

The *Decanter* Interview

# Telmo Rodríguez

This intrepid winemaker has a passion for native Spanish grapes and distinct terroirs, and for reviving traditional methods and styles. Carla Capalbo joins him on a road trip of his vineyards

IT'S A BRIGHT autumn day in Madrid when we pile into Telmo Rodríguez's car and head north on a tour of Spain that will cover 1,800km in three days. Most independent winemakers today inherit or buy a few hectares of land in an established wine area, build a cellar, and then increase the vineyards around it to consolidate their estate. It takes courage and vision to turn that model on its head. Rodríguez and his partner, Pablo Eguzkiza, have opted for a decidedly less conventional scheme. They have assembled a group of remarkable vineyards in nine different locations around Spain, including a cluster in the north-west (Rioja, Galicia, Rueda, Cigales, Toro, Avila and Ribera del Duero), and a few in southern areas (Málaga and Alicante). The pair own 80 hectares, of which 55ha are currently in production; they rent a further 20ha.



wines are produced and bottled under the label La Compañía de Vinos Telmo Rodríguez.

## Captivated by terroir

What got Rodríguez started? 'My father was a businessman but he was interested in archaeology. When I was young, he took us each summer across the interior of Spain, retracing the ancient routes of the *transhumance*, where animals were herded cross-country from summer to winter pastures. We spent weeks off the beaten track, and I became fascinated by the diversity of Spain's landscapes.' That fascination evolved into a search for Spain's historic but forgotten wines. 'We knew of them from 18th-century texts but they no longer existed, even though we discovered cellars where they'd been produced.' The results of his search were to

have been published in a book. So why didn't he write it? 'I did something much more exciting: I made the wines.'

The output includes the legendary 'mountain wine' from Málaga that British connoisseurs and Alexandre Dumas described. Rodríguez and Eguzkiza have recently revived it: a pure, mineral Muscat of sun-dried raisins whose balance of sweetness and acidity maintains impressive elegance.

After two hours' drive, Rodríguez points out ancient cellars carved in the rocky terrain at the

## Rodríguez at a glance

**Born** 1962 in Basque Country  
**Family** married with three children  
**Education** Biology at University of Bilbao, Oenology diploma at University of Bordeaux  
**Mentors/stages** Bruno Prats (then at Cos d'Estournel, Bordeaux); Eloi Durbach (Domaine de Trévallon, Provence); Gérard Chave (JL Chave, Rhône)  
**Career** first vintage with Remelluri, Rioja in 1989, returning in 2010. Formed La Compañía de Vinos Telmo Rodríguez in 1994 with Pablo Eguzkiza  
**Hobbies** surfing, sailing, mountaineering, modern art – he directs an art and wine project for *Matador* magazine



Above: Basque-born Telmo Rodríguez and partner Pablo Eguzkiza met while studying at Bordeaux University. Left and far left: Rodríguez spends a lot of time on the road, visiting vineyards in the nine areas where he makes wine

southern edge of Ribera del Duero, their cave-like entrances boarded up. 'These show how prevalent winemaking once was here,' he says. Rodríguez and Eguzkiza own vineyards on both sides of the Duero river. We climb first to the 1,100m high plateau near Pardilla to visit the 6ha site at Fuentemolinos, where gnarled, free-standing bush vines of Tinto Fino (local Tempranillo) live high on the windy plain in an almost biblical setting. There's been no rain for months and the countryside is parched. Only deep-rooted bush vines can cope with such drought unaided. Rodríguez makes three wines here, from the entry level Gazur to the costlier, barrel-aged M2 and Matallana.

'Our focus is on native varieties,' he says. 'We began as a reaction to the mass plantings of Chardonnay, Cabernet and Merlot here in the 1980s and '90s. In the north, the authorities of Navarra destroyed one of Spain's most beautiful wine areas by ripping out old bush vines in favour of what they considered "nobler" international varieties. We were against that. We didn't want to standardise or internationalise Spain's wines but to express the very Spanish character of its landscapes and grapes. In the '90s, the only Spanish region known for wine was Rioja. We were already looking further afield.'

## Modest beginnings

The pair's first wine, Alma, was made in 1994 from bush-vine Garnacha grapes bought from a Navarra co-op. It was sold at super-affordable prices. 'Until then, Garnacha was considered an inferior variety. It was never vinified by itself except to make *rosado*, but we loved its bright, spicy character.' Alma's success enabled them to buy their first vineyard. ➤



*'We're 10 years behind Italy [when it comes to diversity and indigenous varieties], but soon Spain will be recognised for the intrinsic quality of its terroirs'*

Rodríguez and Eguzkiza enjoy making well-made, entry-level wines to generate cash and to ease themselves into new areas. They created lines for Marks & Spencer using white Verdejo and Viura that helped raise the profile of Spain's native whites as well as reds. 'Wines at all price levels have their dignity and we're not interested in making instant blockbusters. We prefer to go slowly, starting with modest wines until we understand each terroir and its grapes. Then we progress to more complex wines. We're long-distance runners, not sprinters.'

We continue north to the Rodríguez family estate, Remelluri, in western Rioja near Labastida. Rodríguez's father bought the beautiful, isolated ex-monastery in the 1960s when few were interested in Rioja. Rodríguez ran the winery for him for more than a decade before branching out on his own. Last year, Rodríguez came back to run Remelluri and now makes wines there and in two other plots in Rioja Alavesa. 'We've chosen vineyards that follow the contour of the Sierra Cantabria mountains on the northern side of the Ebro Valley,' says Eguzkiza as we scramble up the steep stone terraces of Las Beatas, from which the pair are launching a single-vineyard wine. Here again, 3.5ha of lovingly tended bush vines, some more than 100 years old, have been maintained in the traditional way, with the added plus of being

worked biodynamically (all Rodríguez' wines are certified organic). 'We'd like to see a research project here differentiate between individual townships, like Burgundy's notion of villages,' he says. 'Then we'll demonstrate that within Rioja, Lanciego's terroir is different from Haro's.' Their Rioja wines, Altos de Lanzaga, Lanzaga and LZ, are all field blends of Tempranillo, Graciano and Garnacha.

### Championing native grapes

'We are fascinated by the gestures of traditional winemaking that risk dying out, like the different ways of pruning in each zone,' Rodríguez explains. They recruit locals familiar with those traditions to tend their vineyards. 'This older generation has a direct link to the middle ages. They've passed their craft from father to son, and are able to indicate where the best wines were made, and from which varieties. Sometimes, if we're lucky, a few plants still exist from which to take cuttings.' Rodríguez



**Above: Rodríguez likes to go slow, focusing on modest wines until he understands a region's terroir and its grapes**

and Eguzkiza vinify their Rioja wines in two cellars. One is ancient, externally nondescript, and very atmospheric. The other was designed by them in 2008. Unlike most other Rioja cellars, it's hidden from view within the landscape. In the cellar, all the wines ferment on native yeasts and are left to complete malolactic fermentation in their own time.

Rodríguez and Eguzkiza also hope to see Rioja and other Spanish winemaking areas

recognised for their millennial traditions. Rodríguez explains: 'There's a paradox here: Spain's image as a cheap winemaking country is stuck where it was 20 years ago. That's out of sync with what's really happening.' Spain may be suffering hard times and the bulk of its wine exports may still be of cheap industrial plonk, but there is a growing movement of exciting, quality wines being made in

diverse areas. Rodríguez is optimistic.

'Rioja has reached a turning point,' he says. 'The fashion for mass-producing Cabernet and Merlot and for building giant, architect-designed cellars has ended, often rather ingloriously. The market couldn't sustain those wines. Several of those big wineries are for sale now. A new generation of drinkers wants characterful, place-specific wines rather than constructed, internationalised wines that depend as much on marketing strategies as content. I'm confident that these educated young people, who are as passionate as we are about indigenous varieties, will help maintain Spain's diversity for the future. We're 10 years behind Italy



### The regions and the wines

- Rioja Alavesa**  
Altos de Lanzaga, Lanzaga, LZ  
(grapes: Tempranillo, Graciano, Garnacha)
- Ribera del Duero**  
Matallana, M2 de Matallana Gazur (Tinto Fino)
- Toro**  
Pago la Jara, Gago (Tinta de Toro, Albillo)
- Valdeorras, Galicia**  
Gaba do Xil (Mencia, Godello)
- Rueda**  
Basa, El Transistor (Verdejo, Viura)
- Cigales**  
Viña 105 (Tempranillo, Garnacha)
- Ceberos**  
Pegaso Pizarra, Pegaso Granito (Garnacha)
- Málaga**  
Molino Real, MR, Mountain Blanco (Moscatel, Moscatel de Alejandría)
- Alicante**  
Al Muvedre (Monastrell)



**Above: the Rioja wines, including Altos de Lanzaga, are all field blends of Tempranillo, Graciano and Garnacha. Top: Rodríguez, watched by his son, talks to his vineyard manager at the Fuentelimos vineyard in Ribera del Duero**

on this, but soon Spain will be recognised for the intrinsic quality of its terroirs.'

### Restoring noble vineyards

We drive west 450km to Galicia where young, independent producers abound thanks to Rodríguez and Eguzkiza's pioneering work. We enter a hidden valley at Santa Cruz, Valdeorras, with steep, terraced sides. 'Twenty years ago, when we discovered this place, it was abandoned, the vines dead and the dry-stone walls crumbling,' says Rodríguez. 'But the locals remembered La Falcoiera as the source of the area's greatest wines.' Parcel by parcel they bought a 7ha plot at its centre, restoring the walls and replanting native varieties Godello and Mencia. 'The vines are now 10 years old so we'll soon launch our first important wines from here,' he says.

En route to Madrid, we make one final stop at Ceberos, the pair's highest vineyards, at 1,100m.

### Spain's 'new wine movement'

Telmo Rodríguez thinks this is the most interesting time in Spanish wine in more than 100 years. 'It's great that there are young, passionate people in action now,' he says. 'Until recently, the cards have been stacked against small producers, with the authorities only interested in protecting big co-ops and corporations: in Rioja you had to have at least 500 barrels in your cellar to produce appellation wine.' Now that is changing as many small producers spring up in areas all over Spain that go beyond Rioja and Ribera del Duero.

Over the past 20 years, producers such as Alejandro Fernandez in Ribera, or the Priorat Five, have also provoked

shock waves in what was the perceived hierarchy of Spain's winemaking areas. Galicia is a good example of that. Today fine young producers are working in Bierzo on reds Mencia and Garnacha Tintorera, and whites Doña Blanca and Godello, while in Rias Baixas there's been the rediscovery of white Albariño.

Farther south and east, at Manchuela, the work is focused on reds Bobal, Tempranillo, Monastrell and Garnacha, and whites Albillo, Macabeo and Verdejo. 'You have the impression in those places of being an adventurer, dreaming about bringing forgotten tastes back to life,' says Rodríguez, a true inveterate wine adventurer.

This panoramic site, on slate and granite near Avila, formerly supplied Spain's kings with wines. The 120-year old Garnacha bush vines are healthy, their boundaries demarcated by whitewashed stones, as in the past. '90% of these noble vineyards have been abandoned in the past five years,' says Rodríguez. 'But we're making our greatest wine here. Garnacha is the only grape able to transform this heavy, hot climate into freshness in the wines.' As we head back down to Madrid my mind is full of the unique terroirs and sculptural vines we've encountered. They augur well for the future of Spanish wine. **D**

*Carla Capalbo is an author, photographer and freelance food, wine and travel writer. She won the André Simon Memorial Award for Best Wine Book in 2009*