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The Spanish Wine Region With A Secret White Weapon

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📅 Posted on January 9, 2019 by Liz Sagues



Liz Sagues provides a comprehensive roundup of Rueda, where she samples lots of wines made from the versatile Verdejo grape, from the light and floral to the rich and complex, even including some bubbly, sweet and an old-school fortified Dorado along the way. She also learns that there is a particularly high concentration of female winemakers in Rueda and that wineries from other parts of Spain have been pouring into the region.

High on Spain's northern plain, the rain slashes on the car window, an icy wind bites outside. It's hard not to think of Eliza Doolittle's famous elocution lesson... But this downpour is welcome to Rueda's grape growers, after a summer that has been spectacularly dry, even here where usually barely 100mm of rain hits the ground between April and September. As winter begins, the weather may be harsh but the welcome is warm for a small group of UK wine journalists (three Circle members, one applying to join), invited by DO Rueda. The regulatory council is keen to increase export sales, and the UK is one target, although eyes are also set on bigger gains to be made in Asia particularly.

There is much to do, for Rueda isn't a name familiar to many drinkers outside Spain, despite being comfortably the country's biggest white wine appellation and, we were assured, the Spaniards' favourite wine – after Rioja – to drink with tapas. But DO director general Santiago Mora Poveda and his colleagues have an effective, if hardly secret, weapon: the native grape of Verdejo.

Verdejo dominates the vineyards – it produced just over 85 per cent of 2018's record harvest of 130 million kilos, and it gives the wines of Rueda a character that deserves to be much more widely known and appreciated. It isn't the only variety allowed in the appellation; Sauvignon Blanc, Viura and Palomino Fino are permitted, too, and there are efforts to make a distinctive mark with the first of those. That, though, is work in progress. Verdejo is what's special now, and it should have a starry future worldwide.

The Circle of Wine

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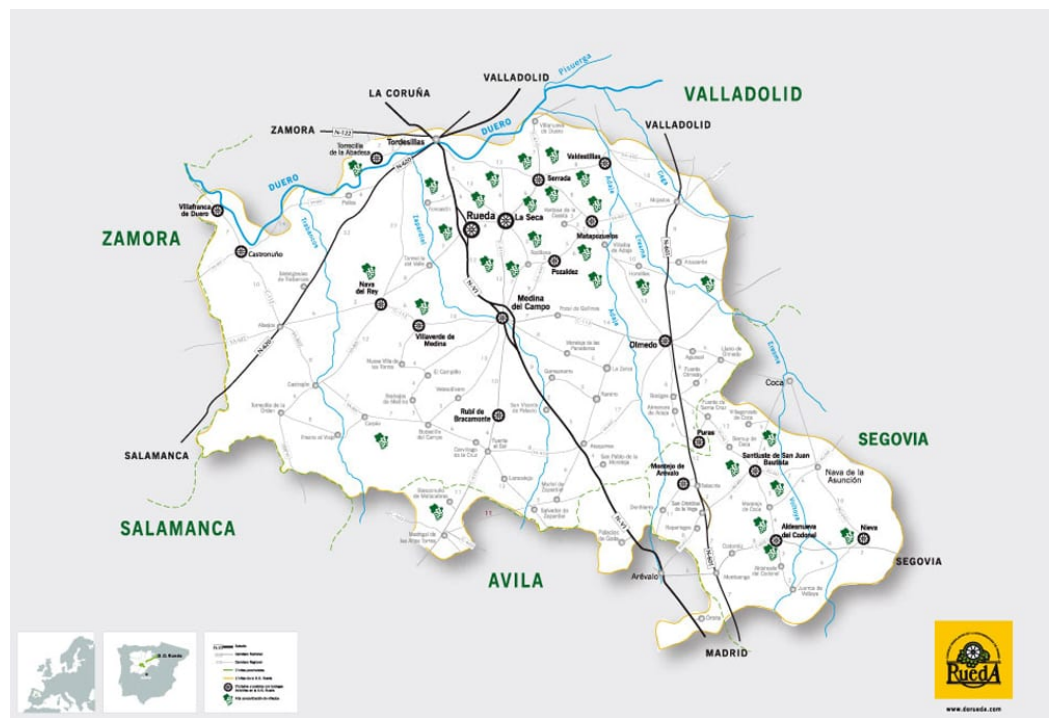
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Rueda DO map

Versatile Verdejo

The grape is versatile: we tasted good traditional-method fizz, the now-rare Dorado – the oxidised, sherry-style wine that was the favourite of the Spanish kings and dominated until the 1970s – even a low-alcohol frizzante and a smart ice-wine style sticky (though the last two aren’t allowed appellation status).

Much of Rueda’s production – which from the 2018 vintage should top 100 million bottles – is intended and destined to be drunk young and fresh, and is a light, crisp and softly aromatic summery wine. Mechanical night-time harvesting and the rapid transfer of the cool grapes to big modern wineries, gleaming with stainless steel, ensure a clean and modern result, priced for supermarkets and other mass sales. Move up a level, and the wines become so much more interesting. Old vines, individual parcel selection and vinification, time spent on lees, barrel fermentation and ageing, experiments with concrete eggs or tulips – we saw and appreciated all these, at wineries which spanned the Rueda spectrum.

The first stop took us back in time, to 1899. Some six hectares of the Verdejo vines now tended by the Herrero brothers, Javier, Pepe and Juan, survived phylloxera thanks to the sand between the pebbles of their vineyard, in Segovia province (Rueda DO spans three provinces: Segovia, Avila and, most important, Valladolid). Not all the brothers’ bush vines, or those on another 20 hectares from which they buy in grapes, are 120 years old, but all are *pie franco*, on their own many-decades-old roots, the succession ensured by layering rather than grafting.

Champagne Chile Cognac
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Javier Herrero among 1899 vines

Inside the Herrero winery, its roof a wooden reflection of the waves the wind makes in the cereal fields surrounding the vines, the concentration such antiquity gives is obvious in the three vintages, 2016, 2014 and 2012, we taste of the old vine cuvée, Robert Vedel, named after the brothers' French grandfather. These wines prove the grape's ability to age, and show the characteristic final bitterness that viticulturalist Pepe emphasises marks quality Verdejo. Here, too, is one of the few organic wines of the trip – Janine Vedel 2016 Sauvignon Blanc, which is aromatic and with discreet tropical fruit. While there may not be much fuss generally in the appellation over formal organic certification, the hardness of Verdejo in particular, plus a climate inhospitable to pests and disease, encourages low-chemical growing practice. With an annual production of around 230,000 bottles, Herrero was one of the smaller wineries on the trip. Numbers are big in Rueda!

Javier Sanz full of vinous surprises

At the rather larger Javier Sanz estate in Rueda's Valladolid heartland there are even older vines, planted in 1863 by Javier's great grandfather, Agustín Nanclares. But the rain was making access to the vineyard too slippery to visit them. Instead, there was indoor history: a tour of the old winery with its 19th and early 20th century equipment. Its walls are scored with simple slashes recording the number of loads of grapes received, its stone floor indicates a level of wealth beyond the adobe used by poorer growers. And then came the modern taste of the past. Javier Sanz himself – whose daughter Leticia will be the fifth generation to head the business – has revived Malcorta, a clone of Verdejo abandoned because of its difficulty to harvest, lower yield and later ripening. Now there are five hectares of vines, and since 2012 a pure Malcorta cuvée has come from them. The wine sells out every year, but production will increase only slowly, to preserve quality. We tasted the aromatic, concentrated 2017 and the elegant, lingering 2016.



How it used to be, the old winery at Javier Sanz

There is more history at Javier Sanz – a red from the Colorado grape. Colorado? Rapid Googling of the Robinson/Harding/Vouillamoz *Wine Grapes* ensued, but yielded no result. It is, explained our host Laura González, a previously unknown variety, with present plantings originating from two vines that stood out for their grape colour in the 1863-planted vineyard. Since 2015 enough has been produced for a small commercial release, quickly snapped up – there was none for us to sample.

The red and sweet side of Rueda

Despite its 99 per cent white wine dominance, DO Rueda does allow red wines, with Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Grenache the permitted varieties. Wines from other grapes have to take the regional Castilla y Leon name – also including the second Javier Sanz single-variety red, Bruñal. Another unfamiliar grape, which *Wine Grapes* reckons is a synonym for Portugal's Alfrocheiro: of the eight hectares in Spain, Sanz owns two, said Laura.

All this very much epitomises Sanz: “Our philosophy is based on the conservation of pre-phylloxera vineyards, local grape varieties, and the recovery of varieties that have almost become extinct.”

Plus modern experimentation: we tasted another non-DO wine, Dulce de Invierno, its major component Verdejo picked at normal ripeness, then dried indoors in the dark and finally frozen before the concentrated juice is blended with 20 per cent late-harvest Muscat-like Gorda de Moldavi. Six months in barrel and 12 in bottle follow. It's a classy dessert wine, deep golden in colour, full of candied peel sweetness cut with typical Verdejo acidity and final bitterness – a sweet wine that shows off the character of its principal grape.

A gothic winery

At around 600,000-700,000 bottles-a-year production, Javier Sanz is still towards the smaller end of Rueda production. As is almost-a-million bottles Gotica, a winery which truly lives up to its name.

Maria Jesús de la Hoz began producing her own wines only a decade ago, though the 120 hectares of vineyards were established by her grandparents. Her fascination with all things gothic explains both name and decoration. The buildings may be only ten years old, but even the workmanlike part of the winery has a pointy frieze, while the tasting room is a riot of carved and painted woodwork and stone, period portraits and religious ornaments.

The wines, though, are serious, and like most of the producers we met, the selection was limited, with the higher-level Verdejo – Gotica's is Trascampanos – showing a great deal more aroma, concentration and length than its entry-level partner.

The modern winery has plenty of room for the planned doubling of production, but I wonder whether Maria will retain her present rather old-fashioned pride in its high electricity consumption. Gotica uses as much as far bigger operations, she

said, arguing for the importance of the power-heavy approach “in the quality of the wines”.



Gotica's tasting room

Ramón Bilbao in Rueda

For now, Ramón Bilbao is in a similar size-league, currently at 800,000-900,000 bottles a year, but here too expansion will surely come soon. The big, smart winery and its associated tourism areas ooze serious investment, as do the regimented vines and their manicured surroundings. Welcoming the wine-drinking public from Spain and beyond, and giving them an engaging and informative experience, is important.

For this new white-wine-only project Ramón Bilbao's bosses have put their confidence in an ambitious and clearly very talented young winemaker from Rioja, Sara Bañuelos, delving deep into the company pockets to provide her with not just a state-of-the art stainless steel main winery but also a project room where barrels from France, Hungary and the US (and soon from Austria and Spain too) sit alongside four 45 hectolitre foudres and four 41 hectolitre concrete tulips with built-in cooling elements. The results are seen in Edición Limitada Lías Verdejo, made from – unusual for Rueda – hand-picked fruit, that comes from the oldest vines on the estate, planted in 1999.

We tasted (and drank with pleasure alongside delicious roast baby lamb) the 2016, the first vintage. It's very well done – fermented in a mix of the Hungarian and French barrels, eight months on the lees, blended, then given at least three months between bottling and release – but to my taste it needed more time for the oak to integrate.

The entry-level Verdejo, entirely made in stainless steel but with three months on lees, is a nicely expressive example (it even incorporates a temperature stamp on the label, turning blue when the wine is sufficiently cool). The Sauvignon, though from very young vines, was one of the most tempting we met, even though Sara admits the vine isn't easy to grow successfully in Rueda. She's aiming for complexity and to create an individual regional style, which seems a challenge here.

The vineyard currently covers 60 hectares, most planted in 2016, 60/40 Verdejo/Sauvignon Blanc.

Sara is confident that Verdejo will continue to do well, even if temperatures rise, arguing that it is very well adapted to a climate that is “hard for the people but very good for the vines”. Looking to the future she'd love to plant Viognier, and perhaps Chardonnay. “We're very young, we're experimenting all the time.”

The big guys

As we met the bigger-league producers, an interesting mix of modernity and tradition appeared. The former was paramount at Diez Silgos, which supplies Rueda Verdejo to UK supermarkets Marks & Spencer and Morrisons. The operation unites 65 growers, but as a limited company rather than in a conventional co-operative format: it's “like a big family” said export manager Miguel Renedo Hidalgo. And it is big: 380 hectares, four million bottles a year produced in an impeccably clean winery (we were enveloped in disposable protective coats and hats before we were allowed inside).



Sara Bañuelos, winemaker at Ramón Bilbao

Big, though, doesn't mean impersonal, and winemaker Sandra Martin Chivite is passionate and charismatic, a huge advocate of Verdejo: "It is an amazing variety. I can make different things with different yeasts, different temperatures. With Verdejo the possibilities are infinite." The first Verdejo we tasted had spent up to six months on lees, with daily stirring, and shows a good concentration and all the right flavours and crispness. Sadly, UK drinkers are, for now, unable to buy the next wine up, the very fine Momento Diez, again a 2017 but from the oldest vines and blended from many different components, some 10 per cent with time in barrel.

It was one of my favourite wines of the trip, sophisticated and elegant and a real pleasure to drink. This was another tasting over lunch, with the Memento Diez served alongside cod in a savoury broth. The new-oak-fermented Diez Siglos X 2014 that followed (with oxtail stew) was impressive and a good foil to the meat's fattiness, but it seemed less special. It should, said Sandra, be kept for two to four years more, "but we need to sell it..."

Here again there is plenty of experimentation, from sparkling wine to an oxidised style produced in small demijohns. "If I only do similar things every year I am very bored," Sandra argued. Two more winemakers work with her, both women, and she makes the point that in Rueda women outnumber men, such a contrast to when she studied in Madrid 25 years ago: "Then 10 per cent were women."

From modern Spain, Marcos Yllera, president of Grupo Yllera, whisked us to ancient Greece, down in the winding cellars cut into the hard clay and limestone 20 metres beneath Rueda town.



Sandra Martin Chivite, winemaker at Diez Siglos



Down in the cellars of Adriane's labyrinth

Wines from the 300 hectares the group owns or controls in the DO are made in a modern winery on the edge of town; El Hilo de Adriane (Adriane's labyrinth) is the tourism and events location. There, Grupo Yllera has opened up a kilometre of the 16th and 17th century cellars (it owns a further two kilometres, and there is much more still to explore, but restoration is pricey) and they form an evocative location for dinners and tastings, even weddings. As visitors wind their way through the brick-lined tunnels, they are transported back in time – different styles of wines evoke appropriate Greek myths and gods, Strauss's *Adriane auf Naxos* is the piped music, the minotaur roars...

Back in the 21st century, we were due to taste what would be the only red wine of the trip. But no, the bottle was missing. Instead, there were two traditional-method sparkling wines, a Verdejo laced with eight per cent Sauvignon Blanc, a pleasantly restrained and balanced pure Sauvignon and a barrel-fermented Verdejo. An intriguing 2018 project will create

a top Verdejo from components made in oak, concrete and polymer eggs, and stainless steel.

Telmo Rodriguez pops up at Palacio de Bornos

Wine tourism is vital, too, to Palacio de Bornos – its shop and tasting area, conveniently sited as traffic from Madrid exits the motorway for Rueda town, has a 2-million-euro annual turnover. The place exudes friendly, rustic charm, in contrast to the very workmanlike winery behind. That has grown in stages over the years and now makes some 5.5 million litres of wine a year, putting Bornos into the top ten of the Rueda production league. There is the capacity to expand to 8 million litres. Walking through, there are surprises. Boxes of Basa? Telmo Rodriguez has a corner where he makes that respected Rueda Verdejo with a touch of Viura, and the eggs we spot are his, too, but it is an entirely separate operation. Then, en route to the next building, the door opens on to an open yard: demi-johns cover just about every spare inch of ground. They are, though, empty, a relic of past Dorado; none is made at the moment.



Christian Bungard with the Palacio de Bornos demi-johns

Palacio de Bornos' big-volume wines, a Verdejo/Viura blend and a straight Verdejo, are good, but again there's much more to enjoy a level up – the single-vineyard La Caprichosa, from 35-year-old vines and with four months on lees. A traditional-method fizz is enjoyable, and, breaking the DO Rueda-only sampling rule, we persuade export director Christian Bungard to open the 5.5 per cent Verdejo Frizzante, an example of the style that is finding a growing market among young Spaniards and whose makers encourage as the first step towards the serious dry wines. The fizz is natural, as fermentation is stopped by cooling, but the 90-gram residual sweetness prompts me to go back to La Caprichosa for the true Verdejo taste to linger on my palate.

Intriguingly, Palacio de Bornos sells more Sauvignon Blanc than Verdejo to the UK. But, as with most of the other producers, UK sales are still small – unlike those in the Netherlands, for example, which imports 1.5 million bottles a year of Bornos Rueda.

Bijou Belondrade Lurton

There's one more producer left to mention, special not simply for being the smallest of all on the trip. Jean Belondrade Lurton, whose father Didier released the first Belondrade y Lurton Verdejo in 1994, is clear in his ambition to create a Bordeaux château-style operation. Take one look at his barrel cellar – it holds the 2018 juice in 396 barriques, from several French forests, from different top coopers – and you're instantly transported 500 kilometres north, to the banks of the Gironde.

Everything is small, precise, perfectionist: the 30-hectare vineyard, tended organically, comprises 22 different plots, the smallest 0.2 of a hectare, the largest 4.6; grapes are hand-picked into 12 kilo crates, with a first selection in the vineyard, the second at the winery – "I want every berry to be perfect," Jean insists. Each plot (even sometimes subdivisions of plots) is vinified separately using natural yeast; no grapes are bought in. All the differences matter: the proportion of pebbles in

the red clay and limestone-based soil, planting pattern, exposition, clones, age of vines. “We always try to magnify diversity.” All but one of the plots are planted with Verdejo, the exception one of Tempranillo, used for a rosé, a tiny part of the estate’s 150,000-bottle production. Yields are around half the Rueda average.

Almost two-thirds of production is destined for Belondrade y Lurton, the top wine. Selection is made after three months in barrel, with the deselected wine being blended with stainless steel-fermented juice for Apolonia, the second wine – named, like the deep rosé Clarisa, after Didier’s two daughters. Neither is RO Rueda. Contents of the chosen barrels are tasted again in the summer following harvest, divided into lots, then moved to stainless steel tanks before the final blending. Six months in bottle follows before release. Belondrade y Lurton is a very serious, long-ageing wine, and all is sold on allocation.

Viticultural and winemaking practice that gives so much choice, Jean argues, is like “painting on a blank canvas”. “The more time I spend here, the more I learn, the more I will be able to push the wine forwards. It is very easy to be a surprise, something different. But it is not so easy to become a reference: that is our next challenge.”



Jean Belondrade Lurton decants the finished product

Major wineries from other Spanish regions flocking in

The very rewarding overview of Rueda Verdejo this trip provided was completed with a tasting of some 25 wines in the DO headquarters. It confirmed that mid-range wines, made with a lot of care, are particularly appealing. It showed, too, the very serious investment that the region is attracting from major wineries based elsewhere in Spain: there were, for example, wines from Marqués de Cáceres and Familia Martínez Bujanda – I particularly liked those from the latter’s Finca Montepedroso. And it was there that, finally, we tasted Dorado.

I hope the efforts currently being made to increase Rueda exports will succeed. Consumers outside Spain could be in for many treats. And if meeting Rueda in the glass tempts more people to visit the area there is much to appreciate, from tiny gems such as the Monasterio de Santa Clara, which was included in our tour, to spectacular churches and cathedrals. Castilla y Leon does, after all, have the largest number of historic monuments of any province in Spain.

By Liz Sagues

UK importers of the wineries visited:

- Herrero: H2Vin
- Javier Sanz: Hallgarten & Novum Wines
- Gotica: Milestone Wines, Robert Anthony Wines
- Ramón Bilbao: Enotria & Coe
- Gruppo Yllera: Corney & Barrow
- Diez Silgos: Boutinot
- Palacio de Bornos: Boutinot, C&D Wines
- Belondrade: Berry Bros & Rudd/Fields, Morris & Verdin

◀ Following a rising star from the east

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