

Spanish awakenings

MY INTEREST in Spanish wines goes back about 18 years. I remember, as a young wine enthusiast, the feeling of great excitement after tasting the first great Rioja that I understood. It was Rioja Reserva 1982, La Rioja Alta-Vina Alberdi. A great wine – spicy, juicy and rich. A wine of discovery. A wine that spoke Spanish.

A couple of months and many Riojas later, I came across Torres and their Cabernet Sauvignon-based Gran Coronas – Mas La Plana, 1985 from Penedes. An outstanding wine of great finesse and class, very similar to what I knew but not exactly the same. It spoke Spanish with a French accent.

Soon after I came across a cold, fresh, bone dry Manzanilla Sherry, served cold in a *copita*. Very different from what I knew but not exactly the same. It spoke Spanish with a French accent. Tangy and slightly salty. I remember drinking Cava in a café/restaurant called Sette Puerte in Barcelona. Dry and refreshing, it is a great aperitif and very Spanish. Add to this the great food, the lively character of most Spanish people and cities. Flamenco, Tapas, Paella, Picasso, Gaudi, etc. My mind was set. Spanish wines are great.

Brief history

The history of Spanish wines is as varied and as interesting as any of the great wines of Europe. Phoenicians established Cadiz (Jerez) in the South. Romans expanded and marketed the vineyards and wines. Moors allowed vineyards to flourish. The English became huge sherry drinkers. The French brought the use of the *barrique* and 19th century wine practices.

All these had a role to play in forging the style of wines the country produces. But by far, the most



A BOTTLE of Rivola

influential event in recent history, has been Spain's joining the European Union in 1986 and the subsequent withdrawal of the ban on irrigation by the EU in 1996.

Spain has the largest area under vine in the world but is only the third largest producer in volume. The average yield is around 25 hectolitres per hectare which is way below the 50 hl in France and 80 hl in Germany.

There are various reasons for this: with 40 million inhabitants, Spain has never had a need for intensive cultivation, but there are other factors. The sometimes very traditional approach to winegrowing and of course the dry and arid climate in most of Spain, are contributing factors. The latter problem has now been largely relieved with drip irrigation.

Spain is divided into 16 autonomous regions which are further divided into about 50 provinces. Some are culturally and eco-



TIO PEPE and other Spanish beauties

nomically more important than others but all regions have kept their traditions, and sometimes language very much alive.

As can be expected there is a huge array of soils and climates. These vary from the chalky Albarisa in Jerez and also in small parts of Ribera, granite in the north west, limestone and gravel in Ribera and clay in Rioja and Catalonia, volcanic and schist in Priorato, to alluvial near the rivers.

The climate, too, varies, with relatively high rainfall on the Atlantic side; it is continental on the high altitude vineyards of the eastern coast and most of the interior, hot and dry in La Mancha, and of course Mediterranean on the eastern coast.

Grape varieties

There are hundreds of vine varieties, including a number of international ones, especially in Penedes. But the best native variety is definitely the black Tempranillo. The name comes from the Spanish for 'early' due to its early ripening. This is a classic variety on a par with Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, etc. It can produce wines of great finesse and aromas. It is the main variety in Ribera, Rioja, Penedes, Toro, La Mancha and many other DOs.

It has many synonyms: U'll de Liebre in Catalonia, Tinto Fino in Ribera, Tinta Roris in Portugal, Cencibel in La Mancha and many more. Other important varieties are the black Garnacha which, especially in Priorato, can produce fantastic wines, Mazuelo and Graciano.

Spain boasts of the world's most planted vine variety. This is the white Airen. Other important whites are Palomino for sherry production, Pedro Ximenes for sherry and Montilla-Morilles.

Macabeo, also known as Viura, is one of the main quality whites of Spain. It is one of the base varieties for Cava and is used as a backbone for Rioja, Navarra, Penedes, etc. Perelada is another of the base varieties of Cava, high-yielding but retains quality. Does best in cool, high altitude vineyards especially in Penedes.

Xarel-lo, also used in Cava, gives aromatic wines and is the principle white in Penedes, Taragona and Costers del Segre. Verdejo is also a high quality grape considered as one of the best in Spain; the main variety is Rueda.

The future

Although we have been anticipating the awakening of this vinous giant for many years, it is not until now that we are experiencing real and substantial progress, both in general quality and marketing.

The French, who have traditionally lost business to Spain before, are very much aware of the potential of their south western

WINE TALK

by Michael Tabone



MIGUEL TORRES – his family makes the world-famous Sangre de Toro

neighbours, and in a way they support the idea that Spain can become Europe's answer to the new world.

Either way, Spanish wines are on the right track and in my opinion the future promises great things for them and for us wine lovers. Whether you like classy, elegant food wines; big, powerful, spicy reds; rustic, country wines; dry or sweet fortified wines; sparkling or nice aromatic whites, Spain is the country to watch out for.

Here are some recommended wines. Most are widely available in Malta. They range in price from under Lm3 to over Lm100 per bottle.

La Rioja Alta (Martinet Fine Wines)

In my opinion one of the best Rioja producers. This bodega realised the benefits of moderate modern influence a while back. Try their Vina Alberdi or Ardanza. Their Reservas 904 and 890 from 1982 have now become classics in many a wine lover's memories.

Vega Sicila (Martinet Fine Wines)

Unfortunately this bodega is now more famous as Spain's most expensive wine. The truth is that their wines are absolutely great. A shame that so many bottles are drunk by people who are only interested in the fact that it is expensive.

There are three offerings, but not all from the same bodega. At the very top is Unico, a monster of a wine with very high natural alcohol but still complex and intriguing. Very long-lived, generally released from the bodega after 10 years. Mainly made from Tempranillo but also includes Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Malbec from very old vines. The other two are also long-lived – Valbuena and Alion. Both are very good wines with some commentators preferring Valbuena to Unico.

Guelbenzu (Carnaby Wines)

The Guelbenzu family is not only famous for its Navarra wines but they are also equally important pianists, composers and painters. Although they have now expanded to other vineyards, both in Spain and Chile, their Navarra vineyard is their flagship. Three wines are produced. The early drinking Azul is a nice, easy, fruity red. Evo is a Cabernet influenced with firm tannins and sweet oak flavours. Lautus is the top offering – a big, classic, powerful, long lived wine.

Abadia Retuerta (Stivala: The

Bottle Vault)

A big estate in Sardon de Duero. Brought back to life in the early Nineties by one of the world's top terroir-orientated oenologists, Pascal Delbeck. A number of styles are produced. Try Primitiva 2003 for fresh and fruity, early drinking wine. Rivola 2001 for spice and richness of flavour, but if you want to taste class and elegance try Seleccion Especial 1999.

Marques de Riscal (Wands Ltd)

A historic bodega with very good vineyards in Rioja Alavesa as well as Rueda. Try their fresh and crisp white Rueda or their Grand Reserva Rioja. Their modern style Baron de Chirel is 50 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon and has recently been attracting a lot of positive comments from the world's wine score boards! Very interesting Rosado too.

Torres (P. Bonnici)

This is the royal wine family of Spain. I can safely say that without Torres, the Spanish wine industry would not be as it is today. Very big land holders in Catalonia (4,000 hectares) but also very big in quality. Try their classic, Cabernet Sauvignon-based Mas La Plana or their Gran Murallas based on traditional Spanish varieties.

Equally interesting, but less expensive is Mas Borrás from Pinot Noir. Makers of Sangre de Toro one of the world's most successful brands, now in its 50th year.

Gonzales y Byass (P. Cutajar)

A bodega established in the mid 19th century. Although they produce a large range of sherries as well as Rioja, I suppose they are most famous for the world's biggest seller of Fino, Tio Pepe. When Tio Pepe is fresh, meaning bottled recently, served cold in a *copita* it is one of the best aperitifs and a great food wine to have with spicy dishes or tapas. It is a shame that we in Malta do not know how to serve it or appreciate it.

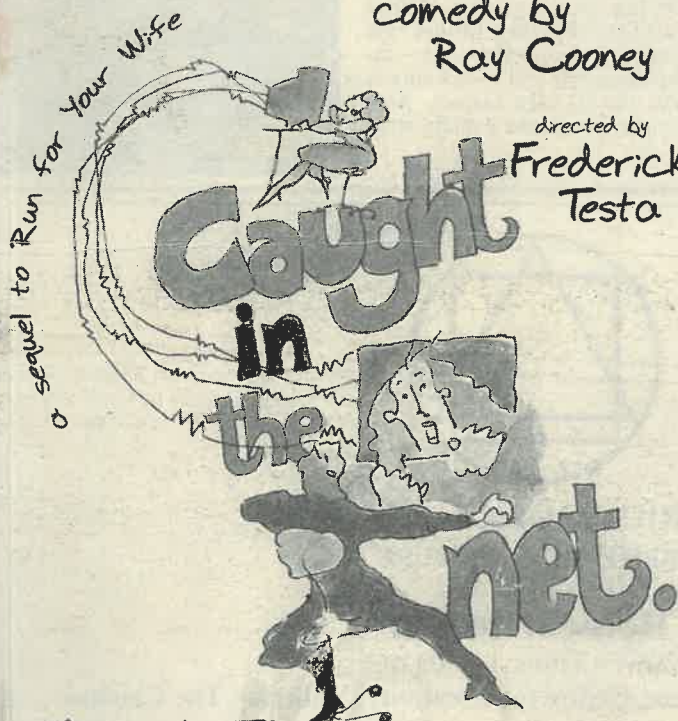
Other reputable wines to look for: from Rioja try Bodegas Muga, Marques de Cacaes, Ramon Bilbao and Bodegas Serres. Try Pesquera and Pingus from Ribera del Duero. From Priorato, Bodegas Alvaro Palacios, makers of the hugely expensive Ermita. Also from the same area, Scala Dei and Clos Magador. From Alicante in the south there is a very reliable co-op Bocopa and from Jerez look out for Lustau and Domecq.

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