

The high-altitude northern Spanish region has an inhospitable climate but it's the home of some of the country's most interesting white wines – and there's plenty to appeal to specialist independents as well as their multiple rivals.

Liz Sagues reports

Three days on a wine tour in Spain and never a single sip of red wine: what's going on? All is explained by the location: this is Rueda, the country's most important white wine appellation, yet one which falls rather under the radar as far as the UK is concerned.

It shouldn't. The area is big, the production is massive – some 90 million bottles a year, representing more than 40% of Spain's white wine – yet quality matters. Much is drunk locally, but the UK is among the export targets of the DO Rueda Consejo Regulador, alongside such potential giant consumers as China.

Essentially, this is an appellation of a single grape, the native Verdejo. Sauvignon Blanc has influential supporters, and Viura and Palomino Fino are also allowed in the denomination, but Verdejo overwhelmingly predominates, responsible for more than

Icy winds swirl in winter, summer brings sweltering temperatures and a steep day/night variation

85% of 2018's record harvest of 130 million kilos. Crucially, Verdejo creates the individuality in the wines from this high (700m–800m) plateau two hours to the north west of Madrid, where icy winds swirl in winter, summer brings sweltering temperatures and a steep day/night variation ensures acidity as well as ripeness.

Verdejo is tough, and flourishes in adversity – there are plenty of pre-phyloxera survivors, some perhaps 200 years old, their roots deep in the sandy, stony soil. That hardness, and a climate inhospitable to pests and disease, encourages low-chemical growing practices.

In visits to eight wineries, ranging from multi-million-bottle *Dies Sigos*, which supplies two major UK supermarkets, to the niche Bordeaux chateau-style operation of *Beldondrade*, plus a tasting of a broad spectrum from others at the DO headquarters, it was intriguing to see the versatility of the vine. We met traditional-method fizz, even an ice-wine sticky and rare examples of the oxidised Sherry-style stings that was the favourite of Spain's kings and flourished until the 1970s.

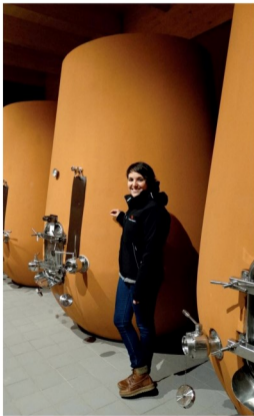
Today, dry and still is the Rueda norm. At the basic, big-scale level the wines are generally easy, fresh and softly aromatic; go small and specialist and there are serious top-category contenders, showing off much investment in individual plot viticultural and new oak. But between these two, where Verdejo is allowed to express its herbal complexity, its serious fruit, its tasty edge of bitterness on a lingering finish, comes something UK consumers most deserve to discover.

Time on lees is crucial in these wines, as is natural or neutral yeast (intriguingly, *Palacio de Bornos* creates its own yeast from winery waste), and the best

A cruel landscape where Verdejo hits the high notes



Above: Javier Sanz at Herrero Vedel
Right: Sara Batuelos and her concrete tulips
Below: Sandra Martín Olivé of Dies Sigos



winemakers will blend from many batches.

Plenty of money is making its way into the area from elsewhere in Spain: Ramón Bilbao, for example, provides an array of barrels, foudres and concrete tulips for winemaker Sara Batuelos's adventurous ambition. But there are other operations with, literally, long roots into the past – such as those pre-phyloxera vines at Herrero Vedel and Javier Sanz, the latter also making palate-rewarding efforts to bring an ancient Verdejo clone, *Malcorta*, back into production.

Wine tourists remain, for the moment, mostly Spanish, but there are efforts to welcome a wider spectrum. One intriguing experience is exploring the labyrinth of man-dog cellars beneath Rueda town that Grupo Ylera has opened up and decorated with a mythological Greek theme. Another is the immersion in all things pointy and painted at *Gotica*.

Outside, the plain may not be as picturesque, but Castilla y León region has Spain's largest concentration of historic monuments, wonderful castles and churches as a cultural foil to vinous pleasure. And the wine and food experience is memorable, the oak-aged whites superb with the signature roast baby lamb. More relevant for the UK is that in Spain, Rueda Verdejo is the second choice, after Rioja, to drink with tapas. ■

UK importers

Beldondrade: FMV
Palacio de Bornos: Boutinot
Ramón Bilbao: Enotria&Coe
Herrero Vedel: HZVin
Javier Sanz: Hallgarten
Grupo Ylera: Corney & Barrow

Liz Sagues visited Rueda as a guest of the Consejo Regulador.