# Vintage in Bierzo part 4 - processing the fruit

18 Dec 2012 by Tanya Garnham

*For the earlier sections of this report, see Part 1 - introducing DJP, Part 2 - waiting and sampling and Part 3 - harvest begins.*

Once off the vine, grapes should really be processed as soon as possible so, on 14 September, after a taking a short break from a long day in the vineyard, we were back at the winery at about 8 pm. I had no idea what to expect as, apart from tanks, hoses, ladders and a fork lift, I hadn't really noticed any 'equipment' in the winery. Well, it turned out that no equipment was actually necessary as the grapes are pressed by foot. I honestly thought Ricardo was kidding when he mentioned this - DJP produce just over 300,000 bottles a year after all - but, no, he wasn't, so it was shoes and socks off, a quick hose down of feet and straight into a 15 kg plastic bucket! About 250 kg of grapes later - or what felt like climbing up the stairs of Dubai's Burj Khalifa - we got to what I thought was the last bucketful and I gratefully put my shoes back on.

Ricardo meanwhile had brought in a tiny destemmer from somewhere to process the remaining grapes (as about half are crushed by foot and half are destemmed), but I think it had already clocked off for the weekend as it started to leak and then the crushed berries got stuck in the attached hose (about 10 m long) and had to be forcibly shaken out! It was quite entertaining listening to the usually quiet Ricardo curse the machinery before it was cleaned and put away … and it was back into the bucket again.

The crushed grapes went into two small stainless-steel tanks - and that was the processing done. No additions, no anything. Ricardo wasn't lying when he said that the wines make themselves and he 'just hangs around to assist'. When I asked which type of yeast would start the fermentation, Ricardo said he didn't know and that 'whatever takes over, takes over'. Once fermented, the wine will be tasted to see which wine it goes into - most likely Pétalos.

**Grower grapes v DJP grapes**

The Bierzo DO is home to 7,000 hectares (ha) of vineyards, of which DJP owns, about 40 ha. This isn't quite enough to make the 300,000 bottles that the company does make, so DJP also buys red grapes from about 125 long-term local growers who, between them, have about 410 parcels of vines. The smallest parcel comprises a grand total of six vines!

Grower grapes (plus about 30% DJP grapes) go into Pétalos, which is mainly made at Maderas, an outdoor site housing tanks of varying sizes (these ones are 18,000 litres) and materials amounting to a 150,000-litre capacity.

Growers pick when given the green light (based on lab and taste tests) by DJP. The company provides crates of different sizes (to make getting the net weight of the grapes easier when they come in) so, from about 20 September onwards, there was a steady stream of growers either picking up crates or dropping off grapes.

Occasionally a grower did come in with his own containers - I did see wicker baskets being carried from the back of a car once (perhaps the guy with the six vines?) - but generally everything was highly efficient and the grapes were weighed, destemmed and crushed, and transferred to one of the tanks.

Despite the efficiency, it still seemed positively manic at the beginning because of the quantity of grapes that came in. But then this is the biggest winery I have worked at. The guys at DJP, however, kept telling me that this harvest was a piece of cake in comparison with other years.

I spent most of the time with a shovel or a pitchfork in my hands and, honestly, if I never see either of those two objects again, it will be too soon. The amount of stems and single berries that a destemmer (a much bigger one that actually worked despite several shrieks of protest towards the end of each day) spits out of its bottom end is phenomenal.

Being a relatively tidy person, I tried to clean up. Five hours of pitch forking stems and shoveling berries into the back of a trailer later, the place didn't look any different and every part of my body hurt so I had to admit defeat. The Spaniards thought what I was doing was hilarious and a couple of them even came to watch; one lovely older gentleman took pity on

me, though, and gave me a lesson on pitch forking (over one's left shoulder if one is right-handed), not understanding that it isn't really a skill required by many organisations in central London.

If I wasn't pitchforking or shovelling, I was washing crates, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit that it became a bit frustrating after a while. For some reason, I wasn't allowed to 'feed' the destemmer, or sort the berries going into it, or use the forklift or drive the tractor, perhaps because the company wanted me to keep my fingers, etc ...

Back at DJP, similar things were happening but perhaps on a smaller scale. Grapes were coming in from DJP vineyards and were being processed for Pétalos (some of which is also made there) as well as for Corullón, Morcerbal, Las Lamas and La Faraona (all of which are made there). On 14 September, the 'recipe' called for about half the grapes to be crushed by foot so Moreira, one of the winery employees, had his shoes and socks off quite frequently (you can just see his arms above the rim of the tank).

*See Part 5 tomorrow for the conclusion to Tanya's report.*