SPAIN’S NEW WAVE OF WHITES

In Galicia, ancient varieties yield distinctive new wines

BY BRUCE SCHOFIELD  PORTRAITS BY FRANÇOIS POINÇET

Galicia is green and wet. Pushing inward from Spain’s Atlantic coast, this westernmost region of Green Spain seems more like the Irish countryside, which was settled some 2,500 years ago by Iberian Celts who left from Galicia’s rocky shores, than like the sun-ripened Spanish wine appellations of Ribera del Duero, Toro and Priorat. Yet Galician wine is following the same path as the wines from these trendy appellations, which have emerged from obscurity to worldwide success. One by one, the winemaking areas of Galicia and of Rías Baixas, just across the border in Castilla y León, are replacing old ways with new, producing better wines and finding markets for them. But unlike the majority of Spain’s best new bottlings, bold reds made from Tempranillo, Garnacha or Syrah, the emerging successes from Galicia are white wines, made from ancient varieties whose distinctive flavor fill the mouth. The Rías Baixas appellation, which hugs the seacoast just north of Portugal, already has gained prominence for its
refreshing Albariños. But Galicia’s four other appellations, Ribeteiro, Ribeira Sacra, Valdeorras and Monterrei, are works in progress. Using some Albariño, but mostly grapes such as Godello and Treixadura that have yet to capture attention outside the area, winemakers are fashioning tangy, high-acid wines stylistically similar to some New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs and Old World Rieslings, yet with flavor profiles all their own. Though often drunk with seafood, they can cut through the spice of a curry, or match the meaty flavors of roasted chicken or pork.

Five producers, spread over four appellations, stand out from the crowd. In Ribeteiro, Javier Alen’s Viña Mein and the iconoclastic Emilio Rojo work nearly within sight of each other, yet have carved out niches in very different corners of the wine business. At Adegas Moure of steep-sloped Ribeira Sacra, vineyard land is divided into dozens of parcels carved into hillocks. Bodegas Godelva all but saved the appellation of Valdeorras and the Godello grape, while Donutino de Tires in Bierzo is making white wine in an appellation gaining attention for its reds.

You won’t find big bodegas or renowned producers represented on these labels. There has been no stream of outside talent, or outside money, to Galicia. Nearly everyone who makes wine here is from here. The learning curve has been steep, but today, Galicia’s white wines are some of Spain’s best. And because they developed from the inside out, they taste like nothing else.

Unlike many of the winemakers and grapegrowers rooted in the region, Javier Alen didn’t inherit a winery. But he did inherit a culture. Galician-born, he was raised in Madrid and trained there as a lawyer, but spent his summers back in Leiro, his ancestral home. Through the years, he drank bulk wine made from Palomino and other ignoble grapes that were prevalent in the region.

In 1988, Alen abandoned law and opened a travel bookstore in Madrid. At about the same time, half as a lark and half because of a midlife crisis, he and some friends bought a disused Leiro winery within sight of his grandparents’ home. They renovated it and planted new vineyards with an idea of resurrecting the Treixadura grape. Once known as “the great white lady,” it had lapsed into oblivion. Gradually, Alen’s partners at Viña Mein fell away. “The winery started as a hobby, but turned into a business,” he says.

These days, he and consulting enologist Emilio Vidal, who also works at the local cooperative and consults for other wineries, turn out more than 8,000 cases annually of Viña Mein bottlings. Now 57, Alen spends weeks at a time in Leiro, where he stays in the home he inherited from his grandmother. He brings to his rows of grapevines the attention to detail he once brought to legal briefs.

Lately Alen has built two hotels in the area, creating the beginnings of a business empire. His wines have exotic flavors, but a smoothness that solicits mass appeal. In his mind, he’s the Robert Mondavi of this corner of northwestern Spain, pulling the Ribeteiro appellation into the modern era.

Yet just around the corner from Alen’s house, the idiosyncratic Emilio Rojo works out of a glorified Quonset hut, deliberately turning his back on modernity. With his brawny mustache and black baseball cap, he is instantly recognizable in wine circles throughout Spain, appearing in magazine photos and attending symposiums. And yet, many Spanish consumers have never actually seen his wine.

Even in his most fecund years, his production is modest by any standard. “Welcome to my kiosk,” he says, opening the door to the two-room, concrete shed that serves as his facility. “This is my labeling area,” he says, motioning toward a piece of cardboard that has been laid atop a plastic crate. A telecommunications engineer until 1992, Rojo quit, spent a year in London, and then three more “relaxing and doing nothing” in Leiro. He took over the winery from his father in 1987 and changed its concept from

Viña Mein’s owner Javier Alen is creating a business empire in Ribeteiro. In the late 1980s, he acquired the winery, near his grandparents’ home where he spent his summers, and has since built two hotels in the region.
bulk wines to tiny quantities of the highest quality. Now 51, he makes a living at it, barely. His wines sell for about $35 a bottle in stores in the United States, startlingly expensive for a Spanish white—but even before expenses, his revenue is meager.

It comes as little surprise that no bottles remain for anyone to taste on site. Instead, Rojo offers visitors refreshment straight from a stainless steel tank. A field blend of five local grapes—Treixadura, Loureiro, Lado, Albariño and Torrontés—the wine will remain unfurled, and a quarter of the 5,000-cold liters will be aged in new oak before the final blend is made. The result, year after year, is a complex and delicate wine that can be found on the wine lists of some of Spain’s best restaurants, including Michelin three-stars El Bulli, Arañón and Can Fabes, and in the United States, which gets an allotment of 50 cases annually.

Despite his critical success, or perhaps because of it, Rojo has no interest in planting new vines, not even on the patch of empty land that sits above his terraced vineyard. “My goal is to make less wine, not more,” he says. “I’d rather have a vineyard with five vines than 5,000.” Believe it or not, he has exactly that: a row of five lonely vines on a strip of soil that his wife’s parents used to own. Its existence expresses his philosophy better than any mission statement or marketing brochure ever could. But Rojo’s scale of production fits Galicia. These aren’t appellations suited for large-scale winemaking.

Heading east from Ribeira, past the city of Orense, the Miño River cuts a deepening gorge in the countryside, and the individual plots get even smaller. In Ribeira Sacra, which means “sacred riverside” in the regional language Gallego, the slope is so steep that in some places the harvested grapes have to be hauled away by boat. Nearly 3,000 acres of vineyards are scattered over five subzones of the crescent-shaped appellation (formally established in 1995), which hugs the Miño and Sil river valleys from Castelo in the north past Quiroga in the east.

“No Álvaro Palacios could come here and buy 10 acres of vineyards,” says Xosé Manuel Moure, 48, of Adegaes Moure, referring to one of Spain’s top winemakers. “See that hillside? That’s 7 acres, and it took me three years to get it.” To do it, Moure says, he had to negotiate with 23 separate owners of various parcels of land. “One lived in Argentina, one in Barcelona, one in Switzerland. I’m their neighbor. I was born here, I know them. Imagine what it would be like for an outsider?”

Moure’s vineyards exist as more than 20 different levels of terraces cut into a picturesque hillside above a sharp bend in the Miño. In the midst of the vines, a swimming pool reflects the sky. It is both a manifestation of how hot this verdant area can get in the summer (as high as 110°F in some years), and a symbol, Moure says, of how well one can live here if he combines hard work with a plan.

In 1982, Moure became the first winery owner outside Rias Baixas to plant Albariño. An area that had subsisted for years on field blends of the red grapes Mencia and Alicante Bouschet and the white Palomino was ready to come to life. In the two decades that followed, Adegaes Moure grew into the largest winery in Ribeira Sacra, making 10,000 cases a year (mostly Mencia) under the Abadia da Gova label.

Moure, who studied enology in Madrid, makes the wine, with the ubiquitous Emilio Vidal as a consultant. Their Albariño bottling contains 15 percent Godello, while the Godello—smoother, rounder, with similarly bracing grapefruit notes yet less of an acidity edge—contains 15 percent Albariño. It is a felicitous pairing that makes both wines more interesting than single-variety wines would be.

Moure’s Godello comes from purchased grapes grown in the sub-appellation of Quiroga, on Valdeorras’ border. It is not idle boasting to say, as Moure does, that the finest Godello in the world is grown in Valdeorras and on Quiroga’s nearby hills. Mostly, though, that’s because this grape is nearly impossible to find anywhere else. And it might have been impossible in Valdeorras, too, had a government employee named Horacio Fernández, now a robust 72, not decided to save the wine industry in his adopted region.

Xosé Manuel Moure owns the largest winery in Ribeira Sacra, Adegaes Moure. He was the first producer outside Rias Baixas to plant Albariño, which he blends with Godello, another grape native to Galicia.
Thirty miles northeast, across the border into Castilla y León, prized vines at least 85 years old dot the undulating countryside. Some are random, like oil wells on the Oklahoma plains. This is Bierzo, where Alvaro Palacios actually did go to start a winery. Helped by names like his and that of Matias Paella, who makes great Riojas, Bierzo has evolved more slowly than Galicia's appellations—"thanks to them, the specialized press has come here," says Antonio Fernandez, a winemaker and partner at the four-year-old winery Domínio de Tares.

Not that they're coming for white wine. The main attraction in Bierzo is the Mencia grape, which has some Cabernet Franc-like characteristics, some Pinot Noir-like characteristics and some traits wholly its own. Fernandez was working at Bodegas Peñafiel in Ribera del Duero when he and some friends had the idea to move to Bierzo and help resurrect Mencia. "Godello wasn't the money, just something on the side," he says. "To us, it was a discovery."

Fernandez, 33, was born in Bierzo, but grew up from the age of 4 in Portugal, the oldest town in Bierzo. You can't say he's some age drinking Godello, because nobody did. As in the appellations to the west, small growers looking to sell wine in bulk pulled out vines and replaced them with something the market place wanted, usually Palomino. Either that, or they gave up. The hillsides across the road from the modern industrial park that houses the salmon-colored Domínio de Tares winery were once covered with Godello vines; only a few remain.

With the success of Fernandez's Godello, made mostly from new plantings and fermented in barrel, more will come. "Our Godello makes a very complex wine," he says. "Not as fresh as its Valdeorras, but more potent, bigger in the mouth. Little by little, the world will find it." He grabs a bottle and sets out for a nearby restaurant, prepared to pour it with fish, with the heavier foods of this landlocked region, or with whatever else might come its way.

It isn't a covered bottle, not yet. With the possible exception of Ennio Roja, who makes so little wine that it is invariably hard to find, none of these wines have attained the cult status of Spain's latest generation of rds. Sometimes, perhaps, interest will grow for these fresh, bright yet nuanced wines of Galicia and Bierzo. If that happens, these wines, like the top California Cabernets and white Burgundies and the prosciutto of the Ria Borsos Aversa, will become wines for special occasions.

In a sense, that makes drinking them near as nothing at all. "It is a wine in the shadows, a white grape in the land of reds," Fernandez says of his Godello. "That it will emerge."