Ribera del Duero

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

This barren plateau between Valladolid and Aranda, self-styled roast lamb capital of the world, is currently producing some of Spain's most admired red wines, to the continuing amazement of the peasant farmers who have lived on the banks of the Duero river for generations. Downstream and over the Portuguese border, their counterparts farm port grapes in what is known as the Douro Valley. But whereas port has been famous for three centuries, the wines of Ribera del Duero are a relatively recent phenomenon.

Only at the end of the 19th century did one producer, now called Vega Sicilia, gain some sort of recognition for the intensity of its wines. And it was not until the mid 1980s that another, an agricultural machinist Alejandro Fernández of Bodegas Pesquera, managed to establish the region as a viable source of high-quality, long-lived, concentrated, deep-coloured wines. The DO classification was not granted until 1982 and since then there has been an invasion of investors keen to transform often highly unsuitable parts of this high plateau into profitable wine production centres.

It is the altitude, about 2,000 feet, which keeps nights cool and extends the grape ripening process until well into October, sometimes November in a particularly cool year. This means that the grapes are harvested with very high levels of colour and flavour. Most of the vines grown are the locally adapted version of **Tempranillo** - which is so common here it is called simply Tinto (red) Fino or Tinto del País - but Cabernet Sauvignon, imported as far back as 1864 at Vega Sicilia, Garnacha, Merlot and Malbec are also permitted. Rot rarely threatens in the crisp dry air of this table land with its little mesas and clumps of umbrella pines. Spring and even autumn frosts, on the other hand, are a perennial danger. This is sweater country; it has nothing whatever in common with Spain's popular Mediterranean image though it gets pretty hot (35 degrees C) in the middle of a summer day. Flocks of long-haired sheep are still driven along the main roads.

A high proportion of the locals have always made some wine for their own consumption. Almost all of those with some to spare used to sell it to the co-operative in Peñafiel in the centre of the region. But since Pesquera became a cult wine in Madrid and the United States, all manner of bodegas have sprouted up, some of them showing the same sort of vibrant potential as Pesquera but many of them clearly opportunists rather than skilled winemakers and some producing decidedly overpriced wines. By the turn of the century, there were well over 100 bodegas (there had been 24 when the DO was created in 1982), typically financed by investors from Madrid, or at least far outside the region. Most of these edifices are prominently situated by a main road, several are of mysterious ownership and many without any obvious source of grapes or wine. As in Rioja less than two hours' drive away to the north east, in Ribera del Duero grape-growing is largely in the hands of peasant farmers who can find themselves in a commanding position in terms of grape prices. (This has led to the same sort of irritating price fluctuations as in Rioja.)

It is small wonder therefore that the region's most admired winemakers such as Dane Peter Sisseck of the fabulously priced Dominio de Pingus and the slightly more affordable Hacienda del Monasterio, are extremely reticent about where exactly they source their finest grapes. It is generally agreed however that soils here vary enormously, even within a single vineyard. White limestone outcrops, most common north of the river, can be useful in retaining such little rain as falls here in the summer. Rain at vintage time however is a perennial threat and vintages can vary enormously in quality.

The correlation between price and quality within this DO is particularly variable here but Aalto, Alion (owned by Vega Sicilia), Alonso del Yerro, Emilio Moro, Pago de Carraovejas, Pesquera, Dominio de Pingus and of course Vega Sicilia have all produced some fine wine in their time.

Thanks to a policy of maturing wine in small barrels for years longer than any other producer I know, Vega Sicilia produces a very individual, and necessarily expensive style of Ribera del Duero (now supplemented by the faster maturing Alión wines). In 1995, for example, Vega Sicilia launched its finest bottling, Unico, from the 1970 vintage (as well as magnums of its legendary 1968). Even the lesser Valbuena bottlings were matured in wood for up to five years. Although troubled by the effects of a noxious wood treatment in the 1990s, Vega Sicilia now clearly has impeccable cellar techniques in both the completely renovated original winery and its newer Alión bodega.

Pesquera's modern style of bottling the wine after just three or four years in cask is more commonly adopted by the newcomers - for obvious financial reasons, but also probably because the livelier style of the wine itself finds more favour

with modern wine drinkers. If Vega Sicilia first brought this mountain region to the notice of the world's wine lovers, it was Alejandro Fernández who spawned today's rash of wannabe wine producers there. It is to his credit that he believes so passionately in the indigenous Tinto Fino grape, foreswearing once-fashionable Bordeaux varieties, and has not overcharged for his wines, despite being firmly convinced they are the equal of Château Pétrus and Romanée-Conti.

Some favourite producers (some of them just west of the official boundary): Aalto, Abadía Retuerta, Alión, Dominio de Atauta, O Fournier, Hacienda del Monasterio, Mauro, Emilio Moro, Pesquera, Dominio de Pingus, Teófilo Reyes, Vega Sicilia, Alonso del Yerro.