

## Spain, Ribera Del Duero: More of the Same

October 30, 2015



Last year I was quite harsh in my comments about Ribera del Duero. But unlike Rueda, where the president of the appellation made a lot of noise locally (including stellar appearances on a local TV channel!), denying everything and refusing to resign despite having a sentence against him, in Ribera del Duero they were much smarter: they said nothing. They just didn't make any noise, as though what I had written hadn't happened, they did not even acknowledge having read it. And in Spain it all went unnoticed...

Well, the problems I described about Ribera del Duero last year are structural (may I refer you to the article published in issue 214 in August 2014?); they are medium and long term issues related to bad viticulture, planting the wrong clones in the wrong places, and uprooting the old vineyards and going for excessive yields, which are problems that cannot be not solved in one year. I don't want to repeat exactly the same and start sounding like a scratched record (although you have to explain things over and over again if you want them to permeate), but what we have this year is, well... more of the same!



*Old vines are becoming rara avis in Ribera del Duero*

OK, that's not strictly true, as some of the problems are also related to the excessive ripeness, extraction, oaking and prices, and those are problems that can be solved faster than errors in viticulture. And some are doing it. Yes, it's a global tendency, balance, elegance, moderation or less is more, call it what you want, but in most places many winemakers are unloading their wines from the excessive extraction, tannin, sweetness and oak, and looking for fresher, more drinkable wines. Is it everybody? No, of course not. Some are faster than others, and some regions are slower than others. Ribera del Duero has been notable for producing too many overripe, excessive reds loaded with tannins, alcohol and oak. Change cannot happen overnight.

### **The Soils of Ribera del Duero**

I'll rescue a sentence from my previous article that pretty much sums things up. The increase in land under vine in Ribera del Duero, from the 6,000 hectares that existed in 1985 to 9,000 hectares in 1990 and to over 22,000 hectares today, means there is surplus of grapes, the result of which is that the grapes from old vineyards have lost their value and there is no incentive to keep them going. And that increase of planted vineyards did not always happen in the best of places. Ribera has moved from being a zone with small, individual wineries to an appellation where 60% of the grapes are sold to large corporations that sell their wines at 2€ in supermarkets.



*Limestone is a crucial component of the soils of the best Ribera del Duero vineyards*

The soils of a great part of central Spain are limestone, a precious soil for quality wine production. Ribera del Duero is no exception. The slopes are where vines were traditionally planted; or let's say poor soils where nothing else would grow. But there are also some deep soils, where the crops were beetroot or potatoes. There was a large sugar factory that used the beetroot grown in the zone. When the sugar factory of Peñafiel closed in January 2010, something that was announced in 2007, many of those fertile, deeper soils were more often than not devoted to vines. Those are some of the newer plantings that have come into production in the last few years.

Let's make a little bit of a gross simplification to try to explain the different soils. In the chalky limestone soils, the limestone mother rock retains water and the roots go down to search for it. The vine sucks up water and plenty of other nutrients from the limestone. This would make for austere, mineral wines. If the soils are deep, and worst of all, the vines are drip irrigated, the roots remain on the surface, in the richer topsoil, like junkies waiting for their daily ration, which tends to provide rounder, fruitier wines, plumper, not so interesting in terms of minerality. So you can have complex, more austere, mineral wines or fruit-forward, simpler ones depending just on where the vine is planted. That's why we *terroirists* call for a classification of the vineyards, just to be able to differentiate and create a hierarchy. Things are, of course, much more complicated than that, and very shallow soil with the mother rock very close to the surface can produce too austere a wine, with harsh tannins that might need a long aging to be polished. So the ideal is a balance between some meat (topsoil) and the bone (mother rock), not too shallow, not too deep.



*Vine roots clinging to the limestone in the Ribera del Duero soils*

Appellations of origin are anything but fast and agile; changes take forever, which in a way is understandable, because they need the agreement of many different parties often with different interests. But there is a timid initiative to make a study of the soils of Ribera del Duero and perhaps eventually a classification of the vineyards into two groups: one for young, unoaked or *roble* (with a few months in oak - *roble* is Spanish for oak) reds and maybe allowing higher yields in them, and another one for fine or the rest of wines. There is a commission led by Peter Sisseck to study this. I spoke to him from Saint-Emilion where he was starting the harvest of his Château Rocheyron (and had finished the one in Ribera, thrilled with the results of this 2015). He explained that he's in charge of getting a couple of experts to explain/propose how this should be done or what can be done by the Consejo Regulador. A decision will then be taken about how to proceed, something that can be expected in the spring. All parties agree at that something has to be done, which is good news, but it has to be something that does not disrupt things and covers the needs of the different parties.



*Peter Sisseck in one of his Pingus vineyards*

This classification of soils would be a first step towards trying to accommodate the different interests, volume and quality within the same rules, or create the necessary hierarchy to make the appellation of origin system sustainable in the long term. Either that or start by defining the villages and their characters. I can tell you, after tasting very extensively, that the wines from Valladolid, Burgos or Soria can be (depending on what you do) distinctly different.

### **The Footprint of Terroir: A Terroirists Manifesto**

That footprint, those characteristics inherent to the place where a wine is born, are only noticeable in a wine under certain specific circumstances. It's obvious that the vines have to grow in a good terroir, a good terroir that, as I have explained, lends character to the wines, and a character that is mostly a texture or a tactile sensation in the palate. But that's not enough; that's only the potential of the vineyard. With a classification of vineyards we'd have the potential, not the quality of what's in the bottle, which comes from the hand of the producer.



*Terroir, as simple as that!*

For the juice of the grapes to express that sense of place, that texture, that minerality, yields have to be limited, as excessively high yields dilute that character, but they should not be too low either; they have to be balanced. The same with the ripeness of the grapes: if they are too ripe that character is blurred, and if they are too green, then well, they are green. So again balance is the magic word.

And balance is the word that you need to apply to vinification, extraction and aging or *élevage* of the wine (be it in oak or in any other container). Doing all that you can to achieve a wine that shows the character of the place where it's born, the minerality from the soil and also the character of the vintage when the grapes were harvested. Those are the fine wines that have us all searching like crazy for bottles that express in a clear and distinctive way what the label says: a place and a year.

The place can be a wide regional one, a smaller one, perhaps a village or a quarter, or a very specific plot of land: regional wines, village ones or single-vineyard ones. But you need to start the house with its foundations, not with its roof. To understand and build this hierarchy I'm talking about takes years, even generations. No, we might never see it as detailed as in Burgundy anywhere in Spain, but it's never too early to start. The earlier the better.



*The Duero River has sometimes left a layer of boulders not unlike those of Châteauneuf-du-Pape*

## **What's Up Folks?**

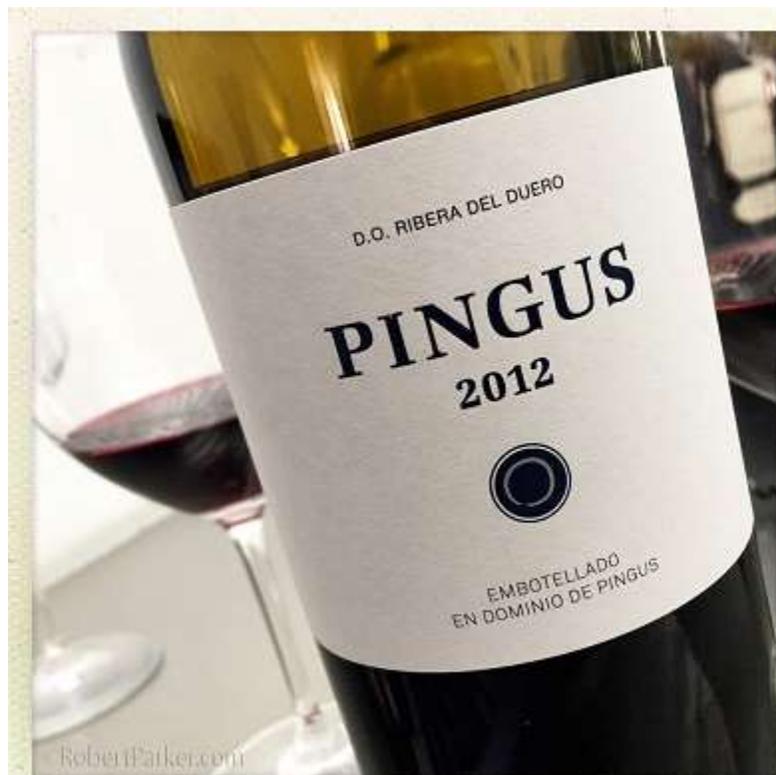
The official search for terroir might not have yet started, but let's not be completely pessimistic. Even if the region as such is not doing much to improve, there are always individuals that work hard to do so; and these individuals do improve the quality of their wines, which at the same time improves the perception we consumers have about the region and, at the end of the day, they also work towards the improvement of the whole region. These quality leaders should, instead of being the target of envy of many, be admired and supported. They are the point of the arrow that breaks new markets, that shows the region to the world and shows what the region is capable of.

There is an increasingly numerous young generation that -more or less- believe in what I have explained about terroir, about quality wines, about hierarchy, and about the need for balance in all aspects of viticulture and oenology. But there are more of them in some regions than in others, and logic says there should be more in regions gifted with a good terroir or certain tradition and wine culture. At the same time, these regions are sometimes the commercially successful ones, and that implies a certain risk of commoditization. To just do volume at low margins and make a lot of money however, does not push people to improve. It's the perfect environment for complacency and resting on your laurels.

To be able to see all this, there are some requirements, aids or shortcuts: travel, visit wine regions, talk to other producers, buy and drink different styles of wines from all

over the world, try to understand and open your mind. I've said it a number of times: the winemakers that do this, the ones that understand fine wine, are the ones that consistently produce the best wines. How can you produce a great wine if you don't know what it is and you have never drunk one? I remember the advice I received from one of the greatest winemakers from Spain many years ago: "Taste as much as you can. Taste different styles, regions and prices. The more the better."

Many times foreigners have an initial advantage when they come from other wine regions and at the very least they can compare their homeland with their place of work. There are a few in the region, of course, Peter Sisseck (Pingus, Hacienda Monasterio), Bertrand Sourdais (Dominio de ES, Hernando y Sourdais), Sophie Kuhn (De Blas Serrano, Hacienda Solano, Gallego Zapatero), Jérôme Bougnaud (Pingus, Quinta Sardonía, Galia)...

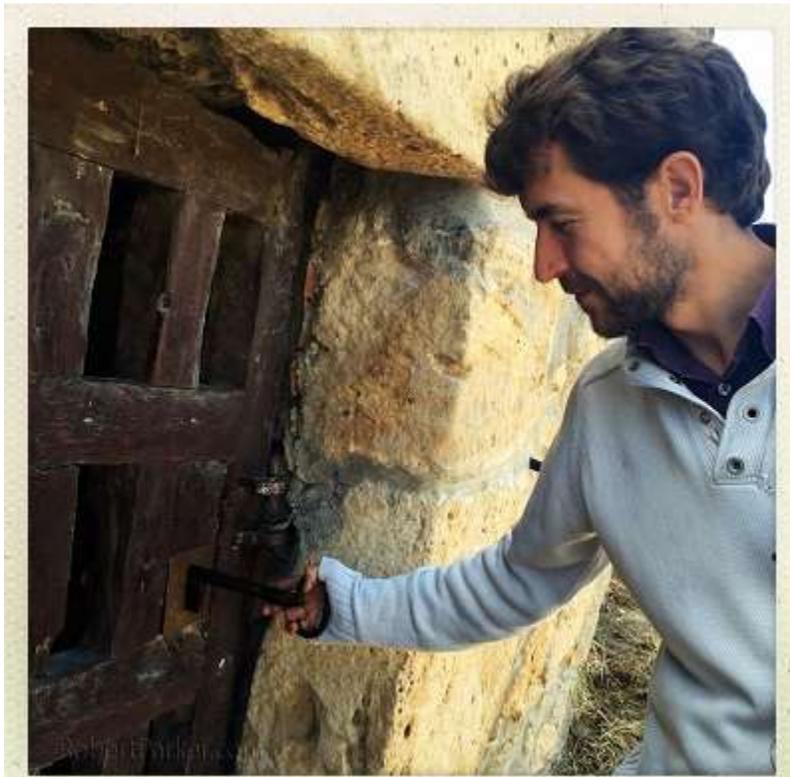


*2012 Pingus, a solid 100-pointer from Ribera del Duero, Sisseck's best to date*

Having just named him, this is a good opportunity to remark how Peter Sisseck has produced his best vintage to date with his 2012 Pingus, which I tasted unbottled last time. I've tasted the finished now and it's as good as anticipated. After I tasted a barrel sample, he decided to extend the oak aging for a while and bottled it a little later than originally planned. I compare 2012 Pingus with the 1996, an old favorite of mine. In the coming years, the discussion will be whether 2012 is better than 2014 or the other way 'round. Sisseck thinks 2014 is somehow similar to 1995, while he agrees with me that 2012 is in the vein of 1996. 1995 and 2014 are very powerful vintages, and according to Sisseck, "wines that almost made themselves, two vintages where everything was so

perfect and easy that we didn't have to do much. We had to work more in 1996 and 2012, and at the end of the day it might be a matter of personal preferences, as the styles are a little different, 1995/2014 more powerful and 1996/2012 finer with higher acidity." I only tasted a very young and promising 2014, which was starting its upbringing in oak, and for now the 2012 has won my heart.

There are always a few new names, but for such a large, important region, I have the feeling that there aren't enough. 3Elementos, Altos del Terral, Dominio de ES, the personal project from Bertrand Sourdais ex-Dominio de Atauta, Magna Vides who I hope to report on in the next article, and not that many more. A debutant in the previous report, Dominio del águila, the project from Jorge Monzón Pascual and his family in La Aguilera, is news again (it was the most exciting new project in my last report), as they are releasing their first Gran Reserva, a red called Peñas Aladas from the superb 2010 vintage, a wine that plays in the premier league. Hacienda Solano and Convento de las Claras, both have, although in completely different styles, a wine at the top of the hierarchy. These are some of the names challenging the status quo.



*Jorge Monzón Pascual entering the old caves of Dominio del Águila in the village of La Aguilera (Burgos)*

The (slow) move towards fresher wines with less ripeness, extraction and/or oak aromas and tannins is noticeable in some wineries like Hacienda Solano, Calvo Casajús or Valderiz. And now that we are on names, it might be the time to look into...

### **The Vega Sicilia Affaire**



Where to start? The family issues over the control of the company, the withdrawal or non release of wines because of technical issues, and the sacking of the technical director of the group a few weeks before the harvest are news that make it to the general news (not only in the specialized press or the wine world), and certainly do not help with the reputation of the house.

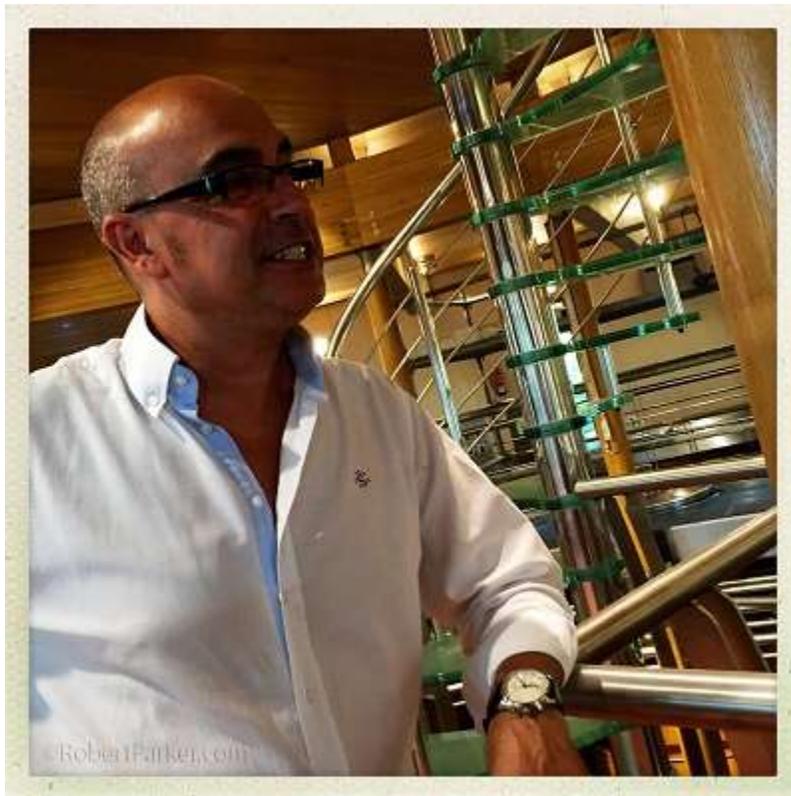


*Pablo Álvarez, a member of the family that owns Vega Sicilia*

The stream of (bad?) news doesn't seem to stop. I'm not that interested in the business side or the internal fight for control of the company, but the issues are there and surely affect things. I'm more interested in the wine (and vineyards) itself. First it was the announcement that the 2010 Alión was not going to see the light as some fining agent had left the wine with sediment in suspension and they didn't deem it had the quality to be released. The same happened with half of the production of 2009 Pintia, but half of the wine had been sold by the time they realized, so they didn't sell anymore. But a good part of it was sold and nobody seemed to have noticed anything.

A couple of weeks before my visit to Vega Sicilia's winery in late August, the big news broke: Javier Ausás, long time technical director at the Vega Sicilia, Alión, Pintia and Oremus group (recently renamed Tempos Vega Sicilia, a name that is a little pompous if you ask me), was leaving. I had seen him a few days before the news broke and nothing indicated what was going to happen. When I phoned him he told me it was all very quick and unexpected. A few days before I went there, his replacement was revealed: Gonzalo Iturriaga. Who, you ask? That's exactly what everyone thought too! Iturriaga is an agricultural engineer with some experience in Ribera, one year in the early days of Alonso del Yerro, and then five years in Extremadura in charge of the wines of Habla, an ambitious project in a southwestern zone of Spain's off-the-beaten-track, which didn't really take off. He has spent the last five years selling yeasts and other oenological products for the French company Lamothe-Abiet, a CV that a priori looks a little poor for someone who is taking over the most prestigious winery in Spain. But let's give him time - it will take a few years until we see any of his wines in the

market - and hope for the best. I didn't have the chance to meet Iturriaga, as the day I visited the winery he was still closing stuff from his previous job and wasn't in the winery.



*Javier Ausás, Vega Sicilia winemaker until the summer of 2015*

On September 22nd it was revealed that Ausás was going to advise Pago de Carraovejas, a well-known winery in Ribera del Duero. It's owned by Segovia's restaurateur José María, whose restaurant in the *plaza* is renowned for its *lechazo* (roasted suckling lamb) - a place that surely sells thousands of bottles of his wine per year. They are also major shareholders of Ossian in Rueda (or half out of it, as most of their wines are released without appellation). Only a couple of days later we learnt that Ausás is also going to help Mallorca's *Ánima Negra*. As news was popping up I spoke with Ausás again to understand what was going on. He seemed very happy (sometimes change is quite good, even if it doesn't look like that initially), and fully involved in the harvests of Carraovejas and *Ánima Negra*. What he told me is something he had mentioned already: he's going to create a wine consulting company so more customers will come in the future, as he wants to have challenges in different appellations of origin, with a view to getting involved in two or three more projects. And, as I was expecting, "I want to do my own wine, a small project, but mine, I also want to make my own wine. We will see next year..."

The quality of the wines and reputation of Vega Sicilia is indisputable, but the style is certainly not the one of yesteryear, and I'm thinking of the golden decade of the 1960s for example. Today's wines are great, but the style is different. They are more

technological, more precise, polished, and do not show those small edges and imperfections of the past. That somehow makes wines from brain rather than wines from the heart, but whether you like a style better than the other is a matter of taste. The one thing that really worried me was the evolution of the bottles once opened, as the wines oxidized very quickly; they were undrinkable the day after, which is something I do not expect from wines that are supposed to have a long, slow development in bottle. That left a bittersweet aftertaste in my memory...

### **The Grapes of Wrath?**

We've talked about soil and people, so that now leaves us with grapes. Basically, the grapes allowed today by the Ribera del Duero appellation were basically the ones that were used at Vega Sicilia at the time of the creation of the appellation back in 1982. That's why we find Malbec among the reds, despite the fact that there is virtually no Malbec there: Vega Sicilia does not really use it anymore, and only Ortega Fournier, after his experience in Mendoza, Argentina, where the grape thrives, has ventured to plant a small plot and experiment.



*Tempranillo reigns in the Duero vineyards*

The permitted grapes are the white Albillo and the reds Tempranillo, Garnacha Tinta, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec and Merlot, and only two styles of wines are covered: rosé and red. The main grape is, of course, Tempranillo, locally known as *Tinto Fino* or *Tinto del País*, the name that is used to refer to the local clone that is found in the old vineyards that has, over time, adapted to the conditions of the zone. Red Tempranillo,

that is. Yes, because there is now a white mutation or White Tempranillo, mostly in Rioja.

The wines from Ribera del Duero are red. Well, mostly. Rosés are also contemplated and so now are *claretes*, the traditional wines that were produced in the zone of Aranda de Duero, which were not rosés as such, but were (darkish) pink wines produced with a mixture of red and white grapes that were aged in oak barrels like a red. Pink wines that in practical terms are like lighter reds.

I mentioned white grapes, oh yes. Because as there is a multitude of other varieties interplanted with the Tempranillo in the older vineyards (Garnacha, Cariñena, Bobal, Monastrell, who knows what else...), and there are (or were, as most were ripped up or regrafted) a fair amount of white grapes, of which the local one is Albillo. Albillo is almost a synonym for white, so there are a number of different grapes called Albillo throughout Spain.



*A bunch of ripe Albillo grapes from this 2015 harvest*

All this comes from the fact that there are a few white wines produced in the region, but they do not have the right to be Ribera del Duero. Fair enough, white wines are not contemplated. But the thing now is that there are rumors that the Consejo Regulador, the regulatory council for the appellation of origin, is looking into the possibility of increasing the number of grape varieties allowed in the appellation. And they came up with the idea that, to avoid discussions about which grapes make sense and which don't, they are planning on allowing all grapes, both red and white, allowed in the wide

and general appellation Vinos de Castilla and León, a super-wide area which borders with Galicia, Portugal, Madrid and Valencia, a kind of catch-all appellation for all zones outside other appellations of origin, and also to give refuge to those using grapes or carrying practices not allowed by their own appellations.

The list of allowed grapes in Vinos de la Tierra de Castilla y León is almost infinite, which translates into the fact that they are proposing to allow grapes like Riesling or Gewurztraminer in Ribera del Duero! Of course, I don't think anyone will plant Riesling or Gewurztraminer in Ribera del Duero, and in reality, allowing an endless list of varieties is a way of hiding the fact that many would be very happy to allow Syrah and Verdejo in Ribera del Duero. I think those are the grapes that the larger, industrial producers are interested in. So regulations will most possibly change to allow white wines in the near future if they allow varieties like Riesling, Gewurztraminer (and especially) Verdejo. I'll come back to Verdejo in a minute. The million-dollar question is, if they expand the appellation to white wines too, would they allow for the whites to be produced with the real local white grape, Albillo? I hope the answer is yes. Albillo is not an easy grape and it requires a lot of work in the vineyard, but it can produce some very good wines. Again, there is an outstanding one from Dominio del águila. Look it up in our database.

Verdejo, yes, I had to come back about Verdejo. Verdejo is the reviled grape from Rueda, the controversial appellation for white wines bordering Ribera del Duero in the provinces of Valladolid and Segovia, that is seeing its wines commoditized and sold in supermarkets at extremely low prices with a similarly low quality. Well, as it happens that many of the large operators in Ribera del Duero also have interests in Rueda. In fact, they have managed to have a joint marketing campaign between Ribera del Duero and Rueda to promote their wines in the United States. I suspect some of these large operators would also be very happy if Verdejo was also allowed in Ribera del Duero and if they could sell a Verdejo under the common brand Ribera del Duero, which still has a bit more credibility than Rueda. Anyway, will we see a *Ruedatization* of Ribera del Duero in the next few years? I honestly hope not, but things are not clear and there are some worrying signs. This marketing campaign on which they plan to spend something like 25 million Euros (!) has started. Some from within the appellation doubt there will be any visible results; I share that same opinion. Only time will tell.

### **A Little About the Vintages**

As I write this, the 2015 harvest is ongoing. Almost over before the end of October, which is unusual, and with mixed feelings. July was extremely hot, maturity was sped up but things slowed down again with more moderate temperatures in August. I believe harvests are going to become increasingly like that, more mixed and depending on how you work your vineyards.

**2014** seems to be the best thing since sliced bread (ice cream if you're American). Peter Sisseck was ecstatic about the quality of the 2014 Pingus, which he calls the best vintage he's seen since his initial 1995, and in a way a similar kind of year. Of course,

it's still early and we'll have to see how the wines develop in barrel, as the new vintage (the one that needs to be sold) tends to be highly touted. There is also a psychological desire to have a great 2014 to continue the 'four' saga of 1994 and 2004. For Sisseck, the vintage was almost a miracle as "we had hail in the Pingus vineyard. At one point we thought we had lost the harvest. But we've been working with biodynamic agriculture for a number of years now, and I believe that makes plants more robust and resistant and they recovered to deliver grapes I hadn't seen since 1995."

If many see **2013** as a challenge, I see it as an opportunity. Yes, it was an extremely challenging vintage, but also a great opportunity for those wanting to produce fresh wines with good acidity and less alcohol to demonstrate who had done the homework in the vineyards, a vintage that will separate the men from the boys. We find a similar situation in other nearby regions (Toro, Castilla y León, for example). It was a complex, uneven vintage, which provided the perfect conditions for the best and the worst. In Ribera, for instance, the 2013s from Aalto were impressive, with good freshness, acidity and balance within their powerful and well-oaked style.

**2012** has behaved as well as expected and the wines are distinctly fresher than those from 2011, with a handful of superb wines produced, among which 2012 Pingus plays in a different league: for me, it's the best wine that Peter Sisseck has ever produced. However, the vintage as such is not as homogeneous or easy as 2010, when almost everybody produced good wines. In 2012 you had to work more; it was not an easy vintage, as it was extremely dry and warm, saved in some places by some rains in August and September. 2012 Alión is also remarkably good, one of the best vintages to date.

As for **2011**, it's been said many times before: it is a very warm and ripe vintage, which has produced many wines with aromas of cooked fruit. Sometimes it's too much.

## **Solid Matters**



*Mannix restaurant in Campaspero (Valladolid) offers excellent, lechazo roasted lamb*

To me there's no wine without food, or the other way 'round. If last year I recommended El Nazareno in Roa for *lechazo*, the oven-roasted suckling lamb famous in the region, let me give you a different address this time (for a little more of the same...), Mannix in the village of Campaspero, 15 minutes drive from Peñafiel. And if you want some variations on the same theme, the village of Traspinedo - very close to Sardón de Duero - is famous for the *pinchos de lechazo*, a slightly different way of cooking lamb on a sort of long metal skewer roasted over charcoal embers that keeps coming to your table with small freshly roasted pieces of lamb, so you don't have to fight with a large chunk of meat on your plate and you're endlessly fed with bite-size morsels of delicious, tender meat. The place to go to there is called Mesón Molinero. I cannot wait to go back there, hopefully with the excuse of my next article on Ribera del Duero some 16 months from now...



—Luis Gutiérrez