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Today, It's Cariñena

By Roger Morris



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Silvertap Dance

By Katie Kelly Bell

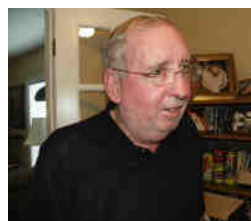


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First Press

By David Wilkening



David Wilkening is a former newspaperman in Chicago, Washington, Detroit and Orlando, where he was a feature writer and often political editor. He worked in politics as a consultant at the national level before becoming a freelance writer. He has contributed to numerous publications and often writes about travel. He is also a ghost writer who has several books under his own name, including the latest, "How to Hide."

Today, It's Cariñena

A journey through northern Spain's Garnacha-rich region

By Roger Morris

Wednesday – The Road to Zaragoza

The 10:30 a.m. AVE train to Zaragoza pulls out of Madrid's Atocha Station and, once the suburbs have been cleared, begins its non-stop slash across northern Spain, reaching speeds of around 190 miles per hour. It is late May, and the open countryside is sprinkled with red clusters of poppies, moving their blooming parade a few miles northward daily.

We are en route to the Cariñena wine region near Zaragoza, a city located downstream from

Rioja and Navarra on the Ebro River, to taste wines and talk with producers. Since the turn of the new century, Spanish winemaking districts that once weren't listed on wine atlases seem to be taking their turns in debuting in the international wine market – Rías Baixas, Toro, Priorat, Bierzo, Jumilla. Now, it is Cariñena's time, its wines slowly slipping into the export stream to appear on the world's retail shelves.

The book on Cariñena is that its D.O. came early, in 1932, and it is home to 2,000 grape growers and 44 wineries on 36,000 acres of predominantly red-grape vineyards, both indigenous

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Downtown Zaragoza

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and international.

Once in Zaragoza – a much larger, cosmopolitan and attractive city than I had expected – writers David Rosengarten, Michael Franz, John Stoker and I are whisked off to lunch at La Bal d’Onsera, a Michelin one-star restaurant near our downtown lodgings, the Alfonso I hotel. Over a delicious lunch that begins with a savory tomato water with pistachio and works its way through pork steak tartar; lobster with beans, beef and egg yolk, and foie gras and onion ravioli in a chick pea broth, we talk with winemakers José Pablo of Bodega Pablo and José Pascual of Gorys.

The conversation is mainly about Garnacha, Cariñena’s most-popular variety, and how it differs from Garnacha, or Grenache, grown elsewhere. “Cariñena” is the Spanish spelling for “Carignane,” but, although the grape and the region share the same name, less and less of it is planted here because Garnacha and international red varietals are considered both better and more marketable. For variety, we taste a Gorys Crespiello, a local grape whose origins date to the 12th Century and which is also known as Vidadilla.

After lunch, we drive about 30 miles southwest along A23 to Cariñena, the small town that gives its name to the district. Here we visited Prinur, a modern winery made of small blocks of limestone that reflect the local soil composition and whose wine bottles are a rectangular shape that remind me of eau-de-vie containers. Prinur, we are told, has vineyards in three of the 14 villages that make up the Cariñena D.O.

Dinner back in Zaragoza is at the Aragonia restaurant, where we meet Ignacio Martinez de Albornoz, in charge of promoting the Aragon region and its products abroad, and our winery hosts for the evening, Jorge Navascues of Pago de Aylés and Susana Munilla, representing Victoria Dominio de Longaz. Aylés produces the somewhat popular El Burro “Kickass” Garnacha, but of equal interest is its delicious 2010 Dorondón Chardonnay, somewhat of an artistic rarity in this red-dominant region.

“I like a French-style white wine made in a *foudre*, like a Leflaive Montrachet,” Navascues says, “but there is no winemaking culture here to produce a different style that can be aged.” Macabeo (Virura) is the local indigenous white grape of preference. The Dominio de Longaz reds are also interesting, but, as



Ignacio Martinez de Albornoz

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Old vine Grenache

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yet, it does not have an American importer.

Thursday – The Red Heart of Cariñena

A long day is ahead of us as we caravan the next morning back to Cariñena – four wineries to visit during the day and two more dinners. Although there are some prominent hillsides, most of Cariñena’s vineyards are on large plains that sweep up from the river toward the mountains.

At our first stop, Ignacio Marin, we are greeted by Angela Marin, whose family owns three wineries, this one for production of crianza or wines of the vintage. Part of the ritual at Marin is for visitors to sign barrels heads, not guest books. By the looks of these oak ledgers, the Chinese and Japanese are frequent visitors. Marin brings up something that we hear repeated later – that the grafting “cure” for phylloxera originated in Cariñena, although no one seems to know who or at what vineyard. *(Note to self to do more research on this.)*

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Here, and at other wineries we visit, a theme is repeated – big Garnachas, often from old vines, that have lots of dark red fruit, loads of dusty tannins, are approachable young but having sufficient leanness and acidity to serve well for making reservas. We also taste several enjoyable young Garnachas during our stay that have rich fruitiness from total or partial carbonic maceration, yet with surprisingly hearty, and compatible, tannins.

Solar de Urbezo, our second stop, is fairly well-known in the U.S., and I particularly like the 2010 Vina Urbezo – a Garnacha-Tempranillo-Syrah carbonic maceration blend – and the 2005 reserva, a 50-50 Cabernet and Garnacha blend.

Next is the first of four regional co-ops we will see on our journey, the very modern Grandes Vinos y Viñedos, the largest in Cariñena and in all of Aragon. We taste mainly the Coronas de Anayon and Beso de Vino lines, most of which are good values. Before lunch, we are taken on a tour of vineyards in the rolling hills overlooking the town of Cariñena. While not exactly Châteauneuf-du-Pape, many of the old, head-pruned vines as well as new plantings are on extensive beds of small gravel. “Most of the reserva wines come from the hills,” winemaker Marcelo Morales tells us. “We pick them a little later, and we pay more attention to the phenolic potential than the alcohol potential.” Drip irrigation lines are also in evidence in some plots, watering being permitted when needed.

The last stop before our retreat to Zaragoza for the night is the smaller Covinca co-op, where the wines are intense, savory and lean, which I rather like, but my colleagues would prefer more fruit.

The delight of the day is meeting early that evening Enrique Abad. Abad is a foodie first, the owner of the tapas bar El Cantálerico in Zaragoza where we nosh and sip, but he has gotten into wines, first as



Enrique Abad

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The San Valero lineup

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an amateur and recently as a serious, if small, producer. Unfortunately, his El Diamante de Abarando, a crisp, spicy, dry moscato, is not sold in the U.S. "I think I'm the only one who makes a dry moscato in Cariñena," he says.

Our final stop of the evening is for a tasting of co-op wines under the Virgen de Aguila brand that, frankly, are not on a quality par with wines we have tasted elsewhere.

Friday – Final Thoughts and the Getaway

This really is a short a wine trip!

Today we visit our last two wineries – Añanas and San Valero. Añanas is a new family winery started in 2000, director Nacho Lárdo tells us, and sells its wines under the CARE brand. Its Chardonnay is quite nice, though tasting more of lemony cream than do most Chards. The reds are generally blends, and it is interesting that here as elsewhere Syrah is seen as the fast-closing comer among international varieties.

Like many co-ops, San Valero, our final visit, makes wines under multiple brands, and two that are most-often seen in the U.S. are Monte Ducay and Carinus. The latter line includes a tinto made of 20 percent each of Garnacha, Tempranillo, Merlot, Syrah and Cab, and, somewhat surprisingly, it's a pretty good wine for \$10. Winemaker Julio Prieto takes us on a tour of vineyards on the plains south of town.

After our cultural moment (which every wine visit must have) – a tour of the impressive, multicultural Aljafería palace/castle/barracks restoration – we are back on the AVE to Madrid, our heads heavy with Garnacha dreams. 🍷

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“The delight of the day is meeting early that evening Enrique Abad. Abad is a foodie first, the owner of the tapas bar El Cantábrico in Zaragoza where we nosh and sip, but he has gotten into wines, first as an amateur and recently as a serious, if small, producer. Unfortunately, his El Diamante de Abarando, a crisp, spicy, dry moscato, is not sold in the U.S.

“I think I'm the only one who makes a dry moscato in Cariñena,” he says.”



Enrique Abad

“El placer del día es encontrarnos con “Enrique Abad”, es un primer gourmet, el propietario del Tapas bar “El Cantábrico” en Zaragoza donde nosotros comimos y catamos, pero él se ha introducido en los vinos, primero como amater y recientemente como un serio, pequeño productor. Desafortunadamente, su ”Diamante de Abarando”, un crujiente, especiado y seco moscatel no se vende en US.

”Yo creo que soy el único que hace un moscatel seco en Cariñena,” dijo él.”