

# RUEDA

## The long wait for the great grape

Spain's reputation for making world-class white wines is on the march, and one of the regions fuelling increased enthusiasm is the D.O. Rueda, in Castile-León. John Radford is an aficionado.



Spain Gourmetour  
Verano 2008

## Text

John Radford/©ICEX

## Photos

Juan Manuel Sanz/©ICEX  
Fernando Madariaga/©ICEX

Twenty years ago. Nava del Rey. The offices of Álvarez y Díez on my first visit to Rueda. I'm in a tasting room hung with diplomas, shields and medals celebrating the prizes won by the *bodega's* wines, and the winemaker is proudly showing off his latest *solera*-aged Rueda Dorada which is, admittedly, excellent. Rueda Pálido is a Fino-style wine, and Rueda Dorada is an Oloroso-style, and I have to confess that I loved them. So did the tasting panels which had awarded all those gongs. As to the world outside, well, shall we say, the enthusiasm was more muted... Or non-existent.

Fifteen years ago. The same tasting room in the same *bodega*. The walls have been cleared of gongs, the *soleras* have been sold off, the old winemaker has retired, the *bodega's* portfolio has changed radically under new ownership, and the thrust

is towards young, fresh, dry whites with lipsmacking acidity and a delicious, herby fruit. This is the Verdejo grape in full throat. But so it was with the Pálido and the Dorada. What happened?

### A long hard road out of the 'solera'

The Verdejo is a tricky grape. The very moment that the bunch is picked from the vine, the juice, still inside the individual berries, begins to oxidize. In the days when growers loaded their grapes into trailers under the morning sun, towed them to the *bodegas* with their puttering tractors, perhaps stopping off for an early *almuerzo* at the cafeteria on the way, the juice of the grapes was so oxidized by the time it arrived at the presses that it was really only fit for turning into *solera* wines, where oxidation is a positive advantage.

Fast forward to 2007, and modern winemaking techniques. Most *bodegas* now pick from midnight to sunrise, the pickers wearing lamps on their heads like coal-miners, loading the grapes into trailers which have been previously filled with inert gas (Nitrogen or Carbon Dioxide) so that the air never gets near the skins. The grapes are rushed to the *bodega* where they are put into a chiller (also filled with inert gas) to bring them down to fermentation temperature (about 60°F) before being passed to the press. From picking to fermentation neither grape nor juice comes into contact with air, and this has been the secret of the Verdejo in Rueda: wonderfully fresh, clean herby fruit and a deliciously crisp finish.

A good deal of the credit for the major resurgence of Rueda as a world-class white wine must go to 'Paco' Hurtado de Amezaga, current head of

the family at the Rioja House of Marqués de Riscal. He didn't like the oaky style of traditional white Rioja, or the 'squeaky clean' style of the 'modern' wines (this was in the 1970s before the 'new wave' took off in Rioja) and he recognized the potential of the Verdejo – a great grape simply waiting for technology to catch up with it. This was in 1978 and there was still an enormous amount of work to be done, but the Riscal name encouraged the world outside to try the wines and, bit by bit, the world decided that it liked them.

### The pioneer Marquis

Riscal also pioneered the planting of Sauvignon Blanc in Rueda, which has taken on a life of its own. I once hosted a tasting in Rueda of the wines of Palacio de Bornos, with Ricardo Sanz, and we tasted



his Verdejo and Sauvignon side by side. The consensus of those present came down on the side of the Verdejo which, at the cellar door, was slightly cheaper than the Sauvignon. Why? "Because", said Ricardo, "I can sell a wine called 'Sauvignon' in every country of the world. And when they like it, I can say 'now would you like to try my Verdejo?' If that had been my first question, no-one would have known what I was talking about."

Perhaps the most classic of the traditional style Rueda is made by Ángel Rodríguez

Vidal from his Martinsancho vineyard. The original Martinsancho vineyard is hardly an acre, with vines which go back to the 17th century: Phylloxera has never been here. Ángel grafts cuttings from the vineyard on to his main, 25 acre plot and makes the wine in the traditional style: fermented in glass and stored in giant oak casks, which he rebuilds himself every five years. The wine is sublime – if you can find it.

## From Bordeaux to Rueda

In due course the region attracted the attention of French winemakers, Didier Belondrade and his wife Brigitte Lurton. They bought an ancient labyrinth of cellars in Nava del Rey in 1994, and built a new winery in La Seca, about 20km to the east, in 2000. In spite of their Bordeaux background (her family owns 11 châteaux) they elected to make a 'Burgundian' style of wine, barrel-fermented in French oak. The result,

simply called Belondrade y Lurton, captures the freshness of the Verdejo whilst adding the complexity of the oak. The winery, now helmed by Didier, continues to be a regular medal-winner.

The initial winemaking plan at Belondrade was devised by Brigitte's cousin Jacques Lurton, and four years later he and his brother François established a *bodega* of their own – Hermanos Lurton – in Villafranca de Duero. The Lurton brothers are well-known as flying winemakers all over Europe and South

Didier Belondrade, of Belondrade y Lurton



America, and their own venture benefits from this accumulated experience. Their flagship wine, Cuesta de Oro, is also fermented in new French oak.

### Locals of note

Castelo de Medina in Villaverde de Medina was established in 1995, vineyards planted in 1990 with all the latest viticultural equipment, including drip irrigation. The 250 acre vineyard is 60/40 Verdejo and Sauvignon, and the flagship wine, Castelo Noble is barrel-fermented from 85% Verdejo. Interestingly, their Castelo de la Dehesa is one of the best-value wines from Rueda.

Dos Victorias is a fascinating project, founded in 1996 by two young women, both called Victoria (to be precise Victoria 'Marivi' Pariente and Victoria 'Vikki' Benavides) who met whilst studying at university. Marivi's family owned a small patch of vineyards, and they set about making a modern-style barrel-fermented Verdejo named after Marivi's father – José Pariente – which is now recognized as one of the best of its kind in the region. The Victorias have now decided to go their separate ways, Vikki Benavides focusing on the reds, and Marivi Pariente continuing the good work on the whites which bear her father's name.

Naia is a small (40 acres)

operation founded in 2002 by the owner of a bodega in Galicia, a wine journalist and an American wine importer, to exploit old Verdejo vines which are planted, ungrafted, in sandy soils in the village of La Seca, which is emerging as one of the best areas for the Verdejo. The flagship wine, Naiades, is a regular medal-winner, but then, so are the rest of its wines. The founders obviously had a very clear vision of what they wanted to achieve, and they are doing so spectacularly.

### The newcomer with the old vines

One of the newest *bodegas* in Rueda has some of the oldest vines. Ossian, in Nieva, founded in 2005, has only 20 acres but the vines are 150 years old, planted long before the Phylloxera struck Spain, and insulated from its approaches by sandy and stony soils. One of the partners in the venture, Javier Zaccagnini, is also a partner with the legendary Mariano Garcia in Bodegas Aalto (D.O. Ribera del Duero). In common

with many of the 'new wave' producers they aim for a 'Burgundian' style, with barrel-ageing on the lees. The quality is exemplary, and although it's a good deal more expensive than most Rueda Verdejo, it represents excellent value for money.

Other new projects have been fuelled by established companies from outside Rueda: Aura was founded in 2000 by what is now Domecq Bodegas; Ermina (1995) is part of the Matarromera Group (Ribera del Duero); Viña Bajoz (D.O. Toro) moved in in 2002;







## VERDEJO GRAPE

NEVER DID A **GRAPE** MEAN SO MUCH TO A **WINE**



Buil & Giné (D.O.Q. Priorat) in 1997; Caserio de Dueñas in 2000 (Hijos de Antonio Barceló Group – D.O. Ca. Rioja, D.O. Ribera del Duero); La Colección in 2005 (D.O. Ca. Rioja, D.O. Ribera del Duero); Osborne in 2000 (D.O. Jerez); and Pagos del Rey in 2004, to name but a few. With this level of confidence, investment and marketing going on, Rueda seems to be on a roll, and a roll which is gathering momentum.

### A final word

The final word goes to Luis Hurtado de Amézaga, winemaker at Marqués de Riscal: "People are planting more and more Verdejo as the market grows, and the best grapes from the oldest vines on the old terraces of the river

Duero command 1 a kilo (roughly 1.5 €), which is a lot for Spain – and astonishing for white wines. New plantings on less appropriate soils fetch lower prices, but the market seems to be demanding quality, and is willing to pay for it."

So, is Rueda now the classic white wine of Spain? Settle back and dip into that peachy-apricot nose, those herby honeysuckle scents, that gentle, aromatic palate which warms with fruit but remains completely dry on the finish... I'm not sure. I may have to have another glass.

*John Radford is freelance writer, broadcaster, lecturer, speaker and actor with a special interest in food, wine and travel and an informed interest in Spain.*



D.O. Rueda, the Spanish leader in white wine  
[www.dorueta.com](http://www.dorueta.com)

Spain Gourmetour  
 Verano 2008