

Codorniu Scholarship Study Trip Report

by Clive Donaldson

Introduction

Wine has been an integral part of Spanish life for a long time with records showing it was being traded there with other staples such as olives and wheat by the Phoenicians as early as 1100BC. However, right up until the end of the eighteenth century the best quality wines were made in a traditional style either sweet or an oxidised rancio style; they were the only wines that could survive high temperatures and non-airtight containers (Penin, 2007, p. 53; Robinson, p. 654). The first major step forward was taken in the mid nineteenth centuries when the Marques de Murrieta and Marques de Riscal imported Bordeaux technology and wine making methods, in particular, better crafted barrels. This enabled winemakers to improve the quality of their table wines, importantly allowing these wines to be transported to the wider world, thus establishing export markets. The next major step forward was taken by Miguel Torres in the 1960s who installed stainless steel winemaking equipment and temperature control at his winery in Catalonia (Radford, 2004, p.11). Others quickly followed suit. Spain had arrived on the modern wine scene.

Throughout the wine world, there is a need to create contemporary wine styles that appeal to today's drinkers. There are many examples of wine styles evolving successfully including the Italians' 'super Tuscans' and the 'garagiste' movement in St Emilion. Today it is difficult to find a heavily oaked Chardonnay in Australia following the 'ABC – anything but chardonnay' consumer backlash. However, some areas have struggled to adapt to the changing market. The penalties for not moving with the times are significant. Germany's classic QmP sweet wines, whilst being of top quality, have failed to find favour with consumers becoming a niche market. Finally, a growing band of growers are responding to the preferences of modern wine drinkers and are making drier wines. 59% of German wines were classified as dry or medium dry in 2005 (Johnston and Robinson, 2007, p. 225).

Today, the Spanish wine scene is one of the fastest changing in the world with forward looking winemakers reinventing some ancient practice (Johnston and Robinson, 2001, p. 186; Robinson, 2006, p. 652). Winemakers are using the latest technology, exploring new areas and regulations are being changed to allow new varieties to be tried such as Pinot Noir for Cava production and Chardonnay in Rioja (Stevenson, 2007). The need to modernise was one of the major themes I observed during my study trip to Spain. A major emphasis is being placed on creating contemporary styles of Spanish wine that would be relevant to today's wine-buying public, whilst respecting the traditions and heritage of each region.

Discussion

Bodegas Bilbainas was founded in Haro in 1859 and quickly established itself as a yardstick for Rioja red wine, so much so that their wines were honoured with the appointment to 'Purveyor to the Royal Family' in 1925. The traditional style for Rioja was pale red wines sweet with vanilla from a long period in American oak barrels (Johnston and Robinson, 2001, p 193). Little had changed at Bodegas Bilbainas in terms of winemaking practice or style of wine until Codorniu purchased the property in 1997. Since then a lot of investment has been made in the winery, resulting in new areas being built for fruit reception, pressing and fermentation, all with state-of-the-art winemaking equipment made from stainless steel and including temperature control. However, the past heritage of the Bodega has not been lost. Rather than demolish and rebuild, which must have been a cheaper option, the beautiful buildings of the old winery and its garden have been restored and integrated with modern offices and the new production facilities in such a way as to compliment the original architecture. This attention to detail is such that in some places the cellar walls had plaster carefully chipped off to reveal original stonework, even in areas which are not open to the public. This shows a respect for the work of the past.

The same philosophy of respecting the past while moving forward has been applied to the wines at Bodegas Bilbainas. The estate vineyards with their gnarled old 'en vaso' trained bush vines are managed using the most up-to-date 'precision' viticultural techniques and use of pheromones treatments to counter spider mite rather than chemical sprays. In the winery, the Bodega's traditional Riojan red wine, Vina Pomal, has been updated by using 100% Tempranillo grapes, picking later to ensure

fully ripe fruit, using longer maceration times to extract more colour and tannin and by the use of French rather than American oak barrels. This approach enabled by the state-of-the-art winemaking equipment means that the wine shows beautifully pure strawberry, raspberry and plum fruit character which is well integrated with a more savoury oak character. New wines have been added to the portfolio to compliment the traditional wines. 'La Vicalanda' is a modern 'high expression' Rioja that is more concentrated and spends a longer time in French oak than Vina Pomal. Another new wine, 'La Vicuana', contains 25% Graciano giving it an intense violet perfume along with dark fruit. It falls outside the Rioja DOCa classification altogether. Whilst very modern interpretations, importantly these new wines are still true to their Riojan heritage.

The Raimat estate was created from a near desert through the vision of Manuel Raventos in 1914 and as a result has always been forward looking. Partly responsible for the creation of the Costers del Segre Dominacion de Origen (DO), this vast area of vineyards has been planted to a range of varietals both traditional, such as Tempranillo, as well as a range of international varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. These vines are grown in vast blocks using state-of-the-art precision viticulture techniques – satellite images are used to monitor the vigour of the vine growth in each block and the amount of fertilizers is adjusted through the drip irrigation system. This space-age technology seems to be reflected in the architectural style of the winery which has automatic doors, a temple-like tasting room and a working vineyard on the roof! It was fascinating to speak to the new young Australian winemaking team that has recently been recruited. Their expressed aim is to modernise Raimat's wines by trying to retain more freshness of fruit. However, they have also requested more traditional Garnacha vines to be planted to increase their blending options when assembling the wines. This typifies the approach of creating wines that are both modern and recognisably Spanish.

Codorniu is the world's largest producer of bottle fermented sparkling wines and, with Freixcinet, one of the two big Cava producers in Spain. Their main site in San Sadurni de Noya, was established in 1551 and production was shifted from still to sparkling wines in 1872 following a visit to the Champagne region by Jose Raventos. Visiting the winery, it is hard not to be impressed by the slightly surreal combination

of beautiful architecture (now given National Historic Artistic Monument status), the on-site museum of old winemaking equipment, the modern, all stainless steel winemaking equipment and the sheer size of the site, which includes over 30 kilometres of underground cellars. Today Codorniu makes over 4 million bottles of Cava every year and receives over 200,000 visitors to the site. A tasting through their product range showed a respect for their past heritage along with a need to produce wines styled for the modern consumer. Codorniu makes a range of traditional Cavas using Viura, Xarel-lo and Parellada and these are sold mainly into the local Spanish market. However, Codorniu also makes a range of very modern Cavas which supplement the blend of local varieties with a varying percentage of Chardonnay grapes to add finesse and possibly a more mainstream flavour. The best example of this is the Cava 'Anna de Codorniu' which contains 70% Chardonnay and is a light, fresh, modern sparkling wine. Most recently Codorniu has been pushing the boundaries with its newest product, the first rose Cava to be made from 100% Pinot Noir. With the change to legislation at the end of 2007 to allow Pinot Noir into non-Rose Cava, I expect to see a more modern champagne style of Cava emerging over the next few years. The danger here is that the traditional varieties will be ignored and Cava could become indistinguishable from any other sparkling wine.

Conclusions

Consumers' tastes change and it is important for wine producers to reflect these changes in their product offering in order to keep their product relevant in the market place. This is particularly true of Spain, whose traditional oxidised styles of wine do not have wide appeal today. However Spain has a rich heritage of indigenous grape varieties and regional wine styles that should not be lost. The key theme I observed during this study trip was the awareness of the need to update whilst maintaining an identity that was Spanish and reflected the region of production. The steps taken so far in the buildings, equipment, techniques and staff show great attention to detail and a sympathetic touch and have resulted in a contemporary and expanded range of wines being made in each of the Spanish wine regions we visited. Jancis Robinson characterised Spain as 'being in the grip of vinous revolution' (Robinson, 2006, p. 652). My experience on this study trip certainly reinforces this point and from both the consumers' and the wine producers' perspectives the future looks very bright indeed.

Bibliography

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