



A Grape For All Reasons

SPAIN'S NATIVE WHITE GRAPE VARIETY

DAN TRAUCKI

IMAGINE standing in the middle of a vineyard (that of Javier Sanz Viticultor) surrounded by short, stumpy, bush vines that were planted 208 years ago! Roughly about the same time that John MacArthur was establishing Australia's first viable vineyard at Camden, before the Hunter Valley was established and long before the Barossa or any other wine growing region in Australia began. Then, just a short while later, you are standing ten metres underground in a cellar that was originally an underground winery, which was dug out in 1656 – that's 14 years before Captain Cook discovered Australia. I recently did both of these, in the Rueda wine region of Spain. While both seem like an extraordinarily long time ago to us, they are short-term in the context of Spain, where they have been making wine for around 3,500 years.

Rueda is located about 200 kilometres to the north-west of the Spanish capital, Madrid. It consists of 13,000 hectares of vines and is a very unusual wine growing region in that the area produces almost entirely white wines (and a tiny bit of rosé). This is due to its elevation, of 700 to 800 metres above sea level, which makes the climate too cool for growing "vinos tintos" (reds).

Speaking of reds, whilst there is a myriad of red grape varieties which have the potential to lure Aussie wine drinkers away from their staple triumvirate of shiraz, cabernet sauvignon and merlot, there are

The Verdejo grape lends itself to producing several distinctly different styles of wines.



Opposite page: Wine varieties from Javier Sanz winery; Vineyards from the Rueda region.

very few white varieties that have the ability to lure drinkers away from the omnipresent sauvignon blanc and chardonnay. Over the years there have been a few attempts, such as verdelho and viognier, but as yet, they have not done so.

In recent times I have been championing Austria's grüner veltliner as an exciting, up-and-coming white wine variety, with a great global future in front of it. Well in Rueda, I have discovered another exciting white variety that I believe has the potential to lift wine drinkers out of the monotony of drinking their "same old, same old" white wine and also to introduce new people to the enjoyment of quality white wine.

This variety is Spain's verdejo – not to be confused with verdelho, a completely separate variety grown in other parts of the country. Verdejo, the origins of which are unknown, has been in Rueda since 1,000 A.D. where over 90 per cent of the region's wines are made from this native white variety. This makes Rueda one of only a handful of wine growing regions in the world that rely almost entirely on one grape variety.

Viticulturally Rueda consists of a considerable number of patches of 100+ year-old bush vines, particularly around the city of Segovia, in addition to the significant areas of newer vines which are trellised for machine harvesting. Their trellising is quite a bit lower than what we are accustomed to in Australia, because as one vigneron explained: "due to their altitude and the



latitude, the growing season here is shorter and therefore the quicker they can get the nutrients out of the ground and into the canopy, the sooner we can ripen the grapes". Some of the larger Bodegas such as Cuatro Rayas, also have a third type of vine management system, in that they have re-trained some of their very old vines onto low trellises so as to be able to machine harvest the grapes.

Much of the vineyard acreage in the region is owned by small family growers who work with the wine companies. More recently they started heeding technology and the winemaker's advice rather than doing exactly the same as previous generations had done. Well, some at least have. I was told that there were still a few who start their harvesting based on the calendar rather than grape maturity, but they are gradually being replaced by the more tech savvy younger generation.

There are a number of organic and biodynamic wineries in the region, however as they explained at the innovative Bodegas Menade (which also brews beer) while I was tasting its delicious wines, the E.U. organic certification is rather lax in that it allows practices that true organic producers would never countenance. Therefore, while they adhere to the "best practices" of organic production, many of the organic and biodynamic producers are not "officially" certified.

The wineries themselves range from some that have been around for centuries such as Hijos de Alberto Gutierrez, which dug its first underground winery in 1656, through to state of the art wineries like that of the innovative Bodegas Castelo de Medina (est.1995) and the newest, Bodegas Shaya which commenced operations in 2008. Bodegas Shaya also

has access to 50 to 100 year-old vines from some of their local growers, allowing them to make a range of different style verdejo wines.

On the subject of underground cellars, most of the villages have a maze of tunnels under them dating back to the days when families made their own wines underground by using gravity feed. In recent times, as small family operations are bought out, some of the larger wineries have been joining up these small tunnels so as to form a maze of maturing cellars. The most awesome of these labyrinths is that of bodegas Grupo Yllera, which has set up "El Hilo de Ariadna" (The Thread of Ariadna – from Greek mythology) tourist attraction under its winery, consisting of over a kilometre of interconnected wine caves with a superb and very elegant 100 seat restaurant, all 20 metres below the surface.

The verdejo grape lends itself to producing several distinctly different styles



Above top: Vineyards in the Spanish Rueda region. **Above:** Javier Sanz Verdejo wine in the vineyard. **Opposite page from top to bottom:** Grape harvesting at Cuatro Rayas vineyard in the Rueda region; Verdejo vineyards grow low to the ground; Road signs in the Rueda region of Spain; Cuatro Rayas selection of wines; A selection of delicious Spanish tapas that complements the verdejo wines.

of wines. The first of which is the crisper, steelier, fruit-driven wine, where the wines are made in stainless steel tanks, bottled soon after fermentation has finished, and then on the market in less than 12 months from vintage. In Spanish red wine parlance these could be called the Joven wines. They are delicious aperitif and summer wines, which slake a thirst and refresh; an ideal type of wine for our weather. Great examples of this style include: Avelino Vegas Circe Verdejo 2015, Bodegas Proto Verdejo 2015, Eresma V&R Verdejo 2015, Javier Sanz Verdejo 2015, Jose Pariente Verdejo 2015, Oro de Castilla Verdejo 2015, Palacio De Bornos Verdejo 2015, Quatro Rayas Organic Verdejo 2015.

The second style is more complex and a more food friendly style of wine. These wines are fermented in stainless steel tanks but the wine is left on lees after fermentation. Also, a proportion of the make is matured in oak barrels to gain even more complexity, particularly with wineries that battonage (stir) the wine. The result is that this style, which could be called Crianza, is less crisp and austere than the Joven style, and has subtler more complex aromas, is bigger bodied and richer in flavour. These wines are typically left on lees for around 3-6 months, then bottled and left in bottle for several months before they are released. Delicious examples include: Castelo De Medina Vendimia Seleccionada Verdejo 2014, Diez Siglos Verdejo 2015, Hijos de Alberto (organic) Verdejo 2015, Javier Sanz Malcorta 2015 – an ancient clone of Verdejo, Menade 2015 V3 (Vinas Viejas Verdejo - organic), Palacio De Bornos La Caprichiosa – very slowly fermented.

The third style of wine could be called the Reserva (in Spanish red wine terms) ▶



“Spain's Verdejo – not to be confused with Verdelho, a completely separate variety grown in other parts of the country.”





as it is much less commonly available as it is made in small volumes, and celled for much longer, by some of the Bodegas. This is the “fermentado en barril” or barrel fermented wine. This is the pinnacle of what verdejo can achieve. It is a sublime, rich, creamy, mouthfilling, unctuous wine that is truly lip-smackingly good. This style of wine is quite comfortable being matched with any meat dish that hasn’t been swamped by a very rich sauce. However, equally, it is fantastic on its own. Great examples include: Caserio de Duenas Ferrmentado en Barrica 2014, Diez Siglos Fermentado en Barrica 2012, Eresma 2014, Jose Pariente Cuvee Especial 2013 - fermented in concrete “eggs”, Oro de Castilla Finca Los Hornos 2014 – single vineyard, Proto Barrel Fermented 2014.

The fourth style is “Method Tradicional” bottle fermented sparkling wine, made exactly the same way as Cava (Spanish for sparkling wine), except that it is made from verdejo. Not many wineries do this because of the amount of effort required, however those that do, produce a damn good sparkling wine such as: Jose Parientes Verdejo Cuvee Especial, Palacio De Bornos Brut and Yllera Privee Brut- a blend of chardonnay and verdejo.

The newest and most exciting style of verdejo wine that is just starting to emerge is that of “Frizzante”, a semi-sweet, lightly sparkling verdejo that finishes nearly dry. In Spain, it is flying off the shelf this Spring/ Summer as the younger generation discover it. It is usually presented in eye catching packaging. It is a smash hit with newer wine drinkers and is also helping to convert new

people into being wine drinkers.

Good examples of this include the crown sealed YLLERA Cinco.5 Frizzante, a delicious fizzy verdejo with 5.5 per cent alcohol which is slightly sweet but finishes reasonably dry. An ideal introductory wine and very popular with the “millennials”, or the slightly stronger (9 per cent) Cuatro Rayas Dulce Bianco 2014.

The final style of verdejo is so old that nobody seems to know how long ago it started. This is the “Dorado” which is made in a somewhat similar style to sherry, but differently. The wine is fermented as normal white wine, then it has its alcohol level raised up to 16 per cent by the addition of grape spirit alcohol and then the wine is poured into 16 litre glass demijohns, as it has been done for centuries. These are not filled completely as they are left with a considerable airspace to aid in the oxidative process. The main difference with sherry is that there is no solera system used in the making of Dorado. In earlier times it was made from the sherry variety, Palomino Fino, but that variety has almost disappeared in Rueda, they now use verdejo instead.

The filled demijohns are stored out in open courtyards with only sturdy shade cloth over them as protection against hailstones which have been known to smash the glass demijohns. They are left there for around 24 months, or longer to slowly oxidise and create a sherry style sweet wine which finishes quite dry. The only attention they get during their “penance” is that they are occasionally checked to see if they have popped their corks, which are then bunged back in. The Alberto Gutierrez “Dorado” has

an amontillado sherry style of nose, a good sweet palate that was not cloying and a pleasant dry-ish, spirty finish.

So as you can see in Rueda verdejo can produce the full range of wines, from a sparkling wine, through to aperitif style wines, serious food wines and also a dessert wine. How versatile is that?

To create a point of difference in some wines, verdejo is ably supported by a splash of sauvignon blanc and to a much lesser extent, viura, in some wines. Like here, they can add up to 15 per cent of other varieties without having to declare it on the label. There are even a couple of “radical” growers out of the 69 wineries in the region, who are experimenting with other varieties to add in small volumes, to their verdejo, so as to make theirs perceptibly different from the others. However, that is still a while away and top secret.

Verdejo is an amazingly consistent high quality white variety, it varies in style according to the winemaker, but each and every wine still has the same inherent primary characteristics of the variety. Unlike, so many other white varieties, such as chardonnay, which can vary so much in flavour that the consumer never knows what they will be getting until they open the bottle and taste it.

Most recently, a handful of adventurous wineries in Australia have started producing verdejo. This small band includes Trentham Estate which was the first to release an Aussie verdejo, Dell’uva and Peter Lehmann in the Barossa. The Aussie verdejo has the same characters as those from Rueda but because our

climate is a bit warmer, they are not quite as steely or mineral, rather they are a bit softer, rounder, more in the aperitif style than the wines of Rueda, which are suited to match all but the richest of meat dishes.

I see Rueda as a prime example of the “Renaissance of Old World” winemaking, where they have kept the best of the past, such as their ancient vineyards and incorporated the latest technology. Some bodegas have even started using “roscas” (screwcaps), to create sensational white wines that are truly worth seeking out. Some Rueda wines are now available in Australia, and I am sure that over time, a lot more of them will become available.

So I suggest that when you get a chance, try a verdejo- a grape for all reasons and you won’t be disappointed!

Opposite page from top to bottom: Cuatro Rayas bush vines, Rueda; Harvesting done by hand at Cuatro Rayas; Glass demijohn bottles stored to create sherry style sweet wine; Cuatro Rayas old family photo showing traditional harvesting; Verdejo grapes from Rueda region. *Above & below:* Javier Sanz wine varieties in the vineyard; a selection of wonderful verdejos.

