Glamorous Godellos

20 Feb 2013 by Jancis Robinson/FT

See also my tasting notes on Rafael Palacios's Godellos.

Spanish white wine. What does this say to you? I go right back to memories of a bright yellow syrup, heavily sulphured to stop it re-fermenting, that was sold as 'Spanish Sauternes in the late 1960s. Fast forward to the late 1970s and 1980s when a few fresh, crisp, if slightly neutral, dry whites started to emerge from Spain. Torres' Catalan Viña Sol was a notable early example and is still going strong.

In the 1990s, racy, marine-tasting dry whites made from Albariño grapes grown in Rías Baixas on the far north-western coast of Spain became increasingly fashionable, first in Spain and then abroad. The rather Sauvignon Blanc-like seeringly tart whites of Rueda followed, many of them made from the local Verdejo grape.

But I have a new enthusiasm: wonderfully complete, beautifully balanced fine whites from the local Godello grape grown inland of Rías Baixas, particularly in its homeland Valdeorras. These are dry, dense wines that have lots of both fruit and acidity and can improve in bottle for many years. In the 1970s the variety was almost extinct - so there are very few really old vines - but cuttings were taken by locals from such vines as remained, most notably by Horacio Fernandez, and the first varietal Godello wine of the modern era was released only in the mid 1980s by Bodegas Godeval.

The biggest private owner of Godello vineyard is probably the family company Valdesil, which used to be big landowners but ceded many vineyards and then had to buy them back once they opened their own Valdeorras winery in the early 1990s. Today Guillermo Prada of Valdesil and family own a total of about 50 hectares or 125 acres, all in tiny lots. As throughout Galicia, there is a tradition of keeping tiny plots which may be allocated on the death of an owner by family members drawing lots from a hat, this is called a *sorte* in Galician.

Valdesil make Godellos at four different quality levels. The basic Montenovo is made in tank without much fuss whereas the Valdesil Sobre Lias has a deeper flavour thanks to being enriched by prolonged lees contact. Pezas da Portela and, from the oldest vines of all, Pedrouzos**,** are single-vineyard wines.

Such is the obvious quality of this rescued grape variety that it has attracted the attention of outsiders. Spain's most prominent flying winemaker Telmo Rodriguez produces his version, Gaba do Xil, named after the river Sil on whose steep banks so many Godello vineyards are located.

And perhaps the most high-profile incomer has been Rafael Palacios, 41, youngest brother of Alvaro Palacios, who put the equally steep and mineral-laden vineyards of Priorat in Catalunya on the map in the 1990s with his stratospherically priced single-vineyard L'Ermita. With his nephew Ricardo Perez Palacios, Alvaro has developed the admirable Descendientes de J Palacios, named after his father and Ricardo's grandfather, which makes fine, terroir-influenced reds from the local Mencia grape in Bierzo just east of Valdeorras.

The Palacios family's original winery is Palacios Remondo in what was the unfashionable lowest, warmest part of Rioja, Rioja Baja, where Alvaro is now making delicious reds from the local Garnacha grape. Unsurprisingly, after wine studies in France and experience in Australia, Rafael (Rafa) came back to the family Rioja estate in 1994. He found himself fascinated by white-wine production. The Placet white rioja he launched in 1997, three years before his father died, signalled a sea change in the reputation of this wine style. On a recent visit to London he admitted that, perhaps influenced by his Australian stint, he was perhaps almost too in thrall to technology at that point.

At about the same time, he first encountered a Guitán Valdeorras at a wine show in Madrid. 'I found Atlantic influence, minerality, volume and real character - more depth than other local grapes such as Treixadura', he told me. He started off working with Valdesil but by 2004 had begun to buy little plots of well-situated vines and launched his own, eponymous Godello called, with a nod to the hat-drawn lots, As Sortes. I was so impressed that I included it in a 2006 tasting I was asked to organise to demonstrate the new wines of Spain to the British wine trade in London.

Today Rafa Palacios owns 22.5 hectares (note that half) of vineyards in 26 different plots of Godello vines between 17 and 92 years old on granite (in preference to the limestone and schist that dominates much of Valdeorras) with heavy sandy topsoils mainly of quartz and mica. But the distinguishing feature of Rafael Palacios' Valdeorras is not just the vineyards so painstakingly acquired but the maniacal gleam in his eye which translates into almost obsessive winemaking detail.

His basic Bolo wines, named after a local village, may be made in stainless steel using selected yeast (he is wary of the yeast called WAM currently sold to so many producers of white wine in Spain), but even the Louro bottling, which can be found for less than £15 a bottle in the UK, is fermented in special 3,000-litre foudres ('round not oval because it means the lees are not as deep') made from Norman oak ('because it is unusually neutral because Normandy is so cold and the wide grain means it is not so oxidative'). Then with the 500-litre barriques in which his top wines are made, he has a water-cooling system for each one and an individual thermostat. He is particularly proud of the bank of screens that show the temperature of every barrel.

Over dinner at Lutyens organised by UK importer and Spanish specialist Indigo Wines, Rafa showed the 2011 vintage of each of Bolo, Louro do Bolo, As Sortes, Sorte O Soro from the first vineyard he bought and even a late-harvest medium-sweet wine from the 43-year-old vines at more than 700 m in the Sorte dos Santos vineyard. We also saw the 2009, 2007 and 2005 As Sortes, the last just coming into its own. But what was clear was the sheer class of the 2011 vintage (2010 was a bit too cool). I urge you to buy some. There is no hurry to drink it.

My only criticism is that all these wines are so good and I would argue that they differ less in quality than in price - but that could easily be said to be a plus point.

So what does Rafael Palacios like to drink when not tasting his own wines? 'I like champagne and Riesling, but I have a little problem with acid and my stomach'.

My Valdeorras favourites

Rafael Palacios, Bolo 2011 (older vintages are much cheaper in the US)

Rafael Palacios, Louro do Bolo 2011, 2009 (in the UK, the 2011 is £14.99 from Solent Cellar, also Berry Bros, Bottle Apostle)

Rafael Palacios, As Sortes 2011, 2009, 2005 (2011 is £29.70 from The Sampler)

Valdesil 2009

Valdesil, Sobre Lias 2008

Valdesil, Pezas da Portela 2009, 2008

Virxen de Galir, G de Galir lias 2007

A Tapada, Guitán 2007

Telmo Rodriguez, Gaba do Xil 2007

See global stockists on wine-searcher.com and my tasting notes in The man with the Godello gleam, or look up Godello in the tasting notes search.