

The changing face of Rioja and Ribera del Duero

With the 'new Spain', 'new wave' Riojas and the affirmation of Ribera del Duero as a fine wine region in its own right, it seems appropriate to examine the outward image that these wineries and regions present. Serious study or work visits aside, wine tourism is gradually beginning to take hold; especially in Rioja long established as the premier region of the country. Producers are notable for their hospitality and generosity in sharing their wines, time and experience. Those of Rioja and Ribera del Duero are no exception; but what message overt or otherwise are they imparting and does it accord with any wider strategy?

Just as brands are the route into Rioja for many consumers, the producers behind two of the most famous – Faustino and Juan Alcorta provide a good introduction to the style and substance of Rioja producers. Faustino with its deliberately antiquarian labelling, frosted bottles, numbered range all represent a deeply traditional route to market for its products. Consumer recognition, international sales, and the profit to build/ buy up other wineries in the region and beyond are all testament to the success of the Group commercially. Quality and consistency for Faustino were achieved by close relationships with producers to encourage low yields, technical analysis on each batch, before consigning it into larger groups of homogenous must to be fermented en mass together. Ageing in excess of the minimum was stressed as being part of the formula that led to Faustino's appeal. However the winemaking equipment and philosophy came across as slightly dated, with other producers such as Juan Alcorta preferring to vinify parcels separately and combine later.

Juan Alcorta is the Rioja outpost of Pernod-Ricard and was essentially a hollowed out hill above Logrono which could vinify and mature a prodigious quantity of Rioja each year, with minimum human intervention. Fermentation halls stretched into the distance with computer controlled must direction, pumping over, and cooling all controlled from a single console. Even the fork lift driver had been replaced by a robot. Our PR Raoul could tell us the total fermentation capacity in litres, the length of piping in kms, and the precise number of barrels, but on issues such as vineyard ownership, relationships with growers and the human opinion in winemaking there was less forthcoming.

Boutique producers such as Miguel Merino represented a contrasting approach, one of open minded empiricism and fanatical obsession with quality. Humorously describing his sorting process as leading to heaven hell & purgatory which he would dispose of accordingly - either selling off, distributing to his helpers or elaborating into his premium wines. Whilst his style may have been rustic; seemingly self-effacing about the relative success of his haphazard approach to wine making, each of his decisions were in fact deeply empirical; based on small batch trials. The message throughout quality conscious producers in Rioja when asked to explain their success was somewhat standard; low yields, pick in small boxes, crop selection, ferment in parcels, elaborate in oak well matched to the wine. What obviously differed in this case was the extent of personal care and attention. Remirez de Ganuza achieved a similar quality by even more extreme means, grapes were chilled on picking before severe triage, and then fermented in an array of stainless steel and wood, before using only free run juice to produce their 'standard' wine. The ir prestige product Trasnocho was actually press wine ingeniously pressed from inside the fermentation vat by a water filled bladder. The focus in the barrel hall was then on pristine cleanliness to allow their admittedly fantastically intense wines to express themselves.

Rioja whilst an established fine wine region is still obviously in flux as producers debate and experiment as to the best way to achieve their potential. A combination of boutique methods and large scale production would seem ideal, but few manage to combine quality, quantity and cost effectiveness relative to their retail price points. Marques de Riscal however did, and thrown in with the justified

arrogance of a first growth and the wider business sense to maximise their justified reputation in wine tourism as well as production. On arrival the PR Director was incredulous that we would attempt to tour Riscal in hours, but did her best. Whilst the architecture of Frank Gehry may have made a great hotel our focus was really on the winery, and we were not to be disappointed. Riscal were the first to introduce manual triage on such a vast scale, and their winery equipment was as up to date as could be expected. The overriding impression was one of wealth, the takeover of half the village of Elciego, the establishment of a wine spa/fine dining restaurant/hotel, all leading to a sense of overriding opulence and confidence.

Ribera del Duero painted a different picture to Rioja; one more proactively seeking to establish itself as a fine wine region in its own right. Whilst the icon wines of Ribera may command high prices, bringing the reputation of the region and its wines on par with Rioja is still a work in progress. Emina was not just a winery with attempts at tourist/consumer education – but a wine interpretation centre. Cellar door sales were more actively courted than in Rioja. Emina in particular seemed relatively unsure of itself, its new building combining with a winemaker relatively new to the job and unsure of where his wines sat amongst his competitors. Ribera was clearly attracting investment, in large quantities and channelled with varying degrees of effectiveness. Down the road at Legaris, the regional outpost of Codorniu the picture and approach couldn't have been more different. The role of the Codorniu family should not be down played in this, with both the expertise and funds to permit deliberate, high quality long term views on winemaking, as their other icon estates such as Raimat show. Legaris was architecturally symbolic of what they wanted to achieve, with all aspects of production being viewable by visitors with ease, set in a striking white square of modernity gracing the valley. The technical approach has been extended to the vineyard, with limited irrigation, frost spraying, and humidity sensors relaying the state of the vines to the winery. Relatively small scale, Codorniu were looking to establish the brand and production as well as waiting for suitable parcels of land became available.

Finally Abadia Retuerta, a Vino de Tierra represented a fantastical approach to wine growing and making. Owned by Novartis, a Swiss pharmaceutical group critical acclaim had encouraged wine production to be followed up as a business in its own right as well as an executive retreat. The 12<sup>th</sup> Century abbey may have been the symbolic heart of the estate, but driving through the vineyards up the hill we happened upon an equally amazing monument, to quality in wine production at seemingly any cost. Gravity is oft touted as desirable over pressure in moving must/grapes about; few have taken it to extent of carrying all must/wine by crane in stainless steel vessels – identified flying objects after the flying saucers they resembled, so that no point would wine do anything more troubling than flow to the container directly beneath it. The barrel cellar was no exception, spacious, humidified to the precise degree, it facilitated the elaboration of these wines perfectly. Vinification was of course by parcel and then subsequently blended into an array of styles unofficially corresponding to Vino Joven, Crianza, Reserva together with many premium, blends often of international varieties. Most striking in these wines was the absolutely precision, purity and sense of purpose at all price points from 3 to 30 Euros.

Rioja and Ribera are exciting on many levels, the combination of tradition & innovation, of commercial success facilitating further development in production, architecture, tourism and wider brand building of the regions. Individual producers justified their efforts with more or less conviction. Recognising that fortunes of the region and the individual are inextricably linked is perhaps the next stage in the evolution of these regions, with Consejgalo Reguladors having the potential to promote their collective fortunes as well as discipline and regulate their constituents. With Wines of Spain doing their best to improve the collective lot of the entire industry, regional association and cross

promotion would seem to be ever more important. Rioja and Ribera are powerful names, but a region must be much more than if it is to survive and prosper in today's competitive market.

Adam Porter

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Wineries visited:

Faustino – Cellar Trends, London Almudena

<http://www.bodegasfaustino.com/> info@bodegasfaustino.es

Marques de Riscal – Laurent Perrier, Marlow PR Ruth Sutton

<http://www.marquesderiscal.com/new/index.php>

Miguel Moreno – TBC – no agent? No PR info@miguelmerino.com

Remirez de Ganuza – Paul Cheney Vintners PR Luis Alberto Martinez

<http://www.remirezdeganuz.com/> fernando@remirezdeganuz.com

Bodegas Juan Alcorta – Allied Domecq or Pernod Ricard PR Rauol

<http://www.domecqbodegas.com/caste/bodegas/index.php?bodega=alcorta>

info@domecqbodegas.com

Legaris – Codorniu UK PR Belen

<http://www.legaris.com/LEGARIS/index.html>

<http://www.groupcodorniu.com/GCV1/index.html>

info@legaris.com

Emina – Agent TBC – PR Christina Winemaker Carlos

<http://www.emina.es/es/02valoraquitect.html>

[enoturismo@emina.es](mailto:enoturismo@emina.es)

Abadia Retuerta – Liberty Wines – PR Rebecca

<http://www.abadia-retuerta.com/default.asp?lang=en>

[info@abadia-retuerta.es](mailto:info@abadia-retuerta.es)