomposed granite, sloping north. It’s mostly Godello although some of the vineyards include Treixadura. This is work in progress for Rafael, as the plan is to graft everything to Godello “for the palate-volume it gives”. None of these vineyards produce anything like the 8000kg/ha maximum permitted yield under the Valdeorras DO regulations.

In these older vineyards I’m surprised to see that trellising has been put in. Rafa explains that in these sites there is often a north wind and the wires help each year’s new growth get established, plus some of the sites have rocks near the surface, so the trellis gives these shallow-rooted vines some stability on these precipitous slopes. An interesting innovation is that the wires are spread out on either side of the posts, which allows the development of thicker canopies and hence shading the grapes at all times of day.

As we drive around the vineyards it's obvious that Rafael takes pride in his work. There's still work to be done and it's a fascinating time to see this project, with things done right and everything taking shape. The terraces are meticulously restored but they're not "over-restored". There's a new building, a improved track, a new wooden gate. Small changes that work in harmony with the region, restoring its legacy, rather than going in with a bulldozer. Apparently he faced a lot of scepticism at first and these multi-ownership small parcels (locally known as "sortes") were a nightmare to buy and knit together. But he persevered and so deserves a lot of credit for breathing life back into an impoverished part of Spain and creating some world-class wines in the process.



Barrels as fermenters, each with their own individual temperature control

### Winemaking

I've worked in quite a few wineries and after a while you can tell a lot about a place from a quick look round. This was a good one. No architect's palace, it was simple, ordered and appealing. Everything had a place and everything was neat and tidy and there were practical designer touches too, such as bamboo flooring. I saw a good few stainless steel tanks and also a number of wooden *foudres* - everything in great shape. One innovation I've never seen before was 500L wooden barrels set up as fermenters, each with their own individual temperature control, implying great attention to detail. As Rafa puts it, "After all the effort we put in in the vineyards, it wouldn't make sense not to do this."

Rafael explained his winemaking philosophy: "We have a high tech winery but I don't want you to misunderstand that point. Technology is not something we're trying to abuse, we just want to understand and get the best out of each plot. We pick the grapes first thing in the morning, starting with the best sites. We don't pick more than 10 tonnes per day. After sorting we de-stem and crush the grapes, cooling them immediately in a heat exchanger before pressing in our Wilmes press, using CO<sub>2</sub> to keep the atmosphere inert. After settling and racking, the juice is fermented with natural or neutral yeasts at around 16-17°C, any lower is not good. My top wines are fermented in 500L barrels, Louro is done in the 3500L foudres and Bolo is done in stainless."

He continues, "We're actually going away from extended lees contact. Godello is not an aromatic variety and lees-ageing can mask the subtle fruity aromas that do exist. The great thing about low-yielding Godello is that it already has a weight to it, it's not something you need to work at in the winery with lees to develop fatness. Now that we've got things right in the vineyard and the soils are alive again, it's better just to let the grape be itself and 'shine naked'. Saying that, wines from our best sites do pair well with oak. I like oak from northern regions of France, like Normandy and we may use 25-30% new (but in 500L barrels, not 228L)."

## **Rafael Palacios - The wines**

2014 Bolo - This is the most commercial offering, made in stainless steel from a blend of vineyards and includes 30% bought grapes. The wine is fresh and fruity, with guava notes and an agreeable hint of reduction lurking at the back. Very round on the palate, the wine comes across almost sweet, though Rafael assures me that the residual sugar is just 1.9g/L.

2014 Louro - In a way similar to Bolo but with a more detailed fruit profile, with white blossom and stonefruit notes complementing the guava and greengage core. Also present are attractive notes of fresh-baked cakes. I've bought and sold the 2012 and 2013 version of this wine, it's one of our top sellers and so I was happy to see the 2014 was very much in the same line.

2011 Louro - Still with guava notes, but this wine surprised me as it had also developed a kind of petrol / rubber character - the sort of thing you might find in older Rieslings.

2013 As Sortes - There are lots of delicious "green" fruit notes present, again with that character that I'm calling "guava". The wine's pretty tight right now, Rafa reckons it will be at its best in its 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year. I asked about that acidity, "Godello doesn't have a lot of malic acid, it's mostly tartaric. This helps create tension in the wine." Apparently the pH of these wines is a rather tart 3.05, unusually low (ie acidic) for wines with such great mouthfeel.

2012 As Sortes - Now so well integrated, as Rafa puts it "You don't know if it's Godello or what it is!"

2014 As Sortes (barrel sample) - I was lucky and honoured to get to taste an oak trial for the 2014 As Sortes wines, still in wood. They were running a trial of the same wine in a new barrel v. one in a new barrel which they'd kept empty for a year, to dry the wood (I've never heard of anyone doing that before but it's a good example of the seemingly small details you can look at in the quest to make the best possible wines). The results were surprisingly different, I think I found the aged barrel more expressive but only Rafa knows how things will end up.

## **Sales and the future**

Over a superb lunch in the charming Pazo do Castro hotel outside O Barco, we brought some of the tasting wines along and they sang with fluffy *croquetas* and the hake. I asked Rafa about sales. He told me that he doesn't employ a sales team and likes getting out and doing it himself and in fact was soon off on a big trip to the States. Apparently 55% of the wine is sold within Spain and the rest exported, a ratio he aims to maintain. Things must be going well, judging by the number of times his 'phone rang during my visit, yet Rafa feels something is still missing: "In Spain people buy the top reds to put on their tables at Christmas. Wines from people like Artadi, my brother Álvaro and Peter Sisseck. Spain is at the top in terms of reds but we're not there yet with whites - there's doubt still."

Rafael Palacios has come a long way in a short time. He knows what he's doing and where he's going. He's 100% confident in the area and in the potential of the Godello grape and up there on those mountain vineyards, with their fresh air and those sweeping views, it was obvious that he'd found his passion. It will be fascinating to see how things advance in his next ten years.



## Bierzo DO



**Where is it?** – North West Spain, but much lower than the rest of León and on the Atlantic side of some major mountains, lending the region a wetter, less extreme climate than much of Castilla y León. The poor stony soils of the hillsides are an important factor in determining wine quality.

**What's planted?** – Old vine **Mencía** is the main story here, with densely planted bushvines usually giving the best results. A number of other grapes being permitted, including trendy Godello (whites).

**What's the wine like?** – Going back a few years, I found these Mencía reds a bit tannic and awkward. Now I feel they've really got into their stride, with luscious dark purple brews overflowing with chunky berry fruits and liquorice, sometimes a little meaty and usually backed up with moderate tannins. To be honest, I often prefer the good value fruity young *jovens* to the top wines, which can occasionally feel a bit over-worked and woody.

**Some wines & wineries** – Álvaro Palacios and the Pérez family really helped put the region on the map in the late 90s and Bierzo is now one of the top “new” regions in Spain. Good wineries include: Akilia, Bodegas Merayo, Castro Ventosa, Descendientes de J.Palacios, Dominio de Tares, Peique, Pittacum, Tilenus, Ultreia, Valtuille...

**Other info** – Bierzo is a largely forgotten region that many people zoom through en-route to/from Galicia, but the abundant regional produce and small towns such as Villafranca del Bierzo make it well worth a stop.

### Vinos Valtuille (Valtuille de Abajo, Bierzo DO, NW Spain) - 2nd March 2015

Marcos García Alba (Winemaker and Viticulturalist)

Elena García Alba (Business Admin and Sales) - [info@vinosvaltuille.com](mailto:info@vinosvaltuille.com)

### **Introduction to the Bierzo region**

El Bierzo lies in North West Spain and is a fantastic region to visit, being a kind of buffer zone between Galicia's verdant valleys and the harsh plains of Castilla y León. There are high mountains on all sides but the heart of the region is a deep, undulating bowl (clearly visible on Google Earth) lying at the relatively modest altitude of around 500m (1640 ft). Politically part of León, the locals would rather consider themselves “Bercianos” and amusingly “León” is often painted-out on many of the road signs. This regionality is also reflected in the local accent, which sounds a lot more *Gallego* than anything east of the Manzanal pass.

650mm a year of rain and hot sunny summers means that a lot of produce grows well here, with roasted peppers, reineta apples, conference pears and chestnuts all thriving. Not surprisingly the rustic cuisine is also superb and if you're hungry (and neither you, nor anyone in your party is even remotely vegetarian) you could try a *botillo* (think chorizo-flavoured pre-historic ribs packed into a haggis, then baked in an oven).

Of course it's wine that I'm most interested in and the main grape around here is Mencía. There are some other grapes planted, including Palomino, Godello and Garnacha Tintorera but Mencía is unquestionably the star of the show and must make up at least 70% of any red. Twenty years ago, hardly anyone had heard of it and there were a lot of old bush vines quietly doing their own

thing. “All” that was needed was a few people to realise the region’s potential and take advantage of some extremely low-hanging fruit (literally in most cases).

In the 1990s some pioneering winemakers did start to create new wines and soon interest in the area and prices shot up. For a region that had 15 wineries there are now 73. In those early days many of these new wines seemed to be over-extracted and with a lot of new wood. Of course that style was in vogue then and it was a great way to get noticed, yet even then I sometimes found myself struggling to enjoy these out of balance tannic monsters, wondering what all the fuss was about and questioning the pricing. Things have settled down a lot since and many of the wines in the region are just fabulous: solid liquoricey reds with great depth, lots of country charm and with tannins in check.

Interestingly enough I was told that Spain’s recent economic crisis has been good for the Bierzo wine scene. Whilst it has closed down some of the region’s heavy industry this has meant more people available to work the land, just at the time when good and well-priced Bierzo reds were starting to be seen as a smart choice in recessionary times.

### **Vinos Valtuille**

Now to one of my favourite producers and some of the nicest people you’re ever likely to meet: Marcos and Elena García Alba at Vinos Valtuille. I met this brother and sister team at the *verema.com* enthusiasts’ fair in Barcelona in November 2013 (a great all-day event, if you are able to make it). It was early in my time as a wine buyer and I was specifically looking for red wines from the Bierzo region, to complement the range of Riojas and Riberas we were slowly building up. Of all the Bierzo wines I tried that day, Pago de Valdoneje was amongst my favourites. Very alive, vibrant and honest, it sang authenticity. A bit chewy perhaps, but it just seemed to have something - a wine lovers’ wine. Yet it was the bottom of the range, a young red, going for a song. This would have to mean some fantastic vineyards and I was curious to see them for myself.

Sure enough, the first thing I noticed as I turned off the A6 *autovía* were the vines! Just amazing, hillside after hillside chock-full of weird gnarly stumps, planted unusually close together. After just one wrong turn, I soon found Valtuille de Abajo, a cute little village surrounded by allotments and with a pleasant smell of wood-smoke in the air. After a further three wrong-turns, I finally found the winery at the top of the hill. “What punctuality!”, observed Elena, as I arrived five minutes late. “Marcos is in the vineyards pruning. It’s rained a lot recently and we’re a bit behind. Shall we go and find him?” Fine by me I thought and off we headed on foot, trying to avoid the worst of the mud.

Marcos met me with a grin and the agreeably weathered features of somebody who spends 364.9 days/year outdoors. He was hard at work with two other blokes, each man to a row, as they pruned back the bushvines. The vines looked old, “about 90 years”, Marcos confirmed and the site looked good, pretty stony and with a gentle SE slope.

The family has been growing vines here since 1910 but it was only in 1999 when Marcos’ father, Dimas, decided to start a winemaking business. Before this the grapes went to the local cooperative and the wines were either just drunk locally or sold off in bulk. These were different times: fertiliser was “poured on” and the more grapes you grew the better, despite the resulting green flavours and lower alcohols in the range 11-13%. But cooperative winegrowing wasn’t



justifying their efforts and Marcos felt that they should either get out or realise the promise of their 12 hectares of old vines, so the family took the plunge. These days Marcos prunes for a final yield of around 6 tonnes/ha, just over half the permitted maximum and quality is the only parameter they care about.



One of their neatly-pruned old vine Mencía vineyards, as indicated on the following satellite map



Numerous vineyards surrounding Valtuille de Abajo



## Winemaking

Everybody round here has a good word for Raúl Pérez, a local pioneer / guru / maverick who knows everybody, seemingly makes wine everywhere and is generous with his help and advice. It was Raúl's early success and encouragement that helped get Vinos Valtuille up and running. Marcos tells me that like everybody who grew up in the area, he has been pruning since 13 or 14 years old but had no formal winemaking training. He knew what he liked, at least. He started making wine in the year 2000 and supported by "Rauli", with hard work, good hygiene and good grapes, he feels he has made progress since, though recognises that he still has lots to learn.

Winemaking at Valtuille is pretty straightforward: grapes are harvested in September and after destemming and crushing are held cold for 2 or 3 days. The temperature is then allowed to rise and the tanks are inoculated with commercial yeast. Marcos is a big fan of long pumpovers and incorporating a lot of air during the process. Once alcoholic fermentation has finished, he likes to keep the wines on skins a further 15 days, so total maceration will be around a month (quite a long time). The *joven* (young) wine, which represents around 90% of their production, stays in stainless steel, their *joven robe* and *crianza* are run off into mostly used French oak. Press wine is added back to the wines where they believe it will help the most.

A month on skins and only stainless steel is not the usual recipe for making approachable young reds and I am guessing that they only get away with it due to the ripeness of the grapes and the large amount of air incorporated during fermentation. It also helps explain why this wine is such a good price, yet it's a fascinating wine. Absolutely bursting with fruit, though a little grippy at the same time, it's not a lean wine, yet neither is it a behemoth. This is something that Marcos acknowledges, "Our young wines are not the same as (easy-drinking, banana-scented, carbonic-maceration) Rioja *jovens*. Our wines have a bit more body but it's the way we all do things around here. It's the same at (neighbouring) Peique for example and people seem to like the results."

In 2013 Vinos Valtuille started a small scale trial of a top wine, to be named "Cabanelas". Some of their best grapes were fermented in a pair of 225L barrels, one with whole bunches (ie including stems) and one just grapes, with no additions to either, except for a little SO<sub>2</sub>. I didn't get to try this wine but Marcos seems happy enough. Then again, he seems happy enough anyway.

## The future

It's a question of steady progress for Vinos Valtuille, with no big-name backers, nor large budgets for sales and marketing. Marcos is quick to recognise the contribution being made by his sister, Elena, who studied Business Administration in Salamanca, then went to London for six months to work on her English. She seems to be just what the firm needed, allowing Marcos to focus on the vines and wines, whilst Elena makes sure that all the paperwork gets done on time, the business is run properly and Sales and Marketing get a push.

It's a pretty tight-knit community up here and it seems that everybody from the label producer to the web designer is some kind of relative or friend, which apparently works out just fine. In fact they still sell a lot of their wine locally in the charming town of Villafranca del Bierzo, which handily is often full of thirsty pilgrims en-route to Santiago. Where they have taken on external help is by working with a professional distributor (Sara Selección) to gain exposure to important trade fairs, such as Germany's ProWein, at a fraction of the cost of going themselves.

Vinos Valtuille currently produce around 60,000 bottles / year and Marcos reckons that if they could grow up to around 150,000 that would be ideal. “We’d like to be able to make a decent living from this, that’s all. I think Bierzo as a whole will remain pretty similar in the future, it’s never going to be a place for huge wineries. One thing that may change is more of a move into ‘roble’ type wines” (a halfway house style of red, with brief oak ageing, that has recently gained a lot of ground in Ribera del Duero).

I ask Marcos what other wines he likes and he surprised me by mentioning Mustiguillo, from far away Valencia. He’d recently got to try it on a sales trip down there, he explained. “I also like ‘non-oxidised’ Riojas and I shouldn’t really say it but I have a soft spot for Ribeira Sacra”. Of course I understand what he means about not wishing to promote a rival region but for me I think there’s more than room enough for two styles of Mencía, in fact it makes the grape still more interesting and puts it in the mouths of critics on a more regular basis. You might generalise that the Ribeira Sacra version is all freshness and perfume, whereas the Bierzo style is meaty liquorice and weight. Talking of meat, after my visit the three of us went off to Villafranca for a very meaty lunch where their 2009 “Viñas Viejas” Crianza absolutely shone.



Enjoying a great lunch with Marcos and Elena in the rustic Mesón Don Nacho, Villafranca del Bierzo



## **Bodegas y Viñedos Merayo (Bierzo DO, North West Spain) - 3rd March 2015**

Juan Merayo Martínez (Manager) - [jmerayo@byvmerayo.com](mailto:jmerayo@byvmerayo.com)

Pedro Merayo Fernández (Head of Viticulture)

Fermín Rodríguez Uría Suárez (Winemaker)

### **Introduction**

These wines I discovered by chance. There was a ham and wine fair going on at the Hotel Costa Vasca in San Sebastián. I didn't know too much about it and the fair was right across town but at the last minute I managed to go. Great event too, if a little geared to local restauranters who seemingly haven't been told that you need to spit if you're going to try a few wines. In a quiet area towards the back stood the youthful figure of Fermín Uría. It was ten to eight and there was just time to try the wines and I'm so glad I did. Good, ripe, honest Bierzo wines, they seemed a cut above even what this A-list region normally produces. As we got chatting, he told me that he had previously been the winemaker at Domino de Tares (one of the best in Bierzo) and I realised that my tastebuds hadn't deceived me, as I was already a huge fan of their *Cepas Viejas 2009*. I wondered why he would want to leave a project like that and what Bodegas Merayo was all about?

A few months later and I was in the Bierzo region, looking forward to finding out more. Fermín wasn't around that day but he had kindly arranged my visit with owners. I was met at the winery by the General Manager, Juan Merayo. There was building work going on and so he suggested that we head out to the vineyards to meet his father, Pedro.



“El Llano” vineyard, Bierzo



## **Pedro Merayo**

Pedro has spent a lifetime in and around the vineyards of Bierzo. In charge of everything to do with grapes, you couldn't buy the level of experience he has accumulated. We met at the bottom of a steep hill and all jumped into Pedro's venerable car to climb up to their vineyards. It was the start of March and they were just finishing off the pruning. Spending time in the vineyards with Pedro was a real treat as it was almost as if I was being introduced to different members of the family. Stopping often to chat, he revelled in pointing out minor differences in slope, soil and mesoclimate and was clearly proud of what each family member was achieving. The vines were mostly very old and the older the vine, the more Pedro seemed to admire it - stopping excitedly to point out ones that were now hollow in the middle from extended age.

## **Vineyards**

As mentioned in the chapter on Vinos Valtuille, the story in Bierzo is mostly about old-vine Mencía. In fact the Merayo's vineyards are only about a mile away from Marcos' vines, slightly further up the same hill, lying roughly equi-distant between Villafranca del Bierzo and Valtuille de Arriba. This seems like a real sweet-spot for old-vine Mencía and these vineyards are no exception, situated on poor, stony soil at around 600m (1970ft) on a generally south east facing slope.

Wine has been in the blood in the Merayo family for a few generations and these vines were snapped up in 1994 by Pedro Merayo. They now own 33 hectares in the same area, which is a sizeable plot for Bierzo where local inheritance traditions tend to have split up the land into ever-decreasing fractions. The majority of the vines range in age between 60 and 100 years old, the age estimated by talking to the oldest inhabitants of the area.

They have also planted some new vines and have grafted new Mencía vines into their existing vineyards where one-off vines had died or had a problem. It's pretty much 100% Mencía although apparently there is also some Godello and Doña Blanca interplanted, which "is a bit of a pain". These old vineyards give them around 4,500 to 6,000 kg/ha, roughly half the maximum permitted under the DO rules. Pedro stresses the importance of green harvesting to help control this yield.

We had a look at their "El Llano" vineyard. This is 4 hectares of unirrigated bushvines with a slight south orientation. They try and prune when the moon is waning and never add fertiliser. Up the hill a bit and we had a look at "El Músico", which was a similar story and named after a previous owner who was a musician. Harvest usually starts around 15<sup>th</sup> September. Normally it's still summer in Bierzo then but these vineyards are right up against the northern altitude-influenced limit for grape growing and so picking dates sometimes go down to the wire, before the Atlantic depressions roll back in after their summer recess. Some of the rows spilled down an east-facing slope, "We consider those grapes differently, at this altitude east-facing is not good. In Bierzo you need sun!", exclaims Pedro.

We went over to have a look at "La Galbana" vineyard. I think this might have been Pedro's favourite and the winery does release a wine made from grapes grown solely from this site. Pedro again delighted in pointing out vines that were so old, that their trunks were hollow. "Bushvines are always going to give you better quality than grapes trained on wires", he observed.



Pedro Merayo pointing out an ancient vine with hollow middle in their ancient “La Galbana” vineyard

We left Pedro to finish off the pruning and I chatted to Juan on the 15 minute drive back to the winery. “Producing wine isn’t like any other business. People who come from other sectors need to be patient. Bits of Ribera del Duero look more like an architecture museum than anything else. Of course investment is good and you need a good winemaker but the fundamental thing is the vineyard. We’ve got great vineyards and I actually think that Spain’s economic crisis will be good for us. It is shaking things up a bit and we will see who’s who and who manages to survive long term on their own merits.”

### **Juan Merayo**

Juan Merayo is Pedro’s son. Growing up in Bierzo, Juan Merayo went off to study Law and Business Administration in Madrid before continuing his studies in the US. He gained experience at General Electric and PricewaterhouseCoopers before continuing his career in banking. He then moved to Angola for a number of years, selling electrical equipment before returning to his homeland. Juan was quick to play down his role in the firm, saying, “Pedro’s in charge of the vineyards and Fermín is in charge of winemaking. They’re a team and whilst of course we can all make suggestions, having two good people who have the last word in their respective areas is important - it gives us direction. Honestly I’d say that 50% of our success so far is down to my father and 50% to Fermín.”



Owners Pedro and Juan Merayo in the field



Winemaker Fermín Uría back at the winery

## Winery and Wines

The winery is certainly no Napa showcase at the moment, but on a large site close to Ponferrada, there is certainly potential. The building was initially designed for fruit packing and Juan Merayo is currently directing some far-reaching changes. It was definitely unusual opening up these huge heavy sliding doors to reveal some neatly stacked barrels - it seemed more like a meat locker or the baddies' lair in a Bond movie than a winery. But give them a year or two and no doubt things will be radically different and for now it works fine.

Bodegas Merayo use only their own grapes and Juan was generous to show me most of their current line-up, including 2014 tank samples from their more commercial "Merayo" range. These Merayo wines were all fresh, showing good fruit and sharing in common a certain elegance that boded well for the future. The colours were all fantastic, in particular the Mencía-based rosado was a delightful bluey-pink. Their Godello-based white was particularly attractive, redolent of pineapple, guava and perhaps crunchy fresh apples, with these same fruits coming through on the palate.

2012 Aquiana (Mencía from El Llano and La Galbana vineyards) - Probably my favourite of all the wines on the day and the one I currently buy. This wine is dense, round and full and is well-accompanied by attractive spicy, cedary oak. A ripe modern wine, perfectly showcasing the excellent Mencía grape.

2012 La Galbana (Mencía from La Galbana vineyard) - Cedary nose with lots of black fruits. Hugely concentrated but not aggressively tannic, the cedary oak stands out a bit at this stage but there is also an attractive underlying graphite character to the very ripe but not jammy fruit. (Note that I tried this wine just opened a little cold at 12 noon. After a day of sloshing around in the back of my car it had opened up considerably and was absolutely fantastic in an unashamedly



modern rather than post-modern style. An opulent dense mouthful of ripe sweet fruit and choco-coffee notes. Superb.)

### **The Future**

Bodegas Merayo aim to grow bit by bit, perhaps taking their delicious mid-tier “Las Tres Filas” wine from the current 8,500 to 30,000 bottles / year and also working on their Godello, with some new plantings. “We’ll still be fairly similar in 20 years but things will be a bit prettier”, muses Juan. “We already export around 30% to a number of countries, in particular Switzerland is proving to be a good market for us, and this is an area I think we can expand. Ultimately I want to enjoy life and having lived and worked in both Madrid and Luanda I can tell you that here in El Bierzo our quality of life is high.” I couldn’t help agreeing with him as I thought about all the happy people I’d met, the honest cuisine, the great wines and the dramatic scenery. Having gone so far in just four years, it seems obvious that with Pedro continuing to look after their old vines, Juan running the business and Fermín honing the house style, that they are well placed to take things as far as their ambitions send them.

### **Fermín Uría**

Fermín Uría is the winemaker I had met back in San Sebastián, at the ham and wine fair. He grew up in the attractive northern city of Oviedo, more famous for *sidra* (cider) and pre-Romanesque churches than anything else. Whilst studying Chemical Engineering at Oviedo his father offered him the opportunity to complete the practical part of his degree at the winery he had just co-founded in Bierzo, “Dominio de Tares”. It didn’t take long before he was hooked and so he decided to stay on at the winery and managed to combine this with a further 2 years’ study, this time in Winemaking at Valladolid.

Fermín stayed at Dominio de Tares for a number of years, gaining in experience and rising up to be Chief Winemaker, no doubt helped by guidance from Consultant Winemaker, Rafael Palacios. Fermín also gained experience at two other projects in the same group, at neighbouring Dominio Dostares and at Pazos de Lusco in Rías Baixas. In 2008 his father passed away and by 2010 he decided that the time had come to leave the business and get involved in other projects, doing things his way and being able to have a hand in every step of the process. “Smaller is good”, he states.

He is currently the Chief Winemaker at Bodegas Merayo and also has an important role at Finca Torremilanos in Ribera del Duero where he is their Winemaking Consultant. Unusually for a Ribera winery, Finca Torremilanos makes Cava as well as the region’s signature reds. So in Fermín’s typical year, picking might start in early September for Cava in Ribera, before moving to Bierzo in mid September, before finishing off back in Ribera at the last week in September. As any winemaker will know, there is no such thing as a “typical” year and these two regions being over 3 hours apart must mean that Fermín racks up quite a few miles on his car in the autumn.

Fermín tells me, “I like the freedom I have at each winery. I can come and go as I please, as long as I get the job done. To help with this I am in the process of training each winery’s staff, so that I don’t need to be there all the time. I’m really happy doing what I’m doing now, I can spend time with my family and if I took on any more work, I wouldn’t be able to complete all the work properly. In ten year’s time, I think I see myself doing the same projects. At Bodegas Merayo I’d really like to see all aspects of this young project evolve to maturity.”

I asked about the sort of wines he liked: “You know over the years my tastes have changed. These days I like less power and wood and prefer wines which are easier to drink. Ultimately I’m looking for wines with great balance and with their own personalities. I like the mineral notes you can get from Bierzo wines and outside of Bierzo I admire the more subtle regions, such as Burgundy. I also find myself with more and more of an appreciation for aged whites.”

Asking about people whom he admired, Álvaro and Rafael Palacios were the first names to come up, “For the way they have helped the broader region with their ability to see the potential that was here all along and for their commercial acumen. Jesús Madrazo (Contino, Rioja) is another person who’s a delight to be with and who’s winemaking skills I admire. There are also plenty of people such as Ginés Fernández (Bodegas Gancedo) and Isidro Fernández (Casar de Burbia) in Bierzo who have been quietly doing things their way, sticking to their beliefs and methods for a long time, without much media attention, who are only now are starting to receive the recognition they deserve. In a way it’s these kind of people I admire the most and the more I think about it, the more names come up, such as Joan Àngel Lliberia (Bodega Edetària, Terra Alta) and Juan Antonio Ponce (Bodegas Ponce, Manchuela). The list is enormous!”

## **NORTHERN SPAIN**

In many ways this is the centrepiece of the Spanish wine industry and the region encompasses a number of famous regions, specifically those of the Duero Valley, plus Rioja and Navarra. Dig a little deeper and it’s easy to find plenty of interest, including well-made zingy Txakoli from the Basque lands and new wave reds from Zamora and León. Even Cantabria has something to offer.

The Duero Valley is a fairly extreme area (climatically, not socially) but it works well for wine: solid, bright Tempranillo-dominated reds are complemented by fresh, grapefruit-tinged whites. Ribera del Duero, Toro and Rueda represent Spanish wine at its reliable best, although they can sometimes be rather formulaic.

Rioja is usually about softish fruity reds, with good freshness and often noticeable oak. Rare these days, it can be a great place to find wines that have undergone long maturation before release. There are also a few ok whites, often over-oaked in a crude attempt to compensate for the Viura grape’s lack of character. Playing next-door neighbour to Rioja can’t be easy and whilst Navarra has something for everyone, it still struggles to gain much recognition. After all, what is it trying to be? Is it a piece of the New World, is it a value producer or is it now trying to catch the old-vine Garnacha train? (oh wait, they can’t, they ripped most of it out a few years back).



San Vicente de la Sonsierra, La Rioja

## Getariako Txakolina DO

photo: doespana.com



**Where is it?** – A very small region, centred just to west of San Sebastián. Hilly and right on the Atlantic, it's an area that enjoys mild temperatures but too much rainfall and not enough sunshine for conventional winegrowing.

**What's planted?** – Astound your friends by naming these two Basque grapes: **Hondarribi Zuri** (whites) and **Hondarribi Beltza** (reds). Whites are much more common than reds, but despite its heavy presence in the bars of the *Parte Vieja* there's not that much to go around, with only approx. 180ha (445 acres) planted.

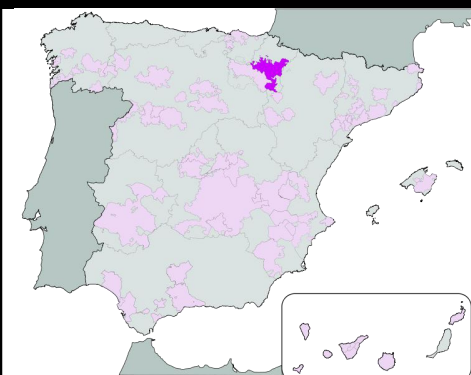
**What's the wine like?** – Txakoli is mostly white and is usually light and refreshing, with a slight prickle of carbon-dioxide enhancing the freshness. Often only around 11% alcohol, it's a good aperitif or thirst-quencher on a hot day and being quite neutral also goes well with seafood. A few producers are trying to make a "more serious" style which generally means a bit more flavour and mouthfeel, but the traditional "battery acid" style is fun too.

**Some wines & wineries** – Agerre, Amezttoi, Elkano, Hiruzta, Katxiña, K5Arguiñano, Rezabal, Txomin Etxaniz.

**Other info** - Normally Txakoli is served an inch or two at a time from a height of 2 or 3 feet into a straight-sided tumbler, forcing it to froth up a bit. Give it a go when you're over here, can be great fun whilst out on the town.

## Navarra DO

photo: vinosnavarra.com



**Where is it?** – Navarra is an historic kingdom in Northern Spain, which forms a transition between the Atlantic-influenced forested mountains of the north and the dry sunny plains of central Spain to the south and east.

**What's planted?** – **Tempranillo** and **Garnacha** are the major planted varieties, but there's also a significant foreign influence, with **Cabernet Sauvignon**, **Merlot** and **Chardonnay** vines planted, plus some **Moscatel**.

**What's the wine like?** – Principally known in Spain for good value strawberryish Garnacha-based *rosados*, the region's reds have not really delivered. Plenty of harmless mid-bodied softish reds exist at the commercial end but higher up the Cabs can be green and the Tempranillos a bit stewy or dried out. On the plus side, there are pockets of good Merlot, but these days it seems **the real stars are the vibrant and sometimes spicy old-vine Garnachas**, made in an appealing fresh, juicy style. There is also **some excellent Chardonnay** and superb fruity Moscatels.

**Some wines & wineries** – Arinzano, Artazu, Azul y Garanza, Casa de Lúculo, Castillo de Monjardín, Domaines Lupier, Chivite, La Calandria, Nekeas, Ochoa, Otazu, Pago de Cirsus, Palacio de la Vega, Tandem, Vintae, Zorzal

**Other info** – Navarra made a brave push forward in the 80s and 90s but has rarely delivered at the top end, so its star has waned as it searches for an identity. This may now be changing as ambitious younger winemakers are trying to unlock the region's best style, with unusually fresh old-vine Garnacha starting to be seen as a trump card.



## Rioja DOCa



**Where is it?** – Northern Spain, about 100km in from the coast, but significantly Rioja lies behind various mountains, so is quite protected from the Atlantic. The climate is very good on the whole, without the excesses of other parts of Spain. Coolish in the north west, Rioja gets significantly hotter and drier towards its south east.

**What's planted?** – Mainly **Tempranillo**, **Garnacha**, Mazuelo, Graciano for reds and mostly **Viura** for whites.

**What's the wine like?** – Reds are generally pretty fruity and usually soft, often with notable supporting oak (vanilla and spice). Traditional wines also show other characteristics from long barrel ageing, whereas modern reds can be quite bright and bold, though are rarely massive. Whites are usually crisp and neutral though some exist with a lot of barrel age – an unusual style, gold in colour and mellow, they can take some getting used to.

**Some wineries:** Allende, Artadi, Baigorri, Beronia, Bilbaínas, Castillo de Cuzcurrita, Contador, Contino, CVNE, Exopto, Gómez Cruzado, La Rioja Alta, LAN, López de Heredia, Luis Cañas, Marqués de Cáceres, Marqués de Riscal, Muga, Palacios, Ramón Bilbao, Remelluri, Remírez de Ganuza, RODA, Sierra Cantabria, Vivanco, Ysios...

**Other info** – Traditionally ageing has played a big part in Rioja wines as follows: **Joven** (no requirement), **Crianza** (min: 2 yrs old with 1 in barrel), **Reserva** (min: 3 yrs old with 1 in barrel), **Gran Reserva** (min: 5 yrs old with 2 in barrel). As tastes change this is becoming less relevant - these days some top wines bypass this system.

**Castillo de Cuzcurrita (Cuzcurrita del Río Tirón, Rioja DOCa) - October 2014 / Feb 2015**

Juan Díez del Corral Ugarte (Boss) // [info@castillodecuzcurrita.com](mailto:info@castillodecuzcurrita.com)

### Introduction

The Rioja DOCa region is mainly driven by a number of large companies making a range of mostly decent, soft, pleasantly oaky reds. People like the wines and exports are booming. In recent years a few boutique producers have also sprung to fame, on the back of their old-vine concentrated reds, which achieved “perfect scores” from a number of critics. There is also a fair bit of flashy architecture in the region, which either jars with tradition or injects life into this sleepy backwater, depending on your point of view.

Castillo de Cuzcurrita is none of the above. It's a fascinating small project, located in a forgotten corner in the far west of the region. The aim of the project is to produce a couple of authentic Rioja wines from the surrounding vineyards. Pretty straightforward really.

What sets them apart is the vineyards, which are almost on the limit of viability for Rioja and the house style which is classy but unflashy. Owners Bergé y Compañía have invested in the project, creating a magnificent new winery and there's a genuine 14<sup>th</sup> century castle on site! Better still, there is a 7 ha (17 acre) vineyard totally enclosed within the castle walls and Cuzcurrita's top wine comes exclusively from that block. So far so good, but it's people rather than castles that make good wine and fortunately the owners made some good decisions. Travelling Winemaker Ana Martín Onzáin has been in charge of the winemaking since the start of the project and in 2009 Juan Díez del Corral Ugarte was welcomed on board as Managing Director.

## Juan Díez del Corral Ugarte

I've known Juan since my Codorníu days. Better dressed than George Clooney and with the manners of an ambassador, at first he seemed to be from another era. Yet when you get to know him, he's friendly and warm, up to date with the latest trends and has somehow retained the energy and optimism of a man twenty years his junior - an enigma.

Born in Bilbao into a wine family, he spent his summers in Rioja. Juan's Great-Great-Grandfather, Santiago de Ugarte, had founded Riojan legend Bodegas Bilbaínas and the property was still under family control as Juan grew up. After studying law in Bilbao, Juan returned to the family firm, working in Sales and Marketing. (He told me that as a young lad he was friends with all the kids from the estates in Haro at that time - from López de Heredia, CVNE, Muga and so on. They were all allowed to work in their wineries and Juan and his brother begged their father to let them do the same. Gonzalo Díez del Corral wouldn't let his children do manual work, preferring them not to take the job of another man. In the end he relented and sent them out in to the vineyards one hot August. After a couple of parched weeks with sore backs and torn hands, the young lads soon got the message.)

In 1997 Catalan Cava giant Codorníu bought Bilbaínas as part of an ambitious diversification plan. Juan did well in the new structure and was promoted to a senior position in group sales. In 2009 Juan was approached by Castillo de Cuzcurrita to run their business. Obviously it was a big step, to cut ties with the remnants of the family firm he had known all his life, but it was a good opportunity and supported by his wife he decided to jump at the offer.



Juan Díez del Corral Ugarte and a nice lunch near Bilbao

## Rioja and Castillo de Cuzcurrita's approach

I asked Juan how he sees Rioja today. "For me a lot of the wines seem the same. One of the biggest problems in Rioja is excess uniformity. Many brands we know today were originally named after the vineyards they came from. Back then these vineyards all had marked characteristics and the differences between them were obvious. But as some brands became successful, more grapes needed to be found. These grapes inevitably came from other vineyards and so that original vineyard character became diluted. The massification of brands has certainly led to remarkable consistency but at what price? There are few low points but neither are you 'talking to God' when you drink them."

So given that context, I asked what Cuzcurrita were aiming to do. "We want wines that are recognisable, wines with personality. The worst thing somebody could say to me is that our wines were 'pretty good'. We don't want that at all, we want wines with character, wines that aren't generic, we don't want indifference. Out here in the west of Rioja Alta, we're almost at the limit of climate for ripening grapes. If you head a few kilometres up the road, you can see the edge. After that, it's too cold and there are no more vines, just cereals. This climate impacts our vineyards and we have no option but to harvest really late. But in doing that we're simply trying to capture the essence of these vineyards in our wines. I would emphasise that we are NOT trying to produce 'Vinos de Autor' or 'High expression' wines. We want RIOJA wines and whoever invented those terms should have their balls cut off! But there's still a long way to go. There's a saying in Rioja 'Your grandkids will enjoy the fruits of your labour.'"

There are literally hundreds of wineries in Rioja and I wondered about competition. "For us, the higher the quality of our neighbours' wines, the better. It raises everybody's game and it raises the quality and reputation of the whole region. We are proud to be part of Rioja and we are doing the best we can in our corner of the region to do something a little different. Believe me the last thing I'd want is for our wines to become fashionable for a while. We want to earn our place in the region and stay there."

Juan started to get quite animated at this point. "The thing with Rioja is that it's a huge region which encompasses a big range of quality but they all say 'Rioja' on the label. Look, if you're buying jamón (Iberian ham) and you have two options: they're both *jamón ibérico pata negra* from Jabugo, but one is 20€ / kg and the other is 70€ / kg, who's swindling who? It's the same with a week's all-inclusive to Cancún, you can pay 700€ or you can pay 4,500€. With whisky, a single malt isn't the same as a blend. In all these cases, both products are valid but you need to understand what you're paying for. It should be the same in Rioja. The DOCa Rioja brand is very strong and that helps us all. But the time is ripe to reassess where we're at. The only thing the wines from around here and those from other parts of the region have in common is that they both say 'Rioja' on the label. Sub-zones might be the answer, but we've been talking about that since the 70s. I want to be clear that I'm not talking about better or worse; there is a lot of good wine out there and everything has a place and a story to tell. The key for us to be successful is to explain our product well."

I asked about the impact of the castle. "Having a castle on site does make us special but 95% of our buyers haven't been here and seen it in person, so it doesn't help us as much as you might think. It's a really nice part of our story but it is the wines that we are focusing on." I asked which part of his job Juan enjoyed the best. "You know, I think I enjoy all aspects of my job. Every day is different and I like the variation. Sometimes I might be buying organic fertiliser and the next



day hosting clients. I definitely enjoy working with people and when we go to wine fairs, it's that contact, that chance to chat to potential customers that I really value. The chance to listen to different viewpoints and to try new wines is extremely useful. I try and choose the fairs we go to carefully. There's not much point being on a small stand at the back of a huge fair. We try and target the smaller fairs, where the experience is a bit more VIP, 'showroom'-style fairs where there's a receptive audience and it's easier to get our message across."



The on-site castle and simple gravity-flow winery at Castillo de Cuzcurrita

## **The future**

Castillo de Cuzcurrita has only been going fifteen years and so barely has a past but Juan has been in the business a while and so has a fair amount of perspective. “Wine has been around for 5,000 years but sometimes it seems that it’s only the present that matters. These vineyards were here before my time and will be here long after we’re gone. All we can do is steer through our time as custodians and try and leave things in better shape than we found them. The people who came immediately before us, the Rioja bosses of the 70s and 80s, had it tough then and I admire that generation enormously. People like my father Gonzalo Díez del Corral, Pedro López de Heredia Ugalde, José Madrazo Real de Usúa and Marcelo Frías Artacho all did a huge amount for the region, yet go largely unsung. Back then there were no famous winemakers and even in Haro there isn’t a single street named after any winery.”

Continuing on an up-beat note, “Now wine is living a boom, it has earned caché and social standing and is seen as high-end. We are currently riding the crest of a wave and this is something we need to capitalise on. Yet we mustn’t become complacent. I enjoy a glass of wine with dinner every evening and I’m very conscious of the many different wines that come from Rioja, from other regions in Spain that weren’t previously highly regarded such as Jumilla, from all over the world, including now from China even! It’s important to try these, to see what other are up to, so that we don’t become complacent and keep our minds open and our palates alive.”

As we parted company Juan was off on another sales mission, this time to Barcelona. It’s a lesson in reality that many would-be winery owners should note. You can be from a 5<sup>th</sup> generation winemaking family, in Spain’s most famous region, making excellent wines at reasonable prices, you can have a 14<sup>th</sup> century castle on site, yet still the wines don’t sell themselves.

## **The wines**

Castillo de Cuzcurrita makes just two wines. In both cases they are 100% Tempranillo from estate-grown fruit. Both wines are Reservas but are labelled with the non-specific green back label (a growing trend in Rioja), which allows wineries to age the wines how they like and doesn’t pigeon-hole them as a certain style.

2008 Señorío de Cuzcurrita - A reasonably solid wine, definitely Rioja, with a nice balance between the dark fruit, firmish tannic backbone and cedary oak. Fairly understated but certainly no pushover, will continue to improve over the next few years.

2008 Cerrado del Castillo - This is the wine that comes from within the walled vineyard. Great colour, still with a reasonably youthful hue. Lovely nose, full of warm ripe fruit and smoky oak. Seems a hint more “modern” in style than the slightly more classic Señorío. Fantastic wine, full of fruit and agreeable darker notes. Still youthful but in no way austere.

**Bodegas Bilbaínas (Haro, Rioja DOCa, Northern Spain) - 30<sup>th</sup> January 2015**

**Diego Pinilla Navarro** (Director Técnico = Chief Winemaker and boss)

m.oyono@bodegasbilbainas.com

***A personal note > Why I love Bodegas Bilbaínas***

*Most of the wineries I've written about are relatively new ventures, looking to take advantage of old vineyards in new ways, creating great new wines in the process. This isn't really the case here, what we're talking about is a Riojan classic, a grande dame located right at the heart of the region. A winery with over 150 years' experience and the first to bottle its own wine in Rioja.*

*I've long had a soft spot for Bodegas Bilbaínas. In the mid 90s we somehow negotiated Rioja's limited train system to arrive in Haro and right off the train there it was! With its own platform and everything! So we had a look around and even back then I remember being taken by the history and charm of the place. Time moves on and I later found myself working for the Catalan wine group Codorníu, who had bought Bilbaínas in the mean time. I soon got posted up there and ended up doing 3 harvests in total and was part of the family for a little while.*

**Diego Pinilla Navarro**

The current boss, Diego Pinilla, was new when I joined, young and ambitious. A branch of his family had vineyards in Aragón, so whilst he was exposed to wine from an early age, he grew up in Jaca in the Pyrenees and so didn't have much chance to get fully involved. After studying agricultural engineering in Pamplona, Diego went off to Rennes in France to study the economic management side of rural businesses. To complete these studies he did a project on wine based in Montpellier and his time in this wine town par excellence proved to be a key experience in re-igniting his passion for wine.

From Montpellier, Diego went on to do work experience in Château Canon-La Gaffelière in Saint-Émilion, before further vintages at Brown Brothers in Australia, Clos du Val in California and Concha y Toro in Chile. From there he took a permanent job at the stunning new Ysios winery in Rioja, where he was signed on as its first Technical Director - not bad for such a young bloke. This led to further opportunities within that group, including at Tarsus in Ribera del Duero and at Riojan giant Campo Viejo. In 2007 he signed for Codorníu to head up Bodegas Bilbaínas - a historic mid-sized winery located right in the heart of Rioja Alta.





## House Style and the Challenge of History

As Diego explained, the key to Bilbaínas and understanding Codorníu's investment is in the vineyards. The firm owns some 250 hectares (620 acres) of prime Tempranillo vineyards across a range of superb terroirs in the Rioja Alta region, mostly adjacent to the winery. You could easily argue that this would have to be some of the best Tempranillo in the world. It's these vineyards which put the winery in a privileged position and of course, greatly influence the style of wines produced. It's something Diego is keenly aware of. I wondered why a young chap would want to take on such a historic brand. Aren't the options and possibilities limited, a bit like winemaking in a straightjacket?

Diego doesn't see it that way, rather he sees himself lucky to be a custodian of such a legendary producer. "It's fantastic to be involved with such a historic brand. Wines such as *Viña Pomal* have been made for every year for more than a century, which is rare, and if we were in France, the equivalent wines with a similar story would be selling for much more."

"What we want to do here is make wines which live up to our history, which maintain a certain classic Rioja style, but classic in the sense of the right fruit profile and with a certain elegance, not using the word 'classic' as an excuse for thinness or old-fashioned wines. We want elegance but complexity too, wines for accompanying food and definitely wines that reflect the Rioja Alta area".

Diego realises of course that one day he will pass on the baton to a new custodian and so in his time at the winery he's not just trying to make great wines but is also busy improving the winery's installations. Being part of Codorníu can have its frustrations in terms of bureaucracy and some big decisions being taken in distant Barcelona but Diego prefers to focus on the positives that group ownership brings, "It helps a lot with sales and marketing and a considerable amount of money has been made available for improvements". Certainly in the five years since I left it's very noticeable that the buildings are in better shape, there are plenty of new tanks, there are numerous changes behind the scenes and there is still work in progress.



Diego Pinilla Navarro and the author in one of Bilbaínas' vineyards in Rioja Alta, autumn 2007

## The Future

Diego remains ambitious and would like to see Bilbaínas complete its boutique “winery within a winery” project. He feels that the ability to vinify certain small lots of fruit separately would really help them be able to focus on detail and quality at the top end. This work would then lead to a greater understanding of site and hence feed down to improvements across the entire range.

In the mean time wines that Bilbaínas do release from time to time are “Vinos Singulares”, one-off wines produced in small volumes that were made as part of their on-going trials and judged good enough to release on their own merits. Wines such as Graciano or Tempranillo Blanco. There aren’t too many pure Gracianos around and Tempranillo Blanco is a recently-discovered grape, derived from a natural mutation in the field. For Diego of course, it’s fun to be able to play around with this kind of stuff, especially as there is no pressure to release these wines every year - but the real story here besides the fun, is that each one of these wines represents a step forwards in their understanding of Rioja. A number of trial wines are made each year and those that aren’t released on their own can still be very useful as they can make interesting components to bring complexity to larger blends.

The more I chatted the more I began to see the charm and the appeal of the challenge Diego has on his hands. On the one hand he wants to lead this historic firm into the future, leaving it in better shape than he found it. On the other, I see the man who loves wine: the man who stays until 10pm to make sure things are going well, the guy who’s out in the vineyards trying to understand their complexities and the chap who’s as excited about 4 barrels of Graciano as he is about a 40,000 case blend. As we tasted through the range, this passion and excitement came shining through. When he’s running the winery, Diego is of course pretty business-like, yet in the tasting room he’s more like a kid in a sweet shop.

## Wine Styles and Variations over time

I asked Diego about vintage variation, north west Rioja being one of the regions that is most susceptible to an annual battle between Atlantic, Continental and (allegedly) Mediterranean forces. “What we try to do is smooth out these annual variations, to maintain a certain quality. In 2013 for example we did a lot of green-harvesting, in 2014 we were active in leaf-removal. We also have margin to play with volumes and years to a certain extent” - meaning that they have a certain liberty to make, say, more Reserva in a good year and less in a poor year.

What is true though is that viticulture in Rioja has changed and changed for the better. I remember when I worked at Bilbaínas we opened up some old wines from vintages between 1950 and 1990. It was fascinating to try these wines of course and (bottle variation apart), anything older than about 30 years tended to taste surprisingly similar, as if frozen in time. But they were made in a different way back then, vineyard yield was the main driver - so dropping fruit would have been throwing money away. Consequently the wines had lower alcohol and higher acidity than now and so have aged pretty well - although you do need to be in the right frame of mind to appreciate them. Some things are still the same however, and Bodegas Bilbaínas still follows a number of traditions, including egg-white fining, where necessary.

>> *Not that there are any poor years any more. If you believe the (self-interested) Rioja Consejo Regulador there hasn't been a poor "mediana" year since 1972 and there hasn't been a "normal" year since 1984, everything else has been "good" or better. Perhaps they were in the Canaries in 2013.*

<http://es.riojawine.com/es/14-anadas.html>

Chatting about older wines, the conversation turned to Gran Reservas, the grandfathers of the region, requiring by law a minimum of 2 years in oak and 5 years total ageing before release. At Bodegas Bilbaínas they tend to blend in a small amount of Graciano with these Tempranillo-dominant wines, to add acidity (which increases ageing potential) and a slight spiciness. Diego feels that these wines have been overlooked in the recent past, in a surge of interest for very concentrated “Vino de Autor” wines that sprang up ten years ago. But now it seems restraint is back in fashion in the wine world and these elegant essence-of-Rioja wines are coming back out of the shadows and starting to find more fans - not least because in the rather fickle wine world, you are getting a genuine old world classic for a very reasonable price.

I asked Diego who he admired and what kind of wines he liked to drink. After a long pause he commented, “There’s not one person in particular that I admire, but I do admire the kind of people who have stuck to their guns, people who make a particular style and do so year in, year out, without trying to follow fashions. Wineries such as López de Heredia for example. In terms of wines I enjoy drinking, I do enjoy a lot of Rioja wines and I also have a soft spot for aged whites. A region that I love and think is criminally undervalued would be Jerez”. When asked about his favourite parts of the job, “Harvest is always fun of course but the bit I probably enjoy most is putting together the blends. I also get to travel quite a bit with Bilbaínas, particularly to Europe, the States and increasingly to Asia. Whilst the actual travelling can be a bit of a pain, it’s always fun when you get there”. Having been with Diego to the London Wine Fair a few years ago, I can testify that it is always fun when you get there.

When asked about the relevance of the Rioja DOCa and the rise of other wine regions, Diego is right behind the Rioja DOCa, “The thing with Rioja is that it’s widely recognised as a great name and a guarantee of quality. This has been a big team effort and Bilbaínas has long been a part of it and it’s pleasing to see recognition for the region growing. After all we’re right at the heart of Rioja, how can we not support it? The consumer understands the name and the style and this simplicity has to be good. What is a shame perhaps is that in such a large region, the different vineyard areas are not more widely appreciated. As for competition, there’s a huge amount of competition everywhere across Spain and beyond. Better wine is better for everybody and we’re happy to fight our corner.”



Some wines from the range, tasted on the day of my visit. Some memories and something new.



## **Bodegas Bilbaínas - The wines**

I was lucky to try a number of the current release wines on my visit and I was happy to see the progress made across the range. Like turning a supertanker, it takes a long time for changes in a large barrel-age dominated winery to show but Diego has been at the helm over seven years now and there's no doubt that the results are becoming apparent. In summary I think he's achieved his stated aim: The wines are all definitely Riojas, generally made in a modernised semi-classic style. There are good points of difference within the wines and there are significant quality steps between layers in the range. Above all the wines are all very drinkable and require no explanation or hard-sell.

The following are some brief notes on the wines I tasted, although there are a number of others in the range, including one of the rare non-Catalan DO Cavas, "Royal Carlton" - a wine with a surprisingly long history.

2013 Vinos Singulares Tempranillo Blanco - Interesting wine from low-yielding vines. Very fresh and quite floral with good citrus notes and marked acidity.

2012 Viña Pomal Crianza - Bilbaínas at its most classic, perhaps. Fairly old school, with that slightly understated Rioja Alta fruit and soft but present tannins.

2012 Viña Zaco - Bilbaínas at its most modern. Quite a lot of deep, bright black fruit packed into a delicious glass - but not OTT and still Rioja.

2010 Viña Pomal Reserva - Diego views this wine as their most emblematic, the reference for Bilbaínas and the jump in quality is obvious from the lower-tier reds. 2010 was an excellent year and here there is lots of depth of fruit and a surprising number of layers within a reasonably firm structure. The oak is present but doesn't dominate and this wine exudes pure class and will doubtless go on to improve over the next few years.

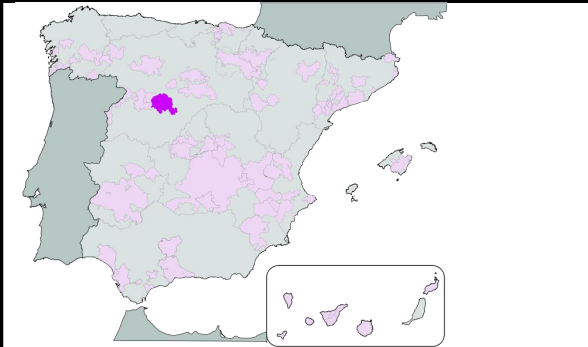
2010 Vinos Singulares Graciano - This is the best Graciano I've ever tasted. I have fond memories of helping to make the Gracianos in previous years, when in some cases they showed a ridiculous untamed white-pepper character. This version retains some of that and is fresh with a blueish colour but is much more a proper wine. Definitive.

2010 Vinos Singulares Garnacha - Paleish colour, with a warming cake / liqueur nose, but retains good balance. More ripe-Atlantic than Calatayud in character.

2010 Alto de la Caseta - Bilbaínas' top wine has a lovely ripe nose. It's still pretty tight and a little understated but with a great core of fruit tucked away and complemented by nice spicy notes. Built for the long haul, more classic than a "Vino de autor" but more up-front than a Gran Reserva.

## Rueda DO

photo: dtlux.com



**Where is it?** - Castilla y León, approx 170km NW of Madrid. Fairly bleak flattish area, about 700m above sea level. Quite a harsh continental climate with plenty of annual sunshine (2700hrs) and not much rainfall (400mm).

**What's planted?** - Mainly known for whites, based on the **Verdejo grape**, with Sauv Blanc also an option and Viura playing a supporting role. Reds are also permitted (Tempranillo, Cab and Merlot) but are bit-part players.

**What's the wine like?** - Rueda whites should always be **clean and fresh** and the **Verdejo-based wines** can really shine, with an amazing zingy acidity and an appetizing grapefruity bite. A bit like NZ Sauv Blanc, but not as intense. The good thing about Rueda wine is that it's widely available and usually very good value. Some people have experimented with barrel-fermenting their best fruit but I'm not sure this style is always successful.

**Some wines & wineries** - Marqués de Riscal was amongst the first producers to try and make modern wines in the region and their wines are still a benchmark. Other good producers include: Belondrade y Lurton, Bornos, Félix Sanz, Garciarévalo, Javier Sanz Viticultor, José Pariente, Martivilli, Naia, Nieva, Ossian, Tomás Postigo...

**Other info** - Sherry-like fortified wines from the Palomino Fino grape have a long history here and are known as *rancios* and *generosos*. Almost the opposite of what current fresh Rueda wines are about, some wineries still persevere with this traditional style. You can also find rosé wines and some sparkling.

### **Bodegas y Viñedos Garciarévalo (Rueda DO, Matapozuelos, Spain) - 27<sup>th</sup> January 2015**

Antonio Arévalo (Chief Winemaker and Boss)

garciarevalo@garciarevalo.com

Rueda is Spain's number one white wine region. The go-to denominación for crisp, refreshing whites at a good price, perfect as aperitifs or with any number of tapas from peppers to tortilla to fish to my favourite: octopus salad. Since the 70s when pioneers Marqués de Riscal (from Rioja) were amongst the first to re-evaluate the region and its local grape Verdejo, its rise has been stunning. The conditions are intense: sandy soils, high altitude, freezing winters and warm sunny summers. Yet in these conditions Verdejo seems to thrive and if made correctly gives refreshing mid-weight grapefruity whites with a bit of greenness and perhaps some tropical notes. No "Cat's Pee on a Gooseberry Bush" for sure, but not a million miles away, if definitely less full-on.

I say "if made correctly" as this is where the controversy lies. Spring frosts apart, Rueda is an easy place to make wine. The grapes will always get ripe, the land is flat and lends itself to mechanisation, you can irrigate to get a biggish crop and you are even allowed to grow the less characterful Viura as a bit of a reliable filler. Thirsty Madrid is not far away and in a country with long warm summers and a huge tourist industry, a local wine which is decent, refreshing and well-priced has got to sell: a golden opportunity.

Unfortunately some people are being accused of taking this opportunity too far and turning out dilute fairly characterless plonk at cheap prices and/or playing around with aromatic yeasts in an

attempt to add character to their insipid grassy brews. It still says Rueda in the bottle and that's all most bars want. Oh dear. In some parts now there is a price war and people who want real whites might switch to Galicia, the Pyrenees or perhaps Catalunya.

A great shame because amongst a big sea of producers there are some really good ones and some ancient vineyards. One such producer is Garciarévalo. I discovered these wines by chance as my local bar in San Sebastián (Bar Antonio - great locals' hang-out) has it by the glass. I used to stop off here en route to the old town and every time I was pleasantly surprised at just how good their Rueda was.

### **Antonio Arévalo**

Antonio Arévalo, is the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of the family growing grapes in the region and is great fun to hang out with. After studying Economics he returned to the family firm and their vineyards and bit by bit took on various amounts of responsibility and is now running the show. He has a plan but is also a realist and, like a mountain climber, prefers to take things one sure step at a time rather than taking on too much risk. Saying that, if a good opportunity comes up he's probably going to take it.





## Vineyards

It's obvious that Antonio loves being out in the vineyards and these are one of the firm's main strengths. Their three vineyards lie close to the winery, in the moderately quaint village of Matapozuelos and there's quite a range in terms of vine age, training and soils. The youngest (around 10 years) are trained in neat rows with drip irrigation and the oldest are over 100 year-old bush vines, planted on a kind of stony sand. The area's pleasant enough, but on a misty day in January, it isn't the Garden of Eden. The firm has about 70 hectares planted in total and they also buy grapes from about another 30 hectares from people they trust, who grow things their way. Nearly everything's Verdejo, but there is a little bit of Viura, as "It's less acid, a bit easier to drink and easier to grow". All-in Garciarévalo represent a little bit less than 1% of Rueda.

Their old vine vineyard feels really authentic and I'd like to come back in the summer and take a look. Antonio loves the site and believes that the grapes produced here have great depth of flavour. But as a business man, I get the impression he's also happy to have some modern vineyards up his sleeve, trained on wires for better yield, enhanced frost-protection and a different flavour profile.

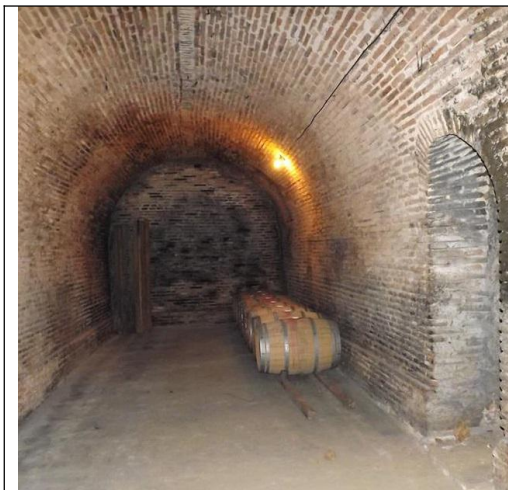


Antonio Arévalo with some 100 year old Verdejo vines

## Winemaking

Antonio was a little apologetic about the winery, but he needn't have been. It's modern, functional, clean and like most places has grown bit by bit. There are quite a few stainless steel tanks, a crusher, a press and a shiny new bottling line. Not much else. What else do you need if you make fruity whites in stainless? What did surprise me was what's down below - miles of caves! Apparently "everyone" made wine in the old days and these 17<sup>th</sup> century cellars were a great way of keeping things cool, so the place is like a honeycomb. Not just any old caves either, we're talking proper brick-lined numbers. There were a few barrels in one and I asked if he was going for a special cuvée. "I'm not really into wood with whites, we're aiming for fresh wines. The barrels are just a bit of red for family and friends. But one day, who knows? A *Blanco de Guarda* (white built to age) might be an interesting project. One thing's for sure, I'd certainly like to finish renovating these caves and get people down here. They're part of our history."

Their winemaking may be pretty simple but there's not a one-size-fits-all formula. Rather they take a range of material from their vineyards and then play around with a few options, such as skin contact, fermentation temperature and lees-ageing to give them different styles. Antonio's too sensible to take big risks, but he does want to improve. He's not thinking of growing the business much bigger, but ultimately he does want the wines to "stand out". So to this end they also run a few trials each harvest - around 3,000L at a time. When the time comes to evaluate the trials, it's "¡Alcantarilla, Mezcla o Botella!" - brutally honest, really - (Down the drain, blend it off, or bottle it straight!).



Nice brick-lined cellars.



Lucky me! Got a sneak peak at the 2014s during a blending trial!

Whilst reds are allowed in the Rueda DO, Antonio doesn't think this is the right way for the region to go. "Despite the rapid growth, Rueda still remains an excellent region for characterful young whites. Saying that, whilst the DO helps us in commercialising the wines, the maximum permitted yield is too high and I don't think their umbrella approach is the best way to represent this region. There are all sorts of plantings and different sized firms here. In our area, in Matapozuelos, the soil's more sandy, which gives us great drainage and excellent vine health. I'd like to see different sub-regions within Rueda being recognised, which would help stylish individual wines evolve. In the future we are working along these lines ourselves, hoping to create a single-vineyard white." I admire the fact that they haven't done this yet. It's easy to release a



single vineyard white and talk it up, but the fact that they haven't yet implies that they want to think about it, to get it right and launch when it makes sense.

Antonio's favourite parts of the job are spending time in the vineyard and enjoying other cultures on sales and business trips. Over lunch it became obvious that he has travelled quite a bit and is much more cosmopolitan than you might imagine for a local lad from Matapozuelos. And what a lunch! In the small village there were at least three restaurants of note, one with a Michelin star. We opted for the rustic Mesón de Pedro and were not disappointed with lechazo (suckling lamb) and rabbit right off the charcoal grill, accompanied by solid bread and Antonio's honest unpretentious red. It always amazes me how in Spain you can eat like a king in the most unlikely places and the locals think nothing of it. This kind of restaurant in London would be 3 months to get in and 3 times the price.

### Garciarévalo - The Wines



I suppose I'd better talk about the actual wines. They are all really good and increase in complexity and mouthfeel across the small range. My favourite would be:

Tres Olmos Verdejo Lías - an excellent example of Rueda, which combines freshness and layers of greenish fruit with tropical hints and interesting notes of fennel. Amazing mouthfeel and a wine which might age well for a couple of years.

2014 Harena (Verdejo - old vine single vineyard) *tasted April 2016* - Wow! This is a top quality wine, with amazing structure, that doesn't scream "Rueda". Shows what old-vine Verdejo can do.

## Cigales DO

photo: agronewscastillayleon.com



**Where is it?** - Cigales lies at around 750m on poor stony soils in the shallow valley of the Río Pisuerga, just to the north of its much more famous neighbours, Rueda, Toro and Ribera del Duero. The climate is continental.

**What's planted?** – **Tinto Fino / Tinto del País** (Tempranillo) is the mainstay of the region (70%), there is also Garnacha, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot for reds; Verdejo, Albillo and Sauvignon Blanc for whites.

**What's the wine like?** – To be honest, I haven't had many. Traditionally Cigales was famous for rosé and *clarete* wines, with neighbouring regions specialising in whites and reds. But in recent years people have been looking again at this region with an eye to making top quality reds. It's still work in progress, but certainly the reds are solid and can age well, whereas the rosés can be fruity with better length than some Navarrans.

**Some wines & wineries** – César Príncipe, Finca Museum (ambitious project, owned by the huge Rioja group Baron de Ley), Hiriart, Traslanzas (pioneers), Valdelosfrailes (owned by another big group, Matarromera)...

**Other info** – Cigales could have been Ribera del Duero or Rueda, but it isn't and sadly rosé wine rarely commands much prestige. But they can fight back with their healthy climate, poor soils and old vines. Where the region ends up will depend on money, fashion and hopefully some passionate locals taking things to the next level.



## Vino de la Tierra de Castilla y León

photo: diariodeleon.es



**Where is it?** - Castilla y León is a big region north west of Madrid. Basically it is a high plateau, ringed by mountains, giving an extreme continental climate with sunny days, not much rain and many frosty mornings.

**What's planted?** - As this is a catch-all region, it includes many different grapes, however the important ones would be **Verdejo** and **Godello** for whites and **Tempranillo** for reds, with a lesser role for Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Garnacha, Mencía + a few rarer ones like Juan García, Prieto Picudo and Rufete.

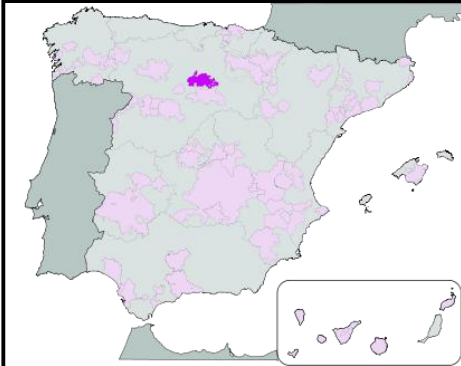
**What's the wine like?** - The wine is usually pretty good, often up to DO quality. You can get full-flavoured whites and smooth, serious reds, similar to Ribera del Duero, plus there is also a bit more experimentation with international varieties. Away from the Duero, the wines may be a bit more rustic but are always worth a try.

**Some wines & wineries** - Abadía Retuerta, La Mejorada, Lar de Maía, Marqués de Griñón, Mauro...

**Other info** - Whilst *only* a "Vino de la Tierra" this region is a bit of a maverick, with some absolutely top wines originating here, making the whole rule system seem a bit silly. Mauro makes some of the best wines in Spain. The system can also be used to blend wines across the region, e.g. Tinto Fino from Ribera + Garnacha from Toro.

## Arlanza DO

photo: 20minutos.es



**Where is it?** - Very little-visited region, just over half way to the north coast from Madrid. Lots of history round here but not much going on. At approx. 900m the climate is harsh continental, on the limit of grape growing.

**What's planted?** - Viticulture was established here by the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, but the region only got its DO in 2007. Just around 440 ha are planted these days, mainly with Tinta del País (= **Tempranillo**) but also Garnacha and most unusually Mencía are also found, plus there is a bit of white from Albillo, Viura and Chasselas Doré.

**What's the wine like?** - The high altitude and cooler conditions result in wines which offer good colour, combined with elegance and fresh acidity. The inclusion of other grapes alongside the usual Tempranillo allows for a greater range of wines, such as floral notes from Mencía or blackcurrant from Cab (if you can get it ripe!).

**Some wines & wineries** - La Colegiada (Bodegas Lerma), Monte Amán, Olivier Rivière, Sabinas y Viñas...

**Other info** - This is an example of a DO that probably shouldn't exist, as a formerly huge region is reduced to almost nothing today. There are two things going on: (i) people coming here from other regions, looking to create a kind of fake Ribera del Duero, planting new vineyards from scratch and also introducing famous varieties that they think may sell, (ii) - People trying to recover old vineyards and respect the terroir with tiny projects.

## **Sabinares y Viñas (Arlanza DO, Burgos, Spain) - 29<sup>th</sup> January 2015**

David González Marcos (co-owner and Winemaker)

### **Introduction**

And now for something completely different. By day, David González is the Winemaker at historic Riojan winery Gómez Cruzado.....but by night he slips across the border to his native Burgos to make a few cases on his own crazy project. Not quite, but almost.

I first met David at the *verema.com* wine fair in Barcelona in 2013. A friendly chap with a steely glint in his eye, I was surprised to see wine from two different regions at the same stand. So I tasted the wines and we got talking. Gómez Cruzado is a little gem, right in the heart of the Riojan industry in Haro, surrounded by illustrious (and bigger) neighbours. David's been taken on there to try and modernise the style a little, whilst the ambitious owners embark on a serious renovation of the beautiful winery buildings. But what were these other wines on the table? What is Sabinares y Viñas and where is DO Arlanza? At first taste, I wasn't even sure about the wines but I loved the story and needed to find out more. Fast forward to January 2015 and David and I are up at 1005m (3300 ft) above sea level, in the midst of one of the craziest vineyards I've ever seen.



David González pruning an old vine, 1005m above sea level, near Covarrubias

## **David González and Sabinas y Viñas**

David González grew up in the village of Villalmanzo (Burgos) in north central Spain. Middle of nowhere really, but like much of Spain, with a long tradition of small-scale winemaking. A few barrels for friends and family, that kind of thing, made using the simplest possible facilities, from vineyards lying in and around the valley of the River Arlanza. David's grandfather was involved with this wine scene and this was the spark that ignited the young David's life-long passion. So he went off to Logroño (the capital of Rioja) to study Agricultural Engineering and Winemaking and got some work experience at classic Rioja winery "El Coto" along the way.

After graduating he stayed with El Coto and worked as a Grower Liaison Officer (the link between Winemaking and a big sea of growers) and he also helped instigate a small-scale premium wine project. So he got to know vineyards and he got to know premium. Of course these sorts of skills were in demand so he then got involved with a number of other companies, first at Vizar in Valladolid, then on to be Chief Winemaker at Pagos del Rey in Rioja. But David was beginning to realise that his heart lay in smaller-scale projects, so he moved on to L'Emperatriz in Rioja and later started advising Gómez Cruzado.

With his increasingly expert eye for old vineyards, his mind kept turning back to his native Burgos and his formative years watching his winemaking grandfather. He knew there were some potentially great old vines there and he knew that nobody was exploiting them. It would be a real shame if they were all just abandoned and that piece of history was lost for ever. What if the best sites could be rejuvenated somehow and then wines made from them using current skills and techniques? How might the wines turn out? It was impossible to say, but he couldn't resist the challenge.

Talking with friends and colleagues, he discovered he wasn't alone in thinking along these lines and soon a critical mass of Arlanzaphiles emerged. They realised they'd be better off banding together, rather than doing things separately, the other team members being Bequer Prieto, Luis Martín and Juan Antonio Leza. Their first vintage was in 2011. It's still early days but things are progressing, helped and considerably encouraged by strong critical acclaim from some top wine writers (including Jamie Goode and Jancis Robinson). The four do all the work themselves and make the wine in Luis Martín's garage.

## **Vineyards**

At the moment the project has vineyards in two areas, high up on the hills above Covarrubias in the east of the region and on flatter, slightly lower land near Villalmanzo. In both cases they knew what they were looking for: old vines, planted on the right kind of stony soil, which if pruned back to shape would give low yields of authentic grapes (whatever that meant). Vineyards that were pretty much abandoned as there was nobody to work them any more and no obvious reward for all the toil.

Covarrubias is a fairly remote village, but well on the tourist trail, due to its brilliantly preserved old centre and attractive riverside setting. But it's not particularly cosmopolitan and has an ageing population. On the right night, you could easily film a horror movie round here, with some of the locals as extras. Apparently when David and his chums started asking questions about the local vineyards and who owned them, this outsider became known as "El Temido" (the one who is feared). Bear in mind that this "outsider" was born and bred in a village 24km away and you get



the picture. Anyway it's a great story and so they named one of their wines "El Temido" to honour their reputation.

In total the project has access to about 4.5 hectares (11 acres). The really interesting thing around here is the mix of grapes: a weird field blend of Tempranillo, Mencía and Garnacha (reds) and Albillo, Viura, Malvasía and Chasselas (whites). Mencía comes from NW Spain and Chasselas from Switzerland. What unearthly experiment has been going on in these remote mountainsides? David's idea is that the area is a natural cross-roads: on the main north-south route in Spain but also not far from the Camino de Santiago. There are certainly a lot of monasteries in the area. Could it be that wandering travelers and monks brought this rich tapestry of vines with them? In fact the picture is even more complicated than summarised here and this has inspired David to start researching a PhD in the grape varieties of the Arlanza Valley - where he finds the time, I'm not quite sure.

Whatever the story, these field blends are unique and it's something that the Sabinares boys want to exploit. So no prissy separate fermentations, no picking when each grape is ready, no control freakery. Just go for it and see what happens!



Beautiful buildings in Covarrubias and David González in the "El Quemado" vineyard

## Winemaking

Low intervention is also the approach in the "winery". There are a few random tanks, some quite nice barrels and a Nomblot egg (trendy concrete tank). They hand-pick the grapes and then de-stem them, before throwing them into open fermenters. They are increasingly realising that they don't want to work the grapes too hard and so manual punchdowns aren't even performed every day (pretty unusual). When the ferments are over, the wines are drained off into the aforementioned tanks and barrels.

They feel that the best way to express these vineyards is without aiming for too much extraction - hence the infrequent punchdowns. They are aiming for elegant wines with good natural acidity and using oak in a supporting role only. Now the project is up and running they feel that the ideal oak mix would be about 20% new and the rest up to three years old. There are a couple of 500L puncheons too, as an alternative to the more standard 225L and 228L barrels, which also help to reduce the oak impact.

“I hate fashions”, David states. “The whole focus of this project is in finding the right vineyards. In the winery we’re just trying to capture those sites in the glass. Around 2005, wine fashion was for huge massively-extracted wines with lots of new oak. Now things have gone the other way. For all the hype about the Garnacha-based wines, coming out of the Gredos (west of Madrid) these days, for me they are too light. In both cases people are trying to force the situation, trying to create something that isn’t really there. Here in this valley we have something unique, the vines must all be mixed up for a reason. We’re aiming to respect the history of our area, that’s all.”

Yet he’s no ‘Natural Wine’ evangelist. “We try and make wines that reflect our vineyards, yes - but I definitely don’t identify ourselves with the Natural Wine movement. My favourite part of the year is August and September. You see how the grapes are ripening, you might do some leaf removal or green harvesting. You need to make quick decisions to get the best out of each site whatever the year throws at you. In the winery we do add sulphur dioxide after malolactic fermentation, we do filter our wines. Natural Winemaking is like tossing a coin. What does it even mean anyhow? Wine made without any intervention at all, would turn to vinegar. We want clean wines that express our area. Also we want these wines to be able to travel.”

### **DO Arlanza and the future for Sabineros y Viñas**

David explains, “In the 1920s there was a lot of wine made here, much of which was drunk within Burgos. In those days many more people lived in the countryside and wine was a staple, people drank it on a daily basis. Yet in this region frosts have always been a serious problem. As times changed it became just too hard to make a living here, it was easier to find work in the cities and people moved away.”

Certainly during our drive round the area it was hard to avoid the sense of loss and it became increasingly obvious that it was something that David felt passionately about. “Look - almost everything is abandoned. There’s a generation missing. People could come up here and make a decent living off the land, but nobody wants to, nobody knows how to and the skills are being lost.”

However there were also a few signs of recent investment. There’s a DO Arlanza wine trail, Lerma’s touristy shops are full of local wines and we see a few neat new vineyards scattered around. Surely a good thing? “I’m not in favour of these big-investment projects in the region. We have a great history and some unique old vineyards but these outside investors don’t want that. Instead they are trying to create another Ribera del Duero. Their introduced monoculture vineyards don’t belong here. There are only two people I know of trying to do something authentic here, ourselves and (enigmatic Frenchman) Olivier Rivière.”

I asked David about sales and where the project was heading. “Sales are actually pretty good, all four of us are in the business, so we all know somebody. The wines are in really limited supply, for example we only made 798 bottles of our 2012 ‘El Confin’. Our importers would like us to produce more but we don’t really want to grow much more. At the moment we can’t - unless we find some more vineyards that match what we’re looking for... This started off as a fun weekend project but now we’re doing this one day a week. We’re happy where we’re at.”



Sampling a 2014 red from the puncheon and checking out some white from the Nomblo egg!

### The wines

The Sabinas y Viñas wines are hard to categorise, but one thing seems certain: they will all improve with age. The whites are not fruit-bombs, rather we are looking at a more savoury, thought-provoking style. In some there's a little waxiness but they seem to be able to combine this with a certain delicacy and with notes that suggest white flowers and crystallised oranges. Most of the wines I tried were work in progress at this stage and some were showing hints of reduction - but that would not be unusual for part-finished wines, ageing on lees. In all cases, there was a definite freshness lurking in the background, yet also a hint of nuttiness in the older whites.

The reds again are hard to generalise, seemingly combining usually opposite traits. There are ripe alcoholic noses and suggestions of raisins, combined with a big whack of liquorice and fennel plus some fairly sappy fruit character. The colours are pretty blue still and again there is good acidity. These are definitely savoury wines, less intense on the palate than the noses might imply, but no ethereal shrinking violets either - medium bodied wines with plenty of interest.

This project and the wines are still evolving and it will be fascinating to come back in a couple of years and see how they've aged (if there's any left). David himself feels that they have made progress since 2011. "The vineyards now are more how we want them and we've learned from the first few harvests. We're still learning now, of course but in general we're happier with the wines now and we're getting good feedback from the market."

With that, we shook hands and I left him to top up the barrels and lock up the cellar. Co-incidentally that night I was staying in Santo Domingo de la Calzada (in Rioja), the town where David lives, 90 minutes away. It was a long dark winding drive and there had been snow the week before. I couldn't help marvelling at the passion and dedication of the man, given that he comes up here once a week, maintains a day job in Rioja and has a young family.



## Ribera del Duero DO

photo: estebanapdevila.com



**Where is it?** – Central Northern Spain, about 2 hrs from Madrid in a shallow valley around 800m above sea level. This area experiences an extreme continental climate, with lots of sunshine, but sometimes very cold temperatures, leading to both spring and autumn frost risks.

**What's planted?** – **Tinto Fino** (=Tempranillo) and some Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Malbec...

**What's the wine like?** – Ribera del Duero is a bit like Spain's version of Argentine Malbec - the high altitude and large amounts of sunshine produce grapes with thick skins which are full of flavour and polyphenols. The wines are usually very good, or excellent, with good dense fruit, sometimes a little meaty, integrated oak and spice plus amazing balance. Candidate for best reds in Spain, though the expensive ones can still be a bit over-oaked.

**Some wines & wineries** – Investment has absolutely poured into this area and now there are loads of top-end wineries in this region, including: Aalto, Alejandro Fernández, Alilian, Alión, Alonso del Yerro, Arzuaga, Bosque de Matasnos, Carmelo Rodero, Cillar de Silos, Dominio de Pingus, Epifanio Rivera, Emilio Moro, Hacienda Monasterio, Legaris, Pago de Carraovejas, Pago de los Capellanes, Protos, Quinta Sardonía, Resalte, RODA, Tomás Postigo, Trus, Valduero, Vega Sicilia, Viña Mayor, Viña Pedrosa, Vizcarra...

**Other info** – Vega Sicilia (founded in 1864) is the grandfather of the region, but it was Alejandro Fernández that helped kick-start the modern era with wines such as "Pesquera" which garnered lots of praise from critics.

**Epifanio Rivera** (Pesquera, Ribera del Duero DO, Valladolid) - 27<sup>th</sup> January 2015

**Santiago Rivera Aparicio** (Winemaker and Co-Owner) // (+34) 983 870 109

I used to work for Santi early in my wine career and was struck by his solid methods, calm manner and meticulous nature. In particular, I've never seen anyone keep their barrels in such amazingly good condition with barely a stain and much of what I learned from him in 2005 has stayed with me throughout my career.

Born and raised in Ribera del Duero, Santiago Rivera Aparicio is the real deal, someone who knows the area backwards and has been steeped in vineyards and grapes and wine and its traditions all his life. Not an old man, he still has 40 years' experience under his belt. And in this high-altitude wine area, that can be useful. Ribera del Duero is a harsh region for viticulture, with sparse rainfall and frosts in both spring and autumn a constant threat.

He now works as the Winemaker for the family firm, along with his two brothers, Epi, who handles business admin and sales and Borja who runs the vineyards. The firm was set up by their father, Epifanio, who is now retired in the village of Pesquera. There's a lot of wine history round here and Santi showed me the old lagares and caves where they used to make wine until pretty recently. There are also plenty of big names too, indicating the quality of the region. Their immediate neighbours include Vega Sicilia, Hacienda Monasterio, Emilio Moro and Alejandro Fernández.



Santiago Rivera Aparicio in one of their top vineyards, near Pesquera

## Vineyards

Like any true wine man, it's the vineyards that get Santi most excited and he took me out in his beat-up old 4x4 to see them. The family business includes a few other areas of agriculture but it's obvious that the vineyards are the real pride and joy. It's easy to see why. Perched half way up a gentle slope, on the north bank of the Duero, the vineyards are on a poor-looking chalky/pebbly soil with a SE exposure, ensuring little frost risk and excellent exposure to the sun. In their best block "El Olivo", the vines are apparently 100 years old and these amazing thick gnarly stumps produce only around 2500kg / ha (just over 1 ton / acre). But what grapes! Surely some of the best Tempranillo around, some of which is sold to Vega Sicilia, with adjacent blocks belonging to Aalto and Telmo Rodríguez, amongst others.

We had a look around a few of their other vineyards, there are different soils and different vine ages but they're all pretty close to each other and are all near the winery. Ribera del Duero covers quite a large area, but as Santi explained, not all the land is equally good. Away from the river, high up in the "páramo" it's basically too cold and bleak. On the valley floor, the soil is too fertile and there are frost risks and humidity issues. On the south side, the slope is steep and tends to face north. So it's only really the mid-slope of the northern valley that tends to have the best land. Further upstream, Santi says that they may have trouble getting the grapes ripe, but around Pesquera there is no problem, in fact it's one of the first areas in the valley to ripen.

Whilst they only grow Tempranillo, locally known as "Tinto Fino", Santi believes that Cabernet Sauvignon can also give good results here (it's used in Vega Sicilia for example). Santi however

still prefers the local grape and reckons that these days less and less Cabernet is used, as people have learned to re-evaluate what they've always had.

Ribera del Duero is a region that has experienced a dramatic investment boom in the last 25 years, something that's pretty obvious as you drive around and discover a number of architecturally incongruous wineries, some more in tune with Dubai or the Napa Valley than rural Spain. But the bigger problem is the excess vineyards that this boom brought, sometimes planted in the wrong spots by people who didn't know what they were doing. Santi reckons that a lot of the poorer-sited places have since closed but observes that many people have got away with it due to the booming export market, with 80% of the wine produced here now sent overseas. Talking about exports, Santi says that the family has had some "luck". Maybe they have but I think it would be pretty easy to argue that their wines deserve some "luck".

### **Winemaking**

The recipe for their success seems pretty simple to understand: (1) Spend as much time as possible in their excellent vineyards, (2) Harvest at optimum ripeness - they get about 70 tonnes in total, (3) Ferment in stainless steel, (4) Do malo in stainless and wood, (5) Mature the wines for 12-15 months in partially new barrels, (6) Bottle the wine and age before release. The family only makes two wines, so blending is relatively straightforward.

But whilst the basic recipe is simple to understand, Santi surprised me at their compact and functional winery by explaining all the trials he had running. I had imagined that after countless vintages and oodles of experience, he might have just settled on a winning formula. But no, apart from ongoing trials within the vineyards, Santi is also experimenting in the winery. One key investigation is the effect of temperature on alcoholic fermentation. When I worked with Santi in the past, most ferments were allowed to warm up naturally as the yeast got to work, peaking at around 32°C (90°F). Now he's looking at longer cold-macerations and ferments that in some cases are capped at just 20°C (68°F). Santi feels that this way you still get great intensity of colour, but you also get better fruit expression and less heavy tannin extraction.

At Epifanio Rivera they generally go with five different barrel providers, buying about 30% new each year. Santi buys barrels to provide a range of different wines when it comes to blending (for anyone who hasn't had the chance to taste the same wine out of different barrels, the results can be astonishingly different). Over time he has found he likes to put some wines through malo in American oak (a technique he feels makes the rather harsh new-oak tannins more presentable) and then likes to deploy fairly high-end French oak for its subtle qualities during maturation. It was great fun trying some of these wines and seeing the different depth of fruit in examples from across their vineyards. In particular it was interesting to taste the 2013 wines from barrel, where it was plain to see each barrel's influence: some showing coffee, some with cake, some fresh and fruity, some spicy etc.

Ultimately, although their vineyards are in a great location to mature grapes, Santi is not trying to go for a blockbuster style. Ripe yes, but not too ripe. He definitely wants to "respect the fruit" and uses wood just to complement this, provide colour stability and as a frame for ageing.



## Epifanio Rivera - The wines

Erial Crianza - You couldn't really describe the junior of the range as "entry-level". It's still a pretty serious wine, offering up plenty of layers of fruit, seamless oak, depth and interest. The only thing is, you need to give it a chance to shine. There's great fruit and also a freshness but in the past I've occasionally found it a bit short. Since then though I've now realised that in fact it was just quite young. Often we've become so accustomed to enjoying big reds at 2 or 3 years of age, that perhaps we need reminding that things weren't always this way. Certainly when I went back to the 2010 Erial in 2014 (after dismissing it in 2013), it had really blossomed and was a great wine, a very accessible taste of what Ribera's all about. Maybe also though the house style is subtly changing - perhaps due to Santi's trials with cooler ferments. The most recent vintage was immediately appealing with lots of cool fruit, but also great length.

Erial Tradición Familia - Their top wine is not a single vineyard wine, rather it's made from the best barrels from across their domain. Quite a bit denser than the Erial Crianza, it's a wine that is definitely built for the long haul. No tannic monster, rather it's one of those unshowy, understated, less-is-more wines that with time in the glass becomes more and more appealing. Ripe yes, fresh and dense at the same time, with lovely integrated supporting notes of cedary spice and roast coffee.

In another world, or if the dice had been rolled differently these wines would be as well known as Pago de Carraovejas, Alejandro Fernández, Aalto or Pago de los Capellanes. As it is the brothers are doing just fine and business is on the up. But it's steady progress and there's a huge amount of work behind the scenes that many people rarely appreciate, as they top up their glass in a restaurant, perhaps on another continent. The wines deserve to be better known but I'm in no doubt it's just a question of time. Time is what this region seems to have, as the Duero ambles west in no hurry, enjoying the protection of the shallow valley it has carved.

As an experienced, meticulous winemaker, Santi is increasingly in demand. In fact he's consulting for a new winery far out to the west, in the Arribes region, almost in Portugal. It's still the Duero, but a different landscape and a different project. No doubt he's doing a great job and I was happy to get a bottle to try. Ultimately though, for the man weaned on Tempranillo, there's no doubt that Pesquera is where the heart it.



Santi was keen to show the many differences across their vineyards, pouring both tank and barrel samples

**Tomás Postigo**(Peñafiel, Ribera del Duero DO, North Central Spain) - 28<sup>th</sup> January 2015  
Tomás Postigo (Technical Director, Boss and Owner) / [administracion@tomaspostigo.es](mailto:administracion@tomaspostigo.es)



Tomás Postigo outside his winery in Peñafiel

Tomás Postigo charmed me from the start. From the cheery wave whilst parking my car, to the friendly handshake and old-school manners, the first thing he did was introduce me to the whole team. Then he asked me if I'd like a coffee, before we sat down for a long chat, sharing a cosy office with his son, Gabriel. The two of them were just back from a business trip in Valencia and I felt honoured to be spared a couple of hours.

Tomás Postigo is one of the leading lights of the region. After studying Chemistry in Madrid then Winemaking in Valladolid, he went on to work for a few years at the Institute of Industrial Fermentations, before moving to Ribera del Duero in 1984. His first job was as Technical Director at the large Protos cooperative. In 1988 he co-founded Pago de Carraovejas, a winery which quickly achieved near mythical status, such were the quality of its wines. But in 2008 it was time for a change and Mr. Postigo set up on his own, creating this simple eponymous winery in a seemingly nondescript pre-fab shed on an industrial street at the edge of Peñafiel. Not for him Napa-style follies nor international architects. He doesn't need them, because Tomás Postigo has got it where it counts: the best grapes and 31 years' experience.

## **Grapes and Vineyards**

Unusually for such a top producer, Tomás Postigo does not own any vineyards. But he does know Ribera del Duero and in a matter of fact way, reckoned that he might just be “the best buyer of grapes in the region”. I’d like to make clear that the previous statement was made without a hint of arrogance, the fact is he might just well be right. It’s hard to imagine anyone who knows the region better and Mr. Postigo knows what he wants and crucially, is prepared to pay for it - typically offering two or three times the going rate for grapes that meet his exacting requirements.

I started off by asking him about his views on grapes from different parts of the region. Whilst recognising that “Pesquera represents the best of Ribera”, the more we talked the more I realised that these generalisations were largely meaningless, because what got Tomás really excited was understanding the best part of the best blocks within each subzone. He painted a picture of a constant voyage of discovery, an endless search for the best grapes, almost like a surfer still out after sunset, still looking for that perfect wave.

Best for Tomás means ripe, something he establishes with a mixture of analysis and tasting the grapes out in the field. For me it’s refreshing in a (welcome) age of dialled-back, lower alcohol, interesting, leaner wines, that somebody’s still prepared to go for it. The 2011 Crianza says 15% alcohol on the label, the same as the 2010. Yet the pH is just 3.58 - pretty low for such a high alcohol. I think that’s his secret and the reason why his wines are just so excellent. If you choose the right grape grown at 750-950m (2450-3100ft) above sea level, in a good year you can afford to wait for perfect phenolic ripeness. Sugar-accumulation is the natural corollary of the wait, yet the end result can still be matched by a healthy natural acidity, resulting in perfectly balanced wines.

“For me it’s an advantage not having my own vineyard as it means I can choose the best grapes no matter what the year, rather than having everything concentrated in one place. Saying that, there are about ten growers I buy from every year, people who always come up with the goods. We’re all friends who go way back and things are done on a hand-shake. Apart from these ten, I would typically buy from around another thirty growers in any given season. The sort of vineyards we look for are ones which are high up with a steep slope to the south. Low-yielding, no more than 4 tonnes / hectare. The harvest usually lasts the whole of October and all the time we’re keeping our eyes out for new parcels of fruit.”

Tomás Postigo is also a supporter of the Bordeaux varieties Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Malbec. “They go really well with Tinto Fino (Tempranillo), though I do vary the percentage, depending on the year”.

## **Winemaking**

The winery is reasonably compact, well-organised and easy to understand. Anyone who’s made red before would be feel at home here within an hour or two. Having a winemaking background myself, I was keen to ask a lot of geeky-questions, but if you have better things to do, feel free to skip the next few paragraphs, as it’s kind of irrelevant. The key is, he buys the best grapes.

“I like to pick the fruit really ripe”, he explains. “We hand-pick into 10kg crates, then we store these crates in a cold room at 5°C (41°F) over-night to chill down the grapes. The next day these bunches go over a selection table, where we might reject between 5-30% of the fruit. I’ve got a top-notch modern destemmer and coming out of this we get around 90% whole berries - so in fact



in the first part of the process we might get some carbonic maceration character. I'm looking for maximum extraction from the skins, NOT the seeds. So we do a long cold maceration with manual punchdowns. Around 80% of the ferments go with wild yeast and the temperature gradually increases from 5°C to 25°C at the end. By the time a ferment's done, the wine has usually been 3 or 4 weeks on skins in total."

In the winery he has installed an expensive-looking gantry crane. One of the main uses of this crane is for transporting the de-stemmed grapes to their fermentation vat without the use of pumps, via an "IFO" (think UFO, but *Identified*). This he can also use for "pumpovers", again without having to use pumps. First the fermenting juice/wine from a given tank runs via gravity into the IFO. Then the crane lifts up the IFO and moves it to hover above the original tank, at which point you open up the bottom of the IFO and all the liquid falls back into the tank, soaking the skins - crucially without damaging the seeds.

"We drain off the tanks via gravity and dig the skins into a basket press, running a series of long, gentle cycles. I feel this is the best way to extract what's left, without damaging the seeds. If the seeds are really ripe, as in 2014, then we might take a second press cut. The best wines are not the ones that contains the most polyphenols (think tannins), rather they are the ones that contain the best polyphenols. I think that the best wines are moderately high in polyphenols, to put a number on it: 40 is low, 80-90 is high, I think around 70 is ideal."



The simple, well-organised interior of the Tomás Postigo winery in Peñafiel

Tomás Postigo also ferments some lots directly in new oak barrels. “This is the best way to get great colour, as the tannins in the new wood help stabilise the colour from the skins. If I’m allowed to dream, one day maybe I’d like to do all our wines this way. After fermentation we keep each lot separate. These lots then go into a range of barrels for malolactic fermentation and maturation. We only use French oak and every year I go to France for a week and personally select the barrels I want. With grapes you get differences in polyphenolic content each year, you can have surprises. With oak it’s more controllable and I don’t want surprises. I don’t worry about barrels, I worry about grapes. In the end, all these different lots are blended together to make the finished wine. This way we get great complexity”. It’s at this point that my jaw drops a bit, as I realise that Tomás Postigo only makes one wine - the usual thing being to have at least two, a “top” based on some criteria and “the rest”.

Tomás explains his point of view, “Making a ‘top’ wine is an error. The best wines don’t come from a single vineyard, but rather, from a blend of different sites. I learnt this at Pago de Carraovejas. For ten years there we only used our own vines, then we decided to also buy in some grapes from different regions and the quality went up”. I don’t think there’s too many growers in Spain who would have the humility to make that observation. I asked what would happen at Tomás Postigo if some lot of wine didn’t make the grade, “It shouldn’t happen. If something’s not good enough to make the blend, then we’ve made a serious mistake.”

### **The Ribera del Duero Denominación de Origen (DO) and other regions**

“I’m in favour of our DO but I think it needs changing. How is it possible that you can buy Crianza wine from here for 5€ a bottle but also 21€? I think we need to bring in different levels of quality to promote what we have and to help the consumer. The best example of this problem is in Rueda, where there’s an absurd price-bloodbath going on. What are the good producers supposed to do if it all just says ‘Rueda’ on the bottle? They definitely need two levels there.”

I asked his opinion about news from Rioja where a top producer (Wine Advocate 100 point winner *Artadi*) had recently threatened to leave the DOCa Rioja, as they didn’t feel it represented them. “I understand where they’re coming from as again, not all Riojas are created equal but I think it’s a pretty radical step, I think there are other solutions. Vega Sicilia said they might leave our DO twenty years ago but in the end they stayed. Ultimately, the DO needs to be stricter, yet I’m still optimistic for the region, as there are a lot of good people here.”

Tomás continues, “My favourite part of the job is undoubtedly spending time in the vineyards, though I also enjoy the commercial work. It’s important to go out and meet the people who are going to sell your wine, make friends with them, make them proud to sell what we produce. On these trips I’m often really impressed by the quality of wine coming out of other parts of Spain. I really loved *El Sequé* for example (A Monastrell-based red from DO Alicante). They’re also making some fascinating wines in Cebreros (west of Madrid) where there are some really interesting combinations of old Garnacha vines on a range of different slopes, soils and mountains. Outside of Spain, the wines of Chile and Argentina are my favourite. I’d love to have a go at making a Malbec in Argentina one day” (and I’d love to try it).

### **Tomás Postigo - The future**

“Our objective is to make the best wine in the world”, softly spoken, without a hint of arrogance. I couldn’t help nodding in agreement, as I wondered to myself why couldn’t it happen? Ribera del Duero is perhaps the best region in Spain, Spain has more vineyards than any other country, Tomás Postigo has over 30 years’ experience and is on top of his game. It all kind of sounds plausible if there that weren’t so many others pursuing the same goal. Yet this ambitious, confident statement comes from an old-school gent, rather than some new-money interloper and is tempered with modesty. “We’ve only been going for four years. I don’t want to build a huge business, I’m not interested in getting rich but we are in a world-class region and we do have the means to make things happen. So far every year I feel we’ve improved and I hope that every year we continue to improve. Ultimately the recipe is simple: choose the best grapes and the best barrels. Yet there’s still so much more to learn in the vineyards and that’s where I continue to focus my efforts.”

As I headed for the door, a couple of men were labouring hard in the cellar, the working environment considerably enhanced by omnipresent classical music. “They’re weighing the barrels - this way we know their humidity content. We also send off samples of the wood for analysis”. Again my jaw drops. Tomás Postigo comes across as a relaxed sort of bloke, he doesn’t seem like an obsessive. Yet weighing the barrels really is an amazing level of attention to detail that I’ve never heard of anyone else doing. Assuming he applies the same fanatical care to all aspects of his work, it’s easy to understand how Tomás Postigo has risen to the top.

### **The wines**

There’s only one red, Tomás Postigo Crianza - it’s really excellent, in a dense way.

As I left, Mr. Postigo handed me a couple of bottles of his Tomás Postigo Fermentado en Barrica Rueda 2011 to try. News to me, I thought he just worked on reds. I’m usually pretty sceptical of this style, preferring my Ruedas to be fresh and fruit-driven, rather than barrel-dominated and tired. Back in San Sebastián this wine was a revelation! An amazing vibrant alive white, which totally blew me away.



Peñafiel’s magnificent, if rather 2-dimensional castle



Over the last 18 months or so, I've had some good opportunities to taste the wines from Carmelo Rodero and every time I've come away impressed. For me these are the kind of wines that Ribera is about: ripe, well-structured and intense but still managing good balance. Lovely fruit, complemented by well-judged oak. It's a family firm and all the members of the family exude considerable charm, so a trip to Pedrosa de Duero to find out more seemed like a no-brainer.

Carmelo Rodero was set up in 1990 but the family has been growing vines in the area for generations. And not just any old vines, in the past some of these grapes were sold to the region's flagship winery, "Vega Sicilia". Carmelo Rodero has slowly increased its vineyard holdings "when the right parcels come up" and now has a total of around 120 hectares (300 acres) of mostly Tempranillo, plus small amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. All the vines are within 7km of the winery and grow at around 750-850m (2600ft) above sea-level on a range of soils, in a climate that tends to give good colour but also decent acidity.

At the stylish, modern winery I was met by Beatriz, one of Carmelo's two daughters, who is now in charge of winemaking. Growing up in the region, you have no option but to like wine and Beatriz is no exception, no doubt further inspired by her father's exceptional passion, drive and "fanatical" love of the land. Studying at Valladolid, and then Bordeaux, she gained experience in Saint-Émilion, the Médoc and in the Cape, plus had time to visit California before returning to the Duero to work for the family firm.

### **The winery**

The winery itself is typical: compact, it looked well thought out and in good condition. One unusual feature is the main fermentation room, where Carmelo has devised an ingenious method of handling grapes and multiple fermentations, without the use of pumps - (the received wisdom being that passing grapes, in particular their seeds, through pumps is bad for quality). Grapes are sorted and de-stemmed directly above a tank and then drop into the tank via gravity. "Pumpovers" are done by collecting a large amount of fermenting juice in a tub then lifting this tub above the tank and letting it all fall back into the tank in one hit. So far so good. The really revolutionary bit is that the de-stemming and tub lifting equipment is fixed and all ten fermentation tanks are mounted on a huge turntable, which at the flick of a switch can be rotated into the right spot for action. The more usual way of doing this is that the tanks are fixed and the de-stemmer and tub lifting equipment move. Not sure which is better, but the Rodero way is certainly different and hints at the creative mind of its designer.

In the cellars a big chunk of space is given over to barrels, 1600 apparently, and there is also a large room where bottled wine can be aged in optimum conditions before releasing to market. Asking about their oak policy, Beatriz tells me that they prefer 100% French oak with medium toast and renew 50% of their barrels every year - a significant expense when you think that new French oak barrels cost around 700-800€ each. It might sound over-oaked, but the wines don't come across that way, basically because they are also full of fruit. Beatriz tells me, "We only grow around 4 tonnes / hectare, whereas the regulations allow up to 7. There's a plan but no real recipe. We'll probably start off putting many of the better lots in new oak, but then we'll have a look in around 6 months and decide what to do, based on taste".

Another expensive operation, reserved for some of the best lots, is fermenting the wine in 500L barrels. It's a lot of work to do things this way, but Beatriz feels the extra work is worth it as "it really helps integrate the oak into the wine". Unlike some wineries where this is done like an open ferment, with one of the barrel heads removed, here the barrels are closed and "pumpovers" are performed by turning the barrels over on specially designed barrel-racks.



Winemaker Beatriz Rodero and their delicious 2011 Crianza

### **Winemaking philosophy**

In 2014, about 12 or 14 different lots of wine were made and these wines were then put into a number of different barrels, providing a good range of blending options for later. Cabernet Sauvignon is not so common in Ribera but Beatriz is a fan. “I love mature Cabernet grapes”, she enthuses. “You get these fantastic balsamic notes plus also great natural acidity. It’s a really useful component and ripens reliably here. Merlot is not such a safe bet - it can be useful, but if the weather turns hot sometimes the grapes will be sugar-ripe but still green phenolically”. Either way Tempranillo is still king round these parts and all DO Ribera del Duero wines must comprise at least 75%.

I asked Beatriz about the philosophy of this family firm. “Primarily we want to let the vines speak. Having high quality grapes is fundamental and if you’re on top of things in the vineyards you can get decent results every year. Of course there is vintage variation but by manipulating the yield and canopy we can equal out some of these differences. Saying that, in cold years such as 2013 when we couldn’t get the quality we wanted for our top wines, we made a lot of excellent Crianza!”

“What we try and do in the winery is reflect the personality of each block and that way create a palette of many different styles to give us interest and complexity at blending”. At this point Beatriz referred to their best grapes coming from their top “Valtarreña” vineyard as “genuine black pearls”. She continues, “In terms of our style, I’d say ‘Iron fist in a velvet glove’. We want meaty, solid, structured wines but we still strive for a certain elegance and poise. We’re not really that interested in increasing the size of the winery, what we’re trying to focus on is increasing the quality and consistency of the wines”.

Looking to provoke a bit of controversy, I didn’t get very far. “We believe in the Ribera del Duero DO, although it should be stricter - some of the sites that were planted in the boom in the 90s were not that great, need irrigation and are only capable of making mediocre wines. For me there are differences across the DO, but I wouldn’t really say that any one region is better than another. In Burgos there tends to be more clay in the soil, which gives the wines more structure. In Valladolid the sandier soils give lighter wines. They’re both equally good, although I prefer the Burgos style.”

### **Working in a family firm**

I asked Beatriz what was her favourite part of the job. “Oh, there’s so much really. Every season has its moment, although being in the vineyards always blows my mind, it’s so emotional. I also enjoy some of the sales side of the business, traveling to wine fairs and meeting clients and so on. In fact I love travelling in general and I think that getting out and about in other regions and trying different wines from home is fundamental. As a young mother though I’m a bit limited in what I can do just at the moment.”

Continuing on this theme of family succession, I ask what it’s like stepping into her father’s shoes. Carmelo Rodero was around at the time of my visit and certainly seemed pretty active and hands-on still. “My father founded this firm and created everything from zero. He’s achieved an awful lot in not such a long time. My sister (María - Sales and Marketing) and I hope we can rise up to his high standards.....or up to his knees at least! For us, more than anything we’ve inherited his passion”. But for all his drive it seems that Carmelo is smart enough to listen too, explains



Beatriz, “Before our wines were very solid, but as I gain in experience I’m suggesting changes and after a little reticence my dad seems to be liking them.”

I asked about other regions and producers and Beatriz was full of enthusiasm. “We’re really lucky in Spain, there are lots of great regions and there’s a lot of great wine. Look at Luna for example in La Mancha or the Eguren brothers or Remírez de Ganuza in Rioja. Bierzo is also really great, as is Toro”.

### **Carmelo Rodero - The wines**



There are six wine in the range:

- Tinto Joven (young red)
- Tinto 9 Meses
- Crianza
- Reserva
- Pago de Valtorreña - a 100% Tempranillo red from a special block around 50 years old, which was awarded “Best wine in Spain” in 2013
- TSM - a top wine which includes 10% Cabernet Sauvignon and 15 % Merlot in the blend.

The younger reds have good depth of fruit and for me come across with an appealing rustic hint and a slightly raw, chewy edge. Definitely full-flavoured and interesting.

From Crianza and up, I think it’s the oak treatment that stands out. Each wine seems to be perfectly matched and supported with high-quality cedary oak and spice. The Crianza itself has loads of attractive accessible fruit, teamed up with a solid structure, whereas the Reserva and above just exude class and polish but still with that “iron fist” of intensity lurking not far from the surface.

Just occasionally for me these top wines come close to the border of overripe but it’s probably just because they are young. In general they stay the right side of the line and in fact sometimes seem almost understated. No doubt amongst the very best wines in Ribera del Duero and don’t just take my word for it, their list of prizes is almost as long as the river itself.

## Toro DO



**Where is it?** - Toro sits in an isolated region in western Spain, in unfashionable Zamora province. In many ways it's similar to Ribera del Duero, but the land is not as high and the climate is warmer and slightly less continental.

**What's planted?** – **Tinta de Toro** (=Tempranillo) is king here, but Garnacha is also important, whilst there is Verdejo and Malvasia for whites. Often the vines are very old and are planted as widely spaced bush vines (see photo), so you don't get many grapes per hectare, but those grapes are very concentrated.

**What's the wine like?** – Toro wines are often excellent: powerful, chunky reds brimming with warm fruit and liquorice notes, the best of which can handle new oak well. Though similar to Ribera del Duero, the local growing conditions seem to give wines with a touch more alcohol and more warmth, possibly at the expense of elegance.

**Some wines & wineries** – Cyan (Matarromera), Elias Mora, Estancia Piedra, Liberalia, Matsu, Maurodos, Numanthia, Pagos del Rey, Pintia, Rejadorada, San Román, Telmo Rodríguez, Teso la Monja, Vetus...

**Other info** - Toro's wine revolution mirrors what has happened all over Spain. This sleepy backwater has been producing chunky reds in a locally famous way for centuries. But recently people realised just how precious these old vines were and money and expertise poured in to this region which is barely 2 hours from Madrid. Now that the dust has settled, Toro reliably turns out some of Spain's best wines, generally at very fair prices.

### Estancia Piedra (Toro DO, Zamora, North West Spain) - 26<sup>th</sup> January 2015

Inmaculada Cañibano Olivares (Boss) / [piedra@estanciapiedra.com](mailto:piedra@estanciapiedra.com)

*June 2016 - Inmaculada has retired since this interview*

### Introduction

Toro is an interesting wine region in western Spain which has risen from relative obscurity to the edge of the A-list in the last 15 years. Similar in some ways to Ribera del Duero, the warmer climate and local clone of Tempranillo, "Tinta de Toro", lend themselves to slightly more powerful wines than Ribera, sometimes at the expense of a little elegance. Garnacha also does well in parts of the region and its softness and drinkability can prove a useful foil for the solid Tinta de Toro. There are also some little-known whites and a bit of rosé.

Toro has seen huge investment in recent years, principally due to the realisation that it was full of old under-exploited Tempranillo vines. The peak of this investment boom coincided with the fashion for heavily-oaked, big, extremely ripe wines, a style that Toro can do well. But now that the dust has settled a bit, there has been some consolidation and there seem to be moves to promote fruit over extraction and to take new oak off centre-stage. The town itself is historic, with plenty of charm and well worth a visit.

Estancia Piedra is a smallish winery founded in 1998 by Scotsman Grant Stein and his wife, Anne. A serious oenophile, Grant loves Tuscany but in the end found what he was looking for in Toro.

Handily just ahead of the investment boom, he was able to buy a couple of superb vineyards lying on sandy soils on either side of the shallow Guareña valley. There are now around 59 ha (146 acres) in production, of which 90% is Tinta de Toro, with Garnacha the remainder. The jewel in the crown is the “Paredinas” vineyard, which includes many vines which are over 100 years old. Once the vineyards were purchased, the Steins set to work building both a winery and a stunning family residence.

I was fortunate to join Estancia Piedra early in my winemaking career. The fairly small scale and focus on quality made things easy to understand and much of what I learned there has stayed with me since. The dynamic boss Inma Cañibano ran a tight ship and had put together an excellent team. We all worked hard and all had fun and I’d have to say that looking back, that vintage of 2005 was one of my favourites. I soon regarded Inma as much as a friend as a boss and her vision, energy and passion continue to be an inspiration for me. Returning to visit in 2015 it was almost as if I’d never left. There was an impressive new visitors’ centre and the vineyards looked even better but the family feel, friendly employees and quality focus was still there.

### **Inma Cañibano**

Inma is a charming, passionate, educated lady who has a clever trick of commanding your attention yet making you feel completely at ease at the same time. Born in Valladolid, she studied Philosophy at Salamanca, then Business in Bilbao. A long term wine aficionado, she started going to wine tastings, whilst living in the Basque Country. As she puts it, “I can never remember a time without wine. Growing up in Castilla y León, wine was as much a part of every meal as bread.”

Inma followed her husband, Carlos, back to Castilla in 1992, settling near Toro. Her husband’s family had a few vines and now back in wine country, she concentrated on study, culminating in a Masters in Viticulture and Oenology. She soon discovered that wine was “Más que un sector, ¡es una secta!” - sounds better in Spanish, but basically saying that wine is not just a normal hobby or interest, but is really a cult. “It ends up being a grey area what’s work and what’s fun, the two blend together”. This attitude couldn’t have been better demonstrated during our interview, when Inma took a call asking her to represent **most of central Spain** at a prestigious wine event in Alicante. Despite being at the other side of the country and coinciding with a holiday, she was delighted to accept. “The thing with wine is that there are a lot of great people in the business. You’re always bumping into new people and everyone has a great story to tell.”

One of these new people was Grant Stein. Inma and Grant ran into each other by chance at one of the region’s superb restaurants (“Chivo” in Morales de Toro if you want to go - great spot if you’re in the right frame of mind). I’m guessing this was after a few reds - Inma and Grant hit things off and have been together professionally ever since. Grant was in Toro looking for vineyards and Inma helped him in this search and got offered her dream job in the process.

### **Wine Style and Philosophy**

Inma affirms that the heart of the winery and its most important asset is the vineyard but rejects the currently popular concept that winemakers do nothing and non-interventionalism is king. She suggests that winemakers are like tailors, “The different grapes are like different types of cloth. The quality of the cloth is key but you still need someone with an eye for detail and experience to cut the cloth and to sew and finish the garment. You also need resources, it’s not the same being a Chef in *Arzak* as it is being a cook in the army.”



I wondered about the house style and how it might have evolved in such a boom region. “15 years for a winery isn’t a very long time. Over this period we’ve grown and we’ve changed. What we’re trying to do is make quality wines, but wines based on our land, each with their own personality. We don’t follow fashions but we do try and get better each year. Toro has seen a big influx of outsiders and this has been good for the region. There’s been an exchange of ideas and everybody’s benefited. My heart’s in Castile but I also love to travel and try other wines. This way you get new ideas and fresh perspectives. You can’t just stay at home doing the same thing every year, believing you know best. I’m proud of what we’ve achieved but I’m not satisfied, there still lots to be done.”

Inma came up with a great analogy about the differences between the Tinta de Toro grape and Tempranillo in other areas. “The way I see it is like language. Tempranillo is like Spanish, which is different in different parts of the world but is still mutually understandable. Tinta de Toro could be like Andaluz Spanish, Cencibel (Tempranillo in La Mancha) could be the Spanish the speak in Mexico. Each has evolved over time and each has their own charm and appeal”.



Old vines on a typically frosty morning in January

## Competition and the DO Toro rules

Inma is also a big admirer of Toro's other main red grape, Garnacha and laments the current DO rules that permit a maximum of only 25% Garnacha in any red blend. "Garnacha in Spain has been a bit like Cinderella, nobody wanted her but now suddenly she's the star of the ball. The thing is, Garnacha has a long history in this part of Toro, the Guareña valley. I've always really felt it brings something useful to blends and I'd like to have the option to use more than 25%. The DO thinks that allowing more Garnacha would make the wines 'not Toro', but they're wrong! Why can't we use more if it's always been a part of this region? In fact, people don't know the real history of Toro, it's not just about big reds; whites such as Albillo de Toro and Moscatel also have a role to play."

On the face of it, the Toro DO seems to be a Spanish success story. Estancia Piedra has been part of that success but Inma recognises that it has been hard going, "In Toro there are various types of wineries. Some have been set up by big names: 'Pintia' has Vega Sicilia behind it. Some are owned by luxury goods brands, for example 'Numanthia' and LVMH, which gives them huge leverage in terms of sales and marketing. Others compete on volume and price. Still others don't even have a winery but just buy a few tanks at a time and bottle these and some just label someone else's wine. We are the genuine article: an own-vineyard focused independent estate. As such, with no big name backers, only 15 years of history and no economies of scale it has been hard to fight our corner and make our name. I think perhaps the DO could do more to distinguish between the genuine estates and the re-labellers. But it's difficult to change something in a DO", she says, with a sigh that belies a few lost battles.

Inma's determined efforts are paying off however and sales are going well, with 60% going overseas. Principal markets include the USA, Switzerland and Mexico. Rather than take any kind of credit, Inma prefers to give credit to her team, in particular singling out the tireless work of Richard Méndez Llorente - a friendly Frenchman who is in a kind of hybrid winemaker / cellar master role. Richard has been with the project from the start and is the sort of person every winery needs: with boundless energy, limitless enthusiasm and the ability to fix anything. He loves his wine too, in a previous role he was cellar master at A-list Ribera producer Arzuaga, and for holidays he has bought a little place in the Rías Baixas.



The owners' magnificent house, with a commanding view over their vineyards



## **Estancia Piedra - The wines**

Owner Grant Stein takes an active interest in defining the style of wines produced and with Inma they have evolved an interesting line up. It's a little hard to generalise about the style. Classy modernised classics, perhaps? Plenty of fruit certainly, but not cooked. Sort of analogous to RODA in Rioja, maybe? Certainly Estancia Piedra is not scared of oak, takes great care in barrel selection and is meticulous in all aspects of barrel work. But Tinta de Toro can handle new oak and the marriage is a good one. Perhaps reflecting the taste of the owner, the winery was built with a large-capacity bottle cellar. So after a year or two in oak, the wines then get bottled and get to rest down there in the cool. It's a real luxury to be able to do this and the barrel-aged reds are smooth and drink well on release, though continue to improve afterwards.

Azul - Is a delicious, fruity, dense but drinkable red. To be honest it's not a red, it's more of a purpley-black. 100% Tinta de Toro and no oak, released young.

Then there are 3 reds going up in terms of grape selection and maturation:

Roble - 6 months in oak (similar to a popular style in Ribera).

Roja - Crianza wine enjoying 12 months in oak.

Platino Selección - One of my favourites, a kind of Reserva. Top fruit, 100% Tinta de Toro and 19 months in oak.

Paredinas and Pride of Paredinas - the top wines. They both come from the old-vine Paredinas block on the other side of the valley. Loads of intensity, well-matched with 2 years in new French oak. I know 100% new oak sounds a bit OTT these days but these wines can handle it.

There's also a really delicious rosé and a white which is made in the neighbouring Rueda region.

Lastly but not least, Lagarona - is a wine Inma has a soft spot for. A lovely red which includes some Garnacha in the blend. "No more than 25% of course", she says, with a wink.





## EASTERN SPAIN

This region is the whole east coast of Spain from the Costa Brava to Murcia and inland as far as Aragón. I've grouped these wines together due to the predominant Mediterranean climate, shared grapes and a certain similarity of style. You tend to get ripe, juicy, generous reds - which are easy to enjoy - with Garnacha, Cariñena (Carignan) and Monastrell playing important roles. Garnacha is very much at home here and unusually concentrated in western Aragón and southern Catalunya.

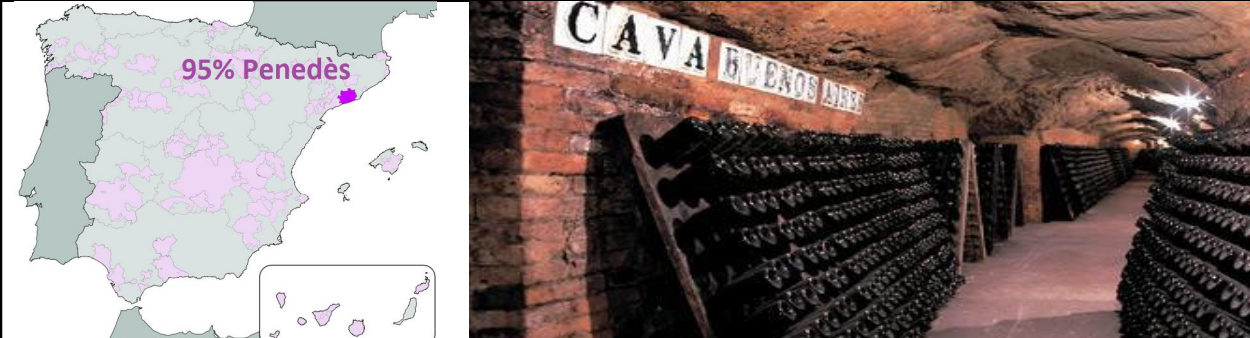
Whites are rarely as exciting, tending to be neutral and lacking zip. There are a number of lovely exceptions, often from cooler mountain areas, where you might find some good Chardonnay and a few surprises such as Gewürztraminer and Riesling. A welcome trend across Catalunya comes from a new wave of passionate, locally-focussed winemakers. By re-interpreting their vinous heritage there are now some serious efforts with older plantings of previously unheralded varieties, such as Garnatxa Blanca, Xarel.lo and Picapoll. The results are mixed but encouraging, the challenge is really in finding the fruit, whilst avoiding over-heavy dullness. The south of the region is home to a number of simple grapey whites, usually based around the Moscatel varieties.

Spain's top sparkler, Cava, has its roots here. Recent years have seen a new push for quality, particularly at the top end, with various new ultra-premium wines popping onto the scene.

Generalisations are only going to get us so far in such a large area. Everywhere you look, there are people doing interesting or unusual things: ageing sweet wines in the sun in the Empordà, fermenting Alicante Bouschet wild in *tinajas* near Jumilla or recovering forgotten varieties in Mallorca or Penedès. With the notable exception of Priorat, these wines are rarely famous and so prices tend to be moderate. Eastern Spain is a hugely important region, with lots still to discover.

### Cava DO

photo: enoturismepenedes.cat



**Where is it?** – Strangely Cava can be made in a number of regions across Spain, but its heartland is undoubtedly the Penedès area near Barcelona - an area which enjoys a warmish Mediterranean climate, moderated by altitude.

**What's planted?** – **Macabeo/u** (aka Viura in Rioja), **Parellada** and **Xarel.lo** are the main grapes in terms of quantity. As white grapes go they're usually fairly neutral and boring but as such they can form excellent base material for the *Método Traditional* to weave its magic (basically Champagne method: 2ndary ferment in bottle + time on lees). Other grapes are also allowed, including high quality foreigners such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

**What's the wine like?** – Cava often seems to get a bad rap, but there are many decent examples, often combining a pleasant apple flavour with persistent bubbles and a creaminess. The top ones can be outstanding.

**Some wines & wineries** – 1+1=3, Agustí Torelló Mata, Albet i Noya, Bertha, Codorníu, Freixenet, Gramona, Jaume Giró i Giró, Juvé y Camps, Llopart, Mastinell, Parés Baltà, Recaredo, Rimarts, Rovellats, Segura Viudas...

**Other info** - Worldwide interest in sparkling wine is at a high, with Champagne production up, English sparkling wine at new heights and Prosecco ruling with Millenials. Cava though has largely missed this boat and a number of companies have ditched the DO, believing that it has become associated with cheap and not always cheerful. The Cava body aims to combat this with the launch of a top tier vineyard-specific level "Cava del Paraje Calificado".

## Penedès DO

photo: recreativiaje.com



**Where is it?** - Penedès is a large wine growing region about an hour west of Barcelona, formed by a number of different areas lumped together. Basically a Mediterranean climate, modified by altitude and distance from the sea.

**What's planted?** - A mixture of local grapes such as Xarel.lo, Macabeu, Parellada, Garnatxa and Monastrell, bolstered by numerous international varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot & Chardonnay.

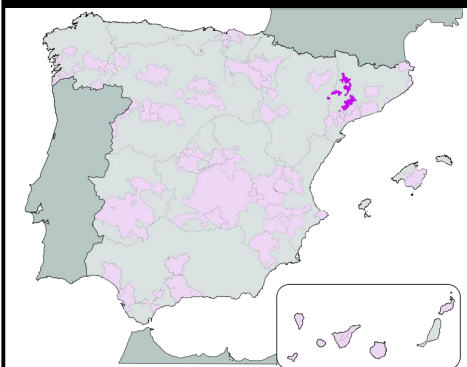
**What's the wine like?** - Penedès seems to be on the move. For too long it just pumped out dull neutral flabby whites and lightish reds, with notable exceptions such as the modern wines from regional giant Miguel Torres. Suddenly things are looking much more interesting, with more depth of fruit in the reds and a number of smaller producers showing what can be achieved with native grapes, such as old vine Xarel.lo and the chewy red Sumoll. In 2014 a new quality-designation for sparkling wine "Clàssic Penedès" was formed, for firms fed up with Cava.

**Some wines & wineries** - 1+1=3, Albet i Noya, Avgvstvs Forvm, Credo, DG Viticultors, Emendis, Finca Viladellops, Jané Ventura, Loxarel, Miquel Jané, Mont Rubí, Pardas, Parés Baltà, Raventós i Blanc, Torres...

**Other info** - To a certain extent **the modern Spanish wine industry was born here**. Jean León was a pioneer in bringing the New World to Spain, inspired by his time in California, planting Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. This move was embraced and enhanced by Miguel Torres who helped introduce modern technology.

## Costers del Segre DO

photo: codorniu.es



**Where is it?** - Strung together in western Catalunya, Costers del Segre has a marked continental climate, with short cool often foggy winters and long hot sunny summers. Large day / night temperature swings save the day.

**What's planted?** - Costers del Segre has a wide variety of grapes planted, from well-known international varieties such as Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Syrah to more local ones such as Macabeu, Xarel.lo, Parellada, Garnatxa Blanca, Trepal and Ull de Llebre (Tempranillo).

**What's the wine like?** - Costers del Segre is a bit of a funny DO without a clear identity and various sub-zones doing different things. A chunk of the grapes go to making base wine for Cava and hence tend to be cropped high and picked early. Another piece is like the New World, making ripe fruity wines with mass market appeal. A third sector is small scale producers with a niche, be it high-altitude vines or local varieties. Quality is improving.

**Some wines & wineries** - Castell d'Encús (interesting high altitude vineyards), Castell del Remei, Cérvoles, Comalats, Costers del Sió, Lagravera, L'Olivera, Raimat (huge producer, almost half the DO), Tomàs Cusiné...

**Other info** - A big part of the history of this DO is linked to Raimat, which was set up by the Raventós family around 100 years ago. But it was slow progress with canals needing to be constructed to bring water and trees needing to be planted to reduce the soil's salinity. Raimat is today Europe's largest family-owned single vineyard.



## Somontano DO

photo: barrelsecrets.wordpress.com



**Where is it?** – Somontano lies in undulating country just south of the central Pyrenees. The average altitude is only around 400m (1300ft), so there are plenty of warm sunny days, though it cools off a fair bit at night.

**What's planted?** – Reviving a little-known area in the late 80s, it seemed like a good idea to plant “international varieties” and create exciting modern wines, **a kind of anything-goes mini-Australia**. The region had considerable early success, particularly with Chardonnay, Bordeaux blends and even Gewürztraminer. Near infinite amounts of investment then poured in and increasingly iconic (silly) wineries were built. But by not pulling together, no Somontano killer-app appeared (e.g. Marlborough Sauv. Blanc). The wineries were left fighting to establish an identity in an unprestigious part of Spain, while the rest of the world moved on, other “new regions” appeared and the bubble burst. Wine fashion has now swung 180° to low-input, authentic local wines from native old vines and Somontano begins to look like a white (and red) elephant. What next for this floundering region?

**What's the wine like?** – Fruity and modern, Chardonnay in particular can be excellent, as can Gewürztraminer.

**Some wines & wineries** – Viñas del Vero and Enate are two big producers that helped establish the region, others include: Blecua, Boutinot, Lalanne, Laus, Meler, Mipanas, Olvena, Otto Bestué, Pirineos, Sommos...

**Other info** - A good little-known tourism destination, with great local food and outdoorsy options in nearby hills.

## Cariñena DO

photo: grandesvinos.com



**Where is it?** – Cariñena sits on a hot dry plain, to the south of Zaragoza. The land lies at about 400m although in the west rises to around 800m, as it approaches the Calatayud region. A continental climate prevails.

**What's planted?** – **Garnacha** (Grenache) makes up 50% of the plantings, but there is also a significant amount of Mazuelo (Carignan) for reds and **Viura** for whites. In the last 25 years international grapes have also been planted, aimed at raising the region's profile, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Chardonnay. Cariñena also produces some rather robust, **sweet Moscatel**, which is a bit rustic but enjoys a local following.

**What's the wine like?** – Principally known in Spain as a good value producer of bulk wine, a lot of Cariñena's success has come on the export markets. Bit by bit the region is making better-balanced, fruitier wines.

**Some wines & wineries** – Bodegas Añadas (CARE), Grandes Vinos y Viñedos, San Valero, Señoría de Águila..

**Other info** – The Cariñena DO is one of the oldest in Spain, being created in 1932. The area is also regarded as the origin of the Cariñena (Carignan) grape - one which is often seen as little more than a workhorse, although old-vine versions can be impressive, if rather tannic, e.g. in the south of France, Catalunya and Maule (Chile, see [www.vigno.org](http://www.vigno.org)). Strangely enough, in Cariñena itself and much of Spain, the grape is referred to as “Mazuelo”.



## Vino de la Tierra Valdejalón

photo: almonacidelasierra.es



**Where is it?** – The Valdejalón region is located in western Aragón in a transition area between the Sistema Ibérico mountains and the low-lying Ebro valley. It's an area with a continental climate, which varies depending on altitude and exposure, but either way you're going to get lots of sun, hot summer days, coolish nights and rather sporadic rainfall. The soils are often poor and stony, which can be ideal for growing quality wine grapes.

**What's planted?** – Lots of grapes are permitted (Vino de la Tierra rules are not as strict as DO rules) but the grape that's putting the region on the map, as in neighbouring Calatayud, is **old vine Garnacha (Grenache)**.

**What's the wine like?** – Garnacha is realising its potential in Aragón and this is another area that's starting to get some attention, especially in the high-altitude Jarque region. Low-yielding old vines in this climate produce very concentrated grapes which can make wines which whilst pretty ripe and alcoholic, maintain a certain freshness and ideally some floral aromas - the sort of solid, ripe wines which can benefit from sensitive use of oak.

**Some wines & wineries** – Bodegas Mancuso, El Garage Wine, Evohé Proyecto....

**Other info** - This was a real backwater until recently but now a few projects are starting to make it quite cool, though with "Parker" wines being out of fashion the region will need to tread carefully to avoid OTT wines.

## Calatayud DO

photo: winesfromspainusa.com



**Where is it?** – Calatayud is located in SW Zaragoza province, between about 550m and 1000m altitude, in a region which experiences an extreme continental climate: Lots of sun, hot days and cool nights, with a frost risk for 6 months of the year and not much rainfall, just 300-500mm. The soils are poor and stony (good for vines).

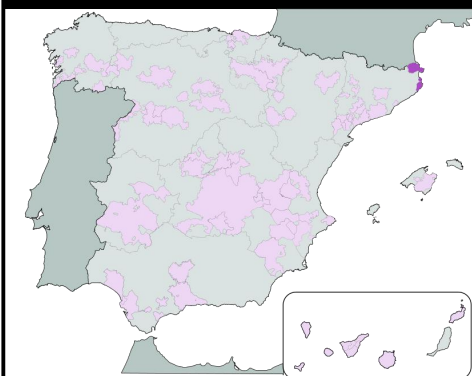
**What's planted?** – The total vineyard area is approximately 3,200 hectares (~7,900 acres). There are quite a lot of different vines planted but it's mostly red (92%). Of these, the most important vine and the one which has put Calatayud on the map is **old vine Garnacha (Grenache)**.

**What's the wine like?** – Here in sunny Calatayud, the wines are often pretty ripe and alcoholic. Garnacha is an interesting grape variety which gives supple, low-tannin wines, which can have a deceptively light, floral nose, yet still pack quite a punch and finish warm and sweet on the palate. Combining well with proportional new oak, these wines make ideal winter warmers and have done well on export markets, particularly in North America.

**Some wines & wineries** – Ateca, August Bilbilis, San Alejandro "Las Rocas", San Gregorio, Virgen de la Sierra "Cruz de Piedra", Bodegas y Viñedos del Jalón "Las Pizarras"...

**Other info** - Remote, but not hard to get to, the AVE train Madrid - Barcelona sometimes stops here.

## Empordà DO



**Where is it?** – Right up in the top right hand corner of the country, the vineyards tend to be located at low altitudes, though often on the edge of mountains. The region enjoys a sunny Mediterranean climate, though is subject to a strong wind, the *Tramuntana*, which greatly reduces vine yields but also helps to keep pests at bay.

**What's planted?** – The region is home to Mediterranean varieties such as **Garnatxa** (Grenache) in its Red, White and Grey forms and also **Carinyena** (Carignan). There are also other reds, such as Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Tempranillo. Apart from Garnacha Blanca, whites include Macabeu, Moscatel and Xarel.lo.

**What's the wine like?** – The Empordà was once a fairly bulk region but is now raising its game at all levels. Whites tend to be fairly neutral and waxy, but usually with good mouthfeel. Reds are ripe (perhaps a bit too ripe), fruity and solid, often in a new world sort of way. Some are a bit short and hot, but things are improving each year.

**Some wines & wineries** – Clos d'Agon (pricey wines, advised by Peter Sisseck), Coca i Fitó (also active in other parts of Catalunya), Còsmic, Espelt Viticultors, Hugas de Batlle, Lavinyeta, Marià Pagès, Mas Estela (Biodynamic), Perelada (large producer making a good range of wines), Terra Remota, Vinyes dels Aspres...

**Other info** - Dessert wines are also made, sometimes aged for several years in glass flagons outside in the sun!

**Vinyes dels Aspres (Cantallops, Empordà DO, Catalunya) - 18<sup>th</sup> April 2016** v1.0

David Molas Alberti (Boss, Winemaker and Co-owner) - [www.vinyesdelsaspres.cat](http://www.vinyesdelsaspres.cat)

### Empordà - A quiet revolution?

The Empordà is a region in the far north east of Catalunya and it's really a fabulous place to visit. There are stunning cliffs, hidden coves, long sandy beaches, high mountains, rice fields and numerous cute villages. There's also a heavy tourism industry, helped by the area's proximity to France. On a clear day you can actually see France from much of the Empordà, as the snowy sentinel of the eastern Pyrenees, Pic du Canigou, maintains its stoical watch along both sides of the border. Not that there necessarily is a border. The Empordà is about as Catalan as you can get and for some people round here, Roussillon still forms a part of that identity.

It's interesting to compare winemaking on both sides of the Pyrenees. Certainly the grapes are largely the same, with Carignan "Carinyena" and Grenache "Garnatxa" playing significant roles in both regions. What has often surprised me about the Empordà wines has been their high alcohols and sometimes overripe, porty notes. Wrongly thinking that north equalled cool, it turns out that the summers here are long and hot. For the French it's pretty much Africa and the wine styles there are full of southern generosity. But (Catalan-independence issues aside), this is northern Spain, so what's going on?

The reason for the hot summers is two-fold. Firstly the Mediterranean Sea warms right up in the summer, whereas the North Atlantic stays chilly. The difference is dramatic. At the same latitude in the west of Spain we'd be in the verdant Rías Baixas, home to delicate whites, not chunky reds.

Secondly many of the vineyards in the Empordà are located at very low altitudes, less than 100m in many cases. This actually makes them warmer than some of Catalunya's more southerly wine areas, such as Penedès, where vines can be found at up to 800m above sea-level.



Typical Empordà vineyard, near Vilamaniscle

Warm sunny summers are usually viewed as a good thing for winemaking: it's easy to get the grapes ripe and you tend to have fewer problems with disease. Certainly it's something that has served the broader area well in the past, with the typical Mediterranean diet of wine, seafood and olive oil practically making itself. But times changed and domestic consumption started to collapse, so the region needed to react. At first "international" vines, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah were thought to be the answer. They do well here, but are still work in progress and besides, everybody else has planted them. A useful ace to have up your sleeve, but not the answer.

Now suddenly the Empordà is back, and a growing number of local wine-fashionistas are even suggesting that it might be the next big thing (along with Terra Alta). But it's a funny revolution; no big Parker scores or unique grapes to exploit, no Álvaro Palacios on the front cover of every wine magazine. In fact no big noise at all. Rather the rise of Empordà has been like dozing on the beach on a Sunday afternoon: not a care in the world, then you suddenly wake up to find your toes in the water and your shoes floating away. How has this happened? Basically through what the Catalans do best: good business sense.

In Spain the Catalans are often dismissed as "tight-fisted" but a more apt generalisation might be "canny". Rather than blow all their cash on eye-catching wineries and 200% new oak, in the Empordà investments have generally only been made where necessary. The existing vineyards are pretty good, the climate's potentially excellent, there's solid local demand. So there has been a quiet revolution with a new focus on quality over quantity. Of course there has also been some investment in wine cellars, but this has generally been round the back where it counts, rather than on needless vanity projects. A little cash has gone a long way and now the region offers a good range of solid, authentic, fruity wines at fair prices. Something for everyone and something that won't break the bank. A recipe that is looking increasingly smart in this post-crisis world. One of the projects that has quietly come up through the ranks is Vinyes dels Aspres.



## Vinyes dels Aspres

Thankfully it was a warm, sunny morning as I drove up to Vinyes dels Aspres in Cantallops, on the edge of the Pyrenees. I say thankfully, as I'd been having Little Red Riding Hood nightmares for much of the previous night. "Cantallops" could be translated as "Singing wolves" and my dreams had been full of abandoned villages under a full moon and a suspicious-looking host. But today it was glorious and I was pleased to leave the charmless border town of La Jonquera and head for the hills. After ten minutes winding through cork forests, I arrived at Cantallops. Prosperous and pleasant-looking rather than American Werewolf in Catalunya, I was immediately drawn to the place.

Finding the winery at the back of the village, the first thing I noticed was the glass flagons. Loads of them! Large and bulbous and stacked on the roof, in full glare of the rising sun. I was dimly aware of this type of *rancio*-provoking winemaking on the French side of the hills but it was a surprise to find it here too. I guess I shouldn't have been. Culturally the regions are similar and Banyuls is less than 20km away. But this type of wine wasn't the main reason I was here, in fact I'd really come to find out more about a decent, honest red wine I'd been enjoying back in Barcelona. At my favourite wine bar "Zim" (too hard to find, don't bother looking) they offer an unpretentious fruity red called "Oriol" from the Empordà. At 3€ a glass it had soon become my go-to red. When I found out that this was the junior of the range from Vinyes del Aspres and furthermore that famous English wine critic Jancis Robinson had recommended their white, I knew that something must be stirring in the hills.

Friendly winemaker-boss David Molas arrived with a smile, apologising profusely for being a couple of minutes late. We sat on the sunny terrace, ignoring the stiff breeze, and he told me a little of the family history. The winery is based around the historic *Can Batlle* property, which traces its roots to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The area has long been known for cork, olive oil and wine production and Can Batlle incorporated a large working cellar. Wine was produced in this cellar until the 1930s but then marriage intervened. The two daughters of the property (three generations above David) married well, pairing up with a doctor and the famous composer and musician Eduard Toldrà. These husbands were busy in their respective fields and nobody had time for winemaking when ownership passed to the sisters, so wine production stopped and the vineyards were rented out.

It was David's father who decided to give things another go, moving up here in the late 70s and taking back control of the family vineyards. Vines were re-planted and the grapes were sold to the local cooperative. But it wasn't a great business and things were barely viable. This was not the Empordà's finest hour, cooperatives cared more about volume than quality and there was more money to be had in other industries. But the family persevered and it was David's uncle Xavier Albertí who took up the challenge and decided that to make things work they had to make their own wines on site. David had recently qualified in agricultural engineering and was an integral part of the plan.

The cellars were renovated beginning in 1999 and the first bottle of Vinyes dels Aspres was produced in 2002. That first batch was just 4,000 bottles across three wines. This has steadily grown to today's figure of around 60,000 bottles across nine labels. There's also a small amount of olive oil produced and David tells me that they will be completing the return to their roots, or rather trunks, by starting with estate-grown cork production in 2016.



David Molas in one of their vineyards on the edge of Cantallops

### Vineyards

Although a little higher than much of the Empordà, the vineyards are still not really high up. The mountain location is deceptive and vineyard altitude barely reaches 200m (660ft). Vinyes dels Aspres has around 32ha (79 acres) in production, with a further 5ha planted. Doing a quick calculation I realise that they are only getting about 2 tonnes of grapes per hectare. Seems a bit low from mainly 30 year-old vines in an area with good annual rainfall and warm sunny summers...“It’s because of the *tramuntana*”, David explains, blaming northern Catalunya’s famous wind. “If it blows early in the season the vines can get damaged. If it blows during flowering, we get much reduced fruit set. When it’s strong the vines can suffer damage no matter what the season.” It seemed fairly strong today but David dismissed it with a flick of the hand, “Pah, nothing, last year we hit 156km/h.”

“Yet at the same time the tramuntana brings advantages. We might get only half the yield of more sheltered spots but the tramuntana dries the air and blows pests away. It’s easy to grow healthy grapes here and so we accept it. What else can we do, the tramuntana blows around 100 days a year? All we can really ask for is the *right amount* of tramuntana.”

“Another difference here is the soils. As you can see we’re right on the edge of the mountains. Our vines tend to be planted in granite and slate, which naturally limit yields. We don’t irrigate here, so the vines are forced to put down deep roots. A little further south and the soil becomes more fertile and the vines don’t have to try as hard. In fact our biggest problem here is wild boar. They live in the forests and love eating grapes, which can cause a lot of damage in the run up to harvest time. This year we’re going to try putting up a fence, but I don’t know...it might not work, or it will just end up passing the problem on to somebody else.”

“Garnatxa (Grenache) is really our star grape and here we have three kinds: Blanca, Roja and Negra. They’re all mutations of the same vine (Roja is also known elsewhere as ‘Grenache Gris’). The other local varieties which we have would be Carinyena and Monastrell (reds) and Picapoll (white). At the end of the 90s we planted some well-known foreign varietals, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot. At the time it seemed like a good idea. Whilst they have little history here, we do like the results. They bring an extra dimension to the local grapes. But our focus should be local and so to push the balance back that way the 5ha we recently planted are all Garnatxa.”

As we stroll around some of the property David shows me an old stone table, hidden in the midst of the woods. Apparently when the composer Eduard Toldrà lived on site he used to come here every day for inspiration. David likes the notion and has plans to improve access to the area to create a space to enjoy the wines whilst on the property. In fact the more I talk to David, the more it becomes obvious that he is alive with ideas. Some bosses seem to shun the PR aspect of their companies but David seems to thrive on it, telling me that he goes to all the wine fairs he can within a 100km radius and is always up here, looking after visitors and thinking about improvements. He admits that he loves the contact with the land, something that all genuine wine people seem to share.

I ask about harvest dates and my impression that some of the Empordà wines I’d tried were a little stewy. “We tend to harvest around the end of September. We could pick at the middle of the month but then we’d only get around 13% alcohol. I prefer to wait. In this region I think you get good phenolic ripeness by waiting until around 15% potential alcohol. The wines have richer aromas but they’re still balanced, they’re still healthy. Every region has it’s characteristics and it makes sense to play to our strengths. Here we like to get things ripe.”

### **Winemaking**

Back at the winery we have a quick look around. It a fairly simple place but they have some decent equipment. There’s an array of clean-looking stainless steel tanks, a pneumatic press and a number of barrels. There’s also one very smart 2000L Seguin Moreau wooden vat. Down below Vinyes dels Aspres has adapted what was the former wine cellar into an attractive barrel cellar. The conditions for wine storage seem to be perfect but although it looks a picture, I can imagine that the array of small rooms and tight stairways must make it a bit tricky to work. “You’re right”, David nods, “and it’s more than that. We can only really work with 225L barrels at the moment but we’d really like to move to 500L for a lower oak impact. We’re actually planning a new storage area now, so hopefully we can move in that direction in the near future.”

I ask David about winemaking. “It’s pretty simple really. We do a selection in the vineyard, looking for grapes which are both healthy and ripe. We then put these over a sorting table before bringing them into the building. For our top white, we take a mixture of Garnatxa grapes from our *Les Corts* vineyard. Once crushed and pressed, around 50% of the juice is run off into 225L French oak barrels, of which around 25% are new. Here the juice undergoes a barrel fermentation, then typically remains around 6 months in oak, with regular bâtonnage (lees stirring). Normally the wine doesn’t undergo malolactic fermentation in barrel, although one year it did. We then blend this barrel-fermented wine with the the rest of the wine, which was fermented in stainless. In this way we get a lovely textural component to our white, but there’s still a freshness and the oak doesn’t dominate.”



“For the reds, we harvest and ferment each variety separately. We ferment at around 24°C and I tend to keep the wines on skins for quite a while, maybe 25 days or so before we press them off. The wine then goes into oak, where it will stay for around 12-16 months. For our top reds a bit of bottle age really helps and I like to keep them here for another year or two before we release them onto the market. In all of our wines we use cultured yeasts. Our grapes are pretty ripe and I can’t afford to take any chances.” I ask about the expensive-looking oak vat, “We’re still learning how to make the best wines here and I like to run trials each year. We ferment in the vat and it’s small enough that we can punch down the cap. The idea is to see if we can get some of the benefits of a barrel fermentation, but with less work and less oak.”

“As for the sweet wines, they only represent around 4% of our production, but it’s something that I like. We make two different styles but in both cases they start with ripe Garnatxa grapes. Once we pick these grapes we leave them in trays in an open storeroom to dry. They might stay there for around 2 months, a bit less if there’s a good tramuntana blowing. This concentrates the grapes, including their sugars. In 2015 we picked 5087kg of grapes but after drying for 59 days just 2538kg remained! We then press these grapes and ferment in stainless steel. Of course this takes months and at some stage the fermentation stops, leaving unfermented sugars behind. We don’t need to add any alcohol, the yeast die when they’ve had enough. For our ‘Vi de panses’ wine that’s all there is to it and we bottle it to preserve the freshness. Our ‘Bac de les Ginesteres’ wine goes into the 20L demijohns you saw earlier and we leave them in the sun for 4 or 5 years. As far as I know it’s the only example in the world of a non-fortified wine aged in this way.”

4 or 5 years in the sun? I’m intrigued, this wasn’t what they’d taught me when I’d studied winemaking at Adelaide. “The process brings a richness, a completely different flavour profile, with caramelised walnuts, almonds and nougat showing through in the finished wine”, David explains. I ask about spoilage and inconsistencies from vintage to vintage and demijohn to demijohn. “Different years can bring different amount of sugar, though we will typically end up with around 170g/L. In the past we have released some wine as a non-vintage product, allowing us to blend sweeter and drier years together for a more uniform product. With the individual demijohns, some may go different ways but they’re all usable, they just bring different nuances to the final blend.”



Vinyes dels Aspres vineyard in dramatic mountain location



Inside the simple winery

## Balancing success with growth

As we wandered around the cellar, David explained what was happening with the business, “Our top white ‘Blanc dels Aspres’ has won some important prizes and is doing really well. The 2013 won ‘Best barrel-fermented white in Catalunya’. It’s a food-friendly style and there are a lot of good restaurants round here, so this caught their attention. The 2013 sold out very quickly, but what do we do? We can’t just make more! Even if we pull next year’s out of barrel early, that doesn’t really solve the problem and besides, releasing a wine too young would also be a risk.”

“We’ve planted more white varieties, but of course that takes years. The thing is that if you run out too quickly, people lose interest and move on to something else. Then when the next year’s wine is ready, it might be too late, you’ve missed your chance. Of course the really good restaurants understand that, but not everybody gets it. Maybe we should have put the price up to manage demand...I don’t know...it’s a problem, but it’s still a better problem to have than sitting on unsold wine in the cellar. One thing that I find really strange relates to our young red ‘Oriol’ (my Barcelona wine bar favourite). As soon as the 2015 was bottled, everybody wanted it and we risked being stuck with the 2014. That’s crazy as far as I’m concerned, the extra year suits the wine and rounds out the up-front fruit. It’s not like we’re making Beaujolais Nouveau!”



Old stone table in the forest



The simple barrel cellar



Demijohns ageing wine outside

“The fact that we’re the only DO in Girona province helps us. People here care about food and there is a local demand for wine to go with it. This helps Empordà wine and means that we don’t need to rely on exports as much as other regions in Catalunya. In fact we only export around 25%. That said, things could still be better. It’s surprising but I’d say that we’re still lacking a proper wine culture here. At all the wine fairs I go to, I tend to recognise the same faces, the aficionados. There’s still a lot of work to be done to convince normal people that it costs a little more to produce good wine but it’s a price worth paying. But we keep plugging away and I love attending wine fairs, wine pairings and hosting visitors, just trying to get our message across.”

“At Vines dels Aspres we’re now producing around 60,000 bottles a year, which is just about enough to make a go of things. Not good enough to ‘launch rockets’ but ok. In Catalunya I think there are around 860 wineries and I don’t know of anyone today who’s made themselves rich through wine production. Going back, of course people like Torres and the large Cava producers have made money but today 80% of the wineries are new and it’s hard to make a great business. But there are other compensations. I love being up here in the fresh air. I enjoy trying to work out how to make the wines better each year. Then there’s the annual puzzle of ‘winery Tetris’ - as we try and get everything to fit, no matter what the year throws at us. And I like it when we get visitors and they tell me a story about one of our wines and that’s what’s led them up here to seek us out and buy a couple of bottles to take home.”

“In the Empordà as a whole, I’m optimistic. Wine production in the region might be at the lowest it has ever been, yet now there are more brands. For me there’s no doubt that Empordà wines have never been better and I think as a region we’ve turned a corner. In terms of planted area, we’ve stopped shrinking and some of us are even planting again. These days everybody is trying to make honest, reliable wines. Everyone’s working hard to get the best out of the land.”

### **The wines**

As we went to taste the wines, David proudly showed me the Vinyes dels Aspres wines written up in a catalogue from (venerable British wine merchant) *Berry Bros. & Rudd*. I was impressed, pretty much everyone else in there from Catalunya and Spain was an established big name. The wine equivalent of playing for a pub team then getting scouted for the premiership. Perhaps this isn’t so surprising. Today’s welcome reality is that good, interesting wine can come from almost anywhere, if you have a decent piece of land and the right person at the helm. The likeable David Molas is the right kind of person and seems to be going about things the right way. He doesn’t claim to have all the answers but is working diligently with what he’s got and as such is becoming a quiet ambassador for the Empordà as a whole. This stunning region seems to have almost everything going for it, how long before it becomes better known?

2015 Blanc dels Aspres (60% Garnatxa Blanca, 40% Garnatxa Roja) - Pale gold colour, with a nice and creamy but fairly neutral vanilla nose, perhaps with just a hint of lime showing through. The palate is fresh and round but very tight still, opening up to reveal stone fruits such as apricot and more vanilla cream. Young and very promising.

2015 Oriol dels Aspres Rosat (96% Garnatxa Roja, 4% Syrah) - These Garnatxa grapes come from the 39 year old *Vallena* vineyard. After a 2 day maceration, unusually the juice is fermented in barrels. But you don’t notice the oak. What you get is a round but light rosé, which defies the usual Garnatxa-gravity. A Sugar Plum Fairy of a wine which expertly dances across the tastebuds in a sprinkling of fresh-herbs, citrus and icing sugar notes.

2015 Oriol dels Aspres Negre (Garnatxa Negra, Carignan, Merlot, Syrah, Cab. Sauv) - A very fruity red, showing ample amounts of strawberries and black plums. Good depth but not tannic.

2014 Xot dels Aspres (52% Garnatxa Negra, 38% Cab. Sauv, 10% Syrah) - Paleish red colour. Very fruity nose of mulberries and blackcurrants, yet soft and with a gentle hint of spice. The palate shows fresh, clean blackcurranty-fruit, destined to open up further in six months or so.

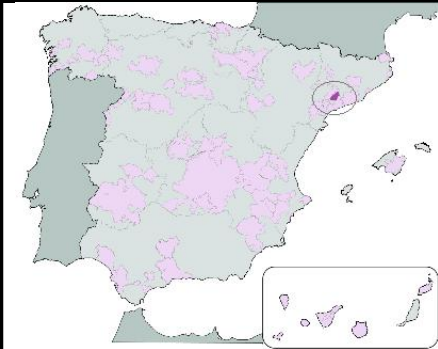
2012 Negre dels Aspres (37% Cab. Sauv, 27% Merlot, Carignan, Garnatxa, Syrah) - Deep colour, showing slight age at the rim. The nose is more evolved than the Xot, showing soft blackcurrants but also a mintiness and perhaps a hint of medicinal complexity. The palate is still tight, with crunchy Bordeaux-style blackcurrant fruit to the fore.

Vi de panses (Garnatxa Roja naturally dried) - Orange colour. The wine comes across as a landslide of sweetness and honey with raisins and nuts offset with a certain sharpness, finishing figgy and complex.

Bac de les Ginesteres (100% Garnatxa Roja naturally dried, wine aged under the sun) - Deep gold / brown. The nose has a burnt, chocolatey presence, along with subtle almond notes. The palate is all rich raisiny depth, yet still fresh and with some bite. Complex, delicious, and a little unusual.



## Conca de Barberà DO



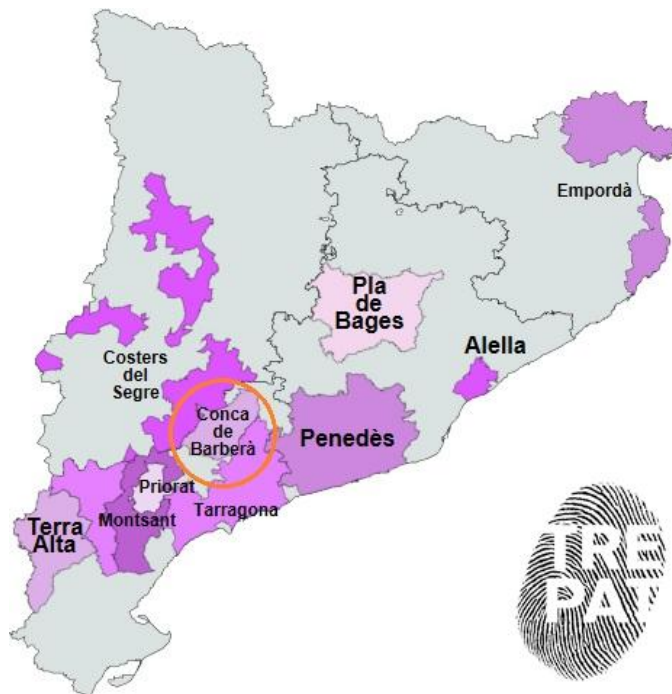
**Where is it?** – A compact region about 30km to the north of Tarragona and 80km west of Barcelona. “Conca” is Catalan for basin and the land here is surrounded by medium-sized mountains which limit both continental and Mediterranean influences, resulting in a transition zone with grapes grown at altitudes of around 350m - 600m.

**What’s planted?** – Quite a lot of the grapes here go to produce Cava, so white varieties include Parellada, Macabeu and more recently Chardonnay. Reds are a mix of Spanish grapes such as Tempranillo, Garnacha and Cariñena along with foreigners such as Cabernet, Pinot Noir and Syrah. “What’s their angle?”, I hear you ask. It’s **Trepat**, a pale-coloured red grape, native to the area, that’s good for Cava, rosés and more recently, lightish reds.

**What’s the wine like?** – Whites tend to be elegant and mineral rather than fruity. Reds *are* quite fruity, often full of crunchy red-berry flavours, with Bordeaux-variety reds displaying marked pyrazine / leafy notes. The Trepat-based wines are a recent development, quite acid, lowish alcohol: rustic Pinot Noir meets strawberry farm?

**Some wines & wineries** – Abadía de Poblet, Cara Nord, Josep Foraster, Molí dels Capellans, Rendé Masdén, Rosa Maria Torres, Succés, Torres (some top wines incl Milmanda Estate and Grans Muralles), Vins de Pedra...

**Other info** – If you’re anywhere near this area, the stunning Monastery of Santa Maria de Poblet (pictured above) is very well worth a visit, as much for its setting at the foot of the Prades mountains as the building itself.



Conca de Barberà must be one of the least known of Spain’s Denominaciones de Origen. Even within Catalunya, it doesn’t enjoy a big presence. This seems a bit odd when you consider the long history of the region, the decent growing conditions and the easy transport links. It’s even located right in the heart of all the action, with Penedès and Priorat for neighbours - so why the anonymity? Over a hundred years ago, Spain’s first cooperative was founded here and the region did very nicely. Perhaps Conca de Barberà has had it too easy and rested on its laurels whilst Penedès geared up with technology, Costers del Segre re-planted and Priorat re-invented? These days everyone needs a USP and unusual grapes like Trepat may not be enough. Yet Torres takes the region very seriously, with some of their top wines grown here. Can the Conca re-conquer?

Catalan wine regions (Wikipedia) & Trepat logo

## Introduction

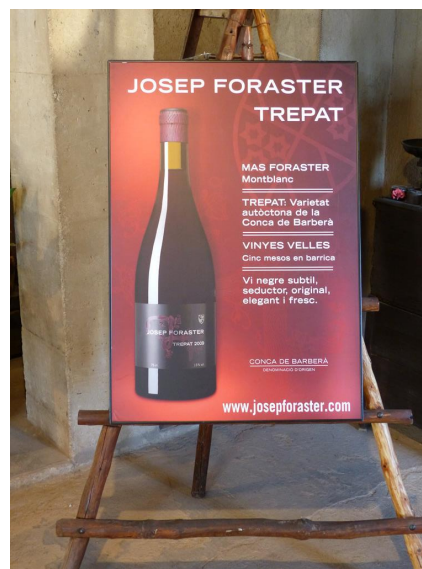
Years ago I lived in Lleida, the dullest of Catalunya's four provincial capitals, famous if anything for persistent winter fog. Many a weekend there was a straight choice: stick around with grey skies, freezing temperatures and a plate of snails (the revered *cargols a la llauna*) or hop in the car and in just over an hour you could be strolling along a sunny beach, wondering if it were *vermut-o'clock* yet.

The reason for the almost guaranteed change in climate is of course down to geography, with Catalunya's coastal mountains effectively separating the Mediterranean from the continental. In the summer it works the other way round, 28°C on the coast and 35°+ inland. The obvious question being: Why live in Lleida? But that's another story.

Being a keen cyclist I often took my bike down with me and parked up by these coastal mountains for an hour or two's exercise before hitting the coast (central Lleida being disappointingly flat). The obvious place to stop was Montblanc: a dramatic-looking small town, ringed by perfect walls and nestled at the foot of some solid peaks.

Parking up on the southern edge of town, I found I was right next to some neat-looking vineyards. The board said "Josep Foraster", so I bought a bottle of a red blend containing Cabernet Sauvignon and found it rather austere but interesting. I bought another and kept it. Somehow this 2003 Criança found its way to my parents' house in Manchester, where it slept until May 2016. Fearing the worst, we were pleasantly surprised: the wine had held up very well with super colour and a pleasant gamey, blackcurrant palate. Interesting.

Last summer I moved to Tarragona (the second dullest of Catalunya's four provincial capitals). At my new favourite wine bar, *Korxo*, I renewed my acquaintance with Josep Foraster. First drawn to the funkily-labelled "Els Nanos" then seduced by "Les Gallinetes". In both cases I really liked these reds. They weren't perfect wines - a bit chewy or pyraziney for some perhaps - but authentic wines nevertheless, combining real personality with very high drinkability. They just seemed to have something about them. I was also intrigued by the crazy labels, a seemingly recent development. So one gorgeous December morning I found myself heading inland to Montblanc to do a little "research". I also packed the bike for a nostalgic crack up the zig-zags to Rojals.





## **Mas Foraster**

Pulling into the neat carpark at Mas Foraster brought back a few memories. Yet it's a funny thing knowing of a place for ten years but never really knowing it well. Boss Ricard was on the 'phone when I arrived and I was happy to wait in the winter sunshine, noticing the 10 degree drop from the coast. "Sorry, I've only got about half an hour", he warned me. "Lots of export orders to prepare before Christmas". Fair enough I thought. So we launched right into it: him pouring a range of hazy tank-samples and me getting in as many rapid-fire questions as possible.

The Foraster family has been growing vines in the area for 150 years but the winery wasn't set up until 1998 by Josep Foraster, Ricard's grandfather. The direction was then passed on to Ricard's uncle, also Josep, before Ricard picked up the baton. With two children of his own, hopefully one day Mas Foraster will stretch to a 4<sup>th</sup> generation. "Mas" is Catalan for farmhouse and the cosy visitor reception area certainly feels the part, with wines for sale sitting atop a thick oak table, amidst wicker baskets and wholesome-looking autumnal produce.



Ricard Foraster about to pour a 2016 tank sample

## **Vineyards and Winemaking**

We head out back and Ricard shows me around. There are a couple of rows of gleaming stainless steel tanks in a tiled out-building and the place is slightly bigger than I was expecting. Certainly the grape reception area is quite large, though there's also a selection table available for hand-sorting. After this is the usual destemmer / crusher and a press. Ricard tells me that they've always destemmed so far. "One of the reasons you might include stems is for freshness and in this area I don't think we really need any more". Certainly all the Conca de Barberà wines I've tried have been on the lean, fresh side.



Ricard pours me a tank-sample of Macabeu. This was picked mid-late September, so the wine's barely 10 weeks old. It's still very estery and primary, with just a hint of reduction in there. I ask about the grapes. "We've got around 29 ha (72 acres) planted with vines and there are also some olive trees. Whites, we have Macabeu, Parellada, Garnatxa Blanca and Chardonnay. For reds we have Ull de Llebre (Tempranillo), Trepat, Garnatxa Negre, Garnatxa Peluda, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. All in all we probably grow about 25% whites". Quite the mix I'm thinking, though not unusual in Catalunya to see well-known French varieties sitting alongside the locals.

Trepat is the only one of these grapes uniquely local to the Conca and I'm anxious to hear more. "There's supposed to be about 1100 ha in the world, of which around 1000 ha are right here - so it's definitely local". We try the 2016 from tank. It's a pretty pale pink for a wine which I expected to be red. "Trepat never has much colour", Ricard confirms, "even though it's picked late. We wouldn't normally harvest this until the end of October or start of November and you see how acid it is still". He's right, the baby wine is very pleasant and surprisingly round, but there's definitely a whack of acidity in there, to go with the strawberry, forest-fruits and pepper notes. Again there is a little reduction, something not unusual in a young red, yet something that not all winemakers would be comfortable with. "It needs a rack", Ricard half-apologises, racking being the process of moving the clear wine away from its solids, which both cleans and opens it up a bit.



Ricard Foraster and the new ceramic egg



The gorgeous barrel cellar

I ask about style direction over the years and where they're heading now. "We grow all our own grapes and these days we're trying to work as naturally as possible. In fact we're in the process of organic conversion and we have a year left to run until we can apply for the certification. In this area there's a 20°C (32F) swing in day / night temperatures, which gives us great natural acidity. It's part of our heritage and it comes across in all the wines from around here. At the end of the day that's all we really want to do, reflect what we have."

"Talking of heritage, we are also backing more and more the native varieties and over the years I think our vineyards and wines will change to reflect that. In terms of style, I am making changes. These days I'm looking for lighter touch, hands-off wines which are less big and structured than we tried to make them a few years back. For example our "Els Nanos" young red might only be 7 days on skins with just one pumpover a day. One pumpover or punchdown per day is the regime I also maintain on our more serious reds, although they would typically stay on the their skins for between 16-20 days." (An extractive regime might be 3 or 4 times per day. It's like making a cup of tea, the more you dunk the bag, the more flavour you'll get out, but it might end up bitter).

We move off to the barrel room, which is a lovely cellar with proper stone walls and again looks very clean and well-kept. A cheery worker is in the middle of some transfers. There's also a 1700L ceramic egg. Ricard explains, "Basically I bought the egg as a trial. I would like to find ways of using less wood in our wines but still maintain that gentle oxygenation effect you find in a barrel." As we headed to the tasting room, I couldn't help being taken by the simplicity and natural flow of the place, with a very few steps from grape to bottle.



### Labels and Sales

In the tasting room I was introduced to Ricard's charming mother, Julieta, the daughter of founder Josep. As we tasted I asked about sales, "We actually sell around 60% of our wines in Catalunya. Then 25% go overseas and just 5% are sold to the rest of Spain. The remaining 10% or so we sell right here at the cellar door." Looking around I couldn't help but be impressed with the numerous trophies and framed certificates proudly on display but I also wondered who would find the place, tucked down a lane in the backstreets of Montsant. In-the-know locals I assumed, although the area does get some tourism, drawn by the monastic heritage of the [Ruta del Cister](#).

As for the labels it was obvious that the whole range had enjoyed a make-over at some stage, with their Criança wine for example brought right up to date with a thick "JF" scrawled across the label in silver ink. Julieta fills me in, "Our labels are designed by a friend of Ricard's. Label changes are scary, but also necessary, to keep up with everybody else. Mind you, whilst there are a good number of imaginative labels on the market, there are also plenty of shockers."

'Els Nanos' features the local big-head characters who patrol the streets of Montblanc during the annual festival. "It's a moment of fun in the village, so we've tried to make a range of fun wines to match", Julieta explains, indicating the corresponding entry-level red, white and rosé. "As for 'Les Gallinetes', this is a wine we made to help a local charity ([aprodisca](#)) that works with disabled people. The label was designed by one of the people linked to this organisation and for every bottle we sell, we make a contribution to help them out." Good initiative!

Local vineyards, local festivals, local charities - it all seems to make sense around here, yet Mas Foraster is on the map and apparently their US importer was over visiting last week. I told Julieta my story about their forgotten 2003 Criança wine I'd enjoyed back home earlier in the year, expecting some surprise. But no, it seems that with the importer they'd actually put on a vertical tasting right back to 1998. Not all reasonably-priced Spanish wines could be expected to hold up for 18 years, which is a testament to the Foraster family's care right from the start, as well as presumably to the decent acidity in the grapes that the region consistently delivers.

I enjoyed my brief visit to Mas Foraster and will be interested to watch their progress, particularly as Ricard edges onwards towards a more "natural" style. With lighter wines and unusual grape varieties seemingly 'in' and Conca de Barberà owning the Trepát category, how long before these chewy, light but interesting wines find a larger audience?



## The wines

2014 Josep Foraster Blanc Macabeu (12.5% vol) - Made from old vines grown at 450m above sea level, with just 150 cases produced. The juice was macerated on its skins for 23 days, which explains the deep yellow, almost orange colour. No SO<sub>2</sub> was used during the production except for a little at bottling. For me the nose was quite dumb (Macabeu is never very aromatic), though perhaps a little cakey/brioche-like. I found the palate hard to define. Not overtly fruity, it was certainly complex, dry, round and persistent.

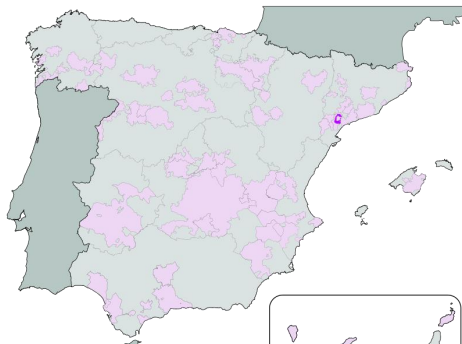
2014 Josep Foraster Blanc Selecció (12.5% vol) - A blend of 50% Garnatxa Blanca, 40% Macabeu and 10% Chardonnay, of which 50% was barrel-fermented and later aged on its lees. Deep yellow/green colour with very interesting nose of fruit, mint and almost ginger hints. The palate is fresh with savoury leafy notes combined with acacia honey, leading to a long round finish.

2012 Josep Foraster Criança (14% vol) - A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Tempranillo and Trepát, fermented by wild yeast and aged at least one year in barrel and one in bottle before release. This deep-coloured wine combines leafy-pyrazines and tar with softer red fruits and crunchy blackcurrants. To me it seems quite Bordeaux-like and is perfumed but fairly tight for now. Approachable yes, but will definitely age well into the future.

2014 Josep Foraster Trepát (12% vol) - Very pale red, showing just a hint of age? The nose is all cherries and oranges, perhaps complemented by a slight gamey / leathery note? The palate is acidic but nice, with sweet and sour chewy cherry fruit to the fore and perhaps an umeboshi plum note for good measure. Definitely not heavy nor austere. A glugger but no pushover!



## Montsant DO



**Where is it?** – Lying at around 450m in southern Catalunya, Montsant pretty much surrounds the more famous but similarish “Priorat” region. It’s a dramatic area with a climate which is between Mediterranean and continental.

**What’s planted?** – **Garnatxa** (Grenache) and **Carinyena** (Carignan) are the main varieties and these survive well through dry periods on these often poor rocky soils. Syrah, Cabernet and Merlot are also planted. Whites are less important, though there are some good wines, usually based on Garnatxa Blanca and Macabeu.

**What’s the wine like?** – The reds are warm, ripe and spicy. Big wines yes, but they have showed the way towards a less extreme and better balanced style than the in theory superior *Priorat* wines and are usually better value too. The whites can be a bit dull and heavy, but occasionally you get an amazing heady perfume and wines of great poise and interest, sort of an apricotty Rhône Valley nose with the structure of old vines Chenin Blanc.

**Some wines & wineries** – Acústic Celler, Baronia del Montsant, Can Blau, Capçanes, Coca i Fitó, Comunica, Espectacle, Gobe, Joan d’Anguera, Laurona, Masroig, Orto Vins, Portal del Montsant, Venus la Universal...

**Other info** - Region to watch as innovative, determined winemakers seek to get the best from superb conditions...

**Vendrell Rived** (Marça, Montsant DO, Catalunya) - 19th January 2019 v1.0

Núria Barceló Montané (Co-owner) - [www.vendrellrived.com](http://www.vendrellrived.com)

### Montsant

In southern Catalunya lies one of the best value wine regions in the world, yet few people have heard of it. Wine has been grown here for centuries but “Montsant” as a protected wine region was only formed within the last 20 years. Perhaps that’s why it’s a bit off the radar. The locals seem to know they’re on to a good thing at least. In recent years more and more cellars have sprung up, with growers switching away from co-ops and chancing their arm with their own wines. Wonder where we’ll be in another 20 years?

Montsant has plenty of permitted grape varieties but the main story is Grenache and Carignan. Which is handy as Grenache is currently having a bit of a moment and (old vine) Carignan is undergoing a re-evaluation. Montsant generally produces chunky Mediterranean reds, often sold at very reasonable prices. There are some whites and rosés and some people are pushing the envelope with high-end wines. There are also some natural wines.

The region itself is quite varied in terms of altitude, aspect and soils. Lying between two mountain ranges but fairly close to the sea, the climate is continentalised Mediterranean. Almonds and olives are also very much at home here and the region is beautiful to visit at any time of year.

## Vendrell Rived

My restaurateur friend Audrey was over from Canada and wanted to do a bit of wine-tasting. It was January and chunky reds seemed in order. Would I drive her round millions of hairpins in Montsant and Priorat and translate, in exchange for a rustic lunch at Mas Trucafort? Not a bad offer and who could resist that cheeky grin? Vendrell Rived sprang to mind for one of the stops. I'd recently been impressed with some of their wines at the wine club I run in Tarragona. Beautiful labels too. (<https://www.meetup.com/es-ES/Tarragona-Wine-Club/>)

We almost found the place first time and had a couple of minutes to admire the mountain backdrop before Núria approached us with a friendly smile. She lives on site so hadn't had far to come. She told us a bit about the property. Vines have been grown here for generations but it wasn't until 2000 that they started to make their own wine. Even now much of what they grow is sold to 3rd parties. They have a total of 25 hectares, including some parcels of old vines and all of this is ecologically certified with CCPAE. None of the vines are irrigated. The grape mix could hardly be more typical for these parts: Grenache and Carignan for reds with Macabeu and White Grenache for whites.

## Winemaking

We had a look round the winery. It didn't take long - it's a pretty simple, functional place. A few stainless steel tanks and not much else. Starting in 2000 with 5,000 bottles of L'Alleu, production has steadily climbed and now sits at around 60,000 bottles / year. All grape-picking is done by hand and due to a rigorous selection in the vineyard, there's no need for a selection table. Wines are fermented in stainless steel and reds are pumped over twice a day, more if they can. Although Núria admitted that they might settle for one long pumpover if they were really flat out. There are also a few smaller tanks where reds can be punched-down instead. Varieties are harvested and fermented separately with blending carried out later on.

We went down a flight of stairs and suddenly things were much more impressive. Beneath Vendrell Rived's small winery lies an immaculate barrel cellar. No shortcuts taken here, with top quality oak present from cooperages such as Taransaud, Radoux, Vicard, Saury and Cadus. The barrels ranged in size from 300-500L, larger formats so as not to have too much oak impact. Núria talked us through the wines:



Seré's slightly whacky old folks label



Núria explains the family's wines

## **Vendrell Rived - The wines**

Wine labels have advanced radically in Spain in the last 10 years or so. These days classic is mostly out and anything-goes is largely in. The results are often striking and those of Vendrell Rived are no exception. Local artist Marina Capdevilla seems to specialise in large-format street art but has come up with a number of labels for Vendrell Rived. The Miloca owl-label wines are beautiful whereas Seré depicts old people, one of Marina's favourite topics apparently. On asking Núria about this, she told me that they wanted to pay homage to the previous generations who had planted the vineyards they were now working.

Rebuf (Macabeu, White Grenache) - Fermented in stainless steel and bottled in January.

2017 Miloca (Grenache), (Tasted April 2018) - Young red, named after the local "Owl Mountain". Decent colour. Bright, clean, berry-ish nose. Gorgeous berries on the palate, just slightly warm. Fabulous!

2017 Miloca (Carignan) - Decent colour. Lovely nose showing creamy notes, ripe red fruits and earthy hints, perhaps leather or forest floor. The mid-weight palate is well balanced, combining interest, freshness again with leather hints.

2017 Seré (50% Grenache, 50%, Carignan) - 6 months in 2nd and 3rd use French oak. Named after a dry wind from the north. Decent young bluey colour. Great nose, hints of lovely cedary oak marry well with bright fruit. Palate similar but quite tight, not blowsy. Lovely long finish. Bound to get better with time in the bottle.

2016 L'Alleu (Grenache, Carignan) - This hard to pronounce red comes from vineyards which are over 50 years old and spends a year in oak. Decent colour, still pretty young. Very concentrated fudgey nose. Lovely wine, fresh, with polished tannins. Again elegant rather than a blockbuster.



Young vines getting started. Laying down a legacy for the next generations.



## Vineyards

We took a stroll around the attractive vineyards, glass in hand, and Núria talked us through the various plots. Many of these surround their house and the winery but the really old vines are a couple of miles away to the south west. I asked Núria why there was no sign on the road, indicating the winery's location. She told me that they didn't want "that" kind of tourism, preferring in-the-know people and prior appointments. We were surprised to learn that an impressive nearby house was abandoned, which prompted a discussion on making a living in the countryside. Harder than it might look. Behind that we could just make out Josep Grau's pleasantly minimalist new winery, peeking out part-way up a hillside.

It was a pretty cold morning, wandering around the vineyards and olive groves but the glass of 2017 Seré kept us invigorated. I was interested to see all the different ages of vineyards. From quite old bushvines to newer vines trained on wires to a new planting and then fallow ground. Work in progress. Núria repeatedly stressed that their plan was "poc a poc", bit by bit, with good Catalan business sense and generally conservative nature showing through. She told me they were happy with DO Montsant and had managed to build up decent sales in Catalunya but also in the UK, Sweden, Switzerland, China and across the USA. Not bad for a small family business.

We bought a few bottles before we left (Seré 5€ and L'Alleu 10€) and were surprised to see some top empties on the shelf. Gaja, Petrus and L'Ermita - not your average drinking. The last one a gift from local Priorat legend Álvaro Palacios, whom Núria's husband Josep Maria Vendrell had worked for whilst he was learning the ropes.



Old bushvines and spectacular mountain backdrop at Vendrell Rived

We headed off somewhat reluctantly after a great visit. I love these ones where you actually get to meet the people who make the wines and can ask all the geeky questions. It's a busy market but Vendrell Rived seems to be doing things right and I wish them well. One to watch.



Land left fallow before new-planting

## Priorat DOQa



**Where is it?** – Priorat lies at around 300m above sea level in southern Catalunya, in a dramatic mountainous area with a climate which is between Mediterranean and continental. Summers are long, sunny and warm.

**What's planted?** – Traditionally **Garnatxa** (Grenache) and to a lesser extent **Carinyena** are the main varieties and deep-rooted old vine examples do well on these poor stony soils (the famous slate/quartz *llicorella*). Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot were also introduced not so long ago. Whites are less important though you may find some excellent powerful wines, usually based on Garnatxa Blanca and Macabeu, plus a few others.

**What's the wine like?** – Ultra-low yields tend to create powerful, intense wines, which in this warm location could be almost undrinkably intense, cooked, porty and alcoholic, especially when cloaked in too much new oak. Fortunately times have changed and there is a new wave of freshness and balance sweeping the area. Less oak too.

**Some wines & wineries** – Alfredo Arribas, Álvaro Palacios, Buil y Giné, Clos Erasmus, Clos Figueras, Clos Mogador, Comunica, Familia Nin Ortíz, Ferrer Bobet, Marco Abella, Mas d'en Gil, Mas Doix, Mas Martinet, Ònix, Sangenís i Vaqué, Scala Dei, Terroir al Límit, Vall Lach...

**Other info** – Records show wine being grown here since 1194, but it was 5 pioneers who revived the region in 1979, when winemakers such as René Barbier and Álvaro Palacios first tried to realise the forgotten potential in these old vines. In doing so, they also sparked the Spanish terroir revolution - a renaissance which continues today.



### **Priorat - in search of direction?**

The story of Priorat has been told many times. It's an isolated, mountainous area, which lies in a lonely part of southern Catalunya. Some Mediterranean crops such as olives, vines and almonds can eek out a living on these rocky slopes but the land is not easy to work. Many locals left. During the 1980s a group of five winegrowers became convinced that the region had potential and started trying to make quality wines here. They did a good job and these new wines soon caught the attention of the wine world. Luckily big, chunky reds were in at the time and arguably this is the style that Priorat does best. Before too long these wines became regarded as world-class, demand shot up and some of these tiny bottlings soon gained pricing to match. Probably the first of Spain's "new" (i.e. re-discovered) wine areas, the incredible success of these pioneers helped spark a terroir-revolution, a volte-face which is still rumbling through the country today.

So that's the official story on Priorat. My personal take is that it's not my favourite region, perhaps because it's somewhere that I don't really understand. Back around 2007 I lived in Catalunya for 18 months and I tried as many local wines as I could. The famous Priorat wines were out of my price range and besides, there didn't seem much point. Priorat is surrounded by the Montsant DO, where similar grapes were grown at a fraction of the price. These honest fruit-filled rustic reds hit the spot for me. Every time I paid double to try a supposedly superior Priorat, I was disappointed, the wines just seemed all cooked and porty, totally out of whack. "Montsant, any day", I used to think and perhaps I still do, but in wine nothing stays the same...



The village of Gratallops, population 243, lies at the centre of all the action



Priorat kept hitting the headlines and the persistent demand from the US made it hard to ignore. I went to a fun wine fair in the regional hub of Falset and surprised myself by falling for the whites. I found a range of lovely, round, interesting wines from the Garnatxa Blanca (White Grenache) grape, that just seemed to have something. Some were a touch flabby but others were spot on.

Shortly afterwards the economic crisis hit Spain hard and soon a number of producers needed to make cheaper wines in order to survive. These younger fruit-forward reds had less new oak and started to make me question my anti-Priorat stance further. Perhaps they weren't "typical Priorat" but they were certainly good. Around the same time a number of new producers started to appear, often young(ish) outsiders, drawn to the old vines and linked to the "natural wine" movement. Generally working tiny plots, their style tended to be edgy: leaner and less fruit-focussed than "traditional Priorat". Too edgy perhaps, but fresh wines at least and another new way of thinking about the region.

What to make of all this? I think you could argue that Priorat is at a crossroads. It has the name, the vines and the investment to do big, expensive, power wines well, but who wants that style today? That same terroir attracts low-intervention idealists, yet these wines tend to be made in a reductive, lean, hard-to-appreciate style that also isn't going to save the region, even if they had the volume. To complicate things further, world wine fashion this season is all about fresh, light "Atlantic" reds, and that's a game that Priorat can't really play. Fresh perhaps, with the right soil and altitude, but not Atlantic. The last hurdle comes from the neighbouring Montsant DO, which continues to raise its game, producing a range of accessible wines at moderate prices.

Shake up these jumbled facts and I think the way out is clear. Priorat has to be true to itself and stick to its guns. It needs to offer a range of vineyard-specific modern wines, which combine fruit and generosity with a certain hands-off freshness and dialled-back oak. And the prices need to be reasonable. Get that right and I think the quality of the terroir here will keep the region at the top. One producer who is trying to do just that is Clos Figueras.

### **Clos Figueras**

It was a lovely sunny morning as I met up with Anne at a railway station on the outskirts of Barcelona. Priorat is quite a difficult place to get to and I was glad of the lift. The first thing I noticed when I got into the car were two rocks by the gear-stick. "Llicorella", she confirmed. Much of Priorat's fame is based on this fragile, slate-based soil. People are always asking Anne about it, hence the need to have a couple of samples handy at all times.

I've known Anne Cannan since January 2005. We were both working in the Barossa Valley in Australia. She was working a harvest at Yalumba and I'd just started as harvest winemaker with Orlando. We had friends in common and as some of the few Spanish-speakers in the valley, it was fun to chat away in code for a while, much to the bemusement of our Aussie mates. Anne's Spanish comes with a charming French accent. She grew up near Bordeaux, daughter of wine industry figure Christopher Cannan. As Mr. Cannan's business took him increasingly to Spain, Anne moved there to finish her education.

Anne's father Christopher Cannan had founded the Bordeaux-based wine company Europvin in 1978. The idea was to source top-quality wines from across Europe and bring these to a wider audience. This business naturally led to the forging of a number of business relationships, some of which became friendships. One of these was with René Barbier Ferrer, one of the original five

Priorat pioneers. In 1997 René Barbier showed Christopher Cannan an abandoned vineyard that he thought was worth buying. Mr. Cannan snapped it up and nineteen years later his daughter is now running the place.

Anne has built up quite the wine CV since our Australia days. On returning to Catalunya, she worked as a sommelier in Barcelona, whilst helping out her father with Clos Figueras and Laurona (a Falset winery which he owned at the time). She then worked for a consultancy in Argentina over a harvest, then went on to work in a cellar in Tuscany the next autumn. Returning to her studies, Anne completed the Master of Wine Management offered by the OIV (The International Organisation of Vine and Wine - a major industry body), based in Paris. Anne combined her studies with work in wine sales during this period. She then started full-time at Clos Figueras in 2008, where she now works as winemaker and in sales and marketing. In 2012 Anne was approached by top Rhône house Guigal, to be their brand ambassador in Spain.

As we drove south west through the Penedès and Cava country it was pleasant to see the first green of spring, after weeks in grimy Barcelona. We left the main roads near Reus and headed for the hills via the *Coll de Pigat* pass, a triumph of civil engineering. At the other side we reached Falset and entered an undulating plain, given over to mixed-use agriculture and the Montsant DO. Branching off onto the T-710 we headed back north. After three or four kilometers we turned a sharp bend, the first of about fifty. “Now we’re in Priorat!”, Anne exclaimed. And she was right. What had been a plain had changed instantly and we were now driving up a rather austere valley, with just scrubby vegetation and prickly pears for comfort. Soon, expensive-looking vineyard terraces sprung up on all sides. A couple of bends later and we’d arrived.



© rafael lópez-monné / CLOS FIGUERES

Christopher Cannan, owner and founder of Clos Figueras, with winemaker daughter Anne Cannan

## Vineyards

The homely Clos Figueras sits at the edge of Gratallops village. Anne had work to do and left me in the hands of their estate manager Miquel Compte. Initially reserved and polite, Miquel's knowledge and passion for the region fast became obvious as we jolted down a bumpy track in the company's smart 4x4. Despite the Catalan accent it turns out that Miquel was born in Venezuela, moving to this area when he was five. He started working for Christopher Cannan fourteen years ago, when he was keen to switch his admin background for the great outdoors. Starting in the vineyards, he learned on the job and was soon promoted. He tells me that this early experience was invaluable, as it gave him a feel for how tough it is to work the land. It also allows him to accurately estimate resources for vineyard jobs today.

We arrived at the Clos Figueras vineyard. Wow! I could not believe the soil! There wasn't any! Three exclamation marks in a row might seem like hyperbole but in this case I think it's justified. I've worked on five continents and this was the most remarkable vineyard soil I'd ever seen. "The famous llicorella", Miquel confirmed with almost fatherly pride. There was mud elsewhere on the property, after recent rain, yet these stones seemed bone dry.

He crouched down and looked at the shattered slate carefully, before grabbing a handful for me. "It's fragile, see? You can break it easily. And look, whilst the surface seems dry, it's actually moist underneath. This property of the llicorella is fantastic. It means that the vines can stay alive during the hot summers and yet the dry surface keeps humidity and vineyard diseases at bay. So it's very easy to work organically here, with just sulphur and copper as necessary. If you're not working organically in this region I think you're doing something wrong. So much so that I'd like to see this become mandatory in the Priorat DOQa rules."



Miquel Compte explains the famous llicorella soils

Clos Figueras has 18ha in total (44 acres) of which 12 are currently planted. We carried on round to look at some more. Whilst the vineyards are largely contiguous, forming part of the same *clos*, there are quite large differences in slope, soil and aspect across this small area. Clos Figueras has attempted to capitalise on these differences by planting a range of varieties to bolster the core old vine Garnatxa (Grenache) and Carinyena (Carignan). There is some Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Monastrell for the reds and Viognier, Garnatxa Blanca and Chenin Blanc for whites.

I was surprised to see the trellising and the irrigation lines. Before my visit I had expected to see nothing but gnarly old stumps. Miquel explained, "When we came here not all of these vineyards



were planted. It's hard to grow vines here. The llicorella soil is fantastic once the vines get established but initially they struggle. The law allows for that and it's permitted to irrigate vines during the first five years of their lives. We find that 10-20% of our new vines don't survive and that's with looking after their every need. If we didn't, it would be closer to 50%. We don't trellis our vines in the normal sense. If you look at them they are still pruned as bush vines. We just use a couple of wires to spread out the foliage that grows each year. The plant's easier to work that way and allows us to green harvest or leaf pluck if we need to, depending on the year. Bush vines survive longer here, but we pay for that with lower yields."

Further down the slope we ran into some men working on the trellises. They were banging in new posts and re-adjusting the wires. "It's because of the rain", one of the workers told me. "The soil expands and it's so soft that it can't support any tension and the posts can fall over or snap." Vineyard posts are not cheap and vineyard labour less so. As I looked around the site I noticed that some bits were very sparsely planted, due to the precipitous slopes and the need for terracing. A lot of money for not many grapes, the reality of Priorat economics was plain to see.

Miquel put numbers to the situation, "On our 12 hectares we have just 21,000 vines. That's less than 2000 vines / hectare AND each vine gives us just under 1 kilo of fruit. So in 2015 we got just 19.6 tonnes from 12 hectares. Plus the berries are small, so we might only get 520-600L of wine per tonne. That works out at not much more than 1000 bottles / hectare. Over in Montsant they might get 4000, maybe more. There you can build a business, here you are doing it for your kids. You don't come to Priorat to make money, you come here to make wine. In fact many of the new-money investors, who came here attracted by the big names, have already left."

Miquel continued, "Farming in Priorat is tough, there are much easier ways to make a living. Some people have stayed though and there's also a new wave of young idealistic growers who've moved here. Land's actually quite cheap, but you have to be prepared to work it! Do everything yourself and you can make a go of it. What's really good now is that pretty much everybody is trying to make the best wines they possibly can. There are approximately 100 winemaking outfits here and everyone's raising their game. Yet I still believe that this terroir is better than us. For all our efforts so far, the best is still to come and I'm happy that people are still pushing."

Just before returning to the winery, the ebullient Miquel stopped to show me a north-facing slope. It must be almost 45° and the poor stony soil was easily visible through the sparse plant life. "This is where we're going to plant some white varieties", he tells me, with infectious enthusiasm. "It will be five years before we see any grapes though. Planting vines here is like throwing your money onto the ground. But in the long run, it will be worth it."



Clos Figueras vineyards and Miquel Compte explaining an area where white varieties will be planted

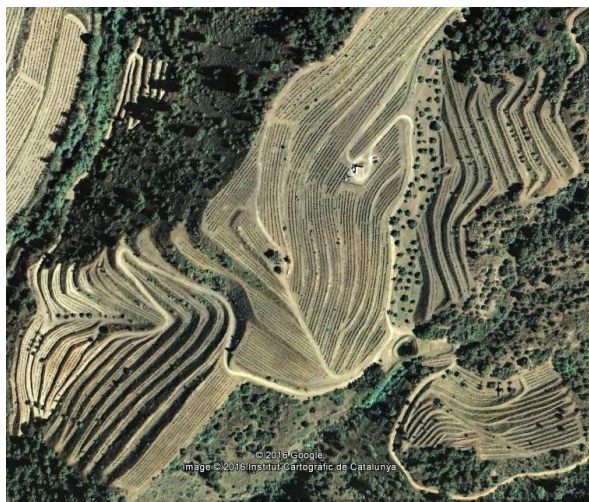
## Winemaking

Back at the winery Miquel took care of other visitors and Anne showed me the barrel cellar. It's beautifully simple and also nice and cool, located directly under the winery. There weren't that many barrels and they were mostly 500L puncheons rather than 225L barriques, "as we don't want too much oak in the wine", Anne informed me. The winemaker in me wondered about logistics, there being no room for a forklift, but Anne assured me that two big chaps could hump them around when they were empty. In the cellar there was also just one rather cool-looking amphora of Syrah, the wine code "A1" suggesting that it might be something pretty special.

The Clos Figueras winery itself is very simple, little more than an array of tanks and a couple of machines. Anne explained their winemaking philosophy, "Everything is hand-harvested into 12kg crates, with an initial selection in the vineyard. The harvest dates can vary by several days within the same block, depending on the exact vine orientation. We chill the grapes overnight in a cold room, then put everything over a selection table the following day. This is because the llicorella soil is amazing at retaining heat, so the grapes can come in warmer than we'd like. We might use some stems if they're ripe enough, especially with Syrah. They can bring freshness and structure, but we wouldn't use them in a cold year."

"For our young wine (Serras del Priorat) we do a fairly short fermentation at around 24-25°C. Our top wine (Clos Figueres) can stay on skins for up to 30 days. We do this in 500L wooden barrels (with the lids removed), where we let the temperature peak at around 28°C. Using barrels as fermenters in this way we find that the oak flavours integrate better into the wine and then subsequently the barrels tend not to dominate when we use them for ageing. We only use 100% French oak and all our barrels pass through this step, we never use new oak directly for wine maturation. Our young red sees about 7 months in oak, the others stay in for around a year."

"Overall we're still trying to gain a better understanding of our vineyards. We will also run trials in the winery but we need to be cautious because we don't have much volume to play with! Including rented vineyards we currently produce about 30,000 bottles per year and we're not going to grow much. There's no room to grow! In the future I'd like to release a 100% Garnatxa wine. It translates the Priorat terroir well and as we grow to understand our vineyards better I think it would work well for us. If I'm being really honest, if we were to do it all again, we might not plant the foreign varieties at all. Saying that, we like what they bring to our wines."



GoogleEarth shot of Clos Figueras vineyards



Beautiful barrel cellar at Clos Figueras



## Running a wine business

We head upstairs into the attractive dining room and it's surprisingly busy. There's also a cute little shop, where they sell their own estate-grown wines and olive oil, plus some smart-looking French wines "from friends". There are future plans to produce and sell their own honey. Apparently 15-20% of Clos Figueras wine is sold on site, whilst 60% is exported.

Clos Figueras operates a boutique B&B on site. Anne tells me that in total they make about 30% of their business from hospitality, "But it's not just about cashflow, looking after guests here generates good feeling and a positive image, which can help down the line. The B&B is going quite well and we get a lot of visitors from North America. It's something I'd like to expand in the future, but we'd need to do that step by step."

I ask Anne what it's like running a wine business in Priorat. "I like all the sides of my role, to be honest, from the winemaking aspects to being with the final client. But it can be hard fitting it all in and there's lots of travelling. You know my son's two at the moment but there are times when I'm really busy with work. The harvest time obviously, but also in April for example when we have a very busy schedule with fairs. My husband's an engineer and he's busy too - so we're lucky to have grandparents around who can help with babysitting."

"In terms of promotion, our DOQa Priorat body could definitely do more to help. I just don't feel like they're doing a good job in getting the message across. This is a really special area and there are important differences within it. For example the wines from around Porrera are really solid, whereas wines from Gratallops tend more towards elegance. We try and tell our story as best we can and of course it's nice to get good scores from critics. That can help sales, but ultimately it's just an opinion. What makes me happiest is seeing our wines on restaurant wine lists." With a hint like that and appetising aromas wafting in from the kitchen, we agree that it's time to eat.



Miquel Compte and Anne Cannan debate the finer points over rustic appetisers at Clos Figueras' restaurant



## **Clos Figueras - the wines**

Lunch at Clos Figueras was one of those moments when you're glad to be in the wine industry. A nondescript Tuesday in March, the rest of the world was probably counting beans or touching up meaningless PowerPoint presentations. Instead I'm tasting some lovely authentic wines over a pleasantly rustic lunch, in the company of Miquel and Anne. We taste the wines on their own first, then again over food.

2015 Font de la Figuera (65% Viognier, 30% Garnatxa Blanca, 5% Chenin Blanc) - Anne tells me that the Viognier was an accident, they'd ordered Cabernet Sauvignon but the nursery sent Viognier instead. It was in the ground before they found out, so they stuck with it and liked the results. The other grapes in the blend help provide acidity and zip. This greenish yellow wine has a fresh appealing nose. There's lots going on: green mango, linalool and esters compete with pineapple and candied lemon on the nose. The palate is similar, with good apricot depth and perhaps a hint of fennel. It finishes long, with an agreeable bitter twist. Anne says that her father prefers the wine with 4 or 5 years of age, when honeyed notes develop, but she prefers it young.

2014 Serras del Priorat (50% Garnatxa, 20% Carinyena, 15% Syrah, 15% Cab Sauv) - This is the wine I used to buy for our wine shop in San Sebastián. It has a bright young colour and a gorgeous creamy blueberry nose that reminds me of fruits of the forest yoghurt. The palate is also fresh and fruity but no pushover, with plenty of depth and finishing with a firm tannic handshake. "It's more Priorat on the palate than in the nose", Anne confirms.

2012 Font de la Figuera (65% Garnatxa, 20% Carinyena, 10% Syrah, 5% Cab Sauv) - I preferred this wine to the 2011 version, which came from a hot year. The 2012 is fabulous, with an intense deep colour and a fantastic nose which is creamy and subtle. The palate is ripe and punchy, with an agreeable hint of rusticity, yet fresh and elegant at the same time. Will undoubtedly get even better with a bit more time in the bottle.

2012 Clos Figueres (mostly Garnatxa and Carinyena) - The property's top wine. Lovely colour. There are some meaty notes but it doesn't smack you around the head, rather it is from the "less is more" school. Charming and beguiling in equal measure. The fantastic palate starts off in a linear fashion then the ripe fruit shows through. Like all great wines, this one is all about balance and does not come across as "too oak", "too heavy" or "too anything". The finish is agreeably warm. Delicious now but I am assuming it's still a baby.

## **Closing thoughts on Priorat**

My visit to Priorat lasted just a few hours but even in the car on the way back I think its magic was starting to work on me. A week later and I'm more curious than ever and want to go back. There's just something about those brooding mountains and steep slopes that demand a closer look, not to mention that crazy llicorella soil. Unlike many in Spain, this DO has a clear geographical basis and the possibilities within it seem dazzling. Whilst Priorat could have rested on its laurels, nothing seems further from the truth. Today it's home to a band of committed winegrowers, all searching to capture the spirit of the place in their own way and it's going to be fascinating to watch. It's almost like the 1980s was a volcanic eruption and the lava is still solidifying. The DO is also one of the most forward-thinking in the country, allowing village wines to be produced and having recently completed an extensive mapping exercise of all its individual terroirs, to facilitate single vineyard *vinya-classificada* wines to be produced.

## Terra Alta DO



**Where is it?** – Terra Alta lies in the extreme SW of Catalunya, bordering Aragón. Despite the name, the land is not so high, approx 400m. The climate is Mediterranean with continental influence + often there is a drying breeze.

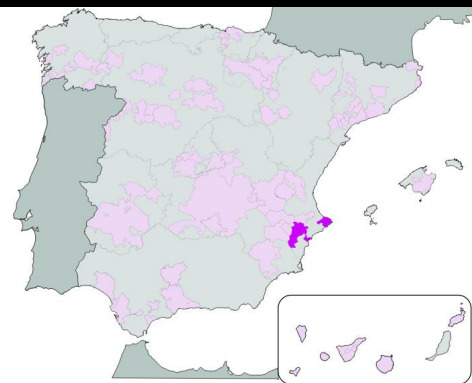
**What's planted?** – Garnatxa (**Grenache**) is top dog here, both white and red, accompanied by some varieties typical to Catalunya, including Macabeu, Moscatel and Parellada (whites) and Samsó (**Carignan**) for reds, plus the usual international suspects. Two local red rarities are **Garnatxa Peluda** (Downy Grenache) and **Morenillo**.

**What's the wine like?** – The whites tend to be fairly full-bodied but not amazingly fruity, usually quite waxy, sometimes with agreeable citrus hints. Reds range from bright fruity quaffers to more serious numbers which are ripe but rarely heavy. New oak levels seem to be low and a pleasant chewy rusticity shows through on some reds.

**Some wines & wineries** - Altavins, Bàrbara Forés, Celler Alimara, Celler Batea, Celler Piñol, Coca i Fitó, Coma d'en Bonet, Cooperatiu Gandesa, Edetària, Frisach, Herència Altés, LaFou, Vins del Tros, Xavier Clua

**Other info** - Terra Alta is seen as an “in” region within Catalunya, principally for the under-exploited plantings of Grenache. The DO is getting behind this, promoting 100% Garnatxa Blanca with a specific back-label. Is this the future or should they also look to their niche grapes as a point of difference from their neighbours?

## Alicante DO



**Where is it?** – In sunny SE Spain, the Alicante DO covers a number of areas from the sub-tropical coastal influenced “La Marina”, to the main part which is around the Vinalopó valley in the east (an arid area with a marked continental climate). Between the two “El Comtat” is a transition zone, lying at about 400m.

**What's planted?** – **Monastrell** (Mourvèdre) is the main story in the interior. With conditions similar to Jumilla and Yecla this is interior Spain and it's October before it gets ripe. On the coast **Moscatel de Alejandria** predominates. There is also some Garnacha and a big raft of other varieties, some local, some international.

**What's the wine like?** – The Monastrell-based reds are really the future here. One of Spain's best grapes, Alicante currently lags its neighbours, with deeply-coloured chunky reds that often fall short. Normal whites are peasant but dull (it's probably too hot), the Moscatel-based whites are grapey and glorious if that's your thing.

**Some wines & wineries** – Bernabé Navarro, Bodega del Pinoso, El Sequé, Enrique Mendoza, Finca Collado, Ibérica Bruno Prats, Mas de la Real de Sella, MG Wines, Primitivo Quiles, Salvador Poveda, Sierra Norte, Telmo Rodríguez, Vinessens, Vins del Comtat, Volver, Xaló...(also non-DO: Celler la Muntanya, Joan de la Casa...)

**Other info** - Alicante is also home to an almost extinct solera-based wine “**Fondillón**”, now slowly recovering



### **Alicante - the world's greatest wine region?**

Wine has been grown in Alicante since Roman times, perhaps even earlier. Centuries ago Alicante wines were held in the highest esteem and were the favourites of both Elizabeth I and Louis XIV. Wines from Alicante accompanied Magellan on his trip around the world and were mentioned by Shakespeare. But times have changed, the lustre has rubbed off the name and their fame has evaporated.

For most people these days Alicante means little more than sunshine and tourism along the beautiful Costa Blanca. The weather's some of the best in Europe and people flock here all year round. In this climate it's very easy to get grapes ripe and so a number of producers have focussed on making simple fruity wines, targetted directly at the large tourism market. Now there's nothing wrong with making agreeable wine at decent prices, in fact there's quite a skill to it. But whilst they may be pleasant quaffers on a hot day, I'd venture to suggest that these are not the kind of wines that made the Sun King weak at the knees.

In recent decades there have been some attempts at diversification within the wine region. Pioneers such as Enrique Mendoza have invested in foreign varieties and better winemaking, yielding good results, giving the region an extra string to its bow.

But the world keeps turning and it has taken neighbouring Jumilla to show what can really be done. This similar wine region lies a little to the west and like Alicante is mainly planted with bush vine Monastrell (Mourvèdre) grapes. Not very long ago, Jumilla was regarded as close to the bottom of the pile, making bulk cheap reds and not much else. Recently it has leap-frogged to mid-table respectability, on the back of a few committed producers and a 99 point score from Robert Parker (back when 99 points was considered good). Can Alicante re-claim its place in the sun? Some people seem to think so, with A-list producers such as Artadi, Telmo Rodríguez and Bordeaux legend Bruno Prats all setting up shop here.

Alicante also has one extra card up its sleeve, a truly legendary aged red wine called *Fondillón*. Think Sherry but made from red grapes. Might not sound anything special but this was one of the world's top wines, fetching up to the equivalent of 1000€ per bottle at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These days Fondillón is the sort of thing you read about in wine fairy tales, but like mermaids and handsome princes, you never actually see any. It's the last question on the Master of Wine exam, the sort of thing you might find at the back of *Berry Bros. & Rudd*. Being a wine geek, I wanted to find some. The one producer who refused to let the flame go out is Primitivo Quiles.



## Primitivo Quiles

Monóvar is an attractive enough small town, but it didn't look like a world beater. Could it really be that one of the globe's most famous wines was produced here? Where were the Bordeaux châteaux or the gilded railings? As I pulled off the dusty main road into this unassuming car park, it didn't really feel like I was at the gates of El Dorado. What had happened to Alicante, where had all the money and the fame gone? I was keen to find out.

Leaving the car behind, I walked up a couple of steps and suddenly I was back in the 1950s or perhaps even the 1920s. The leather chairs, the old barrels and the black and white photographs didn't look like they'd been changed for a while. It was cool in here and there was that pleasant sweetish smell that anyone who has strolled the backstreets of Jerez or El Puerto will be familiar with. A tiny hatch sprang open and the comfortable-looking señora behind assured me that Mr. Quiles would be with me in just a minute.

Showing me into his office with a warm handshake, I was again overwhelmed by the sense of history. Pictures and certificates lined the walls and there were many shelves of old books. The office was full but neat and tidy, like a well-kept archive. Was that an old typewriter over there and surely he didn't still use that dial-up telephone? My gaze was drawn to a picture of my host with the King of Spain. "What was the event?", I bleated out, "Oh, they served our wine at his wedding." Not bad, I thought. It took me a couple more moments to adjust to the time-shift and the array of artefacts, then I came to my senses and I asked Mr. Quiles to tell me a little of the family history.

"The founder of the company was my great grand-father Don Primitivo Quiles Verdú. He grew up west of here, around Pinoso. In those days everything was done in bulk and wine was taken off in large casks to be sold. The growers got paid according to the alcoholic content of the wine, but they always felt they were being ripped-off by these middlemen, the *corredores*. My great grandfather was an intelligent man and decided to do something about it. So he headed off to Valencia to study winemaking. When he came back he set up his own lab, one the locals could trust. Look - there's his degree certificate hanging on the wall. It's dated 1917."



Enology certificate for the founder of the firm: Don Primitivo Quiles Verdú

“Around that time the wine world was still recovering from the phylloxera epidemic. But then France and Italy became entangled in the First World War and so global production dropped again, which sent the demand for Spanish wine through the roof. So my great grandfather decided to start a winemaking business, to capitalise on all this demand. At first we were located near to our vineyards in Pinoso but in 1926 we moved here to Monóvar, so as to have access to the railway. Wine is a heavy product to transport and this relocation greatly increased our ability to access markets, both in Madrid and via the port of Alicante.” Mr. Quiles then showed me an incredible photograph of the Alicant docks, lined as far as the eye can see with large wooden barrels ready to be loaded onto ships.



Alicante docks 1892 (photo [www.lasprovincias.es](http://www.lasprovincias.es))

“One thing that was interesting about that period is that we became exposed to other ways of thinking about the wine business. Back then, cross-regional blending was allowed and some of the big northern Spanish wineries had outposts down here. They used local wine to provide them with blending options to fill out their thin northern wines if the year was cold. Some of the better companies also dealt in vintage-dated wines, something which was unknown in our region at that time.”

“My grandfather, Primitivo Quiles Quiles, studied winemaking in France. When he came back he was convinced that there was good business to be made in sparkling wine. He bought the machines and everything but then they were all destroyed in the Spanish Civil War. Spain wasn’t involved directly in WWII, which helped Alicante to get back on its feet. The demand for our wines soared again, only to crash once more, as the rest of Europe recovered from the war. Prices for Alicante bulk wines fell to new lows and a number of wineries closed.”

“My father, Primitivo Quiles Pérez steered us through this difficult period. He was a tireless ambassador for the quality of Alicante wines and Spanish wines in general. My father realised that the only way to survive was to go up the quality ladder. In the winery we re-orientated our production accordingly and also made the shift from bulk to bottled wines.”

“Today we produce about 700,000-800,000 bottles of wine a year. 80% of this is table wine, based on the Monastrell grape. Some neighbouring producers, such as Enrique Mendoza, were pioneers in experimenting with different varieties in Alicante. We ourselves use some Merlot. It grows well and bring us a different dimension and more options at blending. But Merlot’s not much use on the export market. There’s so much Merlot out there already, what would be our angle, our unique selling point? These days the trend is for local grapes done well and so for us that means sticking with Monastrell.”

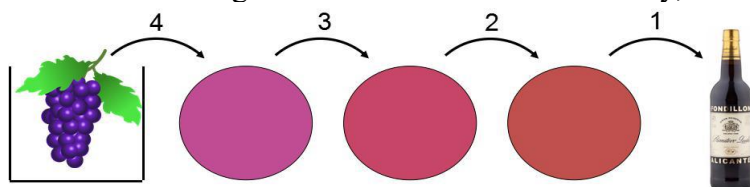
“We don’t have any of our own vineyards but we do have long term contracts with a number of local growers. We’re prepared to pay extra for quality and so some of these growers have been with us for 50 years!” I imagined that this policy had probably saved a few growers’ livelihoods. In 1900 there were 92,000ha of vineyards in Alicante, today there are just 13,000ha. To put these figures into context, Spain’s famous Rioja region currently has around 62,000ha planted and the country as a whole has about 1.1 million ha of vines.

### **Soleras and wine magic**

A *solera* is a system of wine maturation commonly used across southern Spain. The basic idea is that you have a large barrel or number of barrels from which you remove a small amount of wine when you need to bottle some for the market. These barrels are then filled from a series of barrels containing younger wine. Then in turn these barrels are topped up with younger wine and so on, depending on the layout of each solera. The basic point is that you never take out too much wine at once and so what’s left in the bottom row of the solera is always a blend of every year since the solera was first set up.

This system of continuous blending across vintages results in a wine that is consistent from year to year. But soleras are much more than that. Deep within the solera, numerous biological, chemical and physical processes weave their magic and the wine slowly evolves and also becomes more concentrated, due to evaporation. If demand for the wine goes up, you need to expand the solera gradually, too fast and the quality will change. These stately soleras are like vinous supertankers - you need to think a long time ahead if you want to change course. In fact you can’t really change them at all, all you can do is keep them alive.

If you started a solera today it would take decades for it to really get going, you would be doing it for your grandchildren. Making old solera-aged wines is commercial suicide and barring a few bright lights in Jerez and Montilla, pretty much everyone else has gone bust. There’s just no real market for these barrel-aged beauties today, and the wines they produce are not recognised for what they are. It’s pretty remarkable then that Primitivo Quiles has managed to maintain soleras of Fondillón throughout the whole of the last century, through thick and mostly thin.



#### Simplified schematic of a solera

Basically you take a little of the oldest wine out first, for bottling. Then you fill that barrel with younger wine and repeat this until the newest wine enters the solera.



## Fondillón

Solera-aged Fondillón wines were historically the jewel in the crown of the Alicante wine industry. And not just any old jewel, we are definitely in *Koh-i-Noor* territory here. Fondillón is a wine which is made from 100% Alicante-grown Monastrell grapes. The grapes are picked late so as to be extra-ripe and full of concentrated flavours. These grapes are then allowed to ferment, a process which may stop naturally when the yeast have had enough, leaving a little residual sweetness. If this new wine is judged to be of the right quality, it will be aged for some time before being ready to enter stage one of its *solera*. Primitivo Quiles maintains two Fondillón soleras:

1892 Fondillón Solera “El Abuelo” - This solera was started in 1892 and comprised two large oak vats, known as *toneles*. During the Spanish Civil War the winery was used to store aviation material, but it later ended up being looted. Everything was taken, with the miraculous exception of these two toneles. In the 1950s the company took the decision to start re-filling one of the barrels with Moscatel wine instead of Monastrell, leaving just one tonel of 1892 Fondillón. Amazingly **at this time, this was the only tonel of Fondillón left in the world!** Today this remains an extremely rare wine. It's only bottled when the quality is right, and even then in runs of just two or three hundred bottles at a time.



Old wooden toneles quietly age Alicante's legendary Fondillón wine at Primitivo Quiles

1948 Fondillón Solera - The 1948 harvest was large and of high quality but demand for Alicante wine was sluggish at the time. Primitivo Quiles decided to “solve” the problem by investing in the future and so some of this wine was laid down as the basis for a new Fondillón solera. That's the dubious benefit of being in a family firm, you can afford to take a long term view. This solera wasn't ready to be commercialised until the end of the 1960s, a cool twenty year wait!

The decision was undoubtedly commercially difficult, but as time has run its course it has proved to be a good one. Primitivo Quiles has been a tireless ambassador for Fondillón, but there's a limit to what you can do with such a tiny production, no matter what the quality. Recognising that their 1892 solera was too precious to play around with, the company took the brave decision to set up a new solera. Today the wine born in this 1948 solera allows the company to generate more volume at a reasonable price. In this way they are able to bring Fondillón to a wider audience and still retain the 1892 Fondillón for very special occasions.

The main 1948 solera today comprises 10 x 1800L toneles, from which up to 2000L can be drawn at any one time for bottling. This is topped up with wine from two younger layers, called “scales”. Up to 30% of the wine can be taken from these scales at any one time. The scales themselves are filled up from a “pre-solera”, which itself is topped up with four year old wine. This new wine is made from extra ripe grapes from specially selected low-yielding Monastrell vineyards. Quite the process and as Mr. Quiles quips, “I’m still selling my grandfather’s wine!” He adds, “The key is to treat these soleras with a lot of respect. In fact we only open them twice a year: once to check the wines and one to take some out for bottling, before re-filling.”

I ask Mr. Quiles how could it be that Fondillón had fallen from being one of the world’s most expensive wines to to being barely alive today. “More than anything I think that geography and world trade were responsible. Going back a few centuries, all the major Iberian wines travelled well. In fact one of the reasons for their success was that you could sail round the world with something to keep the crew going along the way and have something to trade at the other end. These wines were robust. But when world trade shifted to the Americas and then the Far East (via The Cape) Alicante slipped out of the mainstream. It’s on the wrong side of the Peninsular and so whilst wines on the westerly trade routes like Port, Sherry and Madeira flourished, we got left behind. These days I’m delighted that a few of our neighbours are starting up Fondillón production again. We have one of the world’s great wines here and we need to do what we can to protect our heritage.”



More Fondillón magic in action

## Primitivo Quiles - The wines

Vermouth Rojo P. Quiles - “Vermut” along with gin are really the *in* drinks in Spain these days and they make a good couple. The abysmal hangover you get from drinking overpriced gin from a “fishbowl” glass at 3am can be partially mitigated if you can stomach a glass of vermuth and a few olives the following day before lunch. This is a really good vermuth, quite fresh and with subtle herbs. The sweetness doesn’t stand out at all, in the fact the whole drink is nicely balanced.

2013 Primitivo Quiles “Roble” (60% Monastrell, 40% Merlot) - Nice mid-weight red with notes of black fruits, cedar and tea. The palate is intense and surprisingly fresh, finishing a touch tannic.

2010 Primitivo Quiles “Raspay Reserva” (100% Monastrell) - Clean bright red colour, with a nose of cherry, furniture and fudge. The palate is restrained old-school class from a previous era. Elegant cherry and fudge notes integrate perfectly and the palate finishes long and balanced.

Primitivo Quiles Fondillón Gran Reserva 1948 Solera - Surprisingly bright, clear red / brown colour, showing considerable age. The glass immediately fills with aromas of raisins, fudge, old furniture polish and even a hint of treacle toffee. The palate is quite dry but round, showing its breeding well. There’s a bit less bite than an Oloroso Sherry and a touch more fruit. The palate shows notes of figs and history and this complex wine boasts an eternal warm raisiny finish.

## The future

As my time draws to a close, I ask Mr. Quiles how the business is doing and where he sees the company going. “I don’t think we’re going to make many changes to what we do now and we’re not looking to grow. At a national level things are very hard. Every bar in Spain has wines from Rueda, Rioja and Ribera and just maybe a local wine. It’s the same here, so nationally we only really sell within the Valencian Community. Overseas though things are more interesting. We do good business in Germany, China and the USA and I’m optimistic that we can find new markets.”

“Fondillón in reality is only a very small amount of our business, but it catches people’s attention. You know, competition is incredible these days, from wines aged under the sea to wines made with the influence of the moon. Everybody has a story, everyone has an angle. Having great vineyards and an excellent climate is not enough. We’re proud of our Fondillón and people are curious about the story. So we use this to open doors, which then helps us to sell the rest of our portfolio.”

The Primitivo Quiles I’m chatting to is the 4<sup>th</sup> Primitivo Quiles to run the family firm, so I ask about succession. “You know it’s funny because my father actually didn’t want me or my brother Francisco to go into the business. Times were tough and I’m not sure he saw a future in it. But I think I have wine in my blood. Many of my earliest memories were made here...the clunk clunk sound of the old pump, watching the cooper at work etc...it’s what I remember. So I studied Business at Alicante and then did a Masters in Winemaking. I like wine and I can’t really imagine myself doing anything else. I have a son and a daughter, so who knows?”

Despite the tradition and the sense of history at this bodega, Mr. Quiles has brought about one small change on his watch. “My son’s called Gabriel Primitivo Quiles”, he tells me, “I think four generations of Primitivos are enough!”



## Introduction

Celler la Muntanya and the Microvinia project is a story worth telling. It is the story of a local man who had an idea, that turned into a passion, that became his full-time job. And it's a snowball which is still growing. Juan Cascant is the man in question and his chosen mission is saving forgotten vineyards from extinction. A native of the Comtat region of Alicante, this is where the story begins.

The Comtat is due north of Alicante city, about a third of the way up towards Valencia. Because the coast here sticks out to the east around Xàbia, the Comtat finds itself quite a long way inland. Ringed by mountains on all sides and sandwiched between the Mediterranean and Spain's dry interior, the Comtat's hilly terrain encompasses a startling amount of diversity. At around 400m above sea level the region is two or three degrees cooler than the adjacent coast and gets about 50% more rain. The satellite map shows how the area is significantly greener than Alicante city, despite lying barely 50km distant. The Comtat is an attractive region with strong local traditions and an excellent climate. It's an area of romantic olive groves and historic villages. Less than an hour from one of Europe's most important holiday areas, it ought to be thriving. Yet the Comtat is slowly dying.



From GoogleEarth: The Comtat region of Alicante, surrounded by mountains

“Dying” probably sounds a bit dramatic but it’s true. The small towns and villages in the Comtat share a common problem with many others across interior Spain: the population is ageing and shrinking. Local industries shut down due to strong competition from somewhere more economic. Young people leave to look for better opportunities. This was especially the case during Spain’s booming last decade, when there were myriad opportunities elsewhere. With few young people, the birth rate tumbles and schools close. What’s left are historic villages, bigger than they need to be, populated by charming pensioners and not much else. When this population gets too old to work the local land, there’s nobody left to do it and life ebbs away.

### **Juan Cascant**

Juan Cascant is a man who’s passionate about the Comtat and its history. His job running an architecture studio enabled him to explore all the corners of the region. Twelve years ago he started to make a bit of wine with friends, just for fun. Wine used to be very important in the Comtat, he tells me. Many of the houses contain old wine cellars and much of what is olive groves today used to be vineyards. But industry came along and people abandoned the land for the stability of a weekly salary. “We were stupid”, he laments.

Juan and his friends had no serious background in winemaking. They weren’t even serious wine connoisseurs, just normal locals who enjoyed a glass or two. But they read books and did some trials. To their enormous surprise, their first wine turned out to be quite good. They gave a lot of it away and everyone seemed to like it. As a bit of a joke the wine was sent to the *Guía Peñín* (Spain’s top wine bible). This was their first wine, a 2004 Monastrell Garnatxa blend called *Almoroig*. To their amazement the wine was awarded 90 points! The friends couldn’t believe it.

As Juan tells me, “If you’re an imbecile, you’d become arrogant”. Instead the friends pondered why, continued with their jobs and repeated the experiment the following year. This 2005 wine was awarded 91 points by Stephen Tanzer’s International Wine Cellar. The second wine they’d ever made and one of the world’s most respected wine critic awards it 91 points! So by a process of pure deduction Juan tells me, “We realised that the apparent quality of the wine couldn’t be down to us, it must be the vines!”

Juan continues, “By now we’d started to get a few enquiries about the wine. But what should we do? Make more? But to make more, we’d need more vines. We could plant vines, but it would be three or four years before we had a crop. Everything started to get complicated. In the end the solution was staring us in the face: we needed to get our hands on more vineyards with similar characteristics to the one we already had.”

“We asked around but what we found out was tragic, people said, ‘My grandpa used to have...’, ‘In my mother’s village there used to be...’ and so on, everywhere the same. It seemed we were losing everything. Eventually we found some small vineyards that had some characteristics we liked. In particular we wanted the owners to work them for us! We all had our own full-time jobs as teachers, doctors or architects. We needed to keep working but we also wanted our wine project to grow. Not for egotistical or business reasons, but rather for altruistic reasons that were starting to dawn on us. We were coming to realise that by providing a new outlet for local grapes, we might save some local vineyards and inject a bit of pride and life into the community. Do something for the common good.”

## Microvinya

Fast forward a few years and this ideal has morphed into the Microvinya project and Juan has bravely quit his day job. Now he runs the friends' winery (Cellar la Muntanya) and he has established the Microvinya ideal as a transferable concept, registering the project with the European Union. The idea is that of authentication, so that a product bearing the Microvinya label adheres to a certain set of standards, similar to Fairtrade. In fact Juan tells me he's not really 100% in favour of this kind of authentication. Ideally he thinks that all wines **that aren't** ecologically sound should be labelled as such and should pay a tax for damaging the land. Maybe in the future? At any rate, the Microvinya seals of approval are an interesting development. To earn one, the following conditions need to be met:

- 1) The grape growers must be adequately compensated for their efforts.
- 2) The grapes must be grown according to Good Agricultural Practice (for more info. see link: [http://www.fao.org/prods/gap/index\\_en.htm](http://www.fao.org/prods/gap/index_en.htm) ).
- 3) The winery must form an active part of the local community, cooperating with and bringing something to the local environment.
- 4) The wine should be promoted in a way that is consistent with its birthplace.



Microvinya also runs and authorises 3 day courses. Participants learn about caring for the countryside and practical issues such as pruning and marketing. The project has captured the public imagination at a time when a renewed interest in all things local is starting to take root. In fact Juan tells me that he now spends a lot of time on the road, explaining the project and has been as far afield as Portugal, Lanzarote and even to Boston in the United States.

Choosing not to form part of the Alicante DO because “it didn't represent our interests” is one thing. Taking the issue into your own hands and creating the Microvinya certification is a bold move for a start-up with no wine background. It's a move which has ruffled a few feathers within the Alicante wine community. You can see why. The DO includes a number of producers already working with old vines, in a similar way to Cellar la Muntanya, who don't see the need for the extra level of certification. Alicante is a potentially fabulous wine region, currently a little underrated and I think it would be a shame if all the producers there weren't able to pull together somehow. On the face of it, I can't see why the Microvinyas seal couldn't run alongside the DO system. But as a visitor here it's probably best to stay out of it for now and just enjoy the wines.



Juan Cascant in one of the project's star vineyards



Typical scene from the Comtat region of Alicante



## Celler la Muntanya

The enterprise that makes, bottles and sells the project's wine is called "Celler la Muntanya". There are now 28 members. In some ways it operates like a small cooperative. In the wine world "cooperative" has tended to mean a large outfit making cheap wines of middling quality, where the growers are paid by the kilo. In the case of Celler la Muntanya all the parcels are tiny and the members are definitely not in it to make their fortunes by selling grapes. Instead they have been drawn to the Utopian ideal behind the project, the concept of helping the land and so the broader community. The members come from a range of backgrounds and include writers, musicians and even a poet. Everyone has a voice and they bounce ideas off each other about what they could be doing and where they should be heading. Three of the vineyards are run by local schools.

As Juan tells me the story, we're wading through thick undergrowth. These are exciting times at Celler la Muntanya. The business has developed to such an extent that they have outgrown their premises. So they're moving into a warehouse on the outskirts of town, with the backing of local businessman Josep Marco Sansano. The day of my visit, the concrete-mixers are in, so Juan shows me the exterior. In fact I'm the first guineapig for his imagined future winery tour. The site of the new winery is alongside a fast-flowing stream. There's an attractive stone bridge and a number of mature trees. "It could almost be England!", Juan points out. As we ramble through the thick grass I can see Juan's eyes light up, as he explains his vision for their new base, complete with visitor centre and demonstration vineyard.



Juan Cascant shows me round the new site



Typical elevenes snack in the Comtat

It's time for elevenes and handily Juan knows just the place. It's packed! It always amazes me just how much business goes on in Spain's cafés and bars, even in tiny villages. Not long ago this bar would have been thick with acrid smoke, but fortunately the law changed a few years back, outlawing smoking in all bars and restaurants. Juan greets the owner in a way that implies it's not his first time in here and orders something incomprehensible in valencià, the local language. I survey my fellow guests. Everybody in here must be retired, it's almost 100% men, literally swept out of their houses during the daily cleaning ritual, I imagine. The TV's on loudly, a few old timers are engrossed in the papers but the real centre of attention is an animated game of *Mus*. In less time than it should take to make it, our breakfast arrives, complete with carafe of red (it's 11am, after all). We grab a quiet table at the back and the avuncular Juan continues his story.

“So there we were with 90 and 91 points and a few enquiries. As word spread, we incorporated more vineyards and members and we started to realise we would have to do things properly to get the wine out there. We felt like stagehands at a theatre who had accidentally tumbled on stage and found ourselves in the limelight, not knowing what we were doing there. So we looked around to see how everyone else was selling and marketing their wine and we realised that it wasn’t our thing. I went to some wine fairs and it was all big business, marketing and suits - the things that had almost killed-off our local ecosystems in the first place. We had to do things differently.”

“We decided to promote ourselves by creating an event, a forum for people who shared our ideas and way of seeing things. In 2008 we launched the ‘National Congress for Smallholdings as a Defence of the Mediterranean Eco-System’ with the backing of the University of Alicante. The congress generated the right sort of coverage for us and was so successful that we decided to follow up with a second congress in 2011. This congress attracted coverage from national radio and generated further positive interest in our project.”

“The idea of doing something for the broader region, to give something back not just make a living, seems to be gaining traction. In the early days I went to a big wine fair in New York. At first I tried to copy what the other Spanish producers were doing on their stands and it was a disaster. We couldn’t compete. When I changed tack and explained our story and showed visitors the vineyards we were saving, they liked the idea, and I had an importer within 30 minutes! People come and ask us what we’re about or where we’re heading and I’m not even sure what to tell them. We’re a collective of grape growers, winemakers, poets and artists - all with an interest in doing what’s right for the region, a not-for-profit community.”

### **Vineyards**

As we drove from the new winery to the current building, Juan was good enough to show me some of the vineyards tied to the project. They were a mixed bag of bushvines and trellised vines, on a range of soils. One lay near a river, another at the foot of a large mountain. One sloped east and another to the north. The Comtat might be small, but it’s certainly diverse.



Beautiful old Malvasía vines in the Comtat region, Alicante

## **Wines and Winemaking**

Cellar la Muntanya currently produces around 25,000L - 30,000L of wine annually from eight vineyards, the largest of which has an area of just one hectare. With so many small vineyards, it's no surprise that Juan describes harvest time as a bit of a "potpourri". I ask him how they make sense of it all, "We have a mixture of grapes, including Malvasía, Merseguera, Garnatxa Blanca (whites), Garnatxa Tinta, Garnatxa Tintorera, Bonicaire and Monastrell (reds). Some grapes we're not really even sure what they are yet. Initially we try to ferment each vineyard separately. Our star blocks we save for one-off bottlings. The rest we gradually blend together. In total we are currently producing three whites and four reds. To help us keep on the right track, we employ a consultant winemaker, Marc Pérez and we also get help from other local winegrowers from time to time, such as Rafa Cambra.

"In the vineyards, we work as naturally as possible. We're not interested in eco-certification although we would meet the requirements. It's one of the main drivers behind the project! In terms of 'natural wines', I think there's a bit of hypocrisy regarding the concept. We sometimes use cultured yeast and we do add a little sulphur dioxide. We're so small and new, we can't really afford to take risks with the wine. We think of ourselves as a not-for-profit but we do need to sell wines that people want to drink and we do need to cover our costs. As for profits, we're looking for a different kind of profit."

The wines are attractively packaged and have interesting names. "Minifundi" is their entry-level red and is named after the smallholding concept behind the wines. "Paquito el Chocolatero" is named after a famous pasodoble, written in 1937 by local composer Gustavo Pascual Falcó. The "Naturalment Dolç" wine is a 100% Malvasía sweet wine, with the ferment stopped by chilling, leaving 92g/L of residual sugar. Juan was ridiculously busy the day of my visit, so we didn't get to taste through the wines together. But he did give me a bottle to try back at home. This bottle then got shaken-up in my luggage across Alicante's back roads, so when I got back to Barcelona I let it sit for a week before opening.

2010 Celler la Muntanya (Monastrell, Garnatxa Tinta, Garnatxa Tintorera) - Outside of Spain these grapes would be better known as "Mourvèdre, Grenache and Alicante Bouschet". The wine still shows quite a youngish colour and isn't so dark, despite the Alicante Bouschet component. I'm not so sure about the nose, it seems a little green, with a hint of spicy cherries and perhaps also a forest floor element. The palate is more interesting. It starts quite sharp and fresh but immediately fills out with a spectrum of mid-weight fleshy red fruits. In all I found the wine perhaps a little sappy but still a lovely fresh red, with real personality.

In keeping with their local ethos, 20% of the wines are sold at the cellar door and a further 30% with the Valencian community. Another 30% go across the rest of Spain, with just 20% exported at this stage. I think these figures hint at the extent that Celler la Muntanya has bucked the trend. At the cellar door, the wines retail for between 7€ and 19€. Of course this isn't really expensive but in a country where you can easily buy a bottle of wine for 2€ and a bottle of Rioja Crianza from a well known producer for around 7€, it puts things into perspective. The Comtat doesn't really have any kind of wine reputation these days and Celler la Muntanya has chosen not to have DO Alicante backing. Who's buying the wines then? It must be people who like the product and like the story behind it.



### **Come and join the party!**

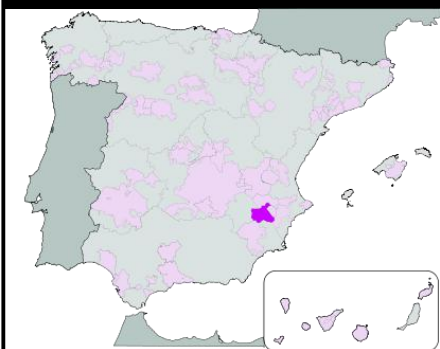
At the new winery there will be room for the business to double in size and Juan is looking for new members. Lots of people dream of owning a winery, but few make the leap, not least because it's expensive to get started. Also most people don't really know how wine is made. Celler la Muntanya is a fantastic stepping stone for anyone living around the Comtat area. You can join the project for a modest sum and can learn from other members. Your wine can form part of a larger blend or you can have it bottled separately. You can even get paid in wine!

But Juan's in no rush and only wants to attract the right kind of people, wine-lovers who share the aims and goals of the collective, not just "hobby winemakers". If you don't own the right kind of vineyard, the project can ask around for you, to help you find somewhere to buy. Then the idea is that you work it yourself - with help and advice on hand from the other members as you need it. Juan feels he's selling the whole philosophy, not just renting space in his winery to help it grow, "We don't want to grow into a big business and sell lots of wine. What we want to do is help to protect the diversity of this area and wine is a vehicle which allows us to do that. We have a phenomenal landscape here, still so much to be re-discovered, and so I'm on the look out for people who are prepared to put a microphone to the land."



Juan Cascant at Celler la Muntanya's new premises, just outside Muro d'Alcoi: 38°47'17.33" N, 0°25'44.40" W

## Jumilla DO



**Where is it?** – Jumilla is interior SE Spain - a scenic area of plains and abrupt mountains. Lying at around 500 - 800m, the climate is dry and sunny with brief winters and hot summers, though it can be subject to violent storms.

**What's planted?** – **Monastrell** (Mourvèdre) is 85% of the vineyards in Jumilla, though lots of other grapes are planted, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, Tempranillo, Syrah, Garnacha and a whole slew of whites.

**What's the wine like?** – Monastrell on its home turf can really be pretty amazing. Definitely ripe, yet the best examples combine solid chocolatey dark fruits and spice with an amazing lifted perfume and freshness.

**Some wines & wineries** – Casa Castillo, Casa de la Ermita, El Nido, Juan Gil...(Laboratorio Rupestre, no DO)

**Other info** - Jumilla is on a bit of a roll. The region suffered from Phylloxera in the late 80s but since then has bounced back by replanting with modern know-how and intelligently focusing on the local grape, Monastrell. Whilst better known is the South of France (as "Mourvèdre") and in Australia (the "M" in GSM blends), some recent wines from Jumilla have been just stunning and just maybe on the back of this success Spain could claim back one of its own (as it should with Garnacha = Grenache). Other developments in the area include Robert Parker awarding a wine from El Nido 99 points and Erik Rosdahl's crazy natural wines, grown outside the DO regs.

### Casa Castillo (Jumilla DO, Murcia, south east Spain) - 31<sup>st</sup> October 2014

José María Vicente (Co-owner and Technical Director) // [www.casacastillo.es](http://www.casacastillo.es)

#### **Introduction**

Jumilla is a region which experiences hot summers and a good deal of sunshine throughout the year. Until fairly recently it was seen as a bulk workhorse, incapable of making truly fine wine. In recent years a few ambitious producers have torn up the rule book and are making a range of very good or excellent reds, mostly from the native Monastrell grape (aka Mourvèdre, Mataro or the "M" in GSM blends). What you get are chunky fairly high alcohol reds. However, whilst ripe and warm, the best also offer up attractive floral or violet notes on the nose and can show a surprising freshness and balance, despite coming from what I imagined to be a torrid area.

Casa Castillo was recommended to me by a specialist wine distributor in San Sebastián (Manso Hermanos). Happily I was looking expand our range of wines from south east Spain at the time. I had the chance to taste through their range of wines at the biennial *Alimentaria* fair in Barcelona. I came away impressed, more than anything by the amazing freshness shown. How could this freshness and lightness of touch be achieved somewhere so far south? I needed to find out more...

#### **Casa Castillo - Aims and Philosophy**

Casa Castillo is a family-owned estate winery growing grapes and olives on a site 10km to the west of Jumilla, lying at around 700m (2300ft) above sea level. These days the operation is run in a hands-on fashion by the ebullient José María Vicente. An architect by training, he found his true passion was the land and so he now spends a lot of time working in the vineyards, observing and learning.



José María's goal is to get the maximum expression from each parcel of Monastrell, Garnacha and Syrah that the family owns, the vines being planted across different facets of this appealing north-facing hillside. When we talk about maximum expression we are not talking about maximum intensity. Eschewing the opulent power wines of some of his neighbours, José María prefers a more hands-off approach, "Manipulation (in the winery) distances you from the vineyard". Available as a small range of red wines reflecting these sites, Casa Castillo is a medium sized producer making wines for wine-drinkers. Offering good value, these wines are steadily becoming better known, though still fly a little under the radar.



José María Vicente and unnamed dog



Self-taught, you can't help but admire the man and his approach. Well-travelled and with a surprising knowledge of both the Spanish and global wine scene, José María told me that he drank different wines whenever he could and was always asking questions and trying to learn, looking for techniques and ideas he might try back home. "We learnt our trade by drinking!" More than once confessing a love for the lighter elegant wines of northern regions such as Alsace, Champagne and Burgundy, it's not hard to see how this love of freshness and drinkability has influenced his thinking in Jumilla. But he's also a pragmatist and realises that he couldn't get the best out of his warm site by planting whites, so instead he seeks an elegant style of Jumilla reds.

José María doesn't much care for DO rules nor the bulk mentality of some of the neighbouring cooperatives - as he put it, "There are really two Jumillas". He focusses on quality over volume, for example their old-vine *Pie Franco* (vines growing on their own roots, planted in 1942) block sometimes yields as low as 500 bottles / hectare. He says that Casa Castillo doesn't choose to enter wine competitions, as they are not looking for medals or top scores. During our visit he repeatedly emphasised what they do want, which is to make drinkable wines, wines that don't take centre stage, "not catwalk wines". He says he is looking for freshness, rather than over-ripeness, wines which invite frequent refills. Elegant wines which complement food and facilitate conversation.

Whilst chatting about sales and markets, I asked how his wines did in Spain, given that it's a country with a traditional outlook and strongly regional by nature, with Jumilla generally being regarded as a workhorse region. His response seemed very astute, again revealing his pragmatic side: "Look, people in Spain grew up with Rioja and then Ribera but now they are having to learn to like all the new styles of wine that are emerging. I don't want to be known for 'the best in Jumilla', I want to be known for making good, authentic wines. In some ways it is easier to do this in export markets, where there are no pre-conceived notions. I'd love to sell more wine in Spain, but also the current (economic) crisis is hitting us hard right now. So we currently export 92% of our production and we choose to focus on countries with a high level of wine culture, such as the USA, Canada and Scandinavia."

### **Grape growing and Winemaking**

This quietly beautiful site totals 402 hectares (993 acres), with about 175 given over to grape growing, both as bush vines and trained. Different parcels support different grape varieties, based on soil and aspect - with some of the soils seemingly composed of nothing more than large stones. But these dry-grown stony vineyards seemed happy enough when we were there in October, despite having just come through a long drought. Of course a result of these conditions is low yields. So Casa Castillo doesn't get a big crop, but they do get a good crop. As José María put it with a wry grin, "In Rioja you need 10 hectares to make a living, but down here you need 200". I got the impression he was happy being down here, away from the spotlight, doing his own thing, with his wines speaking for themselves.

The grapes are harvested from early September to mid October, depending on the year and the parcel. In fact I'm told there's a surprising amount of vintage variation in Jumilla, something José María embraces, whilst seeking to maintain a house style. 2013 was actually a very cool humid year in Spain, which for many regions was very difficult, but José María feels that for Casa Castillo it has perhaps brought their best year yet.

Apparently he then does “nothing” in the winery. It’s certainly a fairly rustic outfit, with the grapes fermented in unpretentious looking stone *lagares*, with natural yeasts and hand punchdowns, before heading off for malolactic fermentation and maturation in mostly non-new 500L oak.



Old bushvines on amazingly stony soil

### **The future**

Casa Castillo is not a producer that is going to make big changes to their recipe or sell-out. Instead they will continue working away, fine-tuning, running trials, always trying to make the best wines from each block whatever the weather throws at them. Their aim is for these genuine wines to be able to stand proud with leading wines from other regions, recognised and valued for what they are. Ultimately José María would love to enjoy more of this recognition at home in Spain. But the goal is not recognition for recognition’s sake, nor for the wines to be put on pedestals or languish in the trophy cellars of collectors. The one thing that drives this open and honest man is the desire to make interesting drinking wines that happen to be from Jumilla and that will bring pleasure to many around the table.

### **Casa Castillo - The wines**

Apparently 15 years ago the wines were more muscular, whereas now they are fresher, though the changes were brought about gradually.

2013 Casa Castillo (100% Monastrell) - This is their entry level wine but despite this has great colour and shows quite a meaty, complex nose. Plenty of fruit on the palate, really clean and fresh. There's not a lot of tannin, they deliberately don't over-extract during fermentation, so it's very enjoyable now as a 1 year old. (Drank again in May 2015, it's utterly fantastic)

2013 El Molar (100% Garnacha) - Not typical to the area, José María loves Grenache and learnt about it in the Rhône, so decided to try some back home. This wine has a beautiful paleish colour and comes across bright and fresh. You don't really notice the wood, despite having spent 12 months in oak. The wine is fresh, pure and alive, though still a little short at the moment.

2011 Las Gravas (Monastrell, Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon) - Decent colour, with a great nose, slightly smoky and reduced at this stage. Perhaps not ultra-complex, nonetheless this is a really enjoyable fresh wine, with amazing purity.

2010 Valtosca (Syrah) - Superb wine with an understated, subtle, classy, slightly meaty nose, backed up by discrete mid-spectrum fruit. The palate, is cool and classy but also vibrant and finishes just slightly warm and tannic.

Pie Franco is their top wine, a 100% Monastrell from a block planted in 1942.



Tasting with Winemaker Julia Casado Marco and José María



### **Other comments during the course of the interview at Casa Castillo**

José María was such fun to be with, I had to include some of these off the cuff comments:

“In 1991 grape prices were very low, the more you had, the more you lost.”

“In Spain we have great conditions for winemaking and a range of excellent native varieties, you just need people who know how to do it and are motivated to succeed. Spain has more vineyard area than France but only one sixth as many wineries. French wine is on a higher level than Spanish because the small producers there can really focus on details.”

“In some of the DOs there are only a couple of people who know what they’re doing. An investor comes along and spends millions on marble (for the showcase winery) but then employs the winemaker from the local cooperative. This is 100% the wrong way to do things. Investors should be focusing on making clean, agreeable, authentic wines.”

“Don’t just come along and plant, say, Merlot without having spent time in St. Emilion first and without having understood what Merlot’s all about.”

“Why is it that film-stars and directors think they can all start wineries? It’s just the same as me going to Hollywood thinking I can make a film!”

### **Re-tasting the range April 2016**

Back at Alimentaria, I had another opportunity to meet the man and taste through the range.

2014 Casa Castillo - Great young colour, juicy fruit with just a hint of smoky reduction.

2014 El Molar - Sweet, lovely glugger but with some substance behind it and a chewy finish.

2013 Las Gravas - Ripe but not OTT and not too tannic. Nice sweet fruit with savoury edge.

2013 Valtosca - Deep colour, very primary still, chewy and dense, with structure to age well.



Some of the younger vineyards at Casa Castillo, looking north

## CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN SPAIN AND THE CANARY ISLANDS

Yes, correct, here is a catch-all “region” for everything else that hasn’t been covered above.

To the west of Madrid, a group of like-minded pioneers are recovering and re-defining old vine Garnacha (Grenache) in a generally hands-off way. Much of the action is based around the town of San Martín de Valdeiglesias and you may hear the name Jiménez-Landi mentioned a lot.

South of Madrid, Castilla-La Mancha is/was a huge bulk wine region but these days is probably better known amongst wine-geeks for the sizeable number of disparate pioneers and mavericks making modern wines from a range of native and international varieties. The Marqués de Griñón was brave enough to set this re-vitalisation in motion, way back in the 70s and continues today with his own DO (Dominio de Valdepeña) in Toledo. More recently others have enthusiastically picked up the baton, including Pago de Vallegarcía and Deheza del Carrizal (Montes de Toledo), Manuel Manzaneque (Albacete) and Alto Landón and Finca Sandoval (Manchuela). Further east Utiel-Requena is stirring with some interesting reds from people giving the Bobal grape a chance. The Valdepeñas DO continues to be home to old-school good value reds, with long barrel ageing.

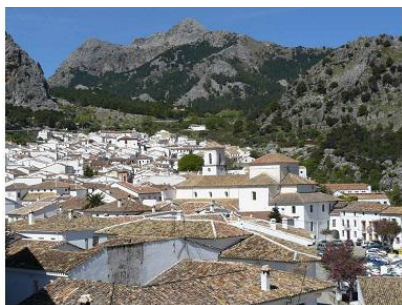
The Romans seemed to have liked it in Extremadura (the bit of Spain that nobody’s ever heard of or visited, between Madrid and Lisboa). They brought vines and left behind some impressive sites, for example in Mérida or Évora (Portugal). In the south of the region, there is a long history of producing extremely smooth, slightly old-fashioned reds at bargain prices, though things have been modernised there in recent years. North into Cáceres the main thing was the über-rustic *Pitarra* wines but recently some exciting new projects have sprung up, not least Bodegas Habla. Further north in the Sierra de Salamanca, in an area which seems torn between Castilla and Extremadura, there are some interesting small-scale projects going on, mainly trying to coax something drinkable (ie not stupidly tannic) out of the little-known Rufete grape.

Andalucía in the south of Spain is principally known for fortifieds and solera-aged gems from regions such as Jerez, Montilla and Málaga. Happily these are now on the up after decades of decline. But there’s lots else going on, usually pretty high up, to mitigate the heat. All across the mountains from the Sierra de Cádiz to the Alpujarras, there are hundreds of small projects fighting for attention. Almerian Pinot Noir, anyone? It’s no joke, it’s just that whilst the fortifieds have a long and distinguished history, this new generation of modern table wines is still trying to discover what it can do best and to make a compelling case away from the purely local market.

We end up in the Canary Islands, a mountainous archipelago lying at around 28°N, just off the coast of Africa. There’s a long history of winegrowing here and a recent new dynamism (particularly on the north coast of Tenerife) is gaining traction, with fascinating results.



Windmills in La Mancha



Famous “white town” Grazalema



Tenerife in January



## Castilla-La Mancha (Regional Summary)

photo: blog.eun.org



**Where is it?** - La Mancha is a big area south of Madrid, experiencing a dry continental climate. Whilst mostly a flattish plain at approx. 600m altitude, there are mountains all around, giving rise to a number of different terroirs.

**What's planted?** - Ok so there's a huge amount of boring old Airén and gentle Cencibel (=Tempranillo) planted in Europe's biggest vineyard (DO La Mancha 190,000ha). But the point is that all around Castilla-La Mancha interesting people are doing interesting things, often at smaller high-end wineries. So expect to find grapes not widely planted in Spain such as **Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Petit Verdot, Chardonnay and Viognier**.

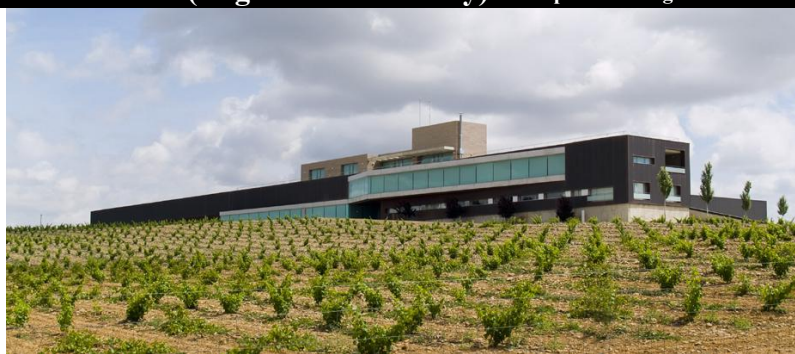
**What's the wine like?** - The basic stuff is very cheap and might end up in bulk blends or own labels. The exciting stuff at the top end is diverse but generally quite rich and ripe, typically in a fruit-forward 90s style.

**Some wines & wineries** - Alto Landón, Bodegas Ponce, Dehesa del Carrizal, Finca Antigua, Finca Constancia, Finca La Estacada, Finca Sandoval, Iniesta, Manuel Manzaneque, Marqués de Griñón, Pago de Vallegarcía, Pago del Vicario, Torre de Barreda, Uva de Vida...

**Other info** - The Marqués de Griñón was one of the first people to really put this place on the map with an astonishing Cabernet Sauvignon planted in 1974, diversifying further into Syrah and Petit Verdot in the 90s.

## Extremadura (Regional Summary)

photo: bodegashabla.com



**Where is it?** - Extremadura is a fabulous slab of the real Spain, which sees few visitors. It's super-historic, has a generally warm climate (though cold winters in the northern mountains), great food and friendly authentic locals.

**What's planted?** - All the main Spanish reds + Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. Whites, a mixed bag of unfamous local grapes, some Parellada and Viura (there is Cava down here) + travellers, such as Chardonnay.

**What's the wine like?** - In the south of Extremadura there is a long history of turning out good value smooth reds. In 1999 DO Ribera de Guadiana was set up to promote these and to encourage investment in the broader area. One newish project is Palacio Quemado, who make an interesting range of wines which are no pushover. Northern Extremadura puzzlingly is not known for wine, except for rustic local wines, such as *Pitarra*. Bodegas Habla are real pioneers in making delicious modern wines from this unfashionable bit of country Spain. Things may continue to change, with foreign investors spotting potential, such as Peter Sisseck's cousin at Mirabel.

**Some wines & wineries** - Bodegas Habla, Bodegas Las Granadas Coronadas, Mirabel, Palacio Quemado...

**Other info** - OK, ok, so I don't know much about wine in this area, but the region's monumental cities are very well worth a visit, especially Cáceres, Trujillo, Guadalupe, Jerez and to a certain extent Mérida. The northern mountains are home to some cute villages and colourful locals, the south is ham country + oak and cork forests.





The Alpujarra region of Granada, looking towards the Sierra Nevada

### **The Maverick**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word “maverick” as *an unorthodox or independent thinker who plants a vineyard in a remote spot, eschewing all conventional winemaking practices*. Or at least it should. Manuel Valenzuela is the man in question and he’s not keen on rules nor on conventional thinking. Hiding out in the mountains of southern Spain, Mr. Valenzuela has been doing things his way for quite some time.

I’d first come across the wines of Barranco Oscuro back around 1995, during one of many epic nights out in Granada. I’d chanced across the Taberna Carmen, ran by the charismatic Jesús Carrillo Díaz. A real wine aficionado, he took me under his wing and let me sample some of the wines from the other side of the sierra. I returned often. Sadly Jesús died not long after in a traffic accident but I will always remember those nights and his generosity and passion for wine.

In those years I was still trying to get to grips with Spanish wine (I still am). Even Ribera del Duero seemed new, so to learn that winemaking was also alive and well in a remote area of the Sierra Nevada seemed almost too much to believe. What’s more the winery in question, Barranco Oscuro, translates as “Dark Ravine”, further adding to the mystery. Since then I occasionally ran into wines from the broader region and sometimes found the odd bottle of Barranco Oscuro on extensive wine lists, but not very often. Now things are changing and the explosion in interest and diversity of Spanish wine is even taking root in the arid south east. Time to see for myself!

## **Manuel Valenzuela**

It was a cold and breezy morning as I stepped out of the car by Barranco Oscuro, just in time to take some pictures before my 9:30 appointment. The mist was starting to lift from the valley, treating me to a commanding view of the unseasonably un-snowy Sierra Nevada to the north. This grand but fairly barren vista was considerably softened by the adjacent pink and white almond blossom and the sprinkling of whitewashed villages along the sierra's southern flanks.

I found Manuel Valenzuela in the cave-like offices and straight away he took me off to explore the hand-built cellar. Originally from the north side of the sierra, his family had a smallholding and grew various crops, making a little wine for local consumption. They were a poor family and these were tough times. Manuel was the only one of nine brothers who managed to further his education past secondary school. Initially drawn to the sciences, Manuel went off to technical college in Jaén then Madrid, where he studied chemistry. He never completed the course. Spain at that time was under the stifling Franco regime and the young Manuel needed a change of scene.

Spending six years in Barcelona, he drifted on to southern France, where he earned some cash by doing harvest work for local wineries. He then moved to Paris and worked for three years for a multi-national drinks company. The corporate world didn't suit him, but whilst in Paris he became immersed in wine culture and learned to enjoy good bottles from across the country. This background has marked his life, "To make wine you have to know how to drink!", he exclaims.



Manuel Valenzuela in his vineyard alongside the winery



Once the Franco regime had fallen and democracy was safely re-established, Manuel returned to Spain. Distrusting authority, he chose a remote ridge in the Sierra de la Contraviesa in Granada, looking for quiet life with minimal “hassle” from the outside world. The place he’d bought was already a working wine cellar of sorts and this idea of living off the land appealed to him. By now an established wine lover, Manuel was curious to find out what might be possible from his site.

In 1980 Manuel Valenzuela started on his winemaking adventure, using grapes bought from a neighbour. The next year he planted his first vines, initially focusing on local varieties. In 1984 he travelled to a number of similar regions bordering the Mediterranean, to see what varieties grew best there, and went on to plant a number of these back home. By 1995 he was established enough to help the Andalusian government to run a trial of ten red and ten white grape varieties, looking at which would best adapt to the local conditions. Winemaking he’s learned along the way.

### **Vineyards**

Barranco Oscuro’s vineyards are planted along the gentle crest of an east-west ridge of mountains, with the surprising neat rows drifting down their southern flank. Sandwiched between the Mediterranean and the Sierra Nevada, there’s a wild feel about the area and noticeably sharp, clear air. Something that hasn’t escaped Europe’s astronomers, as a number of telescopes are situated on nearby summits. Lying at around 1300m (4300ft), these vineyards are among Europe’s highest and the sunlight is blinding, even in early February. Just under 37° north, the UV here is intense and the grapes react accordingly, protecting themselves from the harsh conditions by developing more polyphenols in their skins. Responsible for colour in red wines and a component of mouthfeel, how much of these polyphenols end up in the glass is an important winemaking consideration. The easiest way to think of it is that growing grapes in these conditions gives the winemaker a wealth of raw material to take into consideration.

Barranco Oscuro also has a large range of flavours at its disposal, with the following grapes cultivated on site: Garnacha, Tempranillo, Syrah, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot (reds), Viginiega, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier, Chardonnay, Riesling, Vermentino, Moscatel (whites). Quite the fruit salad! But even so Manuel’s curiosity hasn’t been dimmed and he mentioned that he’d like to plant some Viginiega Negra and a little Gewürztraminer, despite “retiring” a few years back. He confides, “The Viginiega Negra is a local variety I’m trying to recover. The Gewürztraminer is just for fun, you understand? A hundred plants, nothing.” It’s a long way from Alsace to Andalucía but it seems that Manuel’s Paris memories live on.



Lorenzo Valenzuela shows me round a couple of Barranco Oscuro’s spectacularly-sited vineyards



## Winemaking Philosophy

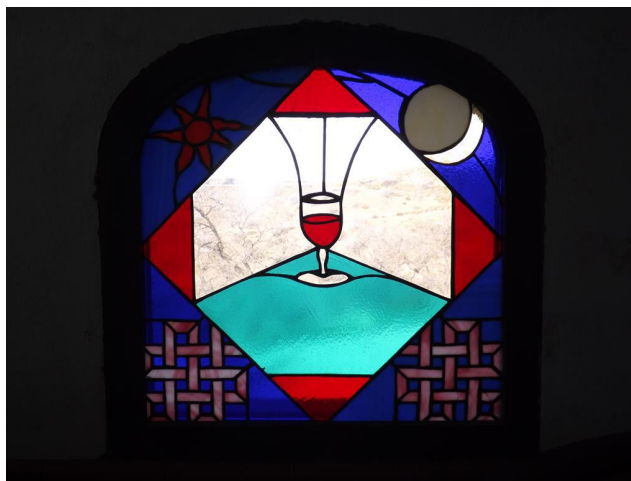
All of Barranco Oscuro's wines have only one ingredient: grapes. No additions or treatments are made at any stage during the winemaking process. The results can be a little variable but these days wine fashion has swung away from clean fruity predictability and embracing non-conventional wines is in. How has being 30 years ahead of the "natural wine" movement helped position the wines, I wonder.

"I don't really like the idea of labels. I don't like categorising producers as to whether they make 'natural wines' or not. Up here the vines are healthy, but we will dust with a little sulphur if we need to. The altitude gives us grapes with fantastic natural acidity and a wealth of polyphenols. We often get 6.5g/L of acidity in our reds and up to 9g/L in our whites. We don't need to add anything and why would we want to take anything away?"

I asked about Biodynamics, thinking that Manuel might be a prime candidate. "Look, I don't subscribe to that system at all. Why should what worked in Austria be suitable for farming here? It's become a dogma. Timing some operations depending on the phases of the moon does make some sense, but I'm not going to be stupid and do something in the vineyard if it's raining, just because the moon tells me to! As for cows horns, I try not to poke fun at anything.....but, it's all become just another religion. Some people are happy with Biodynamics and I'm happy doing things my way."

I ask about the climate, it seems very dry up here. Also I'm mindful of the almost total lack of snow on the adjacent Sierra Nevada, despite it being the middle of winter. "We have had three dry years in a row but things aren't usually too bad. In a normal year we'll get around 450mm. These dry years have also been a bit warmer, so we've started harvesting earlier. The thing is that the native yeast are Andalucian in character and are a bit lazy in the heat - I've noticed that things take a bit longer to get started in the warm years."

It seems unusual being in a cellar on top of a mountain but in the peace and quiet down here you wouldn't know where you were. Looking round the cellar I was immediately struck by the unnecessarily beautiful and intricate brick-lined roof. Manuel is obviously proud of it and the work behind it but shrugs it off, "it was improvised, like me". It's not a high-tech cellar. There are a number of barrels sleeping away and a few tanks plus several racks of sparkling wine bottles.



In the cellars at Barranco Oscuro, with unusual brick-lined roof and one of five stained glass windows

“We make two sparkling wines,” Manuel tells me, “including some using the Methode Ancestrale” (you bottle a wine before it’s finished fermenting and the trapped gas is what gives the bubbles). “For our main wine we follow the Champagne method, using native Vigiriega grapes in the base wine. These grapes are harvested around the end of September but I leave a few vines un-picked. I come back for those grapes later, at the end of November or start of December. Of course the juice from those grapes by then is really sweet. Once it starts to ferment, I let it go for seven days or so, then use this as the *liqueur de tirage*, adding it to the base wine and bottling the mixture. So then this wine finishes fermenting in the bottle, where I leave it for approximately two years on lees.” Simple and natural I thought, why doesn’t everyone do it this way?

“These days”, Manuel informs me, “I tend to ferment all the different grape varieties separately. Things are a bit riskier if you don’t use sulphur-dioxide, things can go a bit haywire if you take your eye off the ball and I don’t want to screw up a whole blend. For me a little bit of volatile acidity is ok, if the wine is strong and can handle it. It will integrate into the wine anyhow. If a wine is born free, it will be ok down the track. The problem is with wines which are too well made, they have no resistance and will go off quickly.”


I asked Manuel what kind of wines he likes drinking these days, now that low-intervention wines have grown in diversity and presence. He tells me, “I like to know the story behind a wine, where it comes from, the baggage. I’m not really interested in a start-up that just buys grapes, makes a carbonic-maceration red and pushes it out the door. I’m interested in wines with a good philosophy behind them, a story, a reason.” On the way up to the tasting room, I am struck by some unusual stained glass windows. A gift from a fan, apparently.

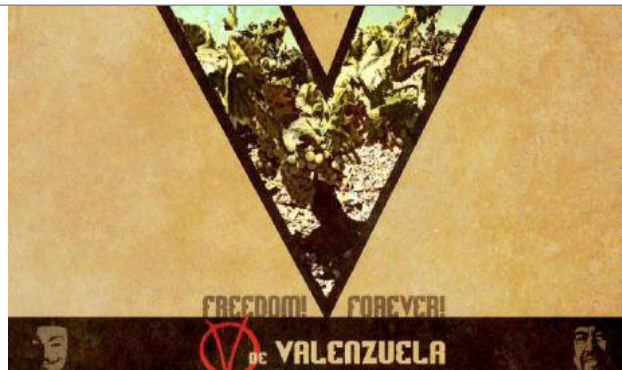


Manuel Valenzuela in the tasting room at Barranco Oscuro

## Barranco Oscuro - The wines

I approached this tasting with some trepidation. I'd enjoyed a few of these wines in the past, but still I wasn't really sure what to expect. Manuel agreed in some part with this sentiment, "Our wines show a different character each year, sometimes they surprise us with what's in there!"

	<p>One thing that is hilarious is the irreverent take on labelling. Manuel tells me he admires the salmon for going against the flow, so his rosé is named "Salmónido". Being outside of any DO means that the wines are effectively table wine and so can't be labelled with their year, nor the grapes that were used to make them. Manuel Valenzuela doesn't like being told what to do, hence his Pinot Noir is innocently labelled as "Pino Rojo" (Red Pine).</p>
---	--

	<p>The "V de Valenzuela" white has a bit of a Che Guevara feel to it and later I half-expect to see Mr. Valenzuela on TV, leading one of Spain's frequent anti-capitalist protests. In small print he spells out his manifesto, "Vigorosa, Irreverente, Generosa, Inconformista, Resistente, Indomable, Extraordinaria, Grandiosa, Autóctona". Probably not just a coincidence that the initial letter of each of these adjectives spells out a grape variety.</p>
--	--

Barranco Oscuro Brut Nature (Vigiriega) - Gold colour, slightly hazy, with very fine bubbles from time on lees. The wine has a yeasty, nutty nose, perhaps with a hint of mango. The palate is very acid, but creamy and smooth. "It goes down on its own", Manuel assures me.

(2014) V de Valenzuela (Vigiriega) - Pale gold colour, with almonds and apricots on the nose. This textured wine has a slightly weird palate with herby, minty notes but also a kind of earthy character. Very acid but long.

(2014) Ring! Ring! (Riesling) - This wine didn't "want" to finish fermentation, so retains a little residual sugar. Quite gold in colour, with a slightly dumbed down but intense nose of nuts and honey. The generous palate is full of character and is not your typical Riesling. I picked out lots of warm marzipan and honey on the palate, accented with thyme and sage notes.

(2012) El Canto del Mirlo (Merlot) - Deep colour, following a one week maceration. Full-on lead pencil, cigar box, slightly herbaceous nose. Palate shows plenty of ripe fruit, with sweetish lead pencil notes, reminds me of Saint-Émilion in a ripe year. Superb.

(2010) Garnata (Garnacha) - Paleish red/black. Intense nose, quite meaty, complexed by the slightest hint of Brett? Intense, dry palate, extremely long and with plenty to give over the coming years. "Reminds me of a big woman and cardinal sin", adds Manuel with a wink.



## The future

It was fun tasting the wines and I was honoured to spend so much time with the man who has built up such a well-respected business, starting from scratch. I asked Manuel if he is happy with the wines and what he has achieved. “What’s interesting is that our wines sell better overseas than in Spain. In fact I’d say Paris probably drinks as much non-conventional wine in a day as Spain does in a year. The French approach has influenced my life and I see myself more as a *vigneron* than a winemaker. I don’t really care about prizes or medals, what makes me happy is that our wines have earned respect. People seem to like what we’re doing and so I am content with what we’ve achieved. What I want to do is die alive, I’d hate to die before I’m dead!”

We step outside and Manuel starts to show me the vineyards they have adjacent to the winery. As we’re talking, a large party of youngsters from Switzerland show up for their appointment. Surely this is the best testament to Manuel Valenzuela and Barranco Oscuro - the surprising number of fans from far and wide who make the long journey to this remote mountain top.

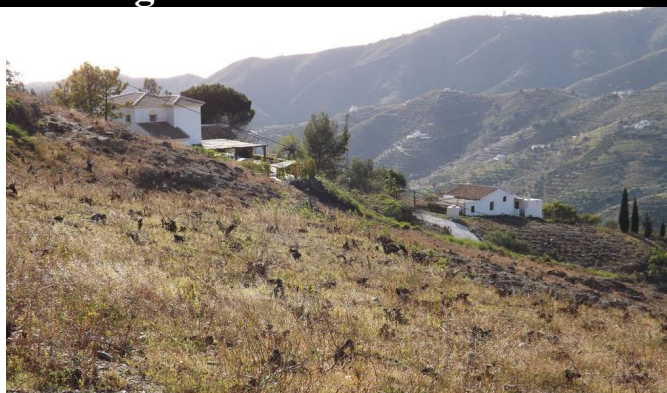
Manuel’s son, Lorenzo was kind enough to show me around the rest of the vineyards. These days Manuel has officially retired and so Lorenzo is running the project. Barranco Oscuro is never going to become corporate, but I get the impression that Lorenzo is more business-minded than his father and has his own ideas about where they should be heading. “Part of my father’s charm is that he is zero business-minded”, he confirms with a grin. Lorenzo tells me that he is aware of the growing trend for fresher, easier wines. Bit by bit things are being prodded that way, with shorter macerations and the wines being released with a bit less bottle age.

We drove up to the adjacent mountain top where the first vines were planted. What an amazing view! The Sierra Nevada lies to the north and the Mediterranean shimmers away to the south. I can just about make out a distant freighter, chugging along towards the Straights. Lorenzo points out the different peaks in the Sierra Nevada and names a few of the white towns, strung out horizontally along its contours. “I’m glad that people come up here. I want people to understand our project. At natural wine fairs in Paris or London for example, people just take a sip and form an instant judgement. Opinions shouldn’t be formed so quickly. I like people to see what we’re doing, to understand the site and to understand what we’re about and the challenges of growing grapes up here. I’d like for people to give the wines a chance, not just a sip.”



Lorenzo Valenzuela points out some landmarks towards the Sierra Nevada

## Sierras de Málaga DO



**Where is it?** – There are actually four production zones within the Sierras de Málaga DO, all of them quite different, due to the influence of altitude, mountains and the sea. Lots of sunshine, with hot summers guaranteed.

**What's planted?** – Traditionally the (Málaga DO) area was known for thick raisiny wines based on PX or Moscatel grapes. That industry almost died out, so to dynamise things the “Sierras de Málaga DO” was created in the same area, but allowing just about any grape you’ve ever heard of to be planted, eg Chardonnay, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, Merlot etc. and also a few local curiosities, such as Doradilla (white) and Romé and Tintilla (red). The bulk of the new plantings are around the stunning town of Ronda, whereas much of the old vine action lies east in the Axarquía.

**What's the wine like?** – I’d like to try some more but my general impression of the wines from the international varieties is that they are correct, with good colours and often surprisingly fresh, but they tend to have a bit of a hole in the middle, with no real depth. Young vines are no doubt partly the reason and it’s still work in progress.

**The real stars of the region are the dry table wines made from old vine Moscatel.** A few brave visionaries took the big step into the uncharted waters of believing in the old vines but re-interpreting them as fresh modern table wines, with moderate alcohols, beguiling perfumed noses, and bone dry ultra-long palates. Just fantastic.

**Some wines & wineries** – Bentomiz, Excelencia, Joaquín Fernández, Jorge Ordóñez, Lunares de Ronda, Samsara, Sedella, Telmo Rodríguez, Vetás...

**Other info** - For old school, sticky Málaga wine & atmosphere try [antiguacasadeguardia.com](http://antiguacasadeguardia.com) (central Málaga)

**Bodegas Bentomiz** (Sayalonga, Sierras de Málaga DO, Southern Spain) - 8<sup>th</sup> February 2016 v1.0  
Clara Verheij (Co-owner and Winemaker) - <http://www.bodegasbentomiz.com/>

### A new life in the south

Clara and André are a Dutch couple who moved to Andalucía in 1995. Already committed Hispanophiles, they knew they would enjoy the change. André, a civil engineer, saw opportunities on the booming Costa, whilst anthropologist Clara founded a successful language school. Basing themselves in the wild Axarquía region east of Málaga and far from the horrific 70s resorts that blight the coast, the bucolic lifestyle started to get under their skin. Already wine lovers and finding themselves amongst orchards and tumble-down vines, they started to wonder what-if?

With no technical wine background, but plenty of curiosity, they looked to the locals for help. Soon they were learning how to prune their 1.5ha (4 acres) back to shape, discovering what they had along the way. It turned out that their vineyard was a mix of Moscatel and Romé. Moscatel is well known in the area, contributing to the unctuous sweet Málaga wines of old that were highly-prized by the Russian court and as “Mountain” wine by the Victorians. Romé is a rare red grape, apparently native to the area, which can give interesting lighter reds with a hint of garrigue character. Their vines might have been up to 90 years old and were eeking out a living on a steep slatey slope. Naturally low-yielding and with deep roots, might they be on to something?

The Axarquía is a spectacular region. Rugged limestone mountains tower up behind the coast and the area is riven by a number of deep verdant gorges. This fragmented geography has rendered big plots of land impractical and at any rate they would be difficult and expensive to assemble. The canny locals are reluctant to sell their scrubby agricultural plots, unless they can get top-euro for them when re-zoned for residential use. The net result is that most people around here are smallholders. Many people make wine of sorts, often following the tradition of first drying the grapes on *paseros* to concentrate the sugars.

Clara and André learnt from the locals and initially followed their methods, loving the romantic nature of the work and the sense of community. Yet as wine-lovers themselves, they weren't totally happy with the results. Whilst proud of their rejuvenated vineyard, they realised that they wanted cleaner fresher wines, more in tune with the times...wines for drinking! Their old vines certainly had the potential. Growing between 450m and 800m above sea level and less than 8km from the sea, the site isn't quite as hot as you might imagine from its southerly location. "It's not Seville", Clara informs me. So they tried picking a little earlier and then crushed some grapes directly, rather than shrivel them first in the sun.

Things progressed and the couple learnt from their mistakes. Clara diligently wrote everything down each year, completed online courses and got in some outside advice. They bought more vineyard land, when the right parcels came up and also starting working with some neighbouring growers. Yet despite the obvious progress, still the wines weren't really at the level they were hoping for. So in 2003 the couple decided to take the plunge, Clara sold the language school and dedicated herself to wine full time. They couple also got to work planning their dream winery.

Their new focus showed immediate results: Clara tells me that their first "good" wine came the very next vintage in 2004. Finally they had the step change they'd been looking for, which must have been a relief, after investing so much in high quality new winery equipment. There are no unnecessary toys here, just the basics: crusher, press, some stainless steel tanks, a very good chiller unit, a few barrels and a rather impressive bottling line. Plus that marvellous view.

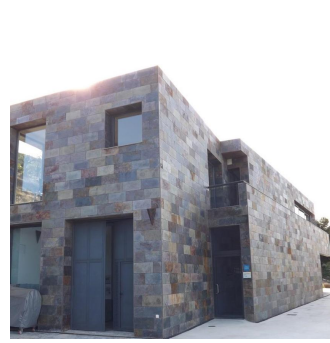
It took many years to complete the new building, with André ferrying up his construction workers whenever there was a slow patch. Whilst they were able to start winemaking there in 2006, the tasting room and restaurant took a little longer, in fact the new building wasn't launched until 2015. It was worth the wait, Bodegas Bentomiz's new home is simply stunning! Built in a minimalist Bauhaus style, the resulting winery and restaurant are light and airy and enjoy a mesmerising view from the mountains to the sea. A haven of northern European style, rising amidst subtropical Andalucían charm. "Bentomiz" incidentally, is the name of a local mountain.



André and Clara



Bodegas Bentomiz new winery and restaurant building





## Vineyards and Winemaking

Clara is looking for fresh, elegant wines without too much oak or alcohol, “We only make wines we want to drink!” They harvest when the grapes are “ripe but not overripe”, with the harvest typically lasting from mid August to the end of September. “There isn’t much vintage variation down here”, Clara points out, “although heatwaves and variable winter rainfall can affect the timing of the harvest.” In fact Clara tells me that the vineyards are generally getting better, as a new interest and pride in the countryside has swept the area. “I just hope we can grow fast enough for all these amazing grapes”, she adds.

In the vineyards things are pretty hands-off, with the dry climate and slate soils tending to keep problems at bay. They don’t use insecticides or herbicides but do get a helping hand from natural predators, such as chameleons and bee-eaters. Everything is hand harvested, with some of André’s workers bringing in friends and family to help. That’s the way things are in this part of the world, hard work is approached with good humour and a collective spirit. This wider-community feel is accurately captured by a series of photographs that Clara has framed leading up the stairs to the restaurant. Spaniards can be a little closed and suspicious of foreigners, so it’s a credit to Clara and André that they have assimilated into the local community so well.

Clara also keeps things simple in the winery. Musts are generally fermented in stainless steel, with only part of the reds and one of their sweet wines seeing time in oak barrels. Some of the wines may spend up to 8 months on fine lees with a little bâtonnage (stirring), helping to extend the mouthfeel. During this period the whites and rosé are prevented from undergoing a malolactic fermentation. The reds go through naturally in the spring.

The barrels themselves are chosen via trial and error, with 80% French and 20% American oak deployed at the moment. In fact Clara told me they were also trying out a different barrel from Seguin Moreau, made with a combination of oak staves and acacia wood in the heads - the idea being that the acacia is less tannic and structured than the oak, promoting delicacy and freshness. Asked about their overall philosophy Clara tells me that they are, “Organic in our own vineyards and pretty natural in the winery but we’re not interested in certification and I’m not fanatical about any of these aspects. The key for me is paying close attention to each step.”

Making good sweet wines is a difficult challenge. It can be hard to get the balance between the flavours, the sugar, the acid and the alcohol just right. A good dessert wine is sweet but at the same time refreshing, so you don’t mind having a second glass. Bodegas Bentomiz makes three dessert wines: two whites and a red. The whites are both from Moscatel, with the first pick of the absolute best grapes going to their *Terruño Pizarroso* wine, a wine which later goes on to see 6 months in new French oak. All these wines are “naturalmente dulce”, meaning un-fortified.

I ask Clara how they obtain and retain the sweetness, “We pick these grapes reasonably early at around 13-13.5% potential alcohol, when they have good natural acidity. We then dry them in the sun for a few days to get to around 18.5% potential - a process which also concentrates the acidity. Then we ferment this must in stainless and once the alcohol has got to around 13%, we stop the ferment by racking the wine off lees and chilling it right down to -2°C. Later I check the surface for bubbles. If it’s bubbling, it’s still fermenting, so I rack and chill the wine again and continue repeating until there are no active yeast left. We lose quite a lot of liquid along the way, in fact for the sweet wines we need 4 or 5 kg of grapes to make 1 litre of wine”. I wince at this stage, as the dubious economics of making sweet wine from a 2 tonnes/hectare vineyard hit home.

## The reality of living your dreams



“We haven’t made a profit yet”, Clara admits, “but we are growing every year”. I ask how optimistic she feels, now that Spain’s tourism industry has recovered from the crisis and Málaga has become Spain’s new ‘in’ city. “Things are definitely on the up here. Málaga (city) has so many more attractions than it used to, like the Thyssen Museum, the Pompidou Centre, the Heritage Museum, the spruced-up harbour....yet Málaga is our most difficult market. Go to any of the bars in the centre and it’s mostly Riojas and Riberas. It takes a long time to change attitudes, but things are getting better. The local government has launched a campaign ‘Sabor a Málaga’ which backs all kinds of local produce and helps with promotional support. In our restaurant we use local products as much as possible, in fact we also grow some on site, such as herbs and figs.”

At this point André greets me, wielding a large knife. “He’s our chef”, Clara reassures me. “These days André has finished with construction and is now dedicated to the kitchen, although we design the menus with the collaboration of (local star) Juan Quintanilla.” In fact the wines of Bodegas Bentomiz are no stranger to the top restaurant scene, being poured in 3 star Michelin restaurants, such as *El Celler de Can Roca* and *Arzak*. They have also been used a dessert ingredient by 3 star Michelin chef Sergio Herman. “The restaurant is definitely important for us”, Clara explains, “We’re within easy reach of the coast and we sell about a third of our wine right here on site. Of the rest, about 40% stays in Spain and the remainder goes overseas.”

Clara laughs and tells me that her favourite part of the job is tasting. “I also love working down in the cellar and experiencing all the aromas during the harvest period. It’s been hard work and of course we’d like to make a profit some day. We’re currently producing around 50,000 bottles a year. Eventually we’d like to get up to around 100,000 but no more. We’ll keep our current wine styles, but it might also be fun to try a sparkling and perhaps a gin with a Moscatel influence. The difficult part of this is that there are so many laws and the paperwork takes up far too much time.”

I asked Clara for her thoughts on the Sierras de Málaga DO as a whole, “Over in the Serranía de Ronda there are some interesting projects but the vines are mostly new. We are in the same DO but our project is based on old vines and re-interpreting tradition, so it’s not really the same thing. I regard the other winemakers across the DO as friends and colleagues and we help each other out. In my view having more quality wines coming from Málaga is a bonus. It helps us all.”

Clara and André are northern European exiles, like so many others down here. Yet they have taken an extra step, followed their hearts and have literally built their dreams on this gorgeous sunny hillside. Progress has been steady and they have not been too proud to seek advice when they felt they needed it. Whilst the project seems isolated, it’s interesting to note that the Axarquía is also home to some of Spain’s top wine producers, such as Telmo Rodríguez, Jorge Ordóñez and Lauren Rosillo. Bit by bit, the secret is going to get out.

## The wines

I'm not sure there's really a house-style to the Bentomiz wines, the small range is actually quite diverse, but there is certainly a common elegance and restraint. Clara and André confessed to being Burgundy, Loire and Riesling lovers. Perhaps it's not too much of a stretch to see how this might have influenced their thinking, despite making wine at the opposite end of the continent.



Vinolok stoppers photo: Vinolok.cz

Strangely enough what first attracted me to Bodegas Bentomiz was their unusual closures - it was the first time I'd ever seen a *Vinolok* stopper. Basically a precision glass "cork", which can easily be re-sealed, looks stunning and lends itself well to branding. Clara's gone for a subtle pink glass number for their rosé wine, bringing a playful element to the clean, professional packaging.

2014 Ariyanas Seco (Moscatel de Alejandría, 8 months on lees) - Pale yellowish colour. Fresh linalool nose, but quite subtle for a Moscatel. The palate is dry but not austere, with a creamy long aftertaste. This is a difficult style to make, as dry Muscats can often be a bit too much, end on a bitter note or be a bit warm and flabby. Hats off to Clara and her team, Bentomiz has nailed it with this superb moreish example, which would be great as an aperitif or would also work well with seafood and Asian dishes. *El Celler de Can Roca* has this wine as part of its taster menu.

2014 Ariyanas Romé Rosado (Romé) - Very, very, very pale and just 11.5% alcohol, you wouldn't think a wine so delicate could come from the south of Spain. On the nose I thought I picked up apricot and honey notes, to me coming across more like a white than a rosé. The palate is also subtle, with some soft peachy fruit, good freshness and length. In all an understated, elegant wine, with a firm core and an almost saline texture.

2012 Ariyanas Tinto (Petit Verdot, Tempranillo, Cabernet Franc, Romé) - For this wine, "the fruitiest part", the Tempranillo and Romé are kept in stainless, the rest spending some time in oak barrels. These components are later blended together. The wine has a youngish colour with a nice blackcurrant and vanilla nose. I found this wine to be quite a light crunchy red, still a little tannic. I'd like to give it another taste in 6 months or so.

2013 Ariyanas David Tinto Dulce (Merlot) - A reddish brown colour, I picked up ripe strawberries and chocolate notes on the nose. Some velvety black fruits on the palate, already showing some development and reasonably sweet. Clara informed me that the wine was pressed off skins after a 5 day cold soak, thus minimising tannic extraction. This year the wine only has 60-70g/L of residual sugar, but in a more typical year that might reach 100g/L or so. An unusual but appealing soft fruity red, not über-intense, specifically designed to pair with chocolate and cheeses.

2010 Ariyanas Naturalmente Dulce (Moscatel de Alejandría, no oak) - Golden colour, with quite an intense Moscatel nose. The palate is concentrated, packed full of mandarins and honey but also showing an agreeable savoury twist. Despite the opulence, this wine is very driven and quite tight, so not at all cloying, nor OTT. Great wine, very well made, Clara's attention to detail shines through.



2008 Ariyanas Terruño Pizarroso (Moscatel de Alejandría, 8 months French oak) - “One of the best wines we ever made”, according to Clara. Deep gold in colour, the wine is starting to complex with age and I thought I picked up some slight blue cheese hints, amongst the assault of honey, dried peaches and quince. Very opulent and round, this stunning, intense wine demands a place in the A-league.



Clara Verheij - Co-owner and Winemaker at Bodegas Bentomiz



Early morning view towards the Mediterranean, Axarquía, Málaga

## Jerez-Xérès-Sherry DO



**Where?** – Cádiz province, Andalucía. A warm sunny spot with temperatures moderated by proximity to the sea.

**What's planted?** – **Palomino Fino** is the main grape, plus there is some **Pedro Ximénez (PX)** and Moscatel.

**What's the wine like?** – Sherry is made in a range of styles, but to generalise is often bone dry, complex and with a characteristic tang. Manzanillas and Finos are fresh - good aperitifs which also go well with seafood. Amontillados and Olorosos seem a bit more serious and have layers of nuts / olives / figs / burnt notes. The sweet PX-based sherries are almost impossibly rich and thick, exuding an amazing chocolatey grapey gooey goodness.

**Some wines & wineries** – Barbadillo, Emilio Hidalgo, Equipo Navazos, González Byass, Hidalgo, Lustau, El Maestro Sierra, Osborne, Pedro Domecq, Rey Fernando de Castilla, Sánchez Romate, Tradición, Valdespino...

**Production** - Newly made wine is *fortified* (alcohol is added) after fermentation, before ageing in barrels. Sherry is rarely a vintage product. Almost always it is made via a system of fractional blending based on layers of barrels, called a *solera*, where you bottle some finished wine from the bottom layer and pour newer wine into the top layer and allow it to trickle down over time. It's the time the wine spends in these soleras and the different biological and chemical processes that are allowed to take place within them that creates such a unique and high quality wine. Recently there has been a boom in "en rama" finos, which are basically unfiltered and have more personality.

## Canary Islands (Regional Summary)

photo: curiositas.com



**Where are they?** - The Canaries lie just off Africa at around 28°N. They enjoy an exceptionally mild ocean climate with little rainfall. The islands are of volcanic origin and are surprising diverse, including windswept moonscapes, sandy deserts, Spain's highest mountain (El Teide, 3718m), lush forests and steep cliffs.

**What's planted?** – The islands have been producing wine for 500 years and so are planted with unusual grapes such as Baboso Negro, Listán Negro, Negramoll, Gual, Listán Blanca, plus Malvasía, Moscatel, Pedro Ximénez...

**What's the wine like?** – The fruity, sometimes sweet Malvasía type wines can be clean and very good and are famous from Lanzarote. For the reds I find it hard to generalise, they are generally fruity and fairly low in tannins, with fresh acidity and a "meaty / smoky / vibrant / natural" character that's hard to put your finger on.

**Some wineries** – Contienpo, Cráter, Envínate, Los Bermejos, El Grifo, Ignios, Suertes del Marqués, Tajinaste...

**Other info** - The Canary Island wine scene is becoming very interesting. Rather than rest on their laurisilvas as niche Malvasía producers, with a side-line in medicore wines sold to patriotic locals (2.1 million population) and tourists, there is now a real pride and determination to create something authentic, different and first class from this beautiful archipelago. A number of wines have started to gain world attention, particularly from northern Tenerife.



### **Winegrowing in the Canaries**

The Canary Islands have a long history of winemaking. In the early days of Europeans “colonising” the Americas, the ships could only really sail with the wind behind them, so they followed the trade winds south west. The Canaries (and Madeira) proved a handy port of call to stock up on food, fresh water and lots of wine before the long leg across the Atlantic to the Caribbean. Wine is produced on most of the islands but until recently, the sweeter Malvasía-based wines of Lanzarote were the only ones that had any fame, mainly due to the efforts of respected producer El Grifo. Strange really, as it’s quite hard to grow grapes on Lanzarote, due to its extremely dry and breezy climate.

But there are plenty of grapes scattered around the Canaries and due to the history and isolation of the islands, most of the grapes are unusual semi-forgotten varieties, often planted in traditional ways. What’s also important is that phylloxera never took hold on the archipelago, so these vines tend to be growing on their own roots.

The Canaries’ geography is very varied, containing deserts, volcanoes, cloud-forests, pine forests, sub-tropical vegetation (bananas are an important crop) and Spain’s highest mountain. For example Tenerife’s green north side is very different from its barren south. Perhaps to try and encapsulate these differences, perhaps to confuse the consumer or possibly in an effort to create jobs there are actually ten DOs on the islands, of which Tenerife has five.



Vines trained in the traditional “trenzado” fashion on Tenerife’s steep north coast



## **Background to this visit**

In the last few years Suertes del Marqués has rapidly become regarded as a key producer of fascinating authentic wines. Not just “good for Tenerife”, but good full-stop. All my favourite critics, like Jancis Robinson and Jamie Goode have raved about the wines - “individual”, “unique”, “characterful” etc. Furthermore, on a personal note, I used to live on Tenerife back in 1999/2000 and I loved the place and wanted to go back. Plus it was January and cold and wet in San Sebastián, so - time for a visit!

## **Suertes del Marqués**

Trained as an economist, co-owner Jonatan García Lima has a passion for Tenerife. Not surprising really, as it’s a fascinating island and he claims his family has been there “at least three centuries”. He believes that the old vines grown on these north slopes are under-exploited, not realising their potential and in need of “rescuing”. Some of the vines in question are over a century old. Whilst old vineyards undeniably form part of the heritage of the islands, it took somebody with passion, belief and a hint of bravery to see these treasures for what they are, save them from re-planting and let them sing-out. The only question: what would be the song?

To find out, Jonatan co-founded Suertes del Marqués in 2006 and the firm assembled a few small parcels of vineyards and built a basic winery, right in the heart of the Orotava region. Rising-star winemaker and Tenerife-native Roberto Santana was given free-rein in the cellar (in April 2016 the baton was passed to experienced Portuguese winemaker Luis Seabra).

## **Grape-growing and Winemaking Philosophy**

The main aim is to make the best wines possible from small plots of vines growing on a steep north-facing slope, around 500m (1650ft) above the Atlantic. The project only uses local varieties, which here principally means pre-phylloxera Listán Negro and Listán Blanco but also includes Vijariego, Baboso, Tintilla, Albillo and various other rare jewels thrown into the mix. Many of these vines are pruned in the unusual “Trenzado” fashion, traditional to the area. Trenzado is Spanish for “plaited” or “dreadlocked”. All their cuvée wines are 100% from their own vineyards. For their bigger-production blends, they also buy in some grapes, but still local grapes, grown with a similar philosophy.



Trenzado vines close up

Suertes del Marqués believe in minimum-intervention as a general philosophy. Their vineyards were farmed conventionally in the past but now have been left to go back to nature to “realise their full potential”. Inevitably this has meant a transition period but these days they are organically farmed and whilst they do also follow some biodynamic practices, they’re not interested in shouting about it or being pigeon-holed.

When I asked Jonatan about this approach, “We need to spend a lot of time in the vineyard”, he mused. “We use natural vineyard remedies rather than synthetic herbicides. What happens under these conditions, over time, is that you get many more micro-organisms in the soil and other plants grow too. So the vines need to compete with these and end up putting down deeper roots and getting stronger and in balance. We believe that this produces better grapes, rather than spoon-feeding the vines and destroying any competition.”

In the winery it’s hands-off too, with low SO<sub>2</sub>, wild yeasts, concrete tanks and non-intrusive oak being the chosen approach. It’s still early days and there is plenty of experimentation going on, for example playing around with lengthy skin-contact for whites. But I get the impression that it’s a case of trying to find the best expression of the site, rather than trying to make niche orange wines only for wine geeks and in-the-know sommeliers. With the arrival of Luis Seabra it will be interesting to see if the wines stick to the slightly reductive profile they found under Santana.

### **Suertes del Marqués - The wines**

Tenerife is a long way south. If it were in the United States we’d be talking Orlando, Florida, or reflected in the Southern Hemisphere somewhere near Coolangatta in Australia. Not really traditional wine country, yet it gets away with it because it’s an island stuck out in the coolish Atlantic. Persistent mild north-east “Alisio” winds blow most days, which keep a lid on temperatures. The altitude also helps and where mountainous Tenerife hits these moist Atlantic winds clouds often form. In summary, northern Tenerife is more North Atlantic than you might think, with a freshness noticeably present in some of the wines, making them more reminiscent of Galicia, than southern Morocco. In fact the wines have been compared by leading critics to wines from the more temperate regions of France, a comparison Jonatan probably does not mind, as he admitted to having a soft spot for wines from the Loire, Burgundy and the Rhône.

2013 Trenzado (mainly Listán Blanco) tasted April 2015 - Quite a reductive style, but good.

2012 Vidonia (mainly Listán Blanco) - Quite a deep gold / green colour with an amazingly intense reductive / struck-match nose that’s not for everybody. Unusual palate, combining some green notes with candied orange, oak and smoke. Low pH means it will definitely last the distance and has probably come together very well in the last year since I tasted.

2013 Vidonia (mainly Listán Blanco) tasted April 2015 - Tight, reductive & smoky. Sensational!

2010 Blanco Barrica (100% Listán Blanco) - Gold colour, with hints of green fruit but also showing some signs of development. Much more mellow than Vidonia, though still retains great acidity.

2012 7 Fuentes (mainly Listán Negro - different plots, a portion in 500L oak) - This is probably their best known label. Beautiful youthful colour with a bright cherry nose and also an appealing hint of reduction. Palate is Atlantic, combining sappy, slightly stalky red fruits with liquorice, but also with some garrigue hints? Pinot-ish, light, chewy, stalky and interesting.

2013 7 Fuentes *tasted April 2015* - Quite smoky and reductive

2011 El Esquilón (Listán Negro and Tintilla, single vineyard) - Showing a slightly more aged colour, this lovely wine still has bright chewy fruit, but in this case it's just a hint rustic and also shows smoky notes. The richer palate is very complex, with lots going on, yet still in a way very light. This is the wine I bought for our shop in San Sebastián.

2012 El Esquilón *tasted April 2015* - Great nose. Smoky, pyrazines, rustic. Fantastic wine!

2010 El Esquilón *tasted July 2015* - Smoky, a bit acid, slight pyrazines? Bright, minerally, lovely depth, fascinating authentic wine which shifts around the palate.

2012 Los Pasitos (Baboso Negro, single vineyard)

Another bright colour, though quite pale. Concentrated spicy, chewy, bright nose. In some ways similar to 7 Fuentes, but a bit more depth and more tannic at the finish.

2013 Los Pasitos *tasted April 2015* - Pale colour. Quite reductive and oniony, with attractive warmth.



Fascinating tasting with Jonatan and his father, with spectacular view over the north coast



2011 La Solana (Listán Negro, single vineyard) - Bright strawberry jam notes with some stuck-match reduction. Quite light and yet serious at the same time, seems kind of Burgundian.

2013 La Solana *tasted April 2015* - Pale. A little pyraziney, smoky. Very tight at the moment.

2011 El Ciruelo (Listán Negro and Listán Blanco, single vineyard) - Paleish colour and very true to the house style. Quite an intense wine with bright but chewy fruit, again showing some reductive notes but also in this case hints of riper candied fruit too.

2013 El Ciruelo *tasted April 2015* - Pale and interesting. Quite a linear feel to this wine which is again true to the house style, with some smoky-reductive notes but also piercing acidity. Less is more.

2010 Candio (Listán Negro, single vineyard with westerly orientation) - Delicious bright, chewy, savoury, minerally wine. Seems to be crafted in a riper, New World style, again showing notes of candied fruit. Excellent denser style.

2011 Candio *tasted April 2015* - Still some reductive notes, but quite big and ripe for Suertes del Marqués. Something different, with a certain candied warmth, though for me not their best wine.

2013 El Lance (A range of grapes, from local growers) *tasted April 2015* - Nice wine, still made in the familiar reductive, smoky but fresh style.

### **Suertes del Marqués - The future**

Suertes del Marqués want to continue exploring and aim to get better every year. “We still don’t know our limits”. They also want to “save” more vineyards, if the right ones come up and are expanding the winery to be able to process this material. What started as a hobby for Jonatan and the team is now a full-time job. With 85% of the wine being sold outside the Canaries, to an astonishing 20 countries, the complexity of the business has grown quickly. Something which is helped no doubt by their mastery of social media.

When I asked about competition, with exciting new boutique wineries cropping up all over the country, Jonatan said that they welcomed it. “We feel that raising Spain’s profile as a whole is good for everyone, rather than being more competition to worry about. In fact we know a lot of these smaller producers and regard many of them as friends, collaborating and helping each other out whenever it makes sense.”

In recent years some of Jonatan’s neighbours (Ignios Orígenes and Envínate Táganán) are now also gaining some fame, following a similar route in crafting hands-off wines from local varieties. Interesting, local, unique wines with an authentic back-story are what the market is looking for these days and this small band of producers from the north coast of Tenerife deserves to do well. They seem to be on track - certainly they are garnering far more press than their small size and lonely location ought to warrant and are gaining a certain cult following in the States. “Unique” is an over-used word, especially as all wines are unique, but in this case I feel it’s a good adjective. These wines share certain characteristics that are different from any others and are well-worth seeking out.

