

Meet Spain's Great Estates

The **Grandes Pagos de España** association is comprised entirely of single-estate producers, all committed to making the best wines possible.

By Michael Schachner.

Didier Belondrade, who is taking Rueda's Verdejo to new heights.

Similar to English, the Spanish language contains homonyms, words that sound similar or are spelled alike, but which have different meanings depending on usage. To wit, here's a homonymic example from Spain's wine world that proves that words, like terroir, matter.

Grandes Pagos de España (GPE) is a 12-year-old affiliation of 30 wineries dedicated to making wines that express what lovers of top Spanish vino should be looking for: a sense of place; a



reflection of regional terroir; and most important, high quality. What does **Grandes Pagos de España** mean? As written, it translates as “Great Estates of Spain,” a fairly all-reaching, self-aggrandizing moniker. But if it were written as **Pagos Grandes de España**, that would mean “Large Estates of Spain,” and based on size alone, no current GPE member would qualify.

Last month, while crisscrossing Spain for *Wine Enthusiast*, I spent time with five wineries that are part of the GPE group: AAlto and Alonso del Yerro in Ribera del Duero; Abadía Retuerta in Sardón de Duero; Bodegas Mauro, which like Abadía Retuerta is located just outside the RDD confines and thus does not to use the official *denominación de origen*; and Belondrade, which is located in Rueda and makes only Verdejo, the white grape of the D.O.

I was familiar with all of these properties either through previously reviewing or writing about their wines. But after spending time with the owners, managers and winemakers of these diverse estates, I came away with a

clearer understanding of why their wines are universally impressive: No costs are spared; human talent is valued; the grapes used are the best; quality is the main pursuit.

For example, Abadía Retuerta, which began producing wine only in 1990s and draws its name from a 12th century monastery situated on the banks of the Duero River, lies adjacent to the so-called Golden Mile subzone of Ribera del Duero, where famed Vega Sicilia is located. Owned by the Swiss pharmaceutical giant Novartis, Abadía Retuerta cuts no corners in its pursuit of making spectacular wines. Year after year, French-trained winemaker Angel Anocibar puts out impeccably clean but lusty single-vineyard wines such as Pago Negralada Tempranillo, Pago Garduña Syrah and Pago Valdebellón Cabernet Sauvignon.

AAlto and Alonso del Yerro were founded in 1999 and 2002, respectively, so they are not yet legendary properties (emphasis on “yet”). With Alonso del Yerro relying on the expertise of renowned Bordeaux consultant Stéphane Derenoncourt since its inception, its Tinto Fino-based wines—the eponymous Alonso del Yerro and the concentrated and powerful Maria—are statuesque, tannic reds with precision as well as potency.

Ditto AAlto, a joint venture between Mariano García, owner along with his sons of Mauro, and Javier Zaccagnini, formerly head of the Ribera del Duero Consejo Regulador, which oversees and regulates the region. Both AAlto and AAlto PS (Pagos Seleccionados) are bold examples of Ribera del Duero at its finest. Barely more than 20,000 cases of AAlto are made per year, while the inky, downright delicious and supple PS sees annual production of around 1,000 cases.

Until now I’ve talked only about the sensational red wines from Abadía Retuerta, Alonso del Yerro and AAlto, but the esteemed García, a dead ringer for Dos Equis beer’s “Most Interesting Man in the World” and the former longtime winemaker at Vega Sicilia, has recently added a Godello from Bierzo to the stable of brawny reds he makes at Mauro with sons Alberto and Eduardo.

For an unwavering champion of world-class Spanish white wines, look no further than Didier Belondrade, originally from Bordeaux. With colorful threads, flying eyebrows and an unbridled desire to show the best that Rueda’s Verdejo grapes have to offer, his Belondrade y Lurton flagship white, made in the commune of La Seca from parcel-grown Verdejo, is fermented in large oak barrels, with winemaker Marta Baquerizo blending fermented-and-aged lots much like a chef blends ingredients and spices. The lightly oaked result is elegant and ranks as the most complex wine made in Rueda.

There you have it, introductions to five of Spain’s elite wine producers. Remember, it’s Grandes Pagos de España, not Pagos Grandes. Size matters; and in this case, small is best.

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