vinos galegos
ATLANTIC and/or CONTINENTAL

Galicia, AKA ‘Green Spain’, sits atop Portugal in the north-west of Spain, and is dominated by the influence of the Atlantic Ocean. However, the wine story of Galicia is climatically more complex than a simple ‘Atlantic=cold+wet’. Yes, it’s strongly influenced by cold and wet from the coast, however ‘continentiality’ also plays a significant climatic role.

Much of the journey through the main DOs of Galicia is along a pair of (ultimately confluent) rivers, the Miño and the Sil. The Miño flows south from its origin in Asturias into central Galicia. The Sil flows west from Bierzo in continental Leon towards the Atlantic. Both meet in the appellation of Ribeira Sacra, and from their merge point continue west as the Miño, ultimately forming the border between Spain and Portugal before delivering the waters of the Sil to the Atlantic at O Rosal. Starting at the Atlantic coast, as we look upstream (and thus uphill to increasing continentality), we can very clearly see an evolutionary logic in the relationship between dominant grape varieties, soil and place, particularly the interplay of continentality and the Atlantic.

Continentiality?

Higher altitude generally means relatively warm daytime temperatures and relatively cool nights – a significant diurnal temperature range compared to the even, moderate conditions along the Atlantic coast. Continentality also suggests rainfall patterns closer to a dry Summer/wet Winter dichotomy, rather than a generalised Atlantic dampness. Moving west-to-east across Galicia, outright Atlantic influences yield evermore to Continental factors as one goes inland and uphill towards the Castilian high plains of central Spain.

GALICIA INCLUDES BIERZO

TSA’s Vinous Galicia is somewhat controversial, as it includes DO Bierzo among Galicia’s wine appellations. The technically correct map above does not include Bierzo, which is off-page to the right of Valdeorras, upstream at the source of Rio Sil. Politically, DO Bierzo is in Castile y Leon, not Galicia. In wine logic, however, Bierzo is entirely continuous with all things vinous in Galicia. Both Mencia and Godello are continuous along the River Sil, which begins its downstream journey to the
Atlantic in DO Bierzo. As one travels downstream from Bierzo, the climate becomes less Continental and more Atlantic, and the wines change shape from relatively rich, round and powerful, becoming more lean and crunchy. Close to the coast, these inland varieties become too lean and green, and yield to varieties which attain adequate fleshiness in purely Atlantic climes.

Mencia and Godello, and their relation to the Sil, make sense as Galicians. However, they also make no sense as Castilian. There is no Mencia and Godello east of DO Bierzo – the outright Continentality and high daytime temperatures in Castile make for a climate too warm for Mencia and Godello to retain adequate acidity and shape.

CONTINENTALITY & SUB-REGIONALITY, what grows where and why
In Galicia, a neat, progressive trade-off between Atlantic mildness and moistness and Continental warmth and dryness defines a continuum of subtly changing associations between place and variety. In whites, at the coast, Albariño’s flashing interplay of fruit and acid seems perfect. However, just 45 minutes inland in appellations such as Monterrei and Ribeiro, continental influences see daytime temperatures which make it difficult to retain acidity in Albariño. The result is pleasant, aromatic wines but which are a little too soft (low in acidity) and round to make successful varietal wines. Instead of lead actor, Albariño inland plays a supporting role, adding perfume and life to Godello and Treixadura whites.

In Ribeiro, Treixadura finds its only really successful home. Steely and golden with fine structure but lacking in aroma, Treixadura with a little Albariño balances beautifully into long wines of subtle richness and aroma. Further inland, however, the progressively Continental environment suits Godello best. In tracing the regions which feature Godello whites, a telling journey of the influence of Continentality becomes clear. From Monterrei, through Ribeira Sacra, on up into Valdeorras and then to the source of Rio Sil atop the continental plateau in Bierzo, Godello is exposed to increasing daytime temperature and becomes progressively richer, fuller and rounder as one continues inland, uphill and into more Continental environments, albeit all with residual Atlantic influences.

Red wines follow exactly the same logic. At the coast, Caiño Tinto and a handful of other local varieties are historically adapted to providing roundness and softness as well as herbal acidity in the mild, damp daytimes of the Atlantic. Inland, these varieties quickly become overly soft. At the coast, one does see some Mencia, but it is irredeemably green and herbal, making rustic and mean wines in the main. In the near-coastal regions of Ribeiro and Monterrei, a range of varieties are adapted to provide a pleasant fruit-acid balance, with the best fit being Brancellao. By the time one gets to Ribeira Sacra, however, the climate has enough daytime warmth to (just, maybe) ripen the tannins of Mencia. As with Godello, Mencia becomes richer and less acidic as it moves inland and uphill. In Ribeira Sacra, it is a little too green more often than not. By the time Mencia is grown at the source of Rio Sil in Bierzo, it can tend towards chocolatey richness and over-softness.

20TH CENTURY GALICIA, a tale of loss and forgetting
Happily, in the here and now of the early 21st century, we apprehend a ‘natural’ Galicia where a regionally diverse range of lovely wines are made thanks to matches of grape variety with sub-regional terroirs. It has only recently been thus, however. If one were to pull back the focus just 40
years to the death of Franco in 1975, for example, Galician wine looks almost entirely different. A lot of bad happened to Spanish (including Galician) wine during the 20th century.

The beginning of this was the arrival of phylloxera, very late in the 19th century. Happily for Spain, by the time the vine louse wiped out tracts of Galicia, Castile and Catalunya, the solution of re-grafting Vitis Vinifera onto American rootstocks was already in place, and most regions that were devastated by phylloxera were very soon replanted with locally-evolved genetics. By 1930, the re-establishment of a ‘natural’ Galicia is easy to picture. Although not yet on the historical scale prior to phylloxera, the various sub-regions of Galicia were successfully replanted to their own locally adapted cultivars, grown on the same sites and soils in the manner of best practice established from perhaps two thousand years of adaptive learning. For the next 50 years, however, pretty much everything went sour. By 1980, most regions of Galicia were growing ‘Jerez’ ...

After the Civil War, agriculture as directed by the ministry in Madrid was utterly focused on low-cost high-yield production. Most of Galicia was planted over to the easy-to-grow, high-yield Palomiño white, native to Jerez. Such plantings were predominantly in the fertile river valleys, ignoring the previously preferred poor soils of the hills and mountains. Quantity, not quality, was the decisive factor.

Worse, as rural industry became less economically rewarding, the youth of the pueblos (historically, 90% of Spaniards lived in very small villages, or ‘places’) were forced to abandon ‘home’ and go to find work, variusly, in the cities, mines or the army. The abandonment of historical viticulture and the weakening of country culture and economy was later joined by the advent of chemical-industrial farming. By 1980, winemaking in Spain bore little resemblance to the natural form which had been successfully re-established in the first decades after phylloxera. In Galicia, remnant plantings of local genetic material remained in the hills and continued to be made as house wine by locals, but generally-speaking, such ‘authentic’ local wines were neglected, lost, forgotten.

**RECOVERY AND REMEMBERING, old and new in Galicia now**

As Spain underwent ‘la transicion’ (the reawakening of civil society and the reversion to functional democracy after Franco’s death in 1975 – a process nominally completed by the elections of 1982), various forms of awakening, remembering and re-imagining worked their way into agricultural practice. Slowly but surely, the native-traditional varieties, locations, pruning techniques and organic practices were remembered and re-asserted. Remnant old vine plantings in the hills and mountains provided source material for new plantings which would re-assert continuity with the genetic heritage of the sub-regions. 30 years later, it is not uncommon to find yourself in a Galician DO established in the 1980s, and home to producers working with a mix of ancient vines and 20-odd-year-old maturing plantings based on heritage genetics.

Let’s not get entirely dewy-eyed at this point, however. Such producers still constitute a minority. Bush vines remain marginalised, thanks to government subsidies which promote high-yield viticulture on trellises. Many new vineyards are planted to yield-oriented industrial clones from commercial nurseries, rather than to more genetically diverse (and definitively local) massale selections from old vineyards. Chemical-industrial farming still predominates over organic and biodynamic methods. Chemical-industrial winemaking (wood chips, additions of acid and tannin, personality yeasts, enzyme treatments, silicone corks, glue corks, and all the rest) remains more common than hand-made and natural practices.

The real deal is out there however. If you care to sort wheat from chaff, there are champions in each sub-region of Galicia faithfully working the locally adapted genetic heritage into beautiful, subtle, delicious expressions of a place and its natural grapes.
While this discussion which follows suggests a ‘natural’ view of the vinous cultivars best adapted to the climates of each sub-region. I wish to stress that this is not simply an environmental-deterministic view of grape varietal evolution. Yes, Mencia, Godello, Treixadura, Brancellao and company are native to Galicia and exist as an evolutionary expression of the relation between cultivar and place. But it is very important to realise the importance of human agency in this process ... it did not just happen! At each moment through history, human taste (as well as practical considerations of yield, stress resistance, ease of propagation) has been the mediating agency between cultivar and climatic influence. Mencia, for example, is the historical result of untold thousands of propagative choices ultimately resulting in the evolution of a varietal with a pleasing fruit-acid balance in a certain place, in reaction to the climatic complexity of that place.

**D.O. RÍAS BAIXAS (Albariño country)**

Rías Baixas (ree-ahs-bye-shus) is on the Atlantic west coast of Spain, in the province of Pontevedra just north of the border with Portugal, which is marked by the Rio (River) Mino. The D.O.’s name in Gallego refers to the “low rivers” or estuaries which criss-cross the Atlantic coastal fringe, draining rainy Galicia and central Spain out to the Atlantic. The D.O. as it stands now was created in 1988, replacing an earlier Albariño-specific D.O. There are 3,500 hectares under vine, owned by over 6,500 growers and comprised of 21,000 plots grown between sea level and 300 metres. There are around 200 bodega labels in production.

Rías Baixas is the natural home of the Albariño (al-ba-ree-nya) white grape, a difficult variety to produce well. Along with the challenge of oidium and mildew in this damp area (1600mm annual rainfall), the risks with Albariño are a tendency to produce neutral battery-acid-water (if extractive techniques are avoided) or over-ripe brown pear bombs (if the must is worked much at all). In between, this racy-fleshy grape can give wines of great nerve and snap, sustaining startling exotic fruit.

White wine accounts for 90% of production. Fantastically enough, prior to the devastation by phylloxera in the late 19th century the region was 95% red wine, so Albariño is really a twentieth century thing. Other whites play minor roles, particularly Loureiro (loo-ray-roh) and Treixadura (treyx-a-doo-rah), with a tiny bit of minor local variety Cañiño (kay-ee-nya) blanco. Albariño really only works close to the Atlantic – once we move away from the coast it quickly becomes a bit part player, relatively indistinct as its showy primary fruits and flashing natural acidity quickly soften and dull in more continental climes. Inland from Rías Baixas, Treixadura takes over in Ribeiro as the key varietal, and further inland from there in Ribeira Sacra, Valdeorras and up into el Bierzo, Godello works best. At the coast, however, the fruity-acidic Albariño rules. There is a small amount of red - albeit very lean, angular and vegetal as a rule, made from Cañiño tinto, Souson and Espadeiro among others, including Mencia, which does rather better further inland.

There are five sub-zones (the three listed first here are the ones which matter): Salnes Valley, which centres on the town of Cambados is the coastal valley of the Rio Umia, an hour north from the Mino-Atlantic confluence and the Spain-Portugal border. Salnes is the coolest and dampest of the sub-zones and its granite soils produce a very pure, delicate floral-mineral Albariño. Salnes wines must be 70% Albariño minimum.

O Rosal is at the confluence of Rio Mino and the Atlantic, reaching inland from the coast along the river as far as Tui. Rosal is noticeably more humid and warmer, with alluvial soils and the wines here tend to be fuller and rounder than those of Salnes. Loureiro comes into play here with the varietal minima here a combined 70% of Albariño and Loureiro to be labelled Rías Baixas O Rosal.
Condado de Tea is an hour inland east along the path of the Mino, upstream from Tui to the border of inland D.O. Ribeiro. Its main feature, apart from the river itself is the relatively mountainous terrain which creates warm south-facing granite and slate slopes above the Mino. The wines of Tea have a slightly more savoury cast, often featuring a delicate and pleasant nip of herbal bitter in the back. Here, away from the coast, Treixadura is the most important running mate to Albariño and the wines of Condado de Tea are required to have a combined minimum 70% Albariño and Treixadura.

Condado de Tea is home to a fair bit of experimentalism – oak and malo are often deployed in an attempt to make “white burgundy” from Albariño. It’s a great point of contention whether the variety can really handle overt winemaking work and artefact, and indeed whether it’s age worthy enough to bother. On balance, perhaps more often the answer is not.

The last two sub-zones are of lesser quality – Soutomaior (inland from capital city Vigo) and Ribeira do Ulla (inland out the back of Salnes) have more fertile soils and provide high crop fruit for the big co-ops. Ulla serves us better as home to the town of Padron and its namesake green frying peppers, Pimientos de Padron.

The climate and soils provide the character of the local Albariño based whites, but also provide huge viticultural and winemaking challenges – humidity, fungus, botrytis and other rots ... rain during ripening and harvest, cool summers ... In conjunction with perhaps the most rustic viticulture in Spain, there’s a wealth of very dodgy fruit; but also an increasing concern with modern viticultural best practice. The region's mean temperature is 14°C, with 1300 mm rainfall annually, and 200 sunshine hours.

Industrial broad-acre vineyards on conventional trellises are becoming more common, but the dominant agricultural form remains the ‘Parrales’ – granite pergolas about 2 metres off the ground with an L-shaped horizontal on which the vines are trained. Rustic, perhaps, but the pergola form allows a couple of significant benefits. Firstly, a traditional mixed-farming regime whereby chickens, Galician cabbages and other agricultural variants are able to be grown on the ground below the elevated vines. Secondly, and qualitatively much more importantly, the elevated, aerated canopy allows humidity to clear from the canopy, ventilating and drying the fruit, and giving desperately needed protection from rot, botrytis, fungus.

**DO Rules**

To be labelled as wine of a certain vintage, the wine must contain a minimum of 85% wine harvested in that year. Thus a 2012 release could be legally freshened with a little 2013 wine, or given depth from some 2011 or older reserve material, or both, provided 85% or more of the finished blend was harvested in 2012.

To be labelled as Albariño, however, the wine must be 100% varietal Albariño. If any admixture of other local varieties (most likely Treixadura or Loureiro) is included, the wine can only be labelled as ‘Rías Baixás’, and as such must still contain a minimum of 70% Albariño. Albariño wines have a legal minimum alcohol content of 11.3%, with Albariño blends released as Rías Baixas wines having a minimum of 11%.
**Bodegas Castro Martín**  
**DO Rías Baixas (Salnes Valley)**

Located in the Salnes Valley sub-zone of Rias Baixas, Bodegas Castro Martin are in the parochia of Barrantes, in the council of Ribadumia, named for the Rio Umia a few kms south towards Pontevedra. The nearest main town, Cambados is 5km away. This is the heart of the Salnes Valley, named for its salty proximity to the Atlantic. The wines here grow in pure granitic sands, and are 100% Albariño.

Castro Martín is still owned and run by the founding family; the Bodega’s history can be traced back as far as 1887 where old documents prove the existence of a wine cellar and the sale of Albariño. The innovative Domingo Martín-Morales (a Venezuelan who married a Galega) had the current winery constructed in 1982, some five years before the DO of Rías Baixas was created. The winery designed to move the wine with gravity, and was the very first in the region to be equipped with stainless steel tanks for wine storage - which at that time seemed to many locals an unnecessary extravagance!

The current owner-winemaker is Angela Martín, daughter of Domingo. Angela started working at Castro Martín in 1981 and took over in 1993. Current export manager is an Englishman, Andrew McCarthy who married Angela and joined in the family business from 2001.

BCM own 11 hectares, principally spread between Pazo (5 hectares) and the extremely mineral granite quartz of Castrello (4ha), which supply 40% of their needs, and the rest of their fruit comes from growers nearby, with all viticulture directed by Angela and extremely strict selection practices in place. Angela is committed to the traditional pergola trellises, as the canopy affords her excellent bunch control and yield management (Castro Martin crop at half the appellation’s norm). Pergola’s reduced vine vigour also produces lower levels of malic acid in the wine, and thus naturally moderates the need for MLF in bodega. BCM’s viticulture is as natural as possible, but not certified organic.

**BODEGAS CASTRO MARTIN Albariño ‘sobre lias’**

All fruit is hand-picked and goes into press less than 2 hours from picking. The fruit is given a whole bunch press and the must is chilled and gravity settled before fermentation in 16 stainless steel deposits of 9000 litres each, all with cooling jackets. Fermentation is seeded with their own neutral yeast selection, and takes place at 14 degrees over 3-4 weeks. After fermentation, the wine is statically aged on lees 6-8 weeks, with the possibility of racking if reduction threatens. Malo-lactic fermentation can usually be avoided (15% of the wine from the very cold 2013 harvest underwent MLF). There is a second cold stabilisation after lees ageing and after 14 days the wine is bottled with only a very light fining.

The philosophy at Castro Martín is simple: to make the best quality wine possible at the most competitive price. The team are constantly re-examining their work, improving and including innovative techniques where possible, whilst still respecting the tradition of the region. They are flag-bearers for the Normacorc Select Series synthetic closure and use an eco-bottle 10% lighter in material usage.

Note: the wine is nowadays labelled as ‘Sobre Lias’, i.e. matured in tank on lees, but this is just acknowledging what has always been the case, and does not denote any change in handling (there are a bunch of people trying to get a marketing edge and add dollars by having an entry level free run wine, and a more expensive version with lees-ageing).
BODEGAS CASTRO MARTIN Albariño ‘sobre lias’ 2014

This wine is balanced on lovely delicate apple-skin tannin, with fine spiced florality, lemon-grapefruit tang and lovely long soft acidity. There’s finger lime and mandarin oil for subtle richness and a touch of oily-spicy linger and stick in the mid-palate before briny acid flourishes a long and delicate finish. The granite undertow in this wine and sea spray tang throughout faithfully transmit the location, just 2km in from the Atlantic.

Zarate Albariños
Rias Baixas (salnes valley)

Location terms can be tricky in Galicia, don’t rely on your GPS! Zarate is located in the Lugar (a small community, maybe 20 families) of Bouza in the Parochia (ambit of influence of a priest) of Padrenda which is a collection of 10 lagares and about 300 families, in the council of Meaño. I’m worn out just thinking about it! Castro Martin are in the Parochia of Barrantes about 3km to the north in the council of Ribadumia.

Originally Basques from Rioja, the Zarate family came to Cambados (capital of the Salnes Valley wine trade) in 1707. Many generations of mixed farming later, the family estate is now devoted solely to wine. 40 year old Eulogio Pomares and his wife Rebecca Zarate are in charge. Trained at Bordeaux, Eulogio is extremely focused on vineyard management, and is the first organic grower in the region. His grandfather Ernesto was the founder of the annual Cambados Albariño festival in 1953. Eulogio and Rebecca took over in 1999 and have considerably upgraded viti-and-vini-culture.

Zarate farm covers about 10 hectares spread over 12 vineyard parcels on Xabre - a mineral granitic soil giving long ageing potential to the wines. The principal variety planted is Albariño, but they also grow native red varieties Caiño Tinto, Loureiro Tinto and Espadeiro (there are currently 1.5 hectares of Tinto, mainly newly planted).

Zarate viticulture

Since 1994, the Zarate vineyards have been un-tilled, with permanent natural cover (mint, dandelion and a dozen other herbs) and there are no herbicides or chemically synthesised nutrients. The grass is cut for mulch three times/year and no fertilisers are used. New vineyards are composted once with sardines and Atlantic seaweed, and planted to diverse massale selections of quality genetic material from Eulogio’s best holdings. Mildew is attacked with rock sulphur in powder and spray form, and a variety of copper formats are applied at extremely low levels to avoid soil toxicity.

While most vines are on American rootstocks, about 15% of their holdings as pre-phylloxeric (Zarate Estate did not suffer from phylloxera). Ungrafted vines grown on pergolas affect a natural yield limit (and supposedly a corollary quality increment) to about 5 tonnes/hectare, compared to up to 15 t/ha from grafted vines grown on trellises. These old vines have lower PH soils with enhanced calcium (they are old oyster middens!). There are three stands of Pie Franco, most significantly, the Palomar plot adjacent to the bodega, planted in 1850. Palomar vineyard also has a very small amount of ancient Loureiro Tinto and Caiño Tinto which survived phylloxera. Bear in mind that pre-1895 when mildew and phylloxera wiped out 99% of the region, Salnes Valley was 95% Tinto – the main varietal red at the time being Espadeiro, which Zarate are currently re-planting. Eulogio also has his own still on site for making artisanal Aguardiente.
Like most of Salnes, Zarate’s vines are planted ‘en parra’ on granite pergolas about 2 metres above the ground. The use of pergolas to distance the fruit from soil humidity dates since the early 20th century – prior to phylloxera, most vines were traditional Spanish ‘en vaso’ goblet-pruned bush-vines. Currently, Salnes is planted to around 2500 hectares – this is just 1/10th of the area under vine prior to the advent of phylloxera ... figures consistent with Bierzo, Priorat and many other regions in terms of pre-versus-post phylloxera cropping. Rias Baixas laws allow for yields of 12 tonnes/hectare, but Zarate crop at 6.

**Zarate wine-making**

Zarate’s fruit is hand-picked, typically yielding just 100 gram bunches. The picking process is spread over six weeks from early September. The vineyards are picked and fermented separately and then blended as finished wines. About 10-25% of white wine goes through malo, depending upon the conditions of the year.

90% of wine is Zarate’s Estate Albariño, with tiny production quantities of three single vineyard Albariño wines. These three taken together constitute an essay on the textural possibilities of Albariño, exploring the limits of winemaking and texture in this local variety.

Zarate’s estate wine is classical in style, based on the granitic soils of Salnes Valley and embracing the pinging acidity of Albariño. It’s first big sister, Balado is an enhanced version – the standard model fermented in stainless gets a brief time unstirred on lees for textural richness, and Balado extends this to 6 months. The result is simply a deeper-set, more profound expression of classical Salnes wine, and is entirely consistent with the Estate wine. The other two single vineyards, however, constitute somewhat of a departure. Tras da Vinya is another stainless steel wine, but aged over 2 years on lees, while el Palomar is barrel-fermented.

**Zarate Estate Albariño**

Produced from vines averaging 35 years old, Zarate’s estate wine is based on minerality and acidity, the combination of Salnes valley Granite and Albariño’s coastal zip producing a fresh, elegant, balanced wine. The fruit is hand-picked, sorted by the bunch in the vineyard, and then berry plucked in the bodega. Gentle pressing gives a low-yield must which is cold-settled and undergoes natural fermentation, then spends 3 months on lees before filtration and bottling. Eulogio plays with MLF a little for complexity, and on average (there is more need of malolactic fermentation in cold years) about a third of the Estate blend goes through malo. Planting density is 1200 vines/hectare, alcohol 12.7, acidity 7.1 g/l, VA 0.5 g/l, pH 3.0, free SO2 22 mg/l, residual sugar 1.6 g/l. 30,000 bottles produced, released as three separate assemblage bottlings in January, June and August.

**ZARATE Estate Albariño 2015**

*Punchy nose of lemon drop and green-grassy herbs with a fennel pollen zap! A waft of the nearby Atlantic adds an entrancing saline line above the granite and below the prickly pear/cut apple fruit. The skinsy component adds a nice fat lemon jube texture without any cloy or caramel. Delicate overall, totally satisfying. Pure Salnes Valley.*

**ZARATE Albariño ‘el Balado’ single vineyard**

‘Balo’ in Gallego means wall, like the French term, ‘clos’. This tiny granite-walled vineyard of just 0.25 hectares contains two plots which were re-planted to ungrafted material in 1950. South-facing, with shallow poor Xabre sand soils, organically farmed. About 1500 bottles are produced, fermented in stainless as for the Zarate Estate wine, without malo, then given a second ageing of 6 months unstirred in small stainless tank on fine lees, once racked off the gross lees from
fermentation. Gently enhanced flesh and textural volume and fine aromatic complexity result. Alcohol 13.6, free SO2 34 mg/l, 2600 bottles.

ZARATE Balado Albariño 2015
Steely, mineral and faintly granitic-smoky and sandy to smell, the lemony fruit rings with green herbs and fennel gives a delicate anisey tang. The palate is pepper-grassy and has a wonderful sense of draw in the mouth and the palate gains an oyster-shell chalkiness as it moves through.

ZARATE Albariño ‘Tras da Vinya’ single vineyard
Bottled separately since 2004 vintage. ‘Tras da Vinya’ is a grafted single vineyard of just 0.6 hectares facing south. The vineyard was planted in 1970 with cuttings from the el Palomar vineyard, but on rootstocks and has deeper, richer soil than Balado and Palomar. This wine has a very high malic content due to its sandy soil, is made in stainless steel by spontaneous fermentation. The wine is racked immediately following fermentation (4 months unsulphured on gross lees), then spends 24 months (more in cold, wet years perhaps) on fine lees, unstirred in tank, with no MLF. 12.3% alcohol, 6.6 g/l total acidity, less than 1.5 g/l residual sugar, 24 mg/l free SO2, 2600 bottles.

ZARATE Tras da Vinya Albariño 2014
Fatly ripe lemon is filled with mint on the nose and green herbs give the wine an electric tingle. There’s soil, lemongrass, hay, and some prickly pear fleshiness. Tras da Vinya has lovely gentle roundness but great structure and acid line through a savoury, classily textural palate.

ZARATE Albariño ‘el Palomar’ single vineyard
Since 2003, ‘el Palomar’ has been made as a single vineyard wine. Adjacent to the Zarate winery, El Palomar was planted in 1740. It’s just half a hectare of 100-200 year-old ungrafted Albariño vines on shallow granite soil over hard granitic bedrock. The roots drill right down into the rock looking for nutrients, and struggle to yield 44 hectolitres to the hectare. De-stemmed, the hand selected berries are slowly, gently pressed then fermented in a single 10-year-old 2200l oak vat. It’s 6 months on gross lees, unracked and unsulphured, then racked and put back into vat on fine lees for a further 3 months, and malolactic fermentation takes place in vat. There is no battonage. 2600 bottles, bone dry, 13.7% a/v, 26 mg/l free SO2, 6.9 g/l total acidity, pH 3.3.

ZARATE ‘el Palomar’ Albariño 2015
With power and precision, this has full on lemon drop streaked with zest and a touch of vanilla richness, all goldenness tucked with a green tinge. It has a wonderful satin texture with a fantastic ‘pop’ at the end.

Adegas Valmiñor
DO Rías Baixas – O Rosal sub-zone
A relative new-comer (established in 1997), Adegas Valmiñor is situated in the sub-region of O Rosal within Rías Baixas. Valmiñor owns 35 ha of its own vineyard, contributing half its requirements, and collaborates with 100 growers throughout O Rosal. Agro Valmiñor does all of the viticulture.

O Rosal has soil which mixes typical Atlantic coastal granite with some richer material, and with vineyards facing south to Rio Mino has a warmer overall meso-climate than the pure Atlantic aspect
of Salnes Valley to the north. The wines of Rosal are thus a little fuller and more tropical, fleshy in style, but should always be graced with a line of acid zip.

Valmiñor’s prime holding is the 4 hectare Catuxa vineyard, home to 30 year old vines, wide spaced, planted on 6 foot high pergola trellises. Catuxa is grassed underneath to reduce vigor, and produces at 8 tonnes/ha, very low for Rias Baixas. Valmiñor’s largest holding, the Figuero Vineyard at 17 ha adds a unique strand to Valmiñor’s wines – it is grown on metamorphic schist rather than the typical granite of the area, and is planted on natural slopes rather than the more common terraces which break the mineral layer. When Figuero was acquired it was planted to local red varieties (Caĩno, Souson, Brancellao), some of which have been retained to make Valmiñor’s Rosado wine, but most has been grafted over to Albariño. All fruit is hand picked into 18kg baskets, then machine de-stemmed, cold soaked and fermented in stainless tank. Fermentations are long and cool, at around 18 degrees over about 20 days. Winemaker is Cristina Mantilla. The winery is named after the owner, Carlos Gomez Davila’s home town near Vigo to the North.

Valmiñor Albariño, D.O. Rías Baixas, (O Rosal subzone) screwcap

Valmiñor Albariño 2014
Prickly pear, a bit of custard apple richness and a bit of green apple tang and a pleasing smell of the dirt underneath so it’s not just a steel tank fruit thing. There’s a touch of nicely controlled nutty phenolics and subtle lees richness helping the fruit to achieve a nice volume in the mid-palate, and nicely savoury in cast. The wine is well-textured through the front 2/3 then glides out onto a rail of apple-steelly acid, exhibiting a great balance between flesh and nerve.

Bodegas Eidosela
DO Rías Biaxas (condado de tea)

Founded in 2003, Bodegas Eidosela is the brainchild of a small group of enterprising, like-minded local growers (61 in total) dedicated to producing their own, quality Rías Baixas wines. Bodegas Eidosela is located in the sub-zone Condado de Tea (county of the River Tea, which flows into the Miño) and has a total of 48 hectares under vine, planted to Albariño, Treixadura and Loureiro in 600 separate parcels, the biggest being just 2 ha.

The name ‘Eidosela’ is the union of ‘Eidos’ and ‘Sela’ which translates to ‘roads to sela’ (meaning the place, ‘here’), and is meant to indicate the paths which unite the little patches here and there which collectively are Eidosela. We import Eidosela under two labels (both of which are the same wine, we ship according to availability in screwcap at any given time), hence you might get ‘Breizo’ which means ‘truth’ in old (celtic) Gallego, or ‘Charquino’, which is another place name, literally ‘little puddle’, referring to the constant dampness near the Atlantic coast. ‘Arbastrum’ is a Latin conjunction that translates to mean ‘Star of Arbo’ (Arbo is the town where the winery is based).

Eidosela Albariño
Stainless steel handling, with 50% of the blend aged 4 months on lees in tank.
Prickly pear, small green apples, pomelo, cut white nectarine, preserved lemon, straw, a nice briny tang and lovely bitter herbs: rocket, white pepper, radish, cut fennel. 100% varietal in a very stylish, smooth, mid-weight register. With juicy acidity and a nice little nutty snap to close, the fruit tannins are perfect.

Eidosela ‘Arbastrum’ Rías Baixas

While the main and more common wine is a straight varietal Albariño, Eidosela’s best wine is ‘Arbastrum’ a sub-regional blend of Albariño with Loureiro 10% and Treixadura 20%. Inland from the
coast, Albariño softens, and the mineral linearity of Treixadura and the lemon-bay tang of Loureiro make for a perfectly balanced blend with the apple-jasmine of Albariño.

The nose has the mineral+stone-fruit, pear and apple trademarks of Albariño, but in a restrained, savoury register – finer, lighter and tighter due to the influence of the other varieties. The palate is pear, nectarine, cut pineapple and feijoa twitched up with green olive and sour herb; all the lines are clean and snappy with a strong steely mineral thread and a nice mineral-bitter tang walking it out at the end.

DO Monterrei: where Galicia meets Spain and Portugal
Monterrei is in Ourense province, about 45 minutes south-east of the city of Ourense and constitutes the boundary of coastal Galicia with Continental Spain and shares characteristics of both. As you drive south into the region from either Rias Baixas or Ribeiro, you will notice the land opening up from the tight hills and valleys of Galicia. The slopes are less steep, the country is drier, less verdant, less berserkly vegetated ... and without noticing, you are also gaining altitude as you climb up out of Galicia into Castile and the high Continental meseta.

The DO is named for the seriously grand and impressive Castle of Monterrei which guards the northern entry to Monterrei’s main town, Verin (pop. 40,000). The 15th century castle was owned by a Count of the same name. The region is famous for its mineral springs, resulting from the Corga Fracture, in towns such as Sousas, Cabreiroá, Fontenova and Verin itself.

Like much else of Spain, it has a historical mix of cultural influences representing an overlay of invading forces from Roman, German, Arabic, Celtic and others. Wine has been made here for 2000 years, and remnant Roman stone lagars are still to be seen in the fields. (Note: the alternative spelling, Monterrey, is Spanish not Galego).

Climate and Geography
The vines grow on the sides of the valleys around Rio Tâmega, which runs south through Verin and joins the Douro (formerly Duero) in nearby Portugal. There are two sub-zones: Val de Monterrei (Monterrei Valley); and Ladeira de Monterrei (Monterrei slopes, accounting for 40% of production). The soils are a mix throughout both zones, featuring poor sandy soils, schist and limestone-clay soils. The altitude range is 300-850m (Quinta do Buble at 850m is Galicia’s highest estate).

Monterrei is the warmest and driest area in Galicia, sharing some climatic characteristics with the Spanish central plain. The climate is Continental-Atlantic. It’s a hot summer-cold winter mix, and summer-time temperatures can hit 40 Celsius, but the continental influence gives a high diurnal temperature range – even such hot days cool to 15 degrees or so at night, de-stressing the fruit. Rainfall is around 600mm.

Grapes, Vines, regulations
While mainly a white wine region, reds do ripen properly here and there is one significant red wine producer making very fine wine from a patch of pre-phylloxera vines below the castle. For the most part, however, it is whites from Godello and Treixadura which matter. Production is a 70/30 split in favour of white (most of which prefer not to use malolactic fermentations).

Comprising just 23 bodegas in the valley of the Rio Tâmega, Monterrei is an emergent source for elegant, savoury whites, mainly Godello – either solo, or blended with Treixadura. It’s early days, though: the DO was founded in 1992 and the process of re-planting to autochthonous varities of the region is only 20 years on. As with much else of Galicia (and Spain write large), the post-phylloxera
years here saw the region re-planted with ‘outsider’ varieties selected for ease and volume of yield, not for quality or any intrinsic match to the local conditions. Since the early 90s, Monterrei has been grubbing out ‘Jerez’ (ie, Palomino) and re-establishing historical local varieties. Of the Galician whites, Godello works best in this continental-verge clime. Although just out the back of Albariño country (Monterrei pretty much joins at the back with the hilly Condado de Tea sub-zone of Rias Baixas), the region straddles Galician and Castilian influences.

The establishment of the DO in Monterrei co-incided with and was largely responsible for the return of local varieties. Recognised white varieties: Godello 60%, Treixadura 15%, Albariño and Doña Blanca 5% each and traces of Torrontes, Caiño Blanco and Loureiro. Reds are Mencia 70% Arauxa (Tempranillo) 20% Bastardo 5%, and 5% mix of Caiño Tinto and Sousau. There are around 1500 hectares of vines, but only 1/3 of these are quality-rated and released under the seal of the CRDO – the balance is Vino de Mesa (Palomino and others), showing how much work remains to re-build authentic local character. There are about 15 hectares of Pie Franco pre-phylloxera red vineyard near Vilardevos. From these, Jose Luis Mateo at Bodega Quinta de Muradella makes ‘Artreba’ and ‘Gorbia’ from Bastardo, Mencia, Caiño Tinto and Sousau. For new plantings, ‘derechos de plantacion’ (planting rights) must be purchased from the government – in line with EU guidelines, this is a practice where badlands agriculture (alluvial valley floors) are decommissioned as part of allowing new plantings in preferable sites on poorer soils and slopes. Sometimes, these ‘derechos’ are exchanged within DOs, but it’s equally likely that 10 hectares of irrigated La Mancha can be converted into a hectare or two of dry grown Monterrei ...

Of the 23 bodegas currently producing, roughly 2/3 (Bodegas Cosecheros) grow their own fruit with the rest (Bodegas Industrios) working on purchased grapes. Yields are a legal maximum of 10 tonnes/hectare, but rarely exceed 8. Legal minimum alcohol is 11% a/v for both reds and whites; there’s no maximum, but most wines are in the 12-12.5% a/v range and 14% is rarely achieved.

For reds, the ageing criteria for a Crianza is a 6 month minimum, meaning callow, under-matured oak-aged reds are not uncommon. Additions of acid and tannin are legal, however the CRDO does not allow irrigation, dilution, chaptalisation, nor does it allow chemical nitrogen and phosphorous fertilisers – good on ‘em!

The Wines of DO Monterrei
It’s fair to say there are two stars. Jose Luis Mateo and Adegas Ladairo. Beyond these, a number of producers are making solid wines. There’s a fairly predictable split between producers with young vines who are doing “the right thing” and attempting to make fairly natural, unaffected wines. For the most part, the result is ‘regular’, pleasant wine fit for local consumption, but not of export quality and interest, at least not yet. However, the nasty side of being young and trying to fit in is as evident here as it is in nearby Ribeiro and Ribeira Sacra.

Many producers in these three DOs are making awful wines with the use of personality yeasts (sometimes in conjunction with enzyme treatments, affecting the micky mouse necktie and goofy character sox double act) and various other elements of the (often Australian-inspired) grab bag of chemical wine-making inauthenticity. Sadly, composite glue corks, silicon closures, oak chips, semi-crianza/robes/barrica short dunk oak treatments, micro-oxidisation and various other shortcuts and quality wine dead-ends also feature regularly.
**Adegas Ladairo**

**DO Monterrei**

Ladairo is a 20 hectare property at around 400 metres altitude, near the village of O Rosal de Monterrei, in Oimbra province (just inland from the border with Portugal). The owners and viticultors are Jose Luis Vaz Vileda and his wife Pepita Vaz Garcia. The winemaker is Alvaro Bueno.

Adegas Ladairo’s vineyard is planted predominantly to Godello white and Mencia red; there is also some Treixadura, Bastardo (aka Trousseau, Merenzao, Verdejo Negro) and Aruaxa (the local name for Tempranillo). Ladairo’s wines are quiet and gentle, very much at ease with themselves. Don’t swirl too much, let them come to you, wandering and changing as they open on air.

**Note:** Adega(s) is galego (Galician language) for Bodega(s), or winery (it can of course also mean wineshop). Adegas Ladairo itself is named for the galego term describing the typical slopes below the mountains in this part of the world – ladairas are gentle intermediary slopes below the hilltops and above the river, which precisely describes the situation of Adegas Ladairo. The vineyards have red soil at the top of the slope yielding to granitic sand below, closer to the river. Beneath the vineyard is the bodega itself, a lovely stable cold, humid cellar just above Rio Tâmega.

**LADAIRO ‘Collecion de la Familia’ Godello Blanco**

Monterrei has a climate which neatly mixes coastal and continental adding punch and finesse to this Galician native. Made in stainless steel with a long rest on lees in tank, unisced and very lightly filtered in order to retain as much textural richness as possible. Godello’s trademark fallen orchard fruits (as always, credit to Bree Boskov for this killer call) are in clear view, along with the soils, twigs, ground herbs and other botanicals of the orchard. Sweet earth and grape skins mingle nicely in the savoury fruit and the whole thing has a lovely sense of movement and length, in a manner rarely seen in Godello (which, while having lovely flavour tends to be front-loaded, perhaps ponderous).

**LADAIRO ‘Collecion de la Familia’ Godello-Treixadura 2015**

| Smells of orchard blossom, honeysuckle, lemon curd, golden straw, cut grass and sandy soil; it’s pollen-rich with a herbal tang. The palate is savoury with pleasing richness, but gentle and nicely laid out. Entirely at one with itself, earthy with good length, rugged out by white herbs a touch of nutty-bitter phenolics and a saline thread through soft natural acid. Really nicely balanced, it has freshness equal to richness is beautifully wound with good grip and even better release, with a lovely floral perfume flourish to finish. |

**LADAIRO ‘Collecion de la Familia’ Mencia Joven**

A simple, unwooded wine made and aged in stainless steel tank, blending Mencia with a bit of Tempranillo, perfectly summing the Atlantic-Continental duality of Monterrei’s climate. Early bottled, this is super-fresh but has surprisingly good depth and texture. Simple and lovely, it’s a classy savoury wine based on countryside tells.

**LADAIRO ‘Collecion de la Familia’ Mencia and Arauxa 2015**

| The nose has lovely ashy, spiced wild berry fruit impregnated with brush and rose (thorns and florals). There’s blood, warm apple and the woody smell of a hedgerow over adobe earthiness in background. The palate is a amalgam of clay-baked, dusty red-black berries, edged by rose thorns, satin-sheened and subtly spiced. Fresh and open its gentle and harmonious, just mid-weight with a touch of mid-palate roundness, great length, energy and style. Acid and tannin combine to a piquant entity, giving a sour thrill to the soft, light round fruit. Slick without glyceric richness, it’s delightfully sweet and sour, gliding into a vibrant acid finish. |

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DO Ribeiro: Treixadura country
Ribeiro is another young DO attempting to re-establish a sense of local and authentic. The use of personality yeasts casts the scene, but there are also several competent and assured producers making delicate granite-influenced savoury whites based on Treixadura. There’s also a genuine superstar in the form of Luis Anxo, making probably the greatest white wines in all of Galicia.

Ribeiro is in central Galicia, just south-west of the regional capital, Ourense. Running south from the banks of the Rio Miño, it’s a multiple-valley DO configured by the Rios Avia and Arnoia. The central town of the appellation is Ribadavia, named for the Riba (in Spanish this would be the Ribera, the span from peak to peak of the river valley) of the Rio Avia. DO Ribeiro is the oldest in Galicia, dating from 1932. There are 100 bodegas, with 6,000 growers working just 3,000 hectares. The bodegas are classified as ‘Colleiteros’ if less than 60,000 litres and as ‘Adegas’ if the produce over 60,000 litres. ¾ of bodegas are little Colleiteros.

Climate and Geography
The region is temperate, damp and hilly, influenced from the west by Atlantic winds. Rainfall is about 1000 mm/annum. Altitudes for viticulture range from 100-700 metres. Three-fingered (like an elongated Y), the region is a constellation of valleys, each named after their river. Each is bound by a different Sistema, or mountain range, heavily forested with Galician Pine, Caravallo Oak and Chestnut. Rio Avia in the east has granitic schist soils and is home to good producers such as San Clodio and Sameiras. The Miño to the west is granitic clay and here the top producer is Rodriguez y Canovas. The Arnoia Valley south of Ribadavia is home to Luis Anẋo. It has granite, clay and sand soils and is home to the relatively rare local white variety, Lado.

Grapes, Vines, Regulations
All rules in Ribeiro are currently in flux as the association works towards quality and authenticity and tackles its historical over-production of dull exogenous varieties. There are two types of fruit legal currently. Autochthonous varieties such as Treixadura, Torrontés, Loureira, Albariño, Godello, Caiño Blanco and Lado whites, with Brancellao, Souson, Mencia and Ferrón tintos. Historically, imported varieties, particularly ‘Jerez’ (Palomino) dominated, being 90% of the plantings in Ribeiro. However, the past 20 years has seen a reversion towards authenticity, which currently sees Palomino pegged back to 50% of production. White dominates, with only 10% of production being red wine. Interestingly, like Rias Baixas, prior to the rupture by phylloxera, it was predominantly a red wine growing region.

The CRDO and growers are working towards quality. Maximum yields, once a whopping 30 tonnes/hectare, have recently been trimmed to 18 for ‘Jerez’ and 12 for Ribeiro grapes. Currently, there is no legal requirement to declare that there is Palomino in one’s blend, but for credibility and authenticity’s sake this will surely change soon. If a wine is declared as a ‘Castes’ (ie varietal) wine, it must be 80% or more that variety.

The best wines tend to favour Treixadura as the forefront of a blended wine. It is naturally savoury, but muted aromatically with a nice relaxed carriage and textural delicacy. It also transmits the terroir flavour of the local granite with truth, and can easily gain aromatic infill from Godello, Albariño and the like (I’m not certain that the underwhelming Torrontés contributes much, however). The same problems as described earlier in Monterrei also apply here (and in Ribeira Sacra): industrial wines abound.
LUIS ANXO (VIÑA de MARTIN)
DO Ribeiro (Arnoia Valley zone)
Luis Anxo Rodríguez Vasquez, hereafter, Luis Anxo, calls his project Viña de Martin. The bodega name is taken from his oldest parcel of vines. The bodega is in the little village of Paixon, south of Ribadavia in the relatively dry Arnoia Valley, under the highest peak of the region, La Carniza. Luis was president of DO Ribeiro, for 5 years until 2012, and is largely responsible for the shift towards quality and local authenticity of late in Ribeiro.

Luis has four hectares comprised of 25 small parcels scattered up the steep slopes above his bodega (which sits on a rise above Rio Arnoia). These are 60% white and 40% red vines planted on ‘Sabrego’ - very poor granitic sands. It’s a very cold area and needs long sun exposure to attain proper ripening. The vineyards have two aspects, facing south-west and north-west down to the river, from 150-250 metres altitude.

Consistent with history, most vines are 30 years old: the main white vineyards for Viña de Martin were planted by Luis in 1984 (early in Spain’s viticultural reawakening), with a few small parcels of 40 and one of 100 year old bush vines. These old vine parcels may contain as few as 100 vines. The white vines are mainly Treixadura, with a bit of local Lado for adding acidity, 10% of Albariño to promote aroma and a negligible amount of Torrontés. The red wine plantings, ‘Torna dos Pasos’ date from 1990 and are 50% Brancellao, 25% Caiño Longo, 20% Ferrol and 5% Caiño Redondo. Younger plantings yield 2kg/vine, older vines about 1kg.

Luis has a second sub-regional holding – 1.5 hectares in Ribadavia the main town, to the north of Paixon. Here, Luis makes a separate wine called ‘Viña Teixa’ as an expression of the Avia Valley sub-zone, and it’s a fascinating little project. The vineyard is a sinewy, downhill transect through 9 parcels over 8 levels in a connected line from high hilltop to river flank. The vines are around 30 years old, planted to 95% Treixadura, 3% Godello, 2% Albariño. Luis purchased this tract in 2010. The first release of this wine was the 2011 vintage.

Luis has been making the Arnoia wines since 1988. The wines are extraordinary. Subtle, slow and gentle to unfold and built for many years of bottle evolution. They are the epitome of contemplation wines. Those looking for bang, boom, winemaking or things expressible in a 100 point scale, look elsewhere. If you are happy to wait long by the river however, something extraordinarily pleasurable will surely drift by you.

The Arnoia wines are two whites and two reds:
‘Os Pasos’ and ‘Escolma’ are Treixadura-predominant white blends incorporating a little of Albariño, Lado and Torrontés. ‘Os Pasos’ simple means ‘here’ or ‘this place’. ‘Escolma’ denotes ‘selection’.
‘A Torna dos Pasas’ and ‘A Torna dos Pasas Escolma’ are red blends of Brancellao, Caiño and Ferrrol. ‘A Torna dos Pasos’ translates (with difficulty) as ‘a little part of here’.

VIÑA de MARTIN ‘Os Pasos’ Treixadura Blanco blend
Spends 2 months unstirred on lees, no malo, aged 12 months in stainless.

VIÑA de MARTIN ‘Os Pasos’ Blanco 2013
With fine shale, meal and honey, there’s a straw sweetness on the nose. Fat lemons run the palate, accompanied by plenty of granitic grip. A very fine, totally savoury wine, beautifully perfumed, it has good volume in the mouth, lovely taper and release with super clean phenolics and a gently perfumed final impression.
VIÑA de MARTIN ‘A Torna dos Pasas’ Brancellao Tinto blend
Aged a year in 1-5 year old 300 litre wood. Un-filtered, not cold stabilised. The reds come from the lower slopes above Rio Arnoia, and weigh in at around 12% a/v.

VIÑA de MARTIN ‘A Torna dos Pasas’ Tinto 2012
Redolent of old, gently pressed red flowers, with delicate savoury fruit. There’s pickled cherry and subtle wood spice, clean fruit tannins and lovely oak harmony. The palate is clear, savoury, dry and delicate; quite long, with a nice sense of chew despite its delicacy.

DO Ribeira Sacra
North-west of Ourense in central Galicia, Ribeira Sacra centres around the ancient mountain fortress town of Monforte de Lemos. Defined by two significant rivers, the Miño and the Sil, Ribeira Sacra pretty much marks the beginning of red wine country in Spain. Here the granite soils of coastal Galicia starts to merge with the continental schist found more in Valdeorras and Bierzo. While there is some red west and south in Ribeiro, Monterrei and Rias Baixas, Ribeira Sacra is where continental climatic factors allow red to take over from white.

Breath-takingly beautiful, featuring crazy-steep deep slopes with grades up to 85 degrees. Endless steps traverse the steep terraces from ridge-top to valley floor – a differential of hundreds of metres. It is no joke to call viticulture here ‘heroic’.

Sadly, Ribeira Sacra is currently a little too pleased with being able to bang on about ‘heroic viticulture’ and too little critical attention is going into whether they make delicious wine or not. On the back of some puff from Parker, Ribeira Sacra is pretty hot right now in the US - for no good reason. There’s a host of bad, bad wood in this hood. Short dunk ‘robles’ wines abound. Shitty compound glue corks are in everything. If your Joven ain’t wooded to all sorts of clunkiness, your Barrica is surely clobbered. And don’t even think about ordering it if it’s hubristically dressed up as ‘Vino del Autor’! Right now, there is very little Ribeira Sacra wine worthy of recommendation.

But, then, there is Pedro Guimaro …
That’s not even his real name. Pedro Perez, owner-maker at Guimaro in Amandi is responsible for deft, heart-breakingly beautiful wines that justify this D.O. all by themselves. Usually, people just call him Pedro Guimaro.

Geography, D.O rules and all that …
D.O. Ribeira Sacra was commenced in 1996, after the rupture of phylloxera, followed by the long bad years of bulk wine production … and is now just coming back to itself and attempting to discover its quality potential. In that, these are very early days, it must be said, but the new D.O. now covers 1200 hectares with 3,000 growers and nearly a hundred bodegas in production. The Ribeira Sacra ‘Region’ is listed at 2500 hectares, but only half of this is actually controlled by the CRDO. Production is 85% Mencia and Tinto overall accounts for about 95% of the crop.

Soils are acidic granite and slate with traces of iron, mica and quartz. There’s a little clay in some vineyards down near river level. Almost all
vineyards are steep terraces, and impossible to mechanise, save for winches to haul baskets of grapes up the forbiddingly steep slopes. See the photo of Pedro with the Cesto (35kg grape basket) on his shoulder (next page) ... until recently, this is how they would get the grapes up from the river to the bodega – in Guimaro’s case, a 10km hike ... workers would make one trip in the morning and another in the afternoon.

The climate varies from quite Atlantic in the west (Chantadi) to relatively Continental in the east (Ribeiras do Sil). Depending on the sub-region, rainfall is from as little as 600mm near the Rio Sil, up to 850mm by the Miño. Autumn is cool, after a long and relatively warm Galician summer.  

There are 5 subregions (hand-drawn by Pedro Guimaro at right):
Amandi, south of Monforte de Lemos, above Rio Sil, granitic and schist soils on steep south-facing terraces (home to Guimaro)
Quiroga-Bebei, with north-facing slopes across the Sil from Amandi is the D.O.’s southern boundary
Ribeiras do Sil in the east abuts Valdeorras, and have more granite in the mix with schist soils
Chantada, is the western boundary of the D.O. on the left bank of the Miño as it runs south towards Ribeiro and ultimately becomes the Spanish-Portuguese border
Ribeiras de Miño, is on the right bank opposite Chantada, north-west of Monforte de Lemos

There are two levels of appellation in Ribeira Sacra
Wines labelled Ribeira Sacra Summum are required to be a minimum of 85% preferred varieties and 60% minimum Mencia. To be labelled varietally, eg as a Mencia, it must be at least 85% Mencia.
The lesser category of Ribeira Sacra need only be 70% preferred varieties.

Yields are limited to 9.5 tonnes/hectare for red and 12 t/ha for whites.

Preferred varieties are:
Red: Mencia, Brancellao, Merenzao, Sousón, Caño Tinto and Tempranillo.
Whites: Godello, Albariño, Treixadura, Torrontés, Dona Branca and Loureira.
There are also ‘authorised’ (but not preferred) red varieties: Garnacha Tintorera (Alicante Bouchet) and Mouratón.

There is only one qualitative appellation: ‘Barrica’ indicates ageing in 500 litre oak or smaller for at least 6 months in case of reds and 3 months for whites. It’s an entirely meaningless appellative.
ADEGAS GUIMARO
DO Ribeira Sacra

His name is Pedro Perez, but everyone calls him Pedro Guimaro, and he’s the best producer in Ribeira Sacra, a radically steep river valley appellation in central Galicia. Steep? As Pedro says, “this isn’t a Valley: it’s a Canyon!” His wines are alive, wild and free, pure expressions of the countryside in which they are grown.

The Perez family own 9 and control another 16 hectares leased from nearly 30 old subsistence growers, across a range of slate soils nuanced with sand and granite. Around 50 parcels in total are farmed from the steepest south-facing (50-70 degree) slopes above Rio Sil in between the towns of Amandi and Doade in the Amandi sub-zone. The soils are hard-packed dark slate with quartz, iron and mica. The bodega itself is in the hamlet of Brosmos. Pedro’s holdings are planted at around 4500 vines/hectare and yield about half a litre of wine per vine. The plots are tiny, planted between 300 metres to 550 metres altitude. New plots planted into the dense stone (there’s no soil until they create it) average about 4-5 vines per day per worker.

Pedro has run the family business since 2000 (he retired from legal practice to take over the family business). His ascension saw a reduction in yield, the banishment of chemicals and an increased focus on distinguishing handling (and in particular, picking times) of the various key plots, thus enhancing the acidity and structure of the wines. Note: Guimaro is Gallego for ‘non-conformist’. Originally, this tag came from their refusal to pay tithes to the count.

Guimaro’s handling is deliberately and meaningfully ‘old-fashioned’: organic viticulture, wild yeast fermentations, foot treading, inclusion of stems, low sulphur regime, ageing in old wood. While the varieties listed on bottle say Mencia and Godello, most plantings are field blends, with some Albariño and Treixadura in the whites, and other local reds such as Caño tinto, Merenzao, Souson and Mouratón in the mix.

The slate soils are interpreted via an estate blend Joven style and 4 site-specific Cru wines

The four single vineyards (including Ladredo which Pedro co-makes with Dirk Niepoort) range from west to east in this order:
- Ladredo (east facing or naciamento - to the rising sun and also the ripping easterly winds that tear down the river from the continental hinterland)
- Capelinos (95 years old vineyard faces south-west towards Pombeiras across a small valley)
- Pombeiras (70 year old granite and quartz over pizzara, south-east facing)
- Finca Meixeman (has a both a slate part facing naciamento and a granite-iron poniente face)

Guimaro Godellos – Joven and Barrica

Pedro gets Godello from 20 parcels of old vines, at different altitudes and orientations, mostly inter-planted with the Mencia. Some Godello remains in the Mencia field blends, while about 4 tonnes of white are picked separately as Godello (in fact about 70% Godello with a lot of Treixadura and a little each of Doña Blanca, Albariño, Loureiro and Torrontés). This yields 3000 litres of Godello, making 3000 bottles of Joven Blanco and 1500 bottles of Barrica.
4x225 litre barrels for Barrica are filled first and whatever is left becomes the stainless steel Joven. The Joven is given a cold maceration with skins for a day, then has spontaneous fermentation in stainless steel for 15 days, and is aged on lees in stainless un-stirred and without malo for 4 months. Cold stabilised, very lightly filtered and bottled with 15 parts free SO2. The portion fermented in Barrica rests unstirred on lees in 6 year old barricas, no malo, no racking, no battonage, and bottled unfiltered after 6 months.

**Guimaro Joven Godello 2015**

*Smells of orange essence, hay, green grassy herbs and has a touch of lovely bitterness edging lemon drop. Apple-pear fruit is open, low, waxy and spicy, with long ripe acidity. There’s plenty of richness and power below the mineral-edged slate-smoke line. A wine of good volume and great style, easy and elegant.*

**Guimaro Godello Barrica 2015**

*A nose of barley water flavoured with orange rind and persimmon skin bitters, there’s lovely richness and weight in a golden orchard fruits register. The palate is super graceful, with fruit richness fading to traces and picking up phenolic bitters as a coda lingering over quartzy-clay minerality.*

**A Guimaro Mencia:**

*Red fruit tea, a shower of roses and a snip of caney tannins*  
*Strikingly pure wild cherry, the smell of rock, beets, little blue flowers*  
*A hint of blood*  
*Liquorous cherry, meat and minerals*  
*Rock rose, carpasso, cherry wood and pomelo*  
*Tobacco, bosky balsamics, and lovely cold dark rocks*  
*Aromatic raspberry and rose petal*  
*Pomegranate fruit with slatey mineral-fresh palate length*  
*Lightly smoked blackberry canes and gently pressed wild cherry juice in mountain air*  

**recent vintages:**

*2015, hot*
*2014, a good year but rain at harvest made it difficult to finish*
*2013, very cold*
*2012, normal and very good*

**Guimaro Mencia Joven**

*A blend of granite, slate and sand soils from many parcels (some yielding as little as 200kg), which are fermented separately by soil type then blended. It’s a summary of Guimaro’s soils, and with an average vine age of about 40 years. The Tinto Joven is made half in foudre and half in tank; de-stemmed, with a small proportion (20% usually) as whole-cluster, fermented after 6 day cold maceration. 20-30 day spontaneous indigenous yeast fermentation, 6 months in tank on lees, un-filtered, cold stabilised, egg white fined. No oak ageing and little filtering giving freshness and purity.*

**Guimaro Mencia Joven 2015**

*Berry-bright (sour cherry, barberry) smoky-spiced red floral tea, freshened with blossom and carpasso. The palate is easy, light and savoury with great balance. The tannin is just ripe and light, almost a line or thread through the gentle fruit jelly glycerol up front, yielding to soil-fattened acidity.*
Guimaro ‘Finca Meixeman’ Single Vineyard Mencia
At 400-450 metres’ altitude, Miexeman is a 1.2 hectare plot of 70+ year old organically grown vines from a ‘two-faced’ vineyard: the larger part is relatively coolly oriented slate facing south-east, or naciamente (to the rising sun); the other is iron-rich granitic soil in a poniente (setting sun) south-west facing. Both sections are streaked with quartz, iron and mica. The grapes are foot-trodden, 40% whole bunch, 16 days maceration on skins and stems after wild yeast fermentation in open foudre. Very gently pressed, aged 6 months in foudre then 12 months in old French 225s. Meixeman was first bottled as a Cru in 2006. “Pedro, what does the name Meixeman mean?” “No idea, Scott.”

Guimaro ‘Finca Meixeman’ Single Vineyard Mencia 2013
Deep, dark violet florals, with pollen above and blood below and scrubby tree branch balsamics everywhere in the mix. Savoury, carnal, yet gentle, Meixeman’s gamey-pastille fruit opens to wild spice and blossom prettiness out back, everywhere riddled with brushy botanicals.

Guimaro ‘Pombeiras’ Single Vineyard Mencia
Pombeiras is the coolest climate single site - 70 year old vines planted on granite and quartz over pizzara, south-east or ‘naciamento’, facing to the rising sun. Fermented in large 20yo ‘Cuba’ French oak with 10% stems, all whole bunches, for 60 days, then aged 10 months in 5 year old 500l French barrels. 2010 was the first vintage. Pombeiras means “Pigeon”.

Guimaro ‘Pombeiras’ Single Vineyard Mencia 2014
Black raspberry on black metal minerals, the fruit is soft with floral lift and carries touches of lavender and thyme. The palace is delicately oily, expressing just a touch of pithy weight over a delicate schist soil ashiness. The mid-palate is round and the wine has gentle fleshy-spicy reach, with a touch of fresh apple crunch.

Guimaro ‘Capelinos’ Single Vineyard Mencia
Just 4 barriques are made from this south-west-facing 0.6 hectare plot, which is a field blend of Mencia with a little Caiño and Mouratón Negrada. Capelinos sits below Meixeman at 350-400 metres and is vinified similarly. 45% stems, long fermentation in open foudre, 12 months or so ageing in 225 & 500 litre old wood. First vintage was 2002. The name means “little church”. Capelinos is more strict and structured than the relatively ethereal Pombeiras. A wine of bright, full cherry fruit, great spice, the voice of the soil and well structured.

Guimaro ‘Capelinos’ Single Vineyard Mencia 2014
Leads with root vegetables and a big hit of dried mixed herbs. The palate is mid-weight (which is plush for here), with fleshy vegetal tannins giving plenty of structure (compared to the satiny waft of Pombeiras). Closes out with fascinating spicy sourness winding out of the earthy tannins.

Guimaro-Niepoort ‘Ladredo’ Mencia
Technically, this is a Niepoort wine, as that’s the company ID on the label. It’s a Guimaro-owned vineyard, which Pedro makes in conjunction with Dirk Niepoort. It’s marketed by the Niepoort machine as part of Dirk’s swag of co-production ‘projects’. Contains about 30% Garnacha Tintorera. 80% whole bunch fermented in small foudre for 60 days; malo and lees ageing in foudre, then 12 months in old French barrique. All the whole bunch makes for serious wine needing time to evolve. 4-6 barrels are made annually. Sweet and sour ‘agrodulce’ beet-rich fruit, tightly wound and spicy, very long working deep and complete into the back palate.
Val de Oras is the old roman name, Valley of Ore, taken from this remote place’s history as a gold-mining region long ago. Valdeorras is the eastern-most wine zone in Galicia – travel further east and you end up in the high, continental hills of Bierzo in the ancient kingdom of Leon. Valdeorras runs about 30km west-east along the course of the Rio Sil, with a shallow north-south aspect of just a few kilometres. The western boundary is the adjacent DO Ribeira Sacra.

The climate is continental-Atlantic. The area is cool, hilly and dry, with a range of micro-climates provided by the alternation of poor-soiled hills with many criss-crossing rivers. Telmo and Pablo’s holdings are in the valleys of the Rio Bibe, a tributary of the Sil. The annual average temperature is about 12ºC with a range between 33ºC and –5ºC. The annual rainfall is about 650 mm with 95 days of rain either side of a dry summer. The soils are cold and dry - a slightly acidic mineral blend of slate and granite with some clay and sand. Telmo and Pablo’s holdings are on granite rather than slate, which in part differentiates these wines from the slate-based wines of Ribeira Sacra and the slate/clay hybrid of el Bierzo.

Telmo Rodriguez
DO Valdeorras

“When you drink, you make choices which make a place (you transform and confirm a certain ecology, landscape and political economy)” ... Telmo Rodriguez

Telmo and Pablo actually made their first vineyard purchase here. In the early 90s, as they commenced their search for the old, hidden, lost and forgotten greatness of Spanish viticulture, Valdeorras was their first stop. Their work in other regions became well-known soon thereafter, however – Valdeorras is their most slowly evolving project, thanks to arduous viticultural work, both re-conditioning old, neglected vineyards, and also developing new vineyards from scratch, using the genetic material of the old parcels as source code. Near to Santa Cruz, they found a vineyard called Falcoeira, ‘the Falconry’. It is an ancient vineyard of very steep terraces established by the romans 2000 years ago, but abandoned since phylloxera laid waste to Valdeorras at the end of the 19th century. The vineyard is super-steep, with 14,000 plants across 3 acres, and can only be pruned at a rate of 150 vines per worker per day. Initially, Falcoeira was re-planted to Godello, but has since been grafted over to Mencia and the other red wine cultivars of the valley. 20 years of viticultural hard slog and counting, eventually we will see a wine from here!

Telmo and Pablo’s holdings in the Ladeiros do Bebei (hillslopes of the Rio Bebei) are in the valleys around the little village of Santa Cruz, south of the exit at A Rua, roughly halfway along the highway between Monforte de Lemos (Ribeira Sacra) and Ponferrada (el Bierzo). Here the soils are granitic in the main. Holdings nearby at Louruco are argile clay, in between granite and slate forms. All are organic, most are biodynamic with the balance in conversion. Vines are grown ‘en parra’ (bush vines trained on poles). The vineyards are between 300-500 metres altitude. The steep valley at Santa Cruz is thickly populated by the herb Carpasso (in Galego, called Cantueso in Castilian), a hybrid rosemary-marjoram-thyme, which clearly influences the wines’ aromatics. The nitrogenous local yellow shrub, Toxo is equally prominent, and historically was used along with a goat-horse-cow dung mix as fertiliser.

Telmo and Pablo are wine-cultural historians. They contend that when you drink (and by extension, plant and grow grapes, make and mature wines), you choose and make a place; establishing its
ecology, its landscape, its political economy and its lived history. You interpret, transform, confirm a certain way of things. Their intention is to interpret and confirm Valdeorras on a human, rather than industrial scale. The wines are delicate, pure, hand-made. “This is the anti-winemaking”, they proclaim.

An evolving range of wines are made by Telmo and Pablo in Valdeorras.

- Firstly there is a pair of simple, but very high quality regional wines of great typicity: Gaba do Xil Godello and Gaba do Xil Mencia. Although named varietally, they are made from historical field blends of several varieties of mixed red and white grapes.
- Currently in the market are a pair of Cru wines, Branco de Santa Cruz which is a Godello-based field blend white, and As Caborcas, Mencia-predominant field blend red.
- Eventually, two other specific sites will be bottled separately. Falcueira and As Ermitas are currently undergoing deep viticultural restoration. Stay tuned.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ ‘Gaba do Xil’ Godello
Gaba is Basque for evening – it was late in the day when Telmo and Pablo first walked this steep valley, whence they now make wine from 21 hectares. Gaba white is a fresh, unwooded wine, gently handled. Expect grapefruit, canned pear, pomelo, white flowers, carpasso herb, some creamy-nutty textural weight, mineral freshness and a nip of tidying acidity.

Telmo Rodriguez ‘Gaba do Xil’ Godello 2015
Almond meal and blossom mix with barley water, cereal and steely green herbs in a spontaneous, unaffected nose. The palate is a fantastic running brook, far from the heavy, front-loaded broadness which often lets Godello down. A delightful, almost dashing wine, lively and filled with the herbs and grasses of the Santa Cruz valley.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ ‘Gaba do Xil’ Mencia
This wine is close to definitive of Mencia’s best attributes. Valdeorras is possibly the perfect natural place for Mencia – enough sun energy to ripen tannin, but cool enough to preserve its scant natural acid reserves. Gaba Mencia is unwooded and barely handled, with a great harmony of fruit, earth and the countryside.

Telmo Rodriguez ‘Gaba do Xil’ Mencia 2014
On the nose, soft red fruits are alive with granite and herbs. All the key Valdeorras Mencia tells are here: floral-fragrant, touches of smoke and meat, gentle fruit tannin and a herb-acid tang to finish. Gaba is energetic and fresh, rounded with lovely crunch, featuring caponata-fleshiness and a touch of cracked white pepper.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ ‘Branco de Santa Cruz’ Cru Godello
Branco de Santa Cruz is based on a little organic vineyard beneath the Valdeorras village of Santa Cruz. A Coroa is in fact the bottom part of the vineyard which gives us Telmo’s extraordinary Heritage Cru Mencia, ‘As Caborcas’. The lower ¼ of the terraces of this hill are planted to Godello in a very cool aspect facing north-west, while the upper reaches are a Mencia and others red grape field blend. (this photo is taken from the bottom of the vineyard, so you can see the Godello terraces in foreground, and the lower reaches of the Mencia-planted upper section.) Telmo has spent many years restoring these old vines. While we call it ‘Godello’, this is a typical heritage planting of old bush-vine field-blend gear, mainly Godello with Loureiro, Doña Blanca, Palomino (Jaen) and others mixed in. Grown at 500 metres’ altitude, an indigenous yeast fermentation is followed by 12 months’ maturation in neutral old wooden vats. The wine is labelled Branco de Santa Cruz, since it is a village wine with some other parcels around the valley supplementing the fruit from A Coroa.
TELMO RODRIGUEZ ‘Branco de Santa Cruz’ Cru Godello 2013
A superbly textural wine with lovely clarity, minerality and line. There’s honey, wattle and crunchy gravel soil twitched up with a bunch of wild herbs. The palate has good body but lengthens beautifully, phenolics are both constructive and controlled and the whole thing is beguiling and gently expansive (but not insistent).

TELMO RODRIGUEZ ‘As Caborcas’ Mencia
High above the Rio Burbia, facing west towards the eastern reach of DO Ribeira Sacra on the other bank, As Caborcas is Telmo and Pablo’s first single vineyard release of Mencia from Valdeorras. Called ‘Ladeiros do Bebei’, which means high terraces above the river, and that’s exactly what it is. Organically grown, hand-planted to selections of indigenous genetic material, it’s a field blend of Mencia with Mouraton, Brancellao and Souson, facing west and north-west towards the Falcoeira vineyard on the other side of the valley. Grown at around 500m altitude and exhaustingly worked by hand, it’s a 50-50 mix of 100 year old Mencia vines and a young field blend. As Caborcas yields a trifling 4 tonnes on nearly 2 hectares of relatively close-planted bush-vine. The images on the label of As Caborcas (and sister wine, Branco de Santa Cruz) are all drawn from the nearby 17th century Santurio das Ermitas. The first release of As Caborcas was 2010, as with Branco de Santa Cruz.

As Caborcas is a magical place, wild and energetic. Standing in its midst I have a chill, nape hairs erect, hearing strains of Warren Ellis’s violin and Nick singing … “I am alive, I am vibrating … look at me now”. As Caborcas is one of the purest wines I’ve ever had the pleasure of. Telmo’s aspiration to express through the earth, rather than winemaking is profoundly achieved - the wine from this granite single vineyard barely seems made at all, but rather like some heavenly breath – an utterance of the soil. It has the roses, velvet, sour cherry and crushed fruit stone/crushed rock perfume on nose and in mouth that can only be Mencia. Deftly textured, mineral, herbal and red-fruitied, it’s long, open and lively with a lovely sense of space. It’s expressive, expansive and utterly free.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'As Caborcas' Cru Mencia 2012, DO Valdeorras
Fine and lingering on nose and in mouth, the fruit is red and floral not unlike the whole of a red apple the moment it is picked ripe in the orchard. The smell and taste of the vineyard runs through everything, as Telmo desires: this really is "the anti-winemaking", tasting entirely of its place.

DO Bierzo – honorary Galicians
Bierzo is in the north-western continental province of Leon (the mid-north is usually referred to as Castile y Leon, with Leon separating the larger province of Castile from Galicia). Bierzo is a basin surrounded by four distinct mountain ranges, from which a number of significant rivers (most notably the Sil) carve their way west, draining central Spain to the Coast via the ‘low rivers’ (Rias Baixas) of Galicia. Along with the Sil, which flows west from Ponferrada, there is also Rio Cua, emanating from Cacabelos and Rio Burbia from Vilafranca del Bierzo. Rising from the valley floor are clay-dirt hillslopes, and surrounding these at the perimeter of the valley are mountain slopes with mineral soils (in particular, those above Corullón in the north-west). The region is green and mountainous, with chestnut forests facing north and south-facing exposures given to viticulture.
Although politically a part of continental Spain, in wine logic we align Bierzo with the Galician-Atlantic DOs, on the basis of two inter-related continuities. Firstly, Rio Sil (which converges with the Miño just west of Ribeira Sacra) defines the main wine regions of Galicia, and this river originates in Bierzo. Likewise, the main Galician wine grapes, Godello and Mencia, originate in Bierzo. Further, these varieties are not grown in the rest of Castile-Leon. Simply, Bierzo grows Galician grapes, and these grapes flourish along the course of a river which arises in Bierzo.

History and wine styles
Bierzo has two millennia of history in wine production, dating back to the Roman occupation (1st-4th centuries AD). After all this time, the economy of the area was closely tied to the grape, but the late-19th century advent of phylloxera interrupted all this. After phylloxera, 40% of the population migrated from the area. Re-planting on American rootstocks, at first in locations based on historical memory and lore saw 30% of the area renewed, but further difficulties arose from 1935 after the Civil War. As the region got poorer, plantings shifted down into the valleys on rich soils. Non-local varieties, particularly Palomino, were planted for their high yields, closely followed by the advent of industrial fertilisers. The old varieties and ways were lost, and a 50 year black age persisted until the late 80s, when a philosophical re-birth slowly emerged. By the 1980s, as with most of Galicia, the high crop white, Palomino dominated, accounting for 50% of the region’s plantings.

Like much of Galicia, the wine tale of Bierzo is one of great loss in recent times. This began with the onset of phylloxera in the late 19th century, which almost eradicated 2000 years of continuous vine culture, accretion of knowledge and the development of autochthonous genetic cultivars. This loss continued during the 20th century due to the twin barbarisms of the post-civil-war dictatorship and twentieth century chemical-industrial agriculture. Agriculture was shifted down into the fertile river valley and only a remnant of hill-slope and mountain holdings were left planted to vine. Planting virtually ceased between 1950 and 1985 as the region’s population hollowed out with people moving into mining, industry and the cities. By 1985, high-yield Palomino dominated the valley floor and quality local varieties, principally Mencia and Godello, were ignored almost entirely.

Nowadays, as the region reverts to its native Mencia and Godello, there are 4500 hectares planted, 90% red, mainly in small plots of 400-800 square metres. Grapes are grown for wine between 300 and 2000 metres’ altitude. The main local grape is Mencia. The white Godello is also important, and there’s a little Garnacha Tintorera (aka the pink-fleshed Alicante Bouchet) and traces of another 20 local varieties, mostly red. Historically the white varieties were blended in with the reds to make ‘Clarete’ – fruity, light pink wines made with about a quarter white grapes. These were the typical local wines for a long while – not just here in Bierzo, but in Ribera del Duero and Rioja too.

Soils and sites
In Bierzo, there are three main vineyard locations – the fertile valley floor, intermediate hill-slopes of red clay dirt, and mountain slopes with schist (slate) mineral soils. No good wine comes from Bierzo’s valley floor. Both the hillside material and the mountain gear are capable of excellence, depending on orientation (south-facing mountain slopes are a warmer site promoting softer Mencia than a north-facing hillside), and clay is cooler than either granite or schist. Along with the complex terroir, altitude and aspect options, keep in mind that Bierzo is a fundamentally mixed continental-Atlantic climate.

The oldest vines are in the mountain slopes, and these vineyards are where the heritage material of Bierzo is to be found. Although most of Bierzo was wiped out by phylloxera, and most of the rest was debased by the practices of the 20th century, some vineyards in the high parts were re-planted by massale selection from the scattered survivors of phylloxera, and these are a direct link to Vitis Vinifera’s long history of evolution in situ here. Vineyards such as those of DJP claim a direct
historical continuity with this legacy, and are a potential source for the authentic renewal of Bierzo. The intermediate slopes – the clay hills of the valley, however, are mostly younger, planted during the rebirth period of the 1980s and 90s.

Godelia
DO Bierzo
Godelia is a relatively young project, at least in its present form. Its wines come from a combination of very old schist-soiled mountain vines and maturing vines from the clay hill-slopes in the centre of the valley. About 30 of the 50 hectares which go into production of Godelia were planted in 1989 by a former owner, who traded under a different brand name. Godelia as such came into being when Vicente Garcia Vasquez, the optometrist of Cacabelos, purchased these holdings in 2009.

The now 20+ year old vines and some 90 year old bush vines in the mountains were entrusted to Josep Serra Guyillen, a Catalan winemaker brought in from outside specifically to avoid local complacency and to revise inherited bad viticultural habits. His brief – freshness and elegance.

The name, Godelia, is Vicente’s invention – intended to allude to a fresh and feminine Bierzo, it is a made up contraction of Godello and Lias (lees).

Location and vineyards
Cacabelos is a town smack bang in the middle of the valley floor, midway along the old highway from Ponferrada in the south to Vilafranca del Bierzo in the north. Godelia are just outside of Cacabelos in a ‘place’ called Pieros. On the Castillo Plateau, Pieros is also directly under the Castro Ventosa – literally, ‘windy hill’. Rising out of the fertile valley floor, the Castro was once a vital defensive mechanism – from its domed top, at a quick trot, one can quickly look around the entire valley floor in all directions and take warning of invaders. With clay over deep sand at 350-450 metres altitude, the slopes of the Castro are home to much of the best fruit of Bierzo. Here are 5 hectares of Godelia material. 5km the other side of Cacabelos, in Legúas on similar rises are 25 hectares of calcareous, granitic, stony clay. The clay of Castro and Legúas also features large pebbles. A further 20 hectares are scattered on the quartz and pizzara (schist-slate) of the mountain slopes at 700-900 metres altitude. These are typically very small plots around 400-800 square metres, largely very old vines which Josep Serra values for their freshening acidity.

Godelia ‘Viernes’ Mencia 2014 Tinto Joven

A bright and correct cherry-earth-spice wine, berry-fresh with bluebells and a touch of dark earth. The delicate, beautifully patterned nose smells the colour of autumnal vine leaves at harvest time. The palate has soft cherry-carob fruit that’s lantana-herb-edged and spicy, with good mid-palate structure, releasing to an easy finish. It’s very high quality for the $.
Descendientes de J. Palacios (DJP)
DO Bierzo
Ricardo Perez Palacios and Alvaro Palacios

Descendientes de Jose Palacios is one of 3 estates of the family of Alvaro Palacios:
- Alvaro’s personally named estate is the leading Garnacha producer in Priorat.
- The family ‘home’ (literally and viticulturally) is the Rioja estate, Palacios Remondo in Alfaro.
- The Bierzo Mencia wines as discussed here.

The ‘Descendientes’ are Alvaro Palacios and his nephew, Ricardo Perez Palacios, both of whom grew up in the Palacios family home in Alfaro, Rioja. Both are descendants of Alvaro’s father, Jose Palacios, who died in 2000, just as the first Bierzo wines were being prepared and for whom the Bierzo project was then named.

DJP commenced in 1999, when the young Ricardo was studying permaculture in Leon, subsequent to his viticultural studies in Bordeaux. Ricardo came across some very old plantings of Mencia high on the mountain slopes above the village of Corullón, and recognised these as heritage material of great potential and importance, just as Alvaro had done a decade earlier with the remnant old autochthonous Garnatxas of Priorat. Alvaro was summoned to inspect and an immediate decision was made to invest and investigate. Ever since, Ricardo and Alvaro have been purchasing and renovating old vineyards, massale propagating heritage genetic material throughout their holdings, refining how to grow and vinify Mencia.

The wines of DJP
DJP Mencias are produced at several levels:
- a regional Bierzo wine – Pétalos, which blends mountain fruit from above Corullón (about 80% of the blend) with that of the clay hill-slopes rising out of the valley floor, mainly around the village of Cacabelos
- a village wine, Corullón, summarising many tiny component parcels of schist-soil-grown Mencia from the mountain slopes above Corullón, and
- site-specific bottlings from three special parcels above Corullón: Moncerbal, Las Lamas and La Faraona. These sites are a combination of Paraje (elsewhere, Partida or Lieu-Dit) wines representing a specific sub-village place, or specific vineyard or Cru wines.

There were two other place wines bottled in earlier years, Fontelas and San Martin, but these have ceased, with Ricardo and Alvaro preferencing quality fruit to the village wine, Corullón. A vineyard such as Moncerbal will see some fruit go into Pétalos, more into Corullón, with a small portion bottled as single site material.

The mountain vineyards for Corullón, including Moncerbal, Las Lamas and La Faraona are very small plots grown at 600-1000 metres altitude. All are based on a mineral slate – some featuring clay and others chalk, with traces of granite and a complex range of metals and minerals. Alvaro and Ricardo have 40 hectares above Corullón made up of 225 parcels (so an average plot would be just about 200 square metres!), and all are the product of organic-biodynamic viticulture, tilled by horse. The resultant wines are fresh, fragrant and deep – juicy, lively and silky. They display elements of gamey-meatiness along with ravishing florals. Round and long fruit tannins are always a feature.
The 2013 vintage
2012/13 was a warm winter but spring 2013 turned cold with frost burn, a cool summer saw late and uneven flowering but autumn was warm and fine, perfectly setting up a slow, very late ripening, where (as always with Mencia) very careful timing of picking and selection was required. The 2013s are wonderfully defined, quiet wines of great focus; they’re cool, a touch abstract and require some patience ahead of a long, harmonious future.

Pétalos, regional blend Mencia
Pétalos is the regional expression (drawn from nearly 900 plots in the region 200 owned by Ricardo and Alvaro, and the rest leased from 175 growers) of Mencias from Bierzo. It’s mountain mineral fruit plus 20% from clay hill-slope sites below Corullon. Aged 12 months in large older French oak.

Pétalos leads with lashings of complex florals: field herb, dried sage, red lavender, violet, pepper tree and rose. There’s fresh clay dirt and lissom red plum and sour cherry fruits: earthy and bright, it sums Mencia and Bierzo perfectly. The palate has nicely moderated fruit plushness in a choc-blackberry register. Pétalos is soft, open, round, pretty and fresh with nice slick-but-earthly tannins and smoky minerals.

Corullón, village Mencia
Corullón is the summation of 210 tiny parcels of fruit grown from the cold metal-mineral soils on the mountain slopes (between 500-1000 metres) above the village of Corullon. Vine age is 50-90 years, and these organic vineyards are un-irrigated and bio-dynamically farmed by hand and horse. Fermentation is in small wooden vats (foudre), and the wine is bottled unfiltered after 14 months' maturation in French oak – the first 7 months in new, then another 6 or so in 2-3 yo barriques and hogsheads with some foudre and clay vats in the mix. About 50% of stems are retained, with just a little, gentle pigeage; fermentation and maceration go for a little more than two months. No pumping, no filtering or fining. 20 parts free and 45 parts total sulphur. 125 barrels total production.

DJP ‘Corullón’ Mencia 2013
Lots of fresh-tilled earth and green herbs, soy, bracken and moss, red fruits in the back slowly go electric. The palate has loads of fresh mineral slate carving a clean line from tongue-tip all the way back and out. Acid grip at the rim accentuates its horizontal plane discus-in-the-mouth affect. It’s a cold rock sandwich, with lovely sweet, herbal, fleshy-vegetal spicy perfume release out back. The palate fills and builds roundness to reach to the back in a plush, complex masterpiece.

Moncerbal, Vino de Paraje
The Moncerbal hillside faces south above the village of Corullon, at above 750m, with vines around 100 years’ age. Rocky slate with silica and quartz, but there’s only about 30cm of soil. Fermented in small open wooden vats (old 1200 litre foudre), aged 14 months in new French barriques. Unfiltered; production total: 8 barrels.

DJP ‘Moncerbal’ Mencia 2013
Quiet and cool, this is a mountain air wine, mingling sour cherry, medicinal herb and savoury dark fruits. It’s very calm, reserved, precise. With wonderful spicy-acid lines and subtle tannin linear and alongside, it has outstanding direction and release, tannins build towards back then release in a sweet-sour squeak.
Las Lamas, vino de Paraje

From 0.54 hectares of south-west-facing slope on the hill named Las Lamas above Corullon, comprised of 60, 90 and 100 year old patches of vines. It’s perilously steep, seeming to hang from the road’s edge (below 750 metres’ altitude). Las Lamas has deeper soils than Moncerbal, with quite a bit of clay, granite and quartz in the typical Corullon mountain light brown and pale grey slate mineral soils. There’s about 1% of Alicante Bouchet field-blended in the Mencia of Las Lamas, which has the longest sun exposure of the three single sites. Oak etc as for Moncerbal. Unfiltered, 5 barrels.

DJP ‘Las Lamas’ Mencia 2013

Lactic with creamy cherries, bracken, smoked blackberry canes, ferrous earth, potash, red flowers and rose thorns. Almost beef stock full, it’s round with iron surff-crashing on a metal-mineral fresh shore and fanning out, energetic and electric. Despite the early body, it’s not overly concentrated, not particularly glyceric.

La Faraona, Cru Mencia

Faraona is single parcel within the Paraje of el Ferro, on a tectonic-volcanic fault and laden with nuclear minerals. With its shallow basalt bedrock, La Faraona is the highest hill in Corullon, ranging from 855 metres at the bottom of the vineyard to 975 metres at the top. Very steep, south-east facing, planted to 65 year old vines which struggle in just 30cm of (volcanic basalt, titanium etc) soil and with just the morning sun for succour. Grey and pale brown slate with quartz. Only worked (tilled by mule) one year in three. It was 50% Palomino when Ricardo and Alvaro purchased it, but this rogue variety is now just a trace along with a little Alicante Bouchet in field blend. Fermented in new 600l French oak, unfiltered, with total production of up to 2 barrels. In 2009, they had to cooper a special ¼ barrel to approximate a second barrel after a full first barrique!

DJP ‘La Faraona’ Mencia 2013

Lots of complex and sour green herbs and grasses, and equally complex fine aromatic metal-minerals, vibrant sour cherry and clear country air. Faraona has outstanding grip from long tannins twining along a rail of steely acid. There’s a thread of volatile wildness relieved by some lovely earth perfumes at finish; complex, packed, but not heavy or dense, just requiring time to blossom.
NOTES ON GRAPE VARIETIES

BLANCOS

Albariño (al-bah-reen-yoh)
Albariño is native to Galicia: the cool, damp province of North-Western Spain, otherwise known as ‘Green Spain’. It’s also common in northern Portugal (as Alvarinho). The varietal flavour spectrum is fruity-floral: apple, jasmine, white peach, lime leaf, nashi pear, (brown pear signifies over-ripe or over-worked Albariño), with spritely, often minerally, acid. The variety generally needs a little, very judicious work with skins, as its free-run juice is flavour-shy and quite acidic; great skill and care is needed, however, as the phenolics can very easily get out of control. Many ‘makers are turning to barrel-fermentation and/or ageing in order to impart extra texture. This can risk phenolic ‘blowsiness’, as can malolactic fermentation. A more successful technique is to add post-fermentation lees contact to a portion of the blend.

Albariño is a small-bunched, round, green, mid-sized, thick-skinned berry and is relatively resistant to fungal disease – pretty important in the damp of Rías Baixas. It is low yielding and expensive to cultivate. Perversely, DO Rias Baixas, which is controlled by the large co-ops, allow huge yields (12 tonnes/hectare ... and in the high yield 2011 harvest this was increased to 15 t/ha at the behest of the big co-ops).

Treixadura (tray-shah-doo-rah)
Like Albariño, Treixadura is also grown in Portugal, where it is known as Trajadura. It finds its best expression inland from Rías Baixas in the DO of Ribeiro, but it is of some importance as a blender in Rías Baixas, particularly in the inland zone of Condado de Tea, where it structures the softer non-coastal Albariño. Treixadura is a naturally savoury variety – more muted aromatically than Albariño, but structurally interesting and age-worthy. At its best it has a charming, long and soft, rounded golden mineral thread. Over-ripened it becomes too soft very quickly.

Loureiro (loo-ray-roh)
Also grown in the Northern Portugal appellation, Vinho Verde, Loureiro is a savoury and aromatic variety with a tell-tale lemon and ‘bay leaf’ aroma (plus orange and acacia blossoms). Louro, in fact is the local name for the laurel family, which gives us the bay tree. Loureiro is used in Spain to give acid structure to softer varieties, Godello, Treixadura and non-coastal Albariño in particular. There is also a red pigmented variant, Loureiro Tinto.

Godello (goh-day-yoh)
Also called Gouveio in Portugal and Prieto Picudo Blanco in Leon (it is no relation to the awful Prieto Picudo Tinto local to Leon). It has small, thick-skinned berries yielding plenty of sugar and extract, acidity not so much. The more continental daytime temperature it sees, the more skins character, glycerol and alcohol in the wines, and perhaps less acidity and length. Godello’s fruit profile is of quite ripe fallen orchard fruits – apples, pears, white peaches and crabapples.

TINTOS

Brancellao (bran-sell-oww)
A variety which balances low acidity and a fan of soft, ashy tannin at or near the Atlantic coast, both in Galician Spain and in northern Portugal (where it’s known as Alvarelhão, the name by which this grape appears in Yarra Yering’s Dry Red #3 blend). Brancellao makes an appealing, light red berry and earth wine with gentle vegetal aromatics when grown in cold soils at low daytime maximum temperatures.
MENCIA (men-see-yah or men-thee-yah, as you like)
smoky, bloody, tangy, earthy, silky, vegetal, floral, mineral, ashy, fleshy
cherry, wild berry, meat, hung meat, roasted meat, soy, plum flowers, tobacco
roses, rose flowers, squashed rose thorns, flowers in blood in soft sweet earth

Mencia is native to the north-west of Spain – both Continental Leon and Atlantic-influenced Galicia. There’s talk of association between Mencia and the Cabernet family (locally, the variety is often referred to colloquially as ‘Medoc’), but Mencia is not well linked by DNA to Cabernet Franc. Mencia is best conceived as a local, autochthonous variety. There’s nothing at all Bordeaux-like about it when well handled: you’re more likely to see something that looks like a cross between wild, spicy Cornas, gamey Cru Beaujolais and supple high-end Burgundy. Bloody meat, inky-jube fruits, rose and violet florals, forest floor, tobacco and dried herbs are common varietal features. It is aromatic, but has mainly secondary and savoury characteristics – it is not a sweet fruit variety. Standout examples of Mencia have a long, fine, extremely silky thread of fruit tannin all the way down the palate. The tannins of Mencia can be its Achilles heel, though. Many producers over-extract or work the tannin and lose the scarce acid of this soft variety in the process (papering over the cracks with oak is usually the next step).

As well as suffering low acidity, Mencia is highly susceptible to botrytis, which is a constant risk with the tendency for autumn to be very wet, with heavy September rains sweeping in from the Atlantic up the Rio Sil. Green harvests are often necessary and grape selection at the sorting table is important. Note that since they purchased Las Lamas in 1999 and commenced re-generation work on Bierzo’s remnant old-vine Mencias, Ricardo Perez and Alvaro Palacios have identified 8 distinct local families of Mencia.

Mencia and ‘environmental acidity’
It’s a curiosity that the better Mencias seem to be such fresh and lively wines, so much so that many casually discuss Mencia as an acid-fresh variety. As discussed, this couldn’t be further from the truth. The seeming acid-freshness of successfully balanced Mencia is a factor which Alvaro Palacios terms ‘environmental acidity’: altitude, low yield, cold-mineral soils, vine age and careful handling of fruit tannin can all be very successful collaborative mitigators of the variety’s low-acid nature and conspire to present the wine in a deceptively acid-fresh guise.