

# Ribera del Duero: ripe for rediscovery

How often do we get to witness the real-time evolution of a great European wine region? It's happening right now, in this high-up area of northern Spain, enthuses Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW

QUIZ QUESTION: 'NAME an Old World fine wine region, with an elongated geographical shape, that gives diverse, terroir-driven and sublime expressions of a single red grape variety.' Most people would rightly say Burgundy. But if I were the examiner, I'd also accept Ribera del Duero.

This classic Spanish wine area, located in the wider region of Castile, stretches 115km on an east-west axis, rather than north-south as in Burgundy. That elongation has great influence on the diversity of terroirs. While in Burgundy latitude plays a key role, in Ribera a continental climate and effect of mountain

ranges are the factors behind the distinct identity of its three sub-regions. The diversity of soils and vine exposure is also impressive; here north-facing vines are frequent.

Tinto Fino, aka Tempranillo, in Ribera plays the role of Pinot Noir in Burgundy (though blends are allowed, and common, so long as Tinto Fino comprises 75%). Like Pinot, Tinto Fino is a conduit for terroir. Rather than retaining a distinct varietal character in a wide range of environments, it offers amazingly diverse and precise expressions. If you are already a Burgundy fan, then Ribera del Duero is a region you should explore.

**Main image: Vega Sicilia's vineyards at Valbuena de Duero, and (top right) the San Bernardo monastery, home to the Cistercian monks who settled here in the 12th century**

Photographs: Mick Rock/Cephas(2)



The two regions also have historical links. In the 12th century, Cistercian monks moved to Valbuena de Duero, settling in the San Bernardo monastery, opposite what is now Vega Sicilia. They applied the same strategy here as in Burgundy, with the same aims: to get an intimate understanding of their soils, excel in vine cultivation, and make wines of the highest quality.

It was then that the fortunes of Burgundy and Ribera diverged. Burgundy's image flourished while Ribera's languished. For centuries, the highlands of Castile were out of the wine trade circuit. Spain was a poor country and wine was a commodity for local consumption. I have an oenology book from 1943 in which the region is not even mentioned. Until the 1970s, the only internationally known reference was Vega Sicilia, and this was considered a lovely anomaly rather than the leading wine from a great region.

## Rapid ascent

Since the 1930s, Protos (formerly Bodegas Ribera del Duero) was the lone rider for affordable bottled wines from the region. Wine was sold in bulk, mostly *clarete*, a pale red. The situation started to change in 1975



when democracy and the EU brought wealth to Spain. Another turning point was 1982, when Ribera's Denominación de Origen (DO) was created. Ribera was on its way.

In 1982 there were only 5,000ha of very old vines. Protos, Alejandro Fernández, Peñalba and the Pérez Pascuas brothers were among the pioneers who first realised its potential. ➤



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(THE GOOD FRIEND)



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(THE LOVING HUSBAND)



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*'Only nine wineries were registered in 1982; today there are about 280. The vineyard area has more than quadrupled, to 21,700ha'*

Almost immediately, international critics were excited about this 'new' region, and demand and prices grew exponentially. The wines' dense, juicy, concentrated style and intense colour, and the early adoption of French oak barriques in the region meant influential critics bestowed the wines with high scores. And that translated into commercial success at home.

As demand grew, a first wave of outside investors bought up great vineyard plots and produced wines of unparalleled quality. The hype became a frenzy in 1997, when Peter Sisseck's Pingus sold through La Place de Bordeaux at \$200 a bottle (rising to \$500 after a quarter of the production disappeared in a shipwreck). From that moment on, it was assumed that Ribera del Duero could produce iconic wines at iconic prices.

### Domestic strength

This was a time of strong economic growth in Spain and investment flowed into the region. A second wave of buyers came when a few old vineyards became available. But most money around this time was going into the cellars. In fact, many of the new wineries didn't own vineyards, old or new; they relied on bought-in grapes. So, for a time, there was little interest in emphasising terroir.

In 1999, Javier Zaccagnini, co-owner of Aalto and Sei Solo, was leading the Ribera DO when the Consejo hired experts to map Ribera's terroirs. 'It was the right move at the wrong time,' he says. 'Producers weren't interested. The documents are still gathering dust.' Even now, many Ribera wines are still blends, with grapes taken from across the appellation.

Initially, demand for Ribera was mainly domestic. Ribera is only 200km from Madrid and the capital accounted for much of the region's sales, especially given its small volumes. Indeed, until 2008 exports accounted for just 15% of total production.

The main export market was the US, where Robert Parker was consistently supportive of the top Ribera wines. Carlos Villar, managing director at Protos, remembers the early efforts to crack the UK market. But exports to Britain were for a long time almost negligible. He admits now that the prices paid at that time for average Ribera wines, domestically and in



**Above: most of the winery facilities at Bodegas Protos are buried beneath the Peñafiel castle hill**

the US, were too high for the competitive UK market. Today he feels that the region is more mature, with higher quality and much lower average prices.



**Left: Dominio de Pingus owner Peter Sisseck produced his first vintage of Pingus in 1995**

## Accelerated growth

Overall, the growth over the past 30 years has been impressive. Only nine wineries were registered in 1982; today there are about 280. In 1982, 500,000 litres of wine was declared; six years later, it was 4.4 million litres (less than six million bottles). In 2014, more than 86 million bottles were produced.

It has come at a price. The vineyard area has more than quadrupled, to 21,700ha. The new professional grape growers, many former

beetroot farmers, planted vineyards based on commercial strategies built upon high yields and cost-effective cultivation methods. Moreover, many plots were not appropriate for quality production. New plantings were trellised with vertical shoot positioning systems, more appropriate for mechanisation to give higher yields than traditional bush vines. Such trellising systems can be detrimental to quality in the semi-arid climate of Ribera, where vine roots need to dig deep for a balanced, quality wine.

Initially few producers were concerned about soils and microclimates. One exception was Vega Sicilia. Discreetly, viticulturists analysed the producer's vineyards and used the acquired knowledge to great effect. Thanks in part to this, Xavier Ausás, Vega Sicilia's recently departed chief winemaker, developed Valbuena, traditionally Vega Sicilia's second wine, into a first growth that is by no means inferior to Unico.

Many new plantings in Ribera were high-yielding Tempranillo clones from Rioja, which didn't adapt well to their new climates. Selecting indigenous rootstock for planting is a recent endeavour, and Bodegas La Horra is a pioneer in rescuing old clones of Tinto Fino. It has found 492 individual vines in 85 old vineyards, and is now multiplying them at a laboratory. Agustín Santolaya, CEO of La Horra, is convinced that this is the key to ensuring Ribera's distinctive character.

Despite its shortcomings, Ribera was, >

## Ribera: know your vintages

**2014** Although the DO qualified 2014 as 'muy buena', in reality it is no more than good. For now, the young wines are delicious.

**2013** Arguably, the worst of the century. Lots of botrytis and irregular ripening. As usual, top wines from best estates are good.

**2012** A difficult vintage, with small production and uneven quality. The best wines are impressively balanced. Many others will be short-lived.

**2011** Very hot, ripe year, with lots of heat stress. Wines from old-vine vineyards are gorgeous.

Overall, less balanced than 2010.

**2010** The dream vintage. Great ageing capacity for the best wines.

**2009** Warmer than 2010, with lower acidities and some wines lacking balance. The best are great, but many will soon begin to fade.

**2008** Small harvest. Summer temperatures cooler than normal. Top wines balanced and elegant, basic wines tend to be unripe.

**2007** A chaotic summer, then frost in late September forced most producers to harvest early, with bad results. Drink up quickly.

until 2008, extremely successful and huge investments were in the pipeline. Then the global financial crisis exploded. Within weeks, the domestic market crashed and wineries quickly realised there was no market for its macho wines. Grape prices plummeted and Rioja started eating into Ribera's market.

It became evident to producers that the only way out was to export. And it was thanks to this crisis that the real Ribera emerged: a region of many terroirs, of elegance and authenticity.

## Change for the better

The quality of basic Ribera has definitely improved; the wines are more balanced; brettanomyces is less widespread; young wines are fresher and fruitier; prices are lower than in pre-2008; and oak is less prominent and more integrated. Now quality, distinctiveness, balance and drinkability are the priorities for producers. The wines are still rich and still powerful, but not the monsters of the past. Javier Bohórquez, of Bodegas Bohórquez, puts this down to careful work in the vineyard. He has increased vine density in his top vineyards to reduce yields and increase quality.

Ribera's top wines are characterised more and more by finesse rather than power. Once again, Peter Sisseck is leading the way. Pingus became famous in the 1990s when 200% new French oak was fashionable. It's proof of his vision that the 2010 is the best expression ever and, in my opinion, a perfect 20 points. His secret? No new oak. The fruit is so pure, the tannins so beautifully sewn together, the finish so intriguingly complex, and the wine so distinctive. Fortunately, other top Ribera producers are following his lead.

## The terroir question

Terroir is another hotly contested topic. While winemakers are fully aware of Ribera's diversity, there's currently no consensus on how or whether to classify sites. The top wines tend to be single-vineyard or vineyard-specific. But the region's economic engines are larger bodegas selling affordable blends. These big wineries buy grapes from all over the region and so are against any such move. Carlos Villar is proud of Protos' brand approach, which allows it to sell in 94 countries. Terroir-driven producers such as La Horra's Santolaya have mixed feelings. He believes brands are a better quality indicator than vineyard classifications but doesn't oppose the idea. Others, such as Alberto Medina Moro at Bodegas Emilio Moro, support a classification of the top vineyards.



Enrique Pascual, president of the DO, also believes that its traceability system could work to support a categorisation. But, for the time being there is no formal way of identifying single vineyards; or even its three sub-regions.

These are around the core towns of Peñafiel, Roa and San Esteban de Gormaz. At Peñafiel, which has the oldest wineries, the wines tend to be fruitier and more rounded in youth, and then to age graciously. At Roa, they are characterised by elegant structure and firm backbone, while in the cooler, smaller area of San Esteban de Gormaz, the wines – from pre-phylloxera vines – render great purity and depth of fruit.

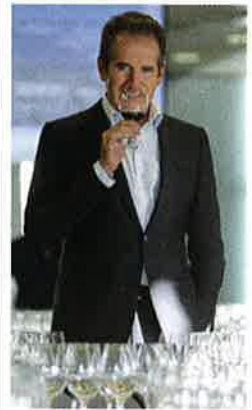
## The chateau model

An increasing number of quality-driven wineries are following Vega Sicilia's chateau model. For instance, José Manuel Ortega created Bodegas O Fournier and is making estate-grown wine from a 55-year-old vineyard bought in 2002. Dominio de Atauta follows a mixed approach. It is the most important winery at Gormaz, Ribera's eastern tip, where most soils are so sandy that phylloxera cannot survive. Vines are extremely old. At 1,000m altitude, its continental climate means huge diurnal temperature differences and a short, frost-free season. Atauta owns some vineyards and also buys in fruit under long-term contracts. Its single-vineyard wines are deliciously unique, particularly recent vintages made by Almudena Alberca.

Ribera may share a historical link with Burgundy, but not with respect to its current ownership profile: most wineries are still in their first generation. Moreover, many key producers come from elsewhere in Spain: large companies such as >



**Above: the Emilio Moro winery near Peñafiel has space to store up to three million bottles**



**Above: Bodegas La Horra chief executive Agustín Santolaya**

**Left: Dominio de Atauta's Valdegatiles is grown on ungrafted vines in sandy soils, at 1,000m above sea level**

La Rioja Alta (Aster), Torres (Celeste) or Félix Solís (Pagos del Rey), and small wineries such as Bohórquez from Jerez or La Horra from Rioja. They join the younger generation of pioneers from the region, including Emilio Moro, Alejandro Fernández, Rodero and Pérez Pascuas. These youngsters share their parents' enthusiasm for the land, but have also benefited from technical training and working at wineries all over the world. Thanks to this, these older estates are now seeing renewed quality and identity in their wines.

There is no better time to get to know Ribera del Duero. There are wines at every

price range and style, but most are affordable, delivering real value for money. They tend to be suave and rich, with a velvety touch, and very food-friendly. The best wines are made to keep and will improve over time, ranging from a few years to decades. They represent an excellent investment in future pleasure and, increasingly, price. The top wines are truly unique, with a great diversity of expressions – some terroir-driven, others based upon top-quality fruit and long, careful ageing.

As Pascual says: 'The best argument in favour of Ribera wines is to try them. Those who try always come back for more.' **D**

*Pedro Ballesteros  
Torres MW is a  
Decanter World Wine  
Awards Regional  
co-Chair for Spain*

## Blue-chip Ribera del Duero: 12 of the best



**Emilio Moro, Malleolus de Sanchomartín 2010** 19.5 (98)  
£93 Christopher Keiller, Bordeaux Index, Nickolls & Perks, Rakuten UK, Wines @ West End  
A most refined, complex delicate, sinewy expression of an old-vineyard wine, this is deliciously harmonious. Iconic. **Drink** 2015-2035 **Alcohol** 14%

**Pérez Pascuas, Gran Selección Gran Reserva 2009** 19.25 (97)  
£149-£163 Bancroft, Capital Vintners, The Wine Society, Wine 360  
The reference for classic La Horra, austere but deep, elegantly balanced, solidly built but suave. Keep it for a few decades if you can. **Drink** 2017-2040 **Alc** 14.5%

**Vega Sicilia, Unico Reserva Especial NV** 19.25 (97)  
£200-£300 Berry Bros & Rudd, Bordeaux Index, Hedonism, WoodWinters  
A blend of 1994, 1996 & 2000. Loyal to its name: unique, special. Wonderfully complex; a wine to have at least once in your lifetime and to savour with closed eyes. **Drink** 2015-2045 **Alc** 14%



**Pago de los Capellanes, El Picón 2010** 19 (96)  
£102-£179 Blanco & Gomez, Corking Wines, Eclectic Tastes, Exel, Hedonism, Le Vignoble  
A great example of Ribera grand cru, this wine sings a distinctive terroir. Finely grained, sinewy, sensual, if a little too young to drink now. **Drink** 2017-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

**Dominio de Atauta, Valdegatiles 2011** 18.5 (95)  
£62-£80 Blanco & Gomez, Hedonism, The Oxford Wine Co, Winey, WoodWinters  
Coming from a remote old vineyard where phylloxera does not dare venture. 100% Tinto Fino (Tempranillo), but this is a unique expression of a different terroir, deftly sublimated by Almudena Alberca. **Drink** 2015-2030 **Alc** 15%



**O Fournier 2007** 18.5 (95)  
£60 Carruthers & Kent, Winedirect  
Restrained and elegant on the nose, this is one of those wines to sniff with parsimony. Deep and fresh on the palate, finishing like an opera singer. Probably the greatest Ribera in this difficult vintage. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14.8%

**Alejandro Fernández, Tinto Pesquera Millenium Reserva 1996** 18.5 (95)  
£95 Fine & Rare  
Living proof of the beneficial effects of ageing top Ribera wines. Still young, this wine is round and persistent. A great classic. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 13.5%



**Bodegas Arzuaga Navarro, Amaya Arzuaga 2010** 18.5 (95)  
£85-£90 Selfridges, The Good Wine Shop  
Dense rather than powerful, this is a rich and serious wine, showing a pleasing velvety touch and a long finish. A previous Trophy winner in the Decanter World Wine Awards. **Drink** 2015-2035 **Alc** 14.5%



**Aalto, PS 2012** 18.25 (94)  
£49-£81 Bordeaux Index, City Wine Collection, Fine & Rare, Hedonism, Justerini & Brooks, R&B Wines, Turville Valley  
Impressively concentrated, amazingly deep. This explosive wine will need many years to be fully tamed, but it is a wild joy to drink now. **Drink** 2015-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

**Bodegas Fusión, Lara O Pro 2011** 18.25 (94)  
N/A UK [www.bodegasfusion.com](http://www.bodegasfusion.com)  
Amazing aromatic precision, with a rich fruit expression in mouth. A relatively new wine, destined to become a classic. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14.5%



**Hacienda Monasterio, Reserva Especial 2001** 18.25 (94)  
£50-£80 Berry Bros & Rudd, Harper Wells  
A great wine by Peter Sisseck, classic Ribera with a spicy supplement and very fine-grained tannins. Just becoming ready to drink. **Drink** 2015-2023 **Alc** 13.5%

**Viñas del Jaro, Sed de Caná 2012** 18 (93)  
£100 Templar Wines  
Intensely flavoured, this is a very juicy wine with lots of fruit and a good, spicy finish. In a particular style – in between Ribera and Rioja – it is highly enjoyable. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

*For full details of UK stockists, see p123*

## Great quality and value under £30

**Finca Villacreces 2011** 18.25 (94)  
£29.99 widely available via UK agent Liberty Wines

This wine could also be in my 12 greatest Riberas. Delicious, complex, finely sewn, open. Top quality, and at a bargain price. **Drink** 2015-2030 **Alc** 14%



**Bodegas Valduero, Crianza 2012** 18 (93)  
£15.49-£21.95 KWM, The Wine Shop NI, Wine Time at Scatchards  
Classic and balanced in style, with good integration of oak aromas. Velvety and suave, this is best enjoyed with food. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14%

**Sei Solo, Preludio 2012** 18 (93)  
£19-£30 City Wine Collection, Hedonism, Justerini & Brooks  
With all the character of a terroir wine, sound backbone and open finish. Affordable access point to the great Ribera wines. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14.5%



**Alonso del Yerro 2011** 17.75 (92)  
£16.21-£16.46 Imbibros, SpaNiche Wines  
Archetypal Ribera, packed with abundant tannins, bountiful fruit and balancing acidity. Both powerful and charming at once. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

**Baden Numen, Au 2010** 17.75 (92)  
N/A UK [www.badennumen.es](http://www.badennumen.es)  
With its concentrated ripe fruit aromas, this is rich and dense on the palate. Impressive but very enjoyable. Keep this ambitious wine for at least a few years. **Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 14.5%



**Bodegas La Horra, Corimbo 2012** 17.75 (92)  
£15-£21 Bordeaux Index, DBM, Hard to Find Wines, The Drink Shop, Uncorked, WoodWinters  
Very clean and precise on the nose, this is a charmingly suave and open wine. Well structured and persistent. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 14.5%

**Bodegas Bohórquez, Cardela 2012** 17.5 (91)  
£12.99-£14.17 Majestic, The Wine Society  
Great expression of Ribera, built on its fruit. Crunchy and delicious – one to drink now and over the next few years. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 14.5%



**Bodegas Pingón, Altamibre 2011** 17.5 (91)  
£17 The General Wine Co  
Very classic style, singing its crianza fruit. Warm, full, savoury and very open. A nice textbook Ribera. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14%

**Verónica Salgado, Capricho Viñas Viejas Vino de Autor 2011** 17.5 (91)  
N/A UK [www.veronicasalgado.es](http://www.veronicasalgado.es)  
If you can find this, snap it up. It would be hard to find more complexity and concentration in what would be a £10 wine. Great ambitions, deft winemaking. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14%

**Aster, Crianza 2010** 17 (90)  
£16-£18 Ministry of Drinks, Winedirect  
Modern-style crianza, with much fruit and little oxidation. Lively with juicy fruit, very clean and highly pleasurable. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 14.5%



**Bodegas Protos, Rosado 2014** 17 (90)  
£9.06 Exel  
This historic winery has improved the quality of its entire range. I'm choosing its rosé because of its originality, fruit, balance and charm. A different take on Ribera, offering much enjoyment. **Drink** 2015-2016 **Alc** 13%

**Bodegas Valderiz 2010** 17 (90)  
£16 The Wine Society  
Soft, rounded and velvety, with lots of warm fruit and unmistakable crianza notes. Excellent partner for food. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 14.5%

For full UK stockist details, see p123



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