

Wine people – Miguel A. Torres

In a three-part series, MICHAEL TABONE profiles three of the most important wine people in the world whom he recently met. In the first part (August 7), he told us about Johnny Hugel from Alsace. Here he recounts his meeting with Miguel A. Torres from Spain, and in the next contribution Thierry Manoncourt from Bordeaux will conclude the trio.



MANY WINE families pretend to be and behave like royalty, but if any one family deserves the title of A Royal Wine Family, surely it is the Torres family of Catalonia, Spain. Reigning over this family since 1991 is the unassuming, immensely agreeable and charming, Miguel A. Torres.

I met Miguel for the first time a few weeks ago, during his quick one-day visit to give a tasting and presentation of some of Torres's wines, here in Malta. We have many friends in common, including the other great wine man I wrote about in my last article, Johnny Hugel, so it did not take us long to break the ice and start a conversation.

As apposed to Johnny – who is such an extrovert and centre of attention – Miguel is one of those quiet, soft-spoken people who uses a few, but well chosen words. I asked him what was it like growing up with a surname like Torres in Catalonia...

As a young boy in the Fifties he admits that he was not totally aware of how important his family was in the wine world, nor was he passionate about wine.

In 1957 he began studying chemistry at Barcelona University but on his father's insistence he changed subjects to oenology and viticulture and moved to Dijon, France, a year later. Life in France was very different from that in Franco-controlled Spain. Miguel enjoyed all the freedoms that French democracy was offering in the late Fifties but returned to Spain and the family business in 1962 as a fully qualified oenologist.

With the knowledge acquired in France, Miguel persuaded his father to embark on a programme of investments, which included the change-over to stainless steel fermentation equipment, the adoption of newer technology, but more importantly the planting of international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Merlot.

This was also a time of growth. Hectare after hectare were purchased and distribution of Torres's wines spread worldwide. In 1975 Miguel's sister Marimar moved to the USA with her new American husband. I asked Miguel what the family's reaction to this was. "My father was not very happy," he told me. "He wanted her to stay in Catalonia with the family. But I think that eventually he approved of her decision. Indeed, when we eventually bought the estate in Russian River, he became very fond of it."

During this time Don Miguel (Miguel's father) dispatched his son to search of a place to relocate the Torres wine empire to – he was very worried about the future of Spain. Miguel first looked at California, then Argentina but it was Chile that Miguel fell in love with.

This was 1977. Having persuaded his father that Chile can produce excellent wine, the Torres family went in knee-deep with the acquisition of a 100-hectare estate two years later. Miguel jokes, "You see, there is an affinity between dictators and the Torres family. Franco in Spain and Pinochet in Chile!"

The late Seventies and Eighties were spent writing books, and establishing the new vineyards. The first one, *Vinas y Vinos*, was published in 1977 and has now been translated into eight languages. Since then he has published a number of other books which include a *Guide to Spanish Wineries* and *Wines of Spain – Tasting*.

To keep up with the great advancements in viticulture during this time, Miguel took a sabbatical year and once again moved to France to take a specialist course at the University of Montpellier in 1982.

In 1991, Don Miguel died and total control of the company passed on to Miguel. In the last 14 years the company has grown enormously with more vineyard purchases and a huge growth in Torres's wine sales around the world. (Incidentally, Malta consumes more Torres wines per capita than anywhere else in the world except Spain).

For his achievements Miguel Torres has been awarded many titles and honours. They include the Order of Bernardo O'Higgins

awarded to him by the Chilean Government in 1996. In 1999 Torres was voted the most important winery in Spain by *Wine Spectator* magazine and in 2002 *Decanter* magazine voted Miguel its man of the year.

With all these achievements one can be excused for expecting a tough, snooty, big-headed type of a man. In fact, Miguel is anything but. He is, however, a self-assured man with a Catalan sense of pride – but more importantly, and in my opinion his biggest achievement, has been the fact that he remains humble and open to suggestions. He is a good listener and attributes most of his success to this fact. Indeed he instigates these values and principles in all his family and employees – Miguel's and Torres's secret of their success.

The family

The history of the Torres family as wine-makers goes back to 1870 when Miguel Torres (the great-grandfather of today's Miguel) together with his brother Jaime built a *bodega* in Vilafranca near Barcelona.

In 1909 another Miguel Torres was born (the father of today's Miguel) who took over the company in 1932. This Miguel (Don Miguel), started a succession of projects that saw Torres become a major player in the world of wine.

In 1940 he started the rebuilding of the *bodega* after it was destroyed in the Spanish Civil War and Torres's wines started being bottled instead of sold in bulk. Two years later the first wine labelled Coronas was sold while in 1946 the Torres 10 brandy was launched. In 1947 the first *Vina Sol* was released but probably the most influential achievement of this period was the introduction of the now hugely popular *Sangre de Toro* in 1954.

Don Miguel's achievements continued well through the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties – only this time he was joined by his son Miguel, who qualified as an oenologist from the university of Dijon-Burgundy. 1975 saw Marimar Torres moving to the USA with her new husband. She was put in charge of the sales of Torres's wines in the Americas.

1979 was a pivotal year for the Torres family with two major events that were to influence the future of the company and to a certain extent the future of Spanish and Chilean wines.

The first was the acquisition of 100 hectares of vineyards in Chile, which also brought with it the first modern wine equipment to the country. The other was the winning of the Gault-Millaud competition with *Gran Coronas Black Label* (now called *Mas La Plana*) for the finest Cabernet Sauvignon based wines of 1970 vintage. The competition was held in France by French tasters and included Ch. Latour and Ch. Haut-Brion. This was the day that Torres exploded onto the premium wine scene.

The marriage of Marimar did not last long but she decided to stay in the USA after the family persuaded her that she should look for a vineyard in California. Three years later, in 1982, Marimar Torres bought a 22.5 hectare estate in Russian River.

In 1984, something which was later to prove hugely important, work was started on recuperating ancient Catalan grape varieties. More land was purchased in Chile in 1985, 1990 and 2003 and 2002 in California.

2003 also saw Torres expanding into other areas of Spain besides Catalonia; 160 hectares were bought in Jumilla, while in 2004 vineyards in Toro and Ribera del Duero were acquired.



MIGUEL A. TORRES

2004 also saw the passing away of Dona Margarita Torres. Miguel's mother, who was very influential in first supporting her husband, Don Miguel and since 1991 after his death, as the matriarch of the company.

The wines

Today Torres owns or has under long-term leases over 3,000 hectares of vines. The biggest chunk of that is in Catalonia but there are also holdings in Ribera del Duero, Jumilla, Priorato and Toro.

In Chile they have some of the best-sited vineyards in the Central Valley region while in California they own two estates, Don Miguel and Dona Margarita.

As expected, a large number of wines of different qualities, styles and ranges are produced. From the low-priced *Nerola* and the hugely popular *Sangre de Toro* to the rare *Mas La Plana* and *Conde de Superunda*. But they all have something in common – Torres's guarantee of quality and value for money. Here are some of my favourites.

Mas La Plana (Black Label), although not very Spanish in style, the feel of this Cabernet Sauvignon-based wine has a certain breed and class in the image of the best Bordeaux wines. In the better vintages it has a very good ageing potential. This is one of my favourite Torres's wines and I was lucky enough to taste the 1970 vintage, now one of the most sought after wines in the world. More recent successes were the 1998, 1995, 1990, and 1989 vintages.

Grans Muralles does not have the same huge aging potential but it does have a Spanish feel and spirit. It is based on Spanish varieties such as Garnacha, Carinena and Monastrell. Quite spicy, rich and Mediterranean-like.

At a lesser level but in the same style is *Mas Rabell*. Also from Carinena and Garnacha, this is easy to drink and excellent value for money.

Look out for the newly launched *Celeste* from the tiny seven-hectare estate in Ribera del Duero, very Spanish from 100 per cent Tempranillo. The 2003, although very young, has rich but round creamy tannins and a lovely, well integrated roasted, spicy flavour. Watch out for their *Priorato* offering soon. Although I have never tasted this wine, Miguel assures me it is something special.

From Chile, without a doubt my favourite

is *Manso de Velasco*. This Cabernet Sauvignon wine has rich ripe tannins and a big mouth feel that lasts for a long time. Very well made, it combines New World directness with European complexity. A snip at about Lm7 (retail).

Also from Chile, *Cordillera* should please those of you who like alcoholic, spicy, rich wines. This one is made from Carinena, Syrah and Merlot. Finally try the very well priced, newly launched *Santa Digna Syrah Reserva*. A mouthful of a wine!

From Russian River in California try the very European-like *Marimar Torres Pinot Noir*. Very clean, fruity and loyal to the Pinot Noir flavours of soft small red fruits.

Although here in Malta Torres is only known for its wines, the company has a long history of producing top level, high quality brandies and distillates which have won many international awards.

At the top of the range there is *Torres 20* which is a blend of vintages, the oldest of which is more than 20 years. *Torres 10* follows the same principle while *Torres Orange Liqueur* is made from macerated oranges. Try this mixed with *Cava Brut* to create an all-Spanish aperitif.

The future

With such a huge expansion and success rate, I asked Miguel if we are likely to see Torres in France, Italy or Australia. He categorically rejected the idea, saying that France or Australia does not need Torres to make good wine.

"We shall continue to work on our mission, which is to stay independent and self-financed. To be a leader in the premium wine and brandy business and to constantly look for ways of improving the quality of our products."

"To clearly and professionally communicate the culture of wine to our customers and to turn each and every customer into a friend. Finally we want to remain concerned about the well being of our staff. The advancement of society and the environment."

With nearly 1,000 employees, Miguel is surrounded by professional and dedicated people, including his daughter Mireille who looks after the vinification team and his son (another) Miguel, whom he calls "a marketing genius".

Although by no means a small wine company the family aspect is still very much part of the Torres company. Indeed I get the impression that every employee looks upon Miguel as a father. This ensures a certain loyalty and dedication to hard work which is reflected in the wines.

Whatever your budget is, and whatever your tastes are, rest assured that you will find a Torres wine exactly like you want. Miguel will make sure of it.

Torres wines are imported by Paolo Bonnici Ltd



ONE of the Torres family's many vineyards