Some top Spanish wines - 2003

22 Nov 2004 by JR

The most impressive wine of a 54-wine line-up of Spain's best earlier this month was made mainly from a grape I had barely heard of, Callet, a native Mallorcan.

Àn Tinto 2001 is one of those wines that pierce the wine taster's cranium with a direct and exciting combination of quality and unfamiliarity - similar to that experienced on first tasting, for example, the southern Italian grape Aglianico (now proved, contrary to centuries of supposition, to have no known Greek relatives).

From the tiny 10-year-old Ánima Negra bodega at Felanitx in south-east Mallorca, the thrilling red Àn Tinto 2001 is serious, meaty, but obviously attractive and refreshing. Round but not sweet, it already has enormous allure for such a young wine as well as obvious integrity; this is no carbon copy of a famous international style. There's a certain dustiness at the end of the tasting experience, but I suppose dust could be said to be a characteristic of this Balearic island.

According to the background notes for this well-organised tasting in Madrid, the wine also contains a little Manto Negro, Mallorca's best-known grape variety (what? you had never heard of it?) plus an equally obscure native, Fogoneu, a barely fermented sample of which was brought from under the tasting table by the *bodega*'s curly-haired young Miquelangelo Cerdá.

Oh, and the wine does not even qualify for an official Spanish wine *appellation*, DO or *Denominación de Origen*. This is pretty typical of the current wine revolution in Spain where there is no shortage of uncharted territory for the vine. Spain has a greater area of vineyard than any other country in the world but has only recently become truly excited about wine. One of many results is the rediscovery of these proud indigenous grape varieties. Another is that ambition, money and technology have been flowing (in that order) in to all sorts of Hispanic nooks and crannies so that the Spanish wine map needs to be redrawn almost on a monthly basis. A third is the rapid development of wine as a serious leisure interest for better-heeled Spaniards.

Thus it was that I found myself in the Palace Hotel fighting my way between elegant Madrileños towards bottles containing the 35 'three-seal' wines nominated by *La Guia 2004*. This happens to be the newest of several annual Spanish wine guides but the one most obviously trying to emulate the hugely successful Gambero Rosso annual guide to *Italian Wines* with its coveted *tre bicchiere* (three glass) awards.

Its Spanish counterpart *La Guia 2004* was published last week by TodoVino, a three-year-old Madrid-based distance-selling wine company, brainchild of ex-McKinsey, ex-stockbroker Gonzalo Verdera. Succumbing to the wine bug, he is trying to capitalise on Spain's newfound passion for wine. 'We want to promote wine culture which is new to Spain,' he told me, as his staff set up the tasting tables for each garlanded producer, a miniature TV studio in the corner of the salon, and the regulation banks of Riedel crystal tasting glasses before the arrival of guests at this second annual tasting, members of several wine clubs with TodoVino involvement.

'We're trying to communicate the big changes that are taking place both inside and outside Spain,' he told me, still looking very much more finance than fermentation man. 'But what the Spanish wine industry lacks is any sense of what it wants to do when it grows up. We have some products competing directly with New World wines and others that follow the traditional model.'

To judge from the three-seal wines selected by TodoVino's panel of prominent Spanish tasters, *La Guia* certainly favours the new above the old. There are remarkably few representatives from Rioja's more cobwebbed *bodegas* and far more of the recent investments in Spain's widely dispersed wine regions. In fact six of the guide's top 35 *bodegas* have been founded in the last five years.

But the selection of three-seal wines (supplemented in many cases by other special wines brought to Madrid by their proud makers) was not just a gaggle of slick copies of international styles. While the Gambero Rosso Italian selection is open to the charge that wines from recently planted Merlot and Cabernet vines are sometimes deemed more glamorous than 100 per cent Italian wines, the great majority of *La Guia*'s favourites are made from Spanish grape varieties, mainly the classic Tempranillo in its various forms. And such Merlots and Cabernets as there are tend to be from vines imported

many years ago such as Enrique Mendoza's in Alicante and various representatives from the north-east of the country.

That said, the guide is basically a guide to beefy red wine (and excludes the rarest, most sought-after bottlings such as Pingus and L'Ermita from its ratings). It could muster three-seal enthusiasm for just two dry whites (Pazo de Señorans top 2002 Albariño and a rather too oaky Viña Mein from Ribeiro), one sparkling Cava (Torelló's 'amphora'-bottled Kripta) and one sweet white (Chivite's remarkably consistent late harvest Moscatel). Verdera obviously feels a twinge of guilt that his guide ignores Spain's unique sherry heritage but uses the excuse that sherry does not come in clearly-identifiable, vintage-dated bottlings.

The relationship between the annual guide and TodoVino the retailer is an odd one. The Guide details a total of nearly 650 wines it believes represent Spain's best, but TodoVino sells only about a fifth of them, plus a further 50 or so wines that are not in the guide. Thus, although wine lovers even in Britain, for example, are free to buy directly from www.todovino.com (now that the company has agreed to comply in full with the demands of Her Majesty's Customs & Excise), they will not find it a direct line to all of the wines deemed best by its sister publication.

Furthermore, the popularity of Spain's best wines with the likes of my fellow tasters in Madrid has tended to boost prices at the top end to levels which many non-Spanish wine lovers find unacceptably high. Even despite the evident dramatic rise in wine quality in Spain and what one might call the El Bullí gastro-boost, it may be a while before fine Spanish wine is as widely accepted internationally as all those Barolos and Brunellos are thanks to the army of Italian restaurants around the world.

My favourite three-seal reds

Listed in alphabetical order by producer, then wine name

- Abadía Retuerta, Pago Valdebellón 2000
- Álvaro Palacios, Finca Dofí 2001 Priorat
- Anima Negra, An 2001
- Leda, Viñas Viejas 2001
- Clos Mogador 2001 Priorat
- Telmo Rodríguez, Altos de Lanzaga 2001 Rioja
- Señorío de San Vicente, San Vicente 2000 Rioja
- Contino Viña del Olivo 2000

For full tasting notes on 50+ top Spanish wines see purple pages.