



Tim's Wine Market

June 2024
By Tim Varan

All of the selections this quarter were made during a trip to Spain in September, 2024. In fact, I actually compiled the purchase order while sitting in the hotel bar in Madrid before leaving the country. A couple of the selections are made in tiny quantities so getting in line early was imperative in order to get the wine. In full disclosure this lineup is not exactly as I planned, with the original selections all coming from Rioja. It was going to be a comparison of three white Rioja, one made from Viura, another from Garnacha Blanca and the final a blend of both. Additionally, one from Rioja Alta, another from Rioja Alavesa and the final pick from Rioja Oriental. But, alas one wine never made it. Thankfully I had the foresight to buy enough of what I thought was the best white wine on the trip as an insurance policy, so while it slightly misses the theme the wine is truly exceptional. I hope these selections open your eyes, or palates, to just how serious the wine game in Spain has become and it encourages you to dig deeper.

2020 Cachazo Rueda Carrasviñas "Félix" - \$55

I last visited Rueda in 2007 and my memory of the place is what I pictured Spain to be before my visit, an arid plain of rocks, scrub and grape vines. That visit, to the humble but brilliant Pablo Villar, was an eye opener as I witnessed how this poor area was being transformed by the wealth that wine creates. You see, even into the 1980's this was one of the poorest areas of Spain, where sunflower oil was the primary crop and source of revenue. Then a small group of farmers pushed the government to recognize their local grape, Verdejo, as a national treasure. With significant government investment they created the Rueda appellation and the fortunes of many families changed for the better.

For this trip I had a chance to visit with the Cachazo family, a fifth generation property with the father Felix being one of the eight men who pushed for appellation status in 1980. The family has extensive holdings and a beautiful winery you could drop into the middle of Napa Valley and it would look right at home. It is modern and expansive, with all the technology a winemaker could dream of having. Much like Villar, the Cachazo family recognize that it all starts in the vineyard and the way they farm the local Verdejo grape.

The history of the Verdejo grape and the wines produced from it is really interesting. The variety was carried by the Arabs to Spain in the 11th century, most likely along the silver trade route they established. Until the Spanish civil war, nearly 900 years later, the grapes were turned into a wine very similar to Sherry, with aging under a yeast cap called flor. It was not until the 1970's when a large Rioja estate, Marques de Riscal, hired the famed Bordeaux oenologist Emile Peynaud, that he created the first light, dry and crisp example. However, when the appellation was first established in 1980 there was not a lot of Verdejo planted so the early rules allowed for up to 50% of other varieties. Even into the late 1990's it was very common to see the Rueda wines contain a high percentage of Sauvignon Blanc. Today the rules are tighter, so wines labeled as Rueda must be 80% Verdejo and 100% if labeled as Rueda Verdejo.

The Cachazo family produces several styles, but this is their top wine produced to honor Felix, the current patriarch. For it his daughter, and winemaker, Ángela Lorenzo Heras uses only the grapes from a 140 year old, pre-phyllloxera vineyard. I walked these vines and each only could ripen a couple of small clusters, which gives the wines amazing intensity. The wine is fermented in a clay amphora using native yeasts, and left for 1 year. It is then bottled and held back another year before release. There were only 2096 bottles of this wine produced and the label reflects his passion for Jai-Lai. On the nose it delivers a wildly complex bouquet of Meyer lemon juice, underripe yellow nectarines, white tea, pea tendrils and saline. On the palate it shows a gripping sense of fruit with a kiss of tannin, with minerality that pushes through the fruit into the long finish. Drink 2024-2029 with butter braised lobster, crab cakes or grilled salmon.

2022 Miguel Merino Rioja Blanco - \$60

For our first night in Rioja we stayed in a small, boutique hotel in the village of Briones, a half-hour west of the regional capital of Logroño. The town sits next to the Ebro River and the hotel, named Tondonia, overlooks the famed vineyard belonging to Lopez de Heredia on the opposite bank. The little town climbs up the steep banks and next to the main road

sits the small Miguel Merino winery. I was already aware that Tim Atkin ranks this winery as a Rioja First Growth so I was excited, but tasting with Miguel far exceeded my expectations.

Miguel's father founded the winery in 1977 but he was working for another large winery so his first vintage was not until 1994. Like all producers of the time he focused on the classic styles; Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva, produced from their small holdings exclusively from vineyards in the village of Briones. Miguel took over the estate and while he is seen as a vanguard producer for terroir driven styles of Rioja, he also continues to make the classic wines in honor of his father. The tasting was a mind-bending experience because producers from both camps tend to talk down the other. In this tasting it was interesting to hear the importance of both styles from the same winemaker, arguably one of the best in the region.

For this wine Miguel uses 50% Viura from a vineyard planted in 1948 and 1977. The remainder is 50% Grenache Blanc which was planted in 1946. Miguel vinifies each variety separately in barrel, and since he does not have temperature control he moves them outside each night to cool. There are only seven 500L barrels of this wine produced and he replaces one each year. There are roughly 350 cases of this wine produced each year.

During this trip I developed a new respect for modern Rioja Blanco, which is far more interesting than the inexpensive examples you find from most producers. There has been a trend among the large estates to create white wines they can market to compete with Italian Pinot Grigio; dry, crisp and inoffensive. The problem is that the ocean of these benign wines establishes a low bar for consumer interest, and wines like this and the next selection are lost. I would encourage you to consider this wine on par with White Burgundy, because texturally and stylistically they have a lot in common. For this wine the nose is less overtly fruit driven with the minerality being more poignant. There are still notes of dried pineapple, quince paste, gardenia, caramel and sea salt so there are plenty of reasons to get your nose down into the glass. The feel on the palate is medium weight but there is very high intensity, with the fruit compacted by waves of minerality and acidity. Drink this wine 2024-2029 with grilled branzino or snapper, brushed with parsley/garlic butter or braised pork with green chilis.

2022 Víctor Ausejo Rioja Garnacha Blanca - \$65

It is appropriate to follow the Miguel Merino bottling with Víctor Ausejo's as the latter encouraged him to turn a hobby into a commercial winery. It all started with Víctor and his sister, Leanne, who wanted to produce some wine from their family vineyard holdings in Alberite, a village in the Rioja Oriental. Traditionally the growers in this area sold grapes to the bigger wineries and rarely bottled under their own label. In 2016 Víctor took a small parcel of old vine Tempranillo and budded it over to Garnacha Blanca. In 2018 they produced their first wines in a tiny garage winery around the corner from their mother's house. While the facility is small the wines Víctor is producing are impressive, making him one of the hottest names in Rioja in just a few short years.

The grapes for this wine come from a 4 acre parcel in the Iregua Valley which lies in the Rioja Oriental, but close to the border with Rioja Alta. The elevation is very high, nearly 1500 feet above sea level, and the soils are primarily iron rich clay. The conditions are perfect for late ripening varieties so he focuses on Garnacha Blanca, Garnacha Tinto and Mazuelo, all varieties that enjoyed great popularity before the civil war. Since the war most producers have moved to planting Tempranillo, which yields a much larger crop and ripens earlier for a more consistent harvest. Victor also farms this three tiny vineyard sites using organic practices although he is far too small to spend the money for certification.

For his Garnacha Blanca the grapes are hand harvested and whole cluster pressed to tank for settling. After a day the juice is moved to 500L French and Hungarian oak barrels where it undergoes fermentation and aging for 10 months. Víctor Ausejo also stirs the lees during the aging process which adds even more texture and body to the wine. None of his wines are fined or filtered before bottling and he produced a scant 110 cases in 2022.

Unlike the Miguel Merino Rioja Blanco which is aromatically reticent, this jumps out of the glass with notes of red apple sauce, dried peaches, fresh pineapple, cardamom seeds, green peppercorns and toffee. On the palate it is initially pretty oily and rich, but quickly finds a frame of acidity that carries into the finish where there is also a kiss of oak. Drink this wine from 2024-2030 with grilled octopus, seafood paella or grilled swordfish with Spanish green sauce.