

The push for Rioja crus

Rioja is one of the world's best-loved, most lucrative wine brands, so why would you want to change a winning formula? Adam Lechmere meets a band of 'reformers' who do – believing that the current level of classification is too simple for such a complex region of terroirs

'DO YOU KNOW the taste of Labastida?' asks Telmo Rodríguez. The same question from a Burgundian or a Bordelais about one of their villages would be far easier to answer. Coming from Rodríguez, as he stands among the tiny, ancient plots of his Las Beatas vineyards in Rioja Alavesa, it's rhetorical. His point is that for a region so varied in terroir, in topography, in soils, elevation and orientation (in their few hectares, the vineyards of Las Beatas face half a dozen points of the compass), it's astonishing how unsophisticated the popular perception of Rioja is. As he puts it, with a note of regret, 'We're happy to be generic.'

Rodríguez, who makes wine in nine regions of Spain, from his family estate of Remelluri in Labastida and the ancient vineyards he has revived in the region, to Ribera del Duero, Toro, Galicia and as far south as Malaga, is one of a disparate group of producers becoming increasingly vocal about the limitations of the Rioja appellation. They have different ways of expressing themselves, but their point is simple: the official classification of Rioja into the three levels of crianza, reserva and gran reserva is an instrument too blunt to do justice to the complexity of what is popularly known as 'the region of 1,000 wines'.

The man who set the whole thing off is Juan Carlos López de Lacalle of Artadi, whose Viña el Pisón, at about £400, has the distinction of being one of Spain's most expensive wines. Early in 2015 the Rioja press reported he would be leaving the DOC. From the 2014

Below: at about £400 a bottle, Artadi's Viña el Pisón is one of Spain's most expensive wines; from the 2014 vintage, it and all other Artadi wines will leave the Rioja DOC and be labelled Vino de Mesa



vintage all Artadi wines will be labelled as Vino de Mesa, and will not carry the Rioja name or official back label stamp.

'We need different tools to express the thousands of different styles of Rioja,' De Lacalle says. As an illustration of what he's talking about, he takes me to his vineyards on the San Ginés river (a tributary of the Ebro) outside the town of Laguardia. On the eastern bank, west facing, is La Poza, and opposite is Valdegines, looking east. The difference is the orientation and the depth of soil. De Lacalle suggests La Poza – warmer, with deeper soils – 'is more Mediterranean'. The wines are markedly different: one with red fruit, the other with riper tannins and a rounder profile. 'This is the kind of terroir we want to focus on,' the winemaker says. 'Why should we put it all in the same tank and label it gran reserva?'

Blending vs vineyard

The singularity of Rioja's classification goes back to the 19th century. Historically Rioja's bodegas have been master blenders, sourcing grapes from all over the region, developing a distinctive house style. The classification is geared to wine age: DO regulations state that crianza wines must spend a year in oak and a year in bottle, reserva a year in oak and two years in bottle, gran reserva two years in oak and three years in bottle. Village names are not allowed on the label as part of the appellation. No notice is taken of place – for most consumers it is irrelevant that Marqués de Murrieta's



Above: Telmo Rodríguez's vineyards in Las Beatas: tiny plots of varied soils, altitudes and elevations

Castillo Ygay comes from one of the most famous vineyards in Rioja Alta. 'The system implies that everything starts when the wine is in barrel or bottle. There's no emphasis on the vineyard,' Murrieta's owner Vicente Cebrián says.

The emphasis on the land is pushed further into the background by the fact that only a handful of bodegas own their vineyards. Almost all (Murrieta, Remelluri, Contino and a handful of others are rare exceptions) source their wines from multiple growers, all over Rioja, working very small plots: the average size of vineyard in Rioja Alavesa is one third of a hectare. The concentration on blending, Rodríguez says, means that 'we forget the grands crus'. Terroir is lost in favour of process.

Las Beatas is a vineyard paradise, with medieval abandoned terraces, and the remains of an 800-year-old stone press hewn into a house-sized rock. For Rodríguez (who studies the old ways, a process he likens to pulling on a rope to bring the past into focus), it is essential to rediscover respect for the land. ➤



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Vicente Cebrián of Marqués de Murrieta (above)

For most people, he says, Rioja is reduced to a simple duality, traditional and modern, where ‘Traditional means American oak and modern means French oak. But it’s far more complicated than that.’

The idea of Rioja as homogenous is quickly exploded by a visit to the eastern tip of Rioja Baja, the biggest but least-celebrated of the three sub-regions of this sprawling appellation.

Baja’s main town of Alfaro has the greatest vineyard area of any town of Rioja. All the great producers source tonnes of grapes from here. But despite the efforts of the bullish and charismatic Alvaro Palacios (Decanter Man of the Year 2015), whose family winery, Palacios Remondo, is in Alfaro, Baja struggles for recognition. There are many reasons for this, the main one being the craze for Tempranillo in the 1980s, which is fine up north but can get overripe if it’s too warm. Palacios is busily regrafting back to Garnacha.

Recognition for Rioja

While to the north the valleys are narrow and steep, Baja is more open, flatland leading to humpbacked hills. The soil is stony – in some places it resembles Châteauneuf du Pape. It is Mediterranean-influenced, the warmth (and the pudding stones) ideal for Garnacha.

Palacios’ dream is to gain recognition for the region. ‘I don’t want to dedicate my life to the vineyard and in 50 years not know where the wine comes from. The worst thing that has happened in Rioja is that when you taste Viña Real 1954, you don’t know any of the vineyards. It wasn’t the winemaker, it was the vineyard, it was those old vines from a special area.’

Palacios was instrumental in getting village designations recognised in Priorat, and he would like to do the same here. ‘We need a pyramid of quality, with country wine at the bottom, then regional, then the villages, then specific plots within the villages.’

The ‘reformers’ are voluble, passionate, dynamic – and inchoate. They agree a quality level should be added to the DOC, but they haven’t put together any sort of proposal. Rodríguez believes his terroir among the best in the world but says he doesn’t want to get bogged down in bureaucracy; Palacios reckons change will come, ‘but not until my grandchildren’s time’. Cebrián is adamant they should ‘reform the DOC but not break it.’

Even a bodega as conservative as Marqués de Cáceres would welcome some sort of reform. Cristina Forner, its president, sees no reason to leave the DOC, though she agrees a way should be found of moving ‘towards models



Left: Marqués de Cáceres’ Excellens range features wines sourced from high-altitude, low-yielding and older vines



Above: Alvaro Palacios stands on pudding stones in the La Montesa vineyard in Alfaro in Rioja Baja – a terroir ideal for Garnacha

focused on quality with future potential’. Cáceres has already launched its own ‘estate’ range, Excellens: five wines sourced from high-altitude vineyards with the emphasis on vine age, reduced yields and limited production.

Others agree that the DOC needs to be improved, but are ambivalent about how to achieve it. At Bodegas Roda, founded in 1987 and one of the most renowned of the Rioja modernists, export manager Victor Chacón says, ‘Yes, the classification should include vineyards. Some sites are better than others.’ But he adds, Roda is a blending house, so village designations would be irrelevant to it. ‘Reform must be handled with great care,’ he cautions.

Open to change

For its part, Rioja’s regulatory body, while often derided for being reactionary, says it is open to suggestions. The problem, general manager José Luis Lapuente told me, is politics. ‘[Producers] are talking to the media but have made no formal application to us. Political issues have blocked the debate.’ But reforms

are being tabled, and ‘certainly the name of a village on the label could add value’.

Bear in mind we are talking about adding value to one of the world’s most recognised, and loved, wine brands. Rioja sells 400 million bottles a year; 80% of bottles opened in Spain are from Rioja. The top bodegas have markets in 120 countries; the UK market alone is worth £220m. With sales like this, it’s not surprising most producers don’t see any need for change.

But it’s happening anyway. Those who know Rioja have long understood the stylistic difference between modern, terroir-driven wines and those that are more traditional and oak-dominant. ‘What’s really exciting for Rioja lovers is that you now have the choice between traditional and modern,’ says Pierre Mansour, who buys Spanish wine for The Wine Society in the UK.

And people like ‘geekery’, as Jean-Rémi Barris of UK independent importer Indigo Wines calls it. ‘Rioja is not seen on a par with the best appellations because there is not enough geekery for people to sink their ➤



Above: Telmo Rodríguez says the focus on blending in Rioja means that ‘we forget the grands crus’



Above: from 2014, Artadi wines will no longer be labelled with the Rioja name, just Vino de Mesa



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Juan Carlos López de Lacalle (above)

teeth into.' The more information you can give a wine lover, the more they will ask you for. 'It's a bit like Champagne. For a long time it was very hard to talk about terroir, but that's all changing with the rise in popularity of grower Champagnes.'

Bureaucratic change will neither help nor hinder this thirst for knowledge of terroir. Artadi, Palacios, Rodríguez and other pioneers will carry on as they are, and their village lands will gradually come to the notice of those keen to delve deeper into Rioja. More and more bodegas will follow suit as they see the value such cuvées bring – and more and more of Rioja's 17,000 growers, such as Pedro Balda, who labels himself a viticulturist and produces 1,200 bottles a year, will release fascinating artisanal wines.



'[Producers] are talking to the media but have made no formal application to us. Political issues have blocked the debate' **José Luis Lapuente**

'My family have been cosecheros (wine grape growers) in San Vicente for six generations,' Balda told me in an email. 'We know there are lots of terroirs that produce a huge range of wines and qualities. So, in the same village, there are many different things you can find.' [D](#)

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Lechmere's top 'reformer' Riojas to try



Remelluri, Blanco 2011
19.25/20 (97/100)
£40-£50 **DBR Wines, Ellis Wharton, Hedonism, Harrogate Wines, Indigo Wine, Vin Cognito**
Field blend including Viura and Albariño. White flower aromas and round palate of stone fruit, peach, exotic spice and honey, pierced by bracing acidity and fine mineral length. Luscious, triumphant.
Drink 2015-2020 **Alcohol** 14.5%

Marqués de Murrieta, Capellania White Reserva 2010 18 (93)
£13.95-£22 widely available via UK agent **Maisons Marques & Domaines**
Full-bodied palate with dancing acidity plus aromas and flavours of roast almonds, white fruit and a delicate finish. Fresh and clean.
Drink 2015-2020 **Alc** 13.5%



Marqués de Cáceres, Excellens Rosado 2014 17 (90)
£5-£10 **Forth Wines, Inverarity Morton, Jeroboams**
Strawberry and red cherry flavours with brisk, balancing acidity. Drink young.
Drink 2015-2016 **Alc** 13.5%

Contino, Reserva 2005
19.25 (97)
£23 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Lay & Wheeler, The Wine Society**

Youthful, floral aroma with black cherry top notes. On the palate there's bright dark fruit, damson and hint of black olive. Fine acidity and lovely dry tannic length. **Drink** 2016-2030 **Alc** 14%



Palacios Remondo, Propiedad 2011 18.75 (96)
£18-£20 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Divine Fine Wines**
This 100% Garnacha has aromas of roses and liquorice on the nose then a classic, linear palate whose tannins show steadily increasing grip alongside redcurrants and pink grapefruit. **Drink** 2015-2030 **Alc** 14%

Artadi, El Carretil 2012 18.5 (95)
£72 **Berry Bros & Rudd, James Nicholson**
Bright dark fruits, blueberry and damson plus notes of leather and exotic spice. Insistent tannins. Superb energy.
Drink 2018-2035 **Alc** 13.5%



Navajas, Reserva de la Familia 2005 17.75 (92)
N/A UK www.bodegasnavajas.com
Splendidly juicy and velvety dark fruit with old-fashioned grippy and leathery tannins. Flavours of quince, polished saddles and liquorice. Very fine in a traditional style.
Drink 2015-2030 **Alc** 13.5%



Ontañón, Ecológico 2013
17.75 (92)
£9.99 **Define Food & Wine, Drinkmonger, John Hattersley, Philglas & Swigot, Vinomondo**
Blackberry fruit on the nose and dry, fresh tannins. A lovely characterful Rioja, classic, restrained black fruit but with charming hints of red cherry.
Drink 2015-2022 **Alc** 13%

Ysios, Reserva 2007 17.75 (92)
POA **Pernod Ricard**
Lovely, dense briar nose with sweet black fruit, fine dry tannins, powerful but with great restraint. **Drink** 2016-2030 **Alc** 14.5%



Ramón Bilbao, Viñedos de Altura 2011 17.5 (91)
£11.99 **Fraziers**
50% Garnacha gives perfumed freshness, with raspberry on the nose and juicy blackcurrant on the palate. Textured, tannic finish. Mouthwatering. **Drink** 2015-2019 **Alc** 14%

Paco García, Seis 2014 17 (90)
£10-£12 **General Wine Co, James Nicholson**
Tempranillo with a dash of Garnacha. Red cherry and redcurrant fruit, very bright with earth and leather. Fine, ripe juicy tannins. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13.8%

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