

La Seca, Rueda, September 2013

AB *Growers in many areas are talking about a very late harvest. Is it the same story in Rueda?*

Didier Belondrade **Compared with recent years, yes it is. But we tend to forget that not so long ago, picking during the last week of September, even well into October, would have been quite normal. In the late 1990s it was often the case at Belondrade.**

AB *On the other hand, the harvest has also often started in August in Rueda...*

Didier Belondrade **For the Sauvignon Blanc, yes. Verdejo is later-ripening. Some growers will be picking Sauvignon in a week's time (about two weeks later than recent years), but as you know we don't have that variety in our vineyards.**

AB *Do you have a precise date for the start this year?*

Didier Belondrade **No, but it will be after the 25th September.**

AB *Are you more nervous when the harvest is later?*

Didier Belondrade **No. We're moving into a pleasant time of year in this region. Warm sunny days and cool nights –great for natural acidity in the wines. We could even do with a drop of rain to encourage the ripening.**

AB *You're never worried about botrytis?*

Didier Belondrade **It's hardly ever a problem here**

AB *That's something of a luxury for a wine grower. Do you have any nervous moments at all?*



Didier Belontrade We get a bit of powdery mildew, which we can manage with sulphur dusting.

AB *Everybody in Rueda should be organic then!*

Didier Belontrade We're actually in the process of getting official organic status.

AB *Many regions have had coulure and millerandage this year...*

Didier Belontrade We had a bit too. There was wet and windy weather during the flowering, but on the whole it's had very little adverse effect. In a way, it has even helped to keep down the crop size, which should be similar to last year's, by the way.

AB *You can understand why so many outsiders have bought vineyards in Rueda...*

Didier Belontrade Yes, but I wish they'd come and make quality single-vineyard wines. As far as I know we are still the only winery in Rueda making wine solely with our own grapes.

AB *Spanish wineries have traditionally bought in grapes. There's nothing wrong with that, is there?*

Didier Belontrade The trend in Rueda is more and more big wineries that arrive from other regions, and the consequence is over-production and lesser quality wines. As a result, local grape producers are happy to produce high yields because they know the big groups will buy the crop.

AB *You seem disappointed with how the appellation is today. Have you ever considered leaving it and marketing your wine without the Rueda name?*

Didier Belontrade Yes, I have. It's more than crossed my mind. In fact, my second brand, Apolonia, isn't a Rueda, it's a vin de pays, even though it comes 100% from my vines in Rueda. The authorities have urged me to make it a Rueda, but in the end I've just left things as they are. Both wines sell on the strength of their brand names. As long as the Rueda Control Board and I get along well, I see no reason to change. Why change a winning formula?

AB *When a consumer wants a Rueda in a restaurant or a wine shop and he or she selects Belontrade, are they actually getting a wine with the usual Rueda profile?*

Didier Belontrade No, they aren't. Belontrade is atypical. That's why, when I'm at wine fairs and I meet people who are looking for Rueda wines, I send them straight to other Rueda stands.

AB *Does Belondrade have anything in common then with other Rueda wines?*

Didier Belondrade It has the Verdejo grape variety with some of its characteristic flavours.

AB *Why did you come and make wine in Rueda, rather than another region?*

Didier Belondrade The reason why I came to grow wine in Rueda is the area's terroir and especially the Verdejo grape. I would never have come here to make Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc.

AB *In vertical tastings of Belondrade, we tend to find two different tasting profiles: powerful, exotic and rich..... or elegant, fine and fresh, depending on the year's climatic conditions. Presumably 2013 will tend towards the latter profile?*

Didier Belondrade That's right, and I'm delighted with that. The climate has an important influence, but over recent years we have also worked towards bringing out more elegance and finesse, even in hotter vintages. Followers of Belondrade have noticed that the wines have generally changed towards a more elegant style with freshness and less oak.

AB *Have you worked in this way because consumers' tastes have changed and you wanted to appeal to the market?*

Didier Belondrade It's actually my taste. I prefer wines with finesse, minerality and freshness, rather than power and too much oak. In fact, I have never tried to make wines for the market. In my first vintages, I made the wines that I really wanted to make at that time. In retrospect, I think our first vintages were a touch too oaky. But it was all part of a learning curve.

AB *Today, you are well established not just in Spain but in more and more export markets, too. Will it be frustrating if one day you don't have enough bottles and cannot, because of your principles, buy-in grapes to meet the demand?*

Didier Belondrade As long as I'm in charge it will remain that way. We'll be gaining organic status this year, anyway; so buying-in would cancel out the guarantee of organically-grown grapes.

AB *Is it important for you to have "organic" on the label?*

Didier Belondrade I'm not going to put it on the label. I want organic status because I believe it's the best way of working the vines. It's a question of conviction. Having the official status of organic is an acknowledgement of what we are doing.

AB *If you don't want to increase production why are you and your son travelling to new markets presumably to sell more wine?*

Didier Belondrade What I'm aiming to do is have Belondrade present in more and more markets to strengthen the brand, not to sell more wine. I'd like it to be served in the top restaurants and retailers around the world. It's all about positioning, not volumes.

AB *Some top producers have used the reputation of their iconic brand to launch a less expensive version that they can produce in larger volumes at a good margin...*

Didier Belondrade Red wines, yes. I don't know many examples of white wines, certainly not on the Spanish market. In Bordeaux there's Haut-Brion, Domaine de Chevalier, but not many others that have established second brands. It's not easy with white wine. My second brand Apolonia has been doing very well, but I've no plans to increase volume. It will only be made from our own grapes.

AB *Has it been easy to maintain your high price since the beginning of the crisis?*

Didier Belondrade I actually increased my price by 6 to 7% two years ago. And nobody complained.

AB *Even in Spain where the wine market is depressed?*

Didier Belondrade Even in Spain. I don't have much stock left to sell, maybe 15,000 bottles, which will go pretty quickly. Sales are up on last year at this stage. And last year was up on the year before. Demand is higher and higher. I think there are more and more people who love Belondrade. It's always been recognized by sommeliers and critics. Now it is being acknowledged by distributors and consumers, too.