



By Luis Gutierrez

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Bierzo: 2012, A Great Opportunity

As planned from the beginning, I returned to Bierzo at the same time as I covered all the appellations of Galicia; they both share the Mencía and Godello grapes and a similar Atlantic climate that is slightly more continental in Bierzo perhaps. The soils are different in that they show more clay in Bierzo though the higher elevation zones and some isolated patches have slate similar to those found in nearby Valdeorras. I certainly detected some similarities in the character of the vintages, and while Bierzo does not have the strong influence from the sea, it's not really as continental as Castilla. Still, it does have elements from both. Let's say that it's a transition zone...

So where are the wines today?

Bierzo is a young appellation, and quality Bierzo is even younger. For a region that used to be known for its pink wines, the rosés are still waiting to be revived, and I haven't (yet) seen an improvement in quality like I've seen in other regions of Spain, or the tendency to produce very pale, light, almost *blanc de noir* rosés so fashionable lately; this a style that could be produced with Mencía. We should not forget that less than 15 years ago the majority of people were of the opinion that Mencía was only suitable for the production of rosés...

Today nobody holds that thought. Some still have to realize is that it is not suitable to produce Ribera del Duero-look-alikes and when the wines are too ripe, too extracted and too oaky they can be truly awful, heavy and show low acidity. There is a global tendency to moderate all these factors, but as elsewhere, some are faster at implementing changes than others and I still find too many oaky reds that are rendered anonymous by excesses.

The young, un-oaked Mencía-based reds - given they are not reduced and if they do they get energetically decanted in advance - are among the most succulent and juicy in their category. Fermentation in stainless steel can produce some reductive aromas, and the wines benefit from air, but being un-oaked also means you don't need to master the use of wood (which is harder than it seems) to produce this category. Here grapes translate into wine more easily, and there are a number of wineries producing delicious Mencía wines year in, year out. Mencía can be a bit flat and low in acidity so the old field blends with other grapes, Garnacha Tintorera, and even some whites, are ideal to create fresher, more balanced reds. When picked at the right moment it can give very floral notes reminiscent of violets, even white flowers, with some aromas that sometimes make me think of Touriga Nacional from Portugal. If picked early it can have a strong herbal side that might have been what lead people to speculate that Mencía could have been related to Cabernet Franc (which is not), but if picked too ripe it easily provides flat wines with jammy, cooked fruit aromas and flavors.

There is quite a lot of Garnacha Tintorera in the old vineyards. Generally speaking, it is a grape that does well in blends and is not necessarily destined to produce varietal wines that can often have too much color, concentration, tannins and acidity. Still, it's a grape that certainly adds all of those qualities to a blend of other grapes.

Talking about other reds, some have high hopes about Estaladiña, also known as Panycarne (bread and meat... don't ask me why?). It is said to be Trousseau/Merenzao but I found very little evidence in the wines I have tasted. Some people tell me the vines, the leaves, bunches and grapes are nothing like Merenzao, so I have serious doubts about the similarities.

As for the whites, Godello does not seem to achieve the heights it reaches in neighboring Valdeorras. There is quite a lot of Jerez (Palomino) in the old vineyards that most doubt would even produce anything interesting. Many are turning back to the ignored Doña Blanca that when cropped at lower yields (and often in blends with Godello) can produce some very good wines.

The Producers

I want to be very clear about something: Descendientes de José Palacios have produced their best wines ever in the 2012 vintage and they take the lead with only Raúl Pérez/Castro Ventosa, Mengoba and Paixar - even though in different styles, which is good - coming anywhere close to them in quality.



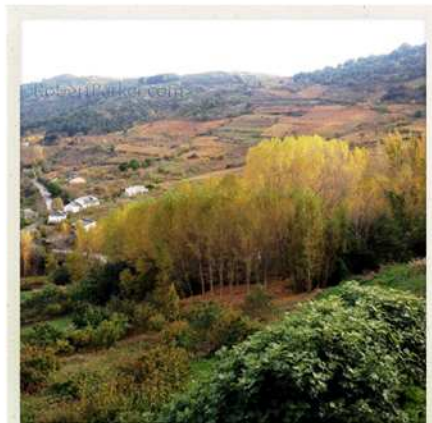
2012 Las Lamas from Descendientes de J. Palacios, the highest scoring wine in this article

As for new names, curiously enough, besides the traditional grape growers from the zones that have started producing, bottling and marketing their own wines after generations tending the vineyards (Aurelio Feo, José Antonio García, Merayo...), there seem to be a few people from Cataluña with newish projects in Bierzo (Akilia, Mas Asturias, José Antonio García again, as he returned from Barcelona...). It's most probably a coincidence, but I wonder why. Look up these names in the tasting notes, as some of them should be followed.

However, Ricardo "Titín" Pérez Palacios was right when he told me, "people want new names, new wines, new labels...but most people forget that we need to get a better understanding of our vineyards, improve our viticulture and increase the quality of our wines. We are chasing the latest flavor of the moment and we forget about the important things." For sure, you cannot say they are not consistent in what they do; he walks the talk and lives on a full-functioning biodynamic farm. But more important than that, they have steadily improved the quality of their wines with their basic Pétalos del Bierzo, one of the best values to be found both in Bierzo and in the whole of Spain. It is not only affordable and produced in enough quantities as to be easy to find, but is at the quality level of the majority of the top of the range labels from many producers in the region, especially in its best vintage ever, 2012. This is a winery with an entry-level bottling at the height of other's top-of-the range. So I'd say that there is a lot of potential in the vineyards of Bierzo to produce more wines like these.

Vintages, and the Rise of 2012

Replicating exactly what I saw and heard in Galicia, there seems to be a cycle change towards fresher, more Atlantic vintages starting with 2012 and lasting (so far) through 2014. Even though 2010 was fresher than 2009 or 2011, it can also be included among the more Mediterranean vintages. The last truly Atlantic vintage was 2008...



High altitude, slope vineyards in the village of Corullón

Almost 40% of the wines I tasted were from the 2012 vintage and while it was not really evident at the time of the harvest, and as I saw with Galicia, it turned out to be a high-potential vintage. Almost one third of the bottles uncorked were from 2013, meaning they were from the latest harvest. Usually the simpler wines that are often unoaked and aimed at short term consumption get released earlier while the more complex wines, the top wines from selected grapes or vineyards are released a bit later. So basically, I got all the big guns from 2012 and only the smaller wines from 2013; therefore they cannot really be directly compared. But even so, I could still feel the balance and freshness of the 2012 combined with perfect ripening of the grapes, making it one of the higher potential - if not the highest - vintages in modern history. We should not forget that the Bierzo appellation was only formalized in 1989 and the modern history of its quality wines only started in 1999 with the release of the first wines from Descendientes de José Palacios. With this in mind, comparisons with older vintages do not go back more than a couple of decades. The relatively modern history is short enough and is something our young memories can still remember.

2013 was complex from day one, with low temperatures and rain that slowed the cycle down and resulted in a late harvest at the end of September with the white Godello being harvested in October, something that had not been seen since 2010. While quality is more heterogeneous, those who worked well in the vineyards will be rewarded with fresh wines with good stuffing to become *vins de garde*. But it might still be too early to say, as I saw with 2012.

16 months ago the potential of 2012 was still not really identified though people talked about an unusual harvest. What they told me at the time and what I could see from the young unoaked wines I tasted last time was that they were showing more red than black fruit and this led me to write that it had been a warm, dry year, the kind which usually produces big, ripe wines. What happened was exactly the opposite: the grapes ripened very slowly and alcohol levels were contained, as the combination of heat and drought meant the plants stopped producing sugar and acidity levels didn't drop. Harvest was late, going back to the dates of the past, with low yields and as I see now, very good overall freshness as well as a return to an Atlantic character in the wines. 2012 has the potential to produce the best wines from Bierzo, but potential has to be realized. Just as a vineyard might have the potential to create great wines (think of a Grand Cru Burgundy), the bottled product is not automatically great; potential has to be realized.

I say potential because I still find too many overripe, overextracted and overoaked wines with low acidity which come through as heavy and difficult to drink. It is as if they were trying to replicate the style of the Ribera del Duero, which if you ask me, it is not really a model to follow. Quite a high percentage of the wines from Bierzo still need to find their character and personality. As I've seen in other Atlantic appellations from Spain, 2012 can mark a departure from a collection of overly warm vintages to the return to cooler years and the opportunity to produce fresher, lighter wines with more acidity... a return to the real Atlantic character. But the opportunity has to be taken, it doesn't happen automatically.

I tasted all the following, already bottled wines in Bierzo at the end of October 2014.