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Winery Design in Rioja and Ribera del Duero

WSET Study Trip to Rioja & Ribera del Duero: 26th-29th March 2007

Driving through the mountains of the Rioja Alta, I found it difficult to assimilate the incredible scenery. Rioja was as dramatic as Ribera was engaging and both seemed to be ideal destinations for wine tourism. Given my preconceptions of the region being traditional and old-fashioned, I had no great expectations for the wineries being prepared for such a future. The WSET study trip in March 2007 certainly proved me wrong. I was amazed to see the level of technology used at all the bodegas we visited and how thoroughly innovative much of the area now is. The modern, forward-thinking ideology fuelling many of the producers seemed often to be reflected by the futuristic design of the wineries themselves which, seamlessly entwined in local heritage as they were, I came to see as fascinating symbols of 'The New Spain'.

The first winery we visited, Bodegas Faustino, was clearly an example of a traditional Rioja winery. Much as I had expected, the winery buildings were built in the local style and the enormous entrance gateway proudly proclaimed the historical achievement of the brand Faustino. The winery itself, however, was impressively modern inside with stainless steel fermentation tanks aplenty, including two 500,000 litre tanks, and a large barrel cellar storing 45,000 barrels. The dark bottle cellars were carved out of the rock underneath the visitors centre and were kept naturally cool by the thick Spanish stone of the building in a very traditional fashion. Upon tasting the wines, it was clear that they made in a traditional style, reflecting my impressions of the winery hardly surprising given that Faustino is the biggest exporter of Rioja in the region and was the first to begin exporting its wines in the 1960s.



Bodegas Faustino – visitor centre and entrance gateway

However, there were some surprising elements to the visit to Faustino that indicated that even this stalwart of traditional Rioja was not averse to modernity. Modern, silicon barrel closures were used to maintain freshness in storing the wines rather than the traditional cork bung; Chardonnay was used alongside Viura in Faustino Cava Brut and, amazingly, Faustino-owned brand Campillo, produced in a winery just a few miles down the road, was softened by an addition of 8% Cabernet Sauvignon as well as 50-50 use of American and French oak. However, nothing surprised me more than to find out that the group had just commissioned British architect, Norman

Foster, to design new winery for Faustino's Bodegas Portia in neighbouring Ribera del Duero. The modern design, pictured below, is certain to alter Faustino's current image as a traditional symbol of old Rioja and launch it firmly into the 21st Century.



Lord Foster's design for the Bodegas Portia winery in Ribera del Duero as viewed on www.guardian.co.uk/spain/article/0,,2087902,00.html

Dramatically opposed to the traditional buildings of Faustino was the incredible, ultra-modern winery and boutique hotel of Bodegas Marqués de Riscal, designed by American architect Frank Gehry. Based in the picturesque village of Elciego, near Cenicero, the fantastic design of the hotel was something to either love or hate, so out of place as it was in its quaint surroundings. Famed for his design of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Gehry's futuristic structure dominated the surrounding landscape. This is what Riscal refer to as the *Ciudad del Vino*, or City of Wine, which consists of the winery, the hotel, a banqueting hall, a museum and 'wine therapy' spa centre. (I didn't like to ask exactly what was involved in 'wine therapy' but almost certainly it was along more holistic lines than my interpretation of such a term.)



Hotel Marques de Riscal (viewed from the winery)

The unusual hotel was designed to reflect its surroundings, albeit abstractly. The red and gold titanium panels folding over the roof symbolise flowing wine and reflect blue sky on a sunny day, integrating the building into the landscape. The local church in Elciego was also deemed to be central to the design with most views overlooking the historic monument and the structure itself was juxtaposed on top of the old winery, reiterating the link between heritage and modernity. The new winery was equally impressive. 151 fermentation tanks were

controlled by just 3 members of staff, with push-button control over all functions of the fermentation tanks. The tanks were on the top level of a building of three floors, with a natural gravity drop to the floor below to the malolactic tanks directly underneath. With great emphasis placed on their brand new sorting table and strict vineyard controls, Marqués de Riscal pride themselves on the quality their wines, aided by no-expense-spared winery equipment and heavy investment.



Fermentation tanks at Marqués de Riscal, controlled by the latest modern technology.

The winery and hotel were clearly symbols of Riscal's pioneering philosophy, taking Rioja forward into the 21st Century. The company certainly promotes itself as one of the most innovative bodegas in Rioja and is proud to have helped to create the neighbouring Rueda D.O. having started the trend for young, fresh fruity aromatic wines from that area in the sixties. Wine tourism is the new path and is an increasing industry here. This expensive, deluxe hotel in the middle of rural Spain has been specifically designed as a first-class holiday destination to bring new visitors to the region. Unsurprisingly we were told that it was very popular among rich Americans; a very clever marketing tool to promote Bodegas Marqués de Riscal to the most lucrative export market for Rioja wine.

The importance of wine tourism to the future of Spanish wine had also been seized upon by Bodegas Dinastía Vivanco in Rioja and Bodegas Legaris and Emina in Ribera del Duero. All were well-equipped for tourists with visitor centres and exhibitions. Dinastía Vivanco however was on a different level to the others with an enormous and truly fascinating wine museum. This must have been a huge investment for the company but they too have cleverly set themselves up as a must-see destination for visitors to the area. Having walked through five different exhibition halls and standing on a platform overlooking their impressive octagonal barrel cellar, the tour finishes with a tasting of their wine and even perhaps lunch or dinner in the top-class restaurant overlooking the medieval town of Briones. Heritage and innovation combined yet again.

One bodega which did not so obviously reflect its local heritage was Bodegas Juan Alcorta, home of Campo Viejo. This was an astonishing winery, albeit on an industrial scale. Cut out of the mountainside, production took place in vast, underground, James Bond villain-style caverns. 327 fermentation tanks, including twelve of 500,000 litre capacity, stretched as far as the eye could see in the eerie, half-light. The barrel cellars were equally enormous with 70,000 barrels looked after by only two staff per shift whilst only a maximum of four were needed at any one time in the winery. Fewer staff may be an inevitable result of greater advances in technology but it was incredible just how few people were needed to run this bodega out of season. Nonetheless, Juan Alcorta was by far my least favourite winery to visit, despite the breathtaking scale of the operation. It was

certainly an impressive installation but there was something very cold and clinical about this level of mass production that did not fit in with my image of Rioja. However, it could not have illustrated more clearly the commercial importance of popular modern Rioja brands.



Bodegas Juan Alcorta – fermentation tanks and barrel cellar.

Diametrically opposed to the winery of Juan Alcorta was that of Bodegas Miguel Merino, owned and run by the affable and instantly likable Miguel Merino himself. Miguel's winery was essentially in two large sheds and his five fermentation tanks seemed enormous in the small space. Yellow picking baskets lined the walls as he entertained us by explaining how all the neighbours help out at picking time and sort the grapes by separating them into 'heaven' for the finest wines, 'hell' for those which will be discarded and 'purgatory' for the average grapes which are then all used to make a wine which is given to the neighbours as payment for their hard work at the vintage. Traditional methods and yet Miguel himself was certainly an innovator producing superb, luscious wines which were thoroughly modern and yet also true to the classic Rioja style. Among his ongoing experiments was a 100% Mazuelo and wines matured in Hungarian oak. His winery may not have been a dramatic or impressive building and yet Miguel Merino's small-production wines were among the finest we tasted; and he could not have been a better ambassador for the region.

From an architectural perspective however, my two favourite wineries were those of Bodegas Remírez de Ganuza in Rioja and Bodegas Abadía Retuerta in Ribera del Duero. Remírez de Ganuza was on a much smaller scale than the Abadía whose beautiful, large 12th Century abbey dominated the landscape. However the wonderful aspect of Remírez de Ganuza's winery was that it was completely disguised, looking simply like an attractive old farm on the edge of a lovely little village. The bodega had bought the buildings a few years earlier and made painstaking efforts to retain the character of the location. The winery equipment was discreetly stored and the barrel cellar was hidden from view, directly beneath the courtyard on which we stood. Nevertheless, despite the traditional exterior, innovation was key to Remírez de Ganuza's philosophy. Their lovely wines were produced by some very experimental methods, including a pioneering slow pressing technique called 'trasnocho' used only to make their top cuvée and various experimentations with different sizes of barrels, which meant that those wines were not permitted by the D.O. They also did much experimentation with cork, immersing many different varieties in water and heating them to 35°C to test which were more prone to TCA.



Bodegas Remírez de Ganuza



The winery at Bodegas Abadía Retuerta

Bodegas Abadía Retuerta however took winery design to a completely different level. Just a few kilometres down the road from Vega Sicilia, the Abadía's winery was quite spectacular. Reminiscent of a Victorian powerstation inside, it had been carefully designed to ensure complete simplicity and minimal-interventionist winemaking. The Abadía's vineyards consisted of 54 separate plots, so there were 54 fermentation tanks, one per plot, with another 54 sister tanks for malolactic fermentation directly beneath. Gravity flow was the priority at all times with a strange loose tank, referred to as the 'Identified Flying Object', that was filled with wine from the bottom of the tank and then carried to the top to carry out the gentlest pumping over possible. Even the barrels were filled and racked by gravity flow, a unique trait of this winery in Spain. The humidity and temperature-controlled barrel cellar was hidden underground with the barrels remaining in exactly the same spot throughout the maturation period so as to keep them undisturbed. The greatest of care is also taken in the vineyards to ensure that only the finest fruit is produced, with no less than 14 airflow indicators throughout the plots to warn of frost hazards and these have proven to be so useful that Vega Sicilia have recently bought four for their neighbouring vineyards. Sadly however, the region is under threat with a proposed motorway due to cut through the vineyards of the Abadía Retuerta and Vega Sicilia among others. The plans have been approved by the government so all hope now rests in an online petition (www.savetheduero.com) to hold back this potential disaster.

The variation in designs of the wineries we visited on our trip was quite fascinating and clearly demonstrated the modern technology and innovative philosophies that are widespread in these regions. No longer will I consider Spain to be a bastion of tradition over modernity. Heritage and innovation exist side by side at the majority of the bodegas with evident respect and pride for the former and enthusiasm for the latter. This careful balance is, in my opinion, a superb example for all winemaking regions to follow. It would be a tragedy indeed if modernity wins the battle in Ribera del Duero and destroys such a valuable part of this region's winemaking heritage.

Wineries Visited

In Rioja :-

- ? Bodegas Faustino
- ? Bodegas Marqués de Riscal
- ? Bodegas Miguel Merino
- ? Bodegas Legaris
- ? Bodegas Emina
- ? Bodegas Abadía Retuerta

In Ribera del Duero :-

- ? Bodegas Dinastía Vivanco
- ? Bodegas Remírez de Ganuza
- ? Bodegas Juan Alcorta



Bodegas Abadía Retuerta – looking towards the Abbey over the vineyards under threat
