

fine lees

Germany

More than Riesling

Champagne

Deconstructed

Rioja

Rediscovered



The unfiltered wine report

Design and illustration by Grace Kennedy

Cover image: the underground cellars at Champagne Palmer & Co.

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The world of wine is exactly that – a world, a community, an extended family of like-minded people; from those who work the soil in rural Rioja, to those who pour the bottle in central London. It's a complex, ever-evolving and exciting world, but can also be fragile and unforgiving at times. Working in wine is more than a job – it's a way of life.

How else can you explain the literal blood, sweat and tears that go into producing many of the world's best bottles? David Sampedro Gil in Rioja Alavesa is one of those inspiring winemakers who does things because it's right, not because it's easy. From horse ploughing and biodynamic farming, to his solar panelled and gravity-fed winery, David's wines can't help but shout of their unique terroir. Read more on p19.

Also in this issue, Christina Schneider takes a look at how far the German wine industry has come to rid itself of its Blue Nun image, bravely taking on the modern world. Looking beyond stalwart Riesling, Christina explores the wonderful Pinot Noirs (or Spätburgunders) produced by a new wave of German winemakers. Over in Champagne, Gergely Barsi Szabo visits Palmer & Co. to explore this independent Champagne producer's incredible (and incredibly old) cellars and the difference 'time' makes.

Taking a step back from the exciting, it's hard not to think about the fragile, unforgiving side of the wine world. Wine, by its very nature, is natural – and as such is wholly dependent on whatever Mother Nature has in store. There's no denying the impact and effects of a changing climate, presenting unique and sometimes devastating challenges to producers. Richard Siddle takes a look at the forces of nature and how producers are rising above to defeat the odds and make even better, more sustainable wine.

I hope you enjoy our latest issue!

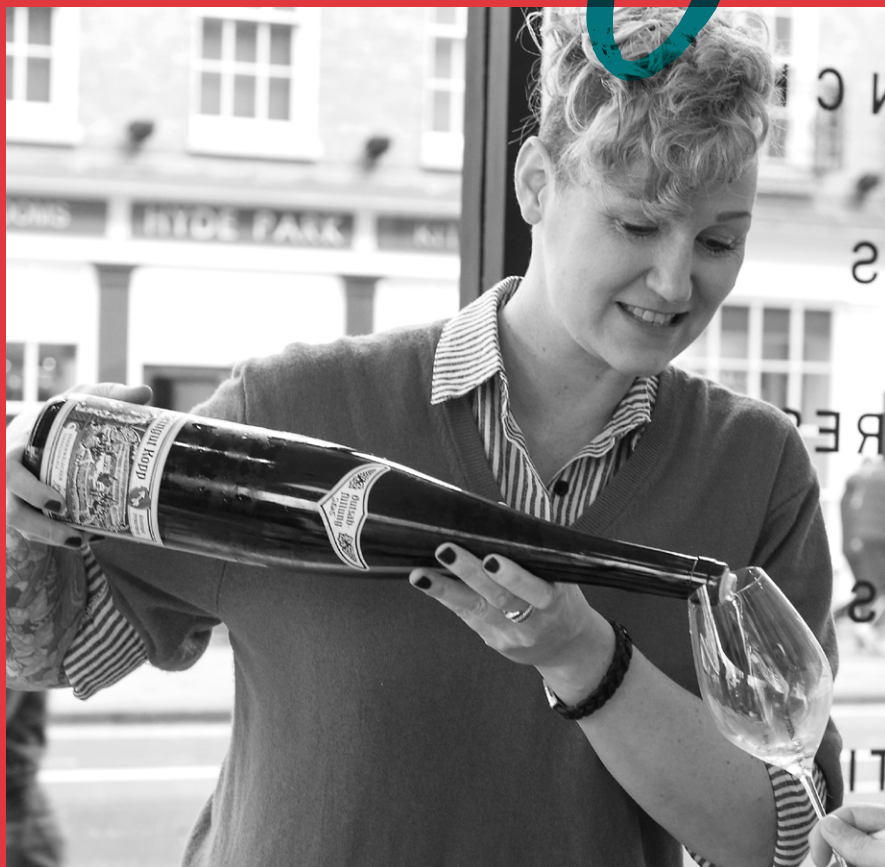
Elona Hesseling



Born into the world of wine, **Elona** grew up on a wine farm in South Africa. After graduating from the University of Stellenbosch with a degree in Viticulture and Oenology, she completed a couple of harvests before joining South Africa's producer-focused magazine WineLand as a journalist. She has judged in various wine competitions, most recently for the IWC. A move to London meant a new adventure. After a brief stint at leading online Fine Wine auctioneer iDealwine, Elona joined Bibendum's marketing team and now heads up the brand side.

MORE THAN JUST *Riesling*

by Christina Schneider, Bibendum Ambassador



I love German wine. I do. Okay, I also love French wine. And Italian. And Spanish. And Hungarian. And well, a lot of others. But if I was forced to choose a single country to supply all my wine for the rest of my life, it would be Germany.

You might say that's because I drank nothing but cheap, sweet Riesling from litre bottles as a teenager. While that's pretty accurate, I'd say that's rather a reason not to love it. Like so many Germans I find it difficult to love things that are quintessentially German. In fact, I only really fell in love with German wine after I moved to London and started working in the world's most exciting food and drinks scene. The quality level of the German wines that I came across in this highly competitive market was worlds apart from the fruity, sweet plonk that gave me my first hangovers over 20 years ago. But to understand what had changed, we must dig a bit deeper...

A troubled past

The history of German wine is a troubled one. The Romans planted vines in the Mosel and Rhine Valleys as early as the first century. The area under vine grew rapidly in the middle ages up to 300,000ha (three times as much as today), which isn't surprising if you consider that the average German drank 120 litres of wine per year (almost six times today's amount!).

Under the lead of monasteries, Riesling became more and more important, and towards the end of the 17th century people discovered its ability to produce the finest sweet wines. So much so, that by the 19th century sweet wines from Mosel, Rhine and Pfalz were the most expensive and sought-after wines in the world. But we all know what happened next. A pesty little bug called phylloxera – followed by two rather devastating wars – put an end to it all, leaving the country poor, broken and hungry with very little need for expensive, high-quality wine.

There was, however, a need to drink and to drink cheap. In the second half of the 20th century Germany drowned in mass produced, thin, chaptalised wines, possibly due to new, high-yielding varieties, state-of-the-art technology and modern chemicals. New vineyards were planted where no one could hope to ever make quality wine, allowing mass production through the use of machinery, which was impossible in most traditional premium vineyards. It was a brave new world where only volume and price dictated the rules. On the other side, German wine lovers who had the funds turned their backs on the domestic juice and Germany became the biggest wine importer in the world.

Rules and laws

Knowing that, it is probably not surprising that the German wine law of 1971 largely focused on grape ripeness and must weight to determine the quality of a wine. This system separates wines into Tafelwein, Qualitätswein bestimmter Anbaugebiete (QbA) and Prädikatswein, which then splits up into Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese, Beerenauslese (BA) and Trockenbeerenauslese (TBA). Although the Prädikat levels can be indicative of the sweetness in the wine, it is vital to understand that they refer to a minimum sweetness within the grape before fermentation, not in the resulting wine. Apart from the must weight requirements, the law also states that Prädikatswein must not be chaptalised and that any wine must have a specified minimum alcohol level.

The law, however, did not set any limits on yields and Tafelwein labels only had to state where wines were bottled, not where the grapes were grown, or even which variety was being used. The result? An influx of cheap grapes or even wines from other European countries to be blended and bottled under German labels, a lot of them from Italy and Austria.

This led the German wine industry into its darkest hour to date, the infamous 1985 diethylene glycol wine scandal. An incident in which several Austrian producers added diethylene glycol (a substance found in antifreeze) to their wines to make them appear sweeter and more full-bodied, some of which found their way into bulk-produced German blends where the toxic substance was discovered in routine quality checks.

While Austria took the main hit – sending its exports crashing and eliminating Austrian wine from the international radar for decades – Germany’s already not-so-great reputation also took a big hit.

German Wine Law can be confusing at best – **[click here](#)** to read Christina’s easy-to-use guide to decipher everything from Spätlese to GG.

Time for a change

Beginning in the 1980s, more and more producers (especially smaller ones) realised that there was no money to be made in the bulk wine sector unless they were able to sell enormous quantities. So they started focusing on quality instead.

At the same time, consumers’ palates started to change. Returning from their summer vacations in France, Spain or Italy, Germans craved what they were drinking on terraces in the sun. Pinot Grigio, Sancerre, Rioja, Chablis... dry wines were in, sweet wines were out!

As a result, a lot of German producers started focusing on drier styles, red wine became more and more important, and international varieties like Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot were planted, replacing work-horse grapes like Müller-Thurgau and Sylvaner.



Seeing red

Pinot Noir, or Spätburgunder as it's known in Germany, probably gained the most from Germany's thirst for quality reds. Having been planted in the south of Germany for almost 1,200 years, Pinot Noir is by far the most important red grape in the country. It takes up almost 12% of the area under vine (nearly 12,000 ha), making Germany the third biggest Pinot Noir producer in the world, after France and the USA.

Until about 30 years ago, thermovinification was the way to go, producing thin, cheap, pale, either off-dry or undrinkable sour reds, basically made like white wine from often partially unripe and even rotten grapes. That was until a handful of winemakers in the Ahr Valley, where slopes are steep and grape growing is expensive, started looking towards Burgundy for inspiration. They started planting different clones, Burgundians among them, reducing yields drastically and experimenting with extended maceration and barrique ageing. Other producers in the Rheingau, Pfalz and Baden followed, starting what can rightfully be called the resurrection of German red wine.

Pioneers of Pinot

In 1991, vintners like Werner Näkel from the Ahr founded the German Barrique Forum, promoting the use of small oak barrels to age their Pinot Noirs, which until then was rarely done and highly disputed. Although some might say that in the early stages the resulting wines ended up going too far in the opposite direction, sacrificing subtlety and complexity

for ripeness, fruit and lots of oak, an important step in the right direction was made.

It took a new generation of young (or at least young at heart), well-travelled and even better-connected winemakers to bring Spätburgunder to its rightful place among the world's top Pinot Noirs. Visionaries like Hanspeter Ziereisen, Benedikt Baltes and Johannes Kopp understood that terroir is what it's all about when it comes to making stellar Pinot. While being inspired by Burgundy, their wines have become known for having a very distinct sense of place and for being a clear reflection of their origin.

At Johannes Kopp's winery in Baden, wines are named after the soils the grapes grow in. There's the Lösslehm Weisburgunder, a Pinot Blanc from loess loam soil, a Buntsandstein Riesling from red sandstone and a Roter Porphy Spätburgunder from red porphyry soil, showing the unusual diversity of soil types in the area and how complex and grown up German wine can be. And grown up it finally is!

With Londoners drinking and eating more local produce, turning more towards the Old World for the next big thing to drink, and prices of good Burgundy going through the roof, the timing for great Spätburgunder couldn't be better. So, the next time you go wine shopping make sure you secure yourself some delicious German Pinot. I can safely say there are a few bottles sleeping peacefully underneath my bed, right next to some Marsannay and Los Carneros – exactly where they belong.



FORCES OF NATURE

How wine producers are coping with the world's changing climate

by **Richard Siddle**, award-winning business journalist

If you glanced through the biggest and most glaring headlines of the last year you would be forgiven for thinking the world was going through the earliest stages of the apocalypse. Particularly as it seemed whole parts of the world were being ravaged by uncontrollable fires, devastating floods and the worst frosts experienced in 50 years.

The reality, of course, was a little less dramatic, and far more isolated than the initial headlines might have you believe. But however much spin you put on it, the vagaries in the weather resulted in world wine production for 2017 falling to its lowest level since 1961, according to the International Organisation of Vine and Wine (OIV).

A drop in production of 8% might not sound too severe, but when you consider that is the equivalent of 2.9 billion bottles, or the equivalent of what France normally produces in one year, then you can see why changes in the weather on this scale are so worrying for the global wine industry.

The OIV's director-general, Jean-Marie Aurand, did not mince his words when he said "this drop (in production) is the consequence of climate hazards".

Now how much of the last year's problems were down directly to long-term climate change and how much was the result of just darn bad luck is impossible to tell. But both the viticultural and scientific evidence points to changes in our weather and overall climate that is already having an impact on wineries, vineyards and the grapes they are growing.

Global changes

All over the world we are seeing warmer conditions resulting in grapes ripening quicker and winemakers harvesting earlier. Particularly in the warmer southern hemisphere, and key wine-producing countries and regions in South America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

But even in classic Old World regions like Burgundy and Bordeaux the harvest, in an increasing number of vintages, has moved forward from mid-October to late September, with white wine varieties being picked even earlier.

Winemakers are increasingly having to adapt to both higher and also extreme fluctuations in average temperatures between day and night, as well as less rainfall and moisture to keep their vines healthy. Just look at South Africa which is going through its longest drought in over a century.

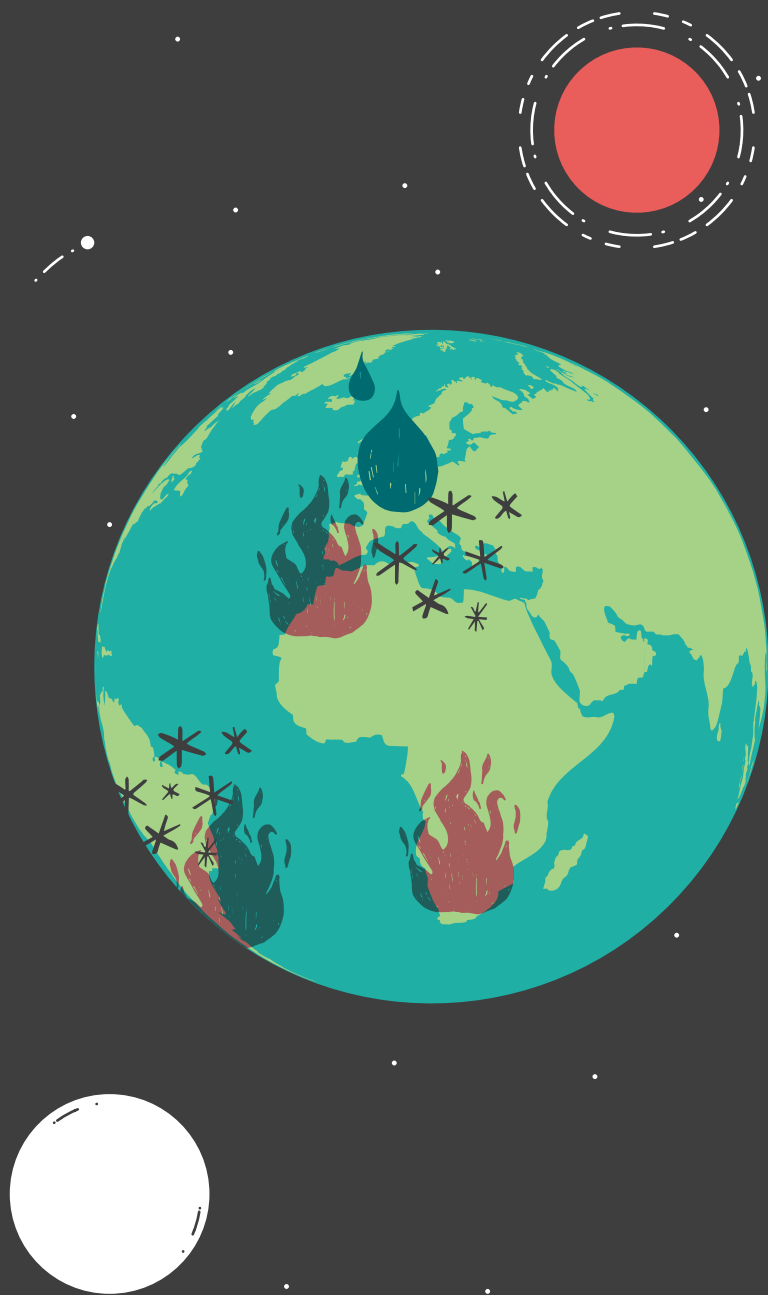
Producers are also successfully planting and growing vines in the northern hemisphere that were previously thought of as no-go zones for wine production.

Now, yes, some of these trends are as much to do with changing consumer tastes for fresher, lighter, fruitier wines, and not the big extracted fruit bombs that late picking of fully-ripened grapes result in.

They are also being heavily influenced by improved and changing viticultural techniques, including sophisticated data analysis of soils and weather heat maps of vineyards to determine the best plots for each type of vine.

But when local differences in weather patterns start to create global changes then we know there is something very real happening.





What winemakers think

Few wine producers have done more to explore the impact of climate change on grapes and viticulture than the Catenas in Argentina, and in particular Laura Catena. They even have their own dedicated research and development centre set up to explore ways to better understand how soils and the climate works when producing grapes for wine.

Laura is not sure there is enough evidence yet to say the climate is necessarily impacting directly on picking times.

“Although over the last 50 years we have seen a very gradual increase in temperatures, recently, in 2015 and 2016, we had two very cold years with a lot of snow in the Andes... So I wouldn’t say there is a significant change in picking times.”

Alois Clemens Lageder, the sixth generation of the winemaking family that has made wine at Alois Lageder in Alto Adige, north east Italy, since 1823, is in no doubt climate change is influencing the wines it can make.

“The extremes are changing faster (from cold to warm weather, dry to wet). In 2016 and 2017 we had frost problems, the first time since the early 1980s. Because of the warm winters the grapes started to shoot earlier, which meant when in April and May we had nights that brought temperatures under 0°C, farmers lost up to 90% of their yields,” he explains.



Laura Catena

Water rights

Access to water, and then an ability to retain it and use it properly, is a growing challenge for wine producers the world over.

Laura Catena says they are working hard to find new regions outside Mendoza, “such as La Rioja to the north and La Pampa in Patagonia, where there is greater water availability and extraordinary terroirs with well-drained alluvial soils”.

The issue of water is where the wine world collides heads on with the needs of other industries. Laura says parts of Mendoza are suffering from “drought conditions” where the “underground water aquifers are being drained by uses related to construction and having an increased population”.

Derek Mossman Knapp, who follows a traditional “garagiste” style to winemaking in Chile with his Garage Wine Company, says the recent devastating fires in Chile was not to do with the climate, but man’s over use of the land.

“I shan’t deny climate change for an instant, but the bushfires last year in Chile was Mother Earth reacting to wanton and unregulated over-planting of pine trees and misguided management by our forestry industry. There was simply not enough water for so many trees.”

“When the water table began to be seriously affected, Mother Earth responded with her reset button. In a few short weeks after the bushfires, streams that had been dry for years began to run, wells refilled and indigenous plants began to bounce back,” he says.

Derek believes there is a better balance to understand between the direct impact of the climate and how wine is being made. He explains: “There are other areas in Chile such as Limari where massive plantings of vines were perhaps executed too fast and without sufficient studies, and many of these have proven unviable. Again, I believe this the result of poor planning more than global warming.”

This is where better scientific analysis of soils and their surrounding area are much needed, says Laura. “We are studying the soil microbiome and I personally think that understanding how rhizobacteria help vines

withstand water stress will be one of the keys to fighting climate change.”

Laura believes the move to drip irrigation by many producers, particularly in Argentina, is the way to go. She estimates the Catena properties’ water usage is 25% of what it was in her grandfather’s time.

How high can you go?

The move towards more cooler-climate wines is not just a fashionable trend to meet the demands of wine hipsters looking to find something new. But increasingly winemakers are having to plant higher, just to make wine at all, not just the wine they choose to.

In the main it is still hard to find too many wineries planted above 1,000 meters. But times



are changing. So much so that there is even a dedicated exhibition and conference to cool-climate wines, *VinoVision*, that takes place in mid-February in Paris.

Argentina has long held the record for the highest-planted vines, with the record going to *Altura Máxima* at a staggering 3,011m.

Again it was the Catenas leading the way in cool-climate plantings with, as Laura says, steps taken by her father, Nicolas Catena, to “pioneer extreme high-altitude plantings in Gualtallary, Uco Valley”.

But she stresses changes in harvest time for their cool-climate vineyards are more “related to better vine health” and finding the right new areas with a cooler climate.

There are also consequences for wineries to consider when looking to make cool-climate wine. She explains: “This search for cooler climate has led to the abandonment of vineyards in Eastern Mendoza and that is causing a crisis for the people there who have lived from farming for centuries. We are trying to revert this by studying Bonarda, which does best in the East of Mendoza, and by improving farming practices.”

But there are growing regions across Europe where wineries are looking to go higher and higher.

For Clemens, the need to find cooler-climate vineyards is a stylistic one so that you can still



Harvest time at Catena in Argentina

“guarantee freshness” and “preserve a certain acidity level in the grapes”, something that is becoming increasingly hard to do at what were normal vineyard levels, he says. “We have vintner partners who have vineyards over 2,800 feet. These vineyards have existed for already more than 400 years.”

But interestingly, he argues there are also hard commercial reasons for wanting to plant higher vineyards. “Today it’s becoming a trend to look for higher vineyards. The reason to do so is often a financial one as the land on higher altitudes still costs less,” he claims.



Snow in the Garage Wine Co vineyards

Nothing new

Climate change is not a new phenomenon. Winemakers for the last 20 to 30 years have been looking at planting other varieties, or using different clones with mixed sugar and acidity levels, to find the ones best suited to changes in their local weather. Rather than stick to the tried and tested, there is now a real need to look at what Clemens says are “exotic grape varieties that are more suitable for higher average temperatures and extreme weather”.

“They will play an important role in the future,” he adds. “Due to the climate changes, we began cultivating new grape varieties in the mid-1980s to determine which would be suitable for higher average temperatures and extreme weather conditions.”

The key, he believes, is to work with varieties that can work in loose clusters, and that have thick skins so they are less susceptible to the diseases that can result from extreme and fluctuating weather conditions.

Back to the future

Winemakers are also responding to climate change by going back in history and re-adapting some of the ancient vinification methods used by their predecessors. As well as switching to more natural wine production.

It’s an approach that is working successfully for Clemens: “We will focus even more on traditional vinification methods that help us guarantee or even increase the perception of freshness in our wines.”

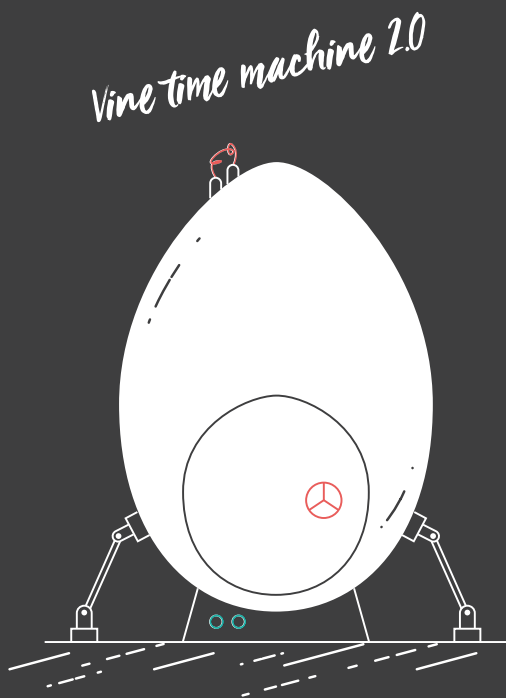
He points to how they harvested their crop of Porer Pinot Grigio grapes from the particularly hot 2015 vintage using “natural and traditional vinification methods. We pressed one part of the Porer’s grapes immediately after their arrival at the estate. Another part we kept on the skins for about 15 hours. The third part was kept for a year on stems and skins. The most impressive result was not the change in colour, but a lower acidity level, and much more profound freshness and tension in the wine.”

Biodynamic winemaking is also allowing winemakers to pick their grapes earlier, says Clemens. “The physiological maturation of the grapes occurs earlier, which means that we can harvest them earlier. The grapes have a lower sugar content and at the same time a higher physiological maturation. The results are precise, fresh and lively wines.”

Winemakers are looking to old techniques to help preserve their wines, like in Alsace where there is increased use of maceration and oxidation techniques to increase stability and longevity of their wine.

Warming temperatures can also be a blessing for winemakers who struggle to consistently get the right levels of natural ripeness. Ernst Loosen of Dr Loosen in the Mosel Valley shared these thoughts in a recent *Journal of Wine Economics* paper on climate change: “Up until the late 1980s, we struggled to reach an average natural ripeness of 8% to 10% potential alcohol in the fruit. These days, the average is closer to 11%. This has given us the chance to produce ripe, well-balanced dry wines without the need for botrytis to increase the must weight.”

He also confirms picking times, with harvest three to four weeks earlier than in the past. He writes: “Our regional climate is definitely getting warmer, and we are harvesting earlier, but our fruit is still not overripe. The warmer conditions are giving us potential alcohol levels that are 1.0% to 1.5% higher than in the past, but it is still a struggle to achieve 12.5% potential alcohol (without botrytis) in all but the finest vineyard sites.”



Winery changes

It's not just in the vineyards where producers are looking to make changes that help them adapt and cope better with climate change.

At Alois Lageder, for example, they try to run the winery as sustainably and carbon neutral as possible. "We try to work as sustainably as possible, in every area, but we are not perfect and we look at it as a process," explains Clemens.

But at every stage in building the winery they looked to use biological materials and ensure all steps were taken to minimise energy emissions and find alternative energy sources. Including heat-ceiling panels, a heat retention system in the air conditioning unit and solar panels to help heat water.

"We don't need to use fossil fuels," says Clemens. "All these measures contribute to reducing emissions released into the environment and the climatic risks they might bring."

At a crossroads...

The final word goes to Miguel Torres, the legendary Spanish winemaker and one of the world's leading voices on climate change. Writing in the Journal of Wine Economics paper on climate change he says: "Climate change is the greatest threat for the wine business in general, and for wine growers in particular... almost all wine producers in the world have noticed changes in the climate over the past decades.

"We are standing at a crossroad, and it is a crossroad about our future and the future of the next generations... Today, many of us act taking only this generation into account, but we should really start to act taking several generations into account. We need to act as individuals, as groups, as countries, but also as companies."



Richard is an award-winning business journalist. Former editor of Harpers Wine & Spirit he now runs his own website (The-Buyer.net), looking at trends and analysis of the premium On Trade. He also produces a fortnightly insights newsletter on the global wine industry called Grapevine for the London Wine Fair. You can follow him at @richardsiddle.

Rioja REDISCOVERED

by Chris Harag, Bibendum business development manager

You would be hard pressed to think of a wine region as popular and yet misunderstood as Rioja.

These red wines – known for their colour, drinkability and that distinct vanilla smoothness – have been on dinner tables for decades. Many a consumers' go-to wine from their supermarket or off license, they offer value, consistency, but dare I say predictability. Yet on a recent trip to Rioja it was clear that the winds of change are beginning to blow. Albeit softly.

Recent changes to labelling laws means that there is a renewed focus on explaining and expressing the three sub-regions: Rioja Baja, Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa. The former is more influenced by the southern Mediterranean, and hence significantly warmer. This is where Garnacha is king and it makes up a significant portion of plantings. In Alta and Alavesa the mountains play a larger role, and harvest lags behind Baja by up to a month in most vintages.

Bodegas Vivanco

Many of the larger wineries source fruit from Rioja Baja in order to gain colour and ripeness. Vivanco, based in Rioja Alta, is no different. What was interesting to note during a recent visit, was how some subtle changes to the winemaking process has had a marked impact on what's in the glass. The American oak has been toned down and French oak much more prevalent. Also, the assemblage in the Crianza has been tweaked to include a small portion of Mazuelo (commonly known as Carignan in France), giving a lovely freshness and peppery note. The result is a more elegant, refined and enjoyable wine.

There is also a focus on single-varietal wines. Vivanco are making a lovely Graciano with colour, plushness and a real line of core acidity not commonly found in Rioja.



Bodegas Bhilar

Travel the short journey over to Bodegas Bhilar in Rioja Alavesa, and most of these themes are amplified. Yet the operation is in stark contrast to that of Vivanco. David Sampedro Gil and wife Melanie Hickman recently completed their modest, fully self-sufficient winery. Solar powered and gravity fed, it really sums up everything they are about. The tiny 80,000 bottle annual production is all fermented with wild yeasts in concrete tanks and then aged in French oak. There is not an American oak barrel in sight!

Bhilar is Basque for Elvilar – the town in which David grew up and returned to after University. His wines are a village expression; something that's not very common in Rioja.

"People are a little bit lost about Rioja because it's a huge region," David explains. "Small wineries like us cannot compete with the larger wineries, so we focus on terroir-driven wines – I started to show specific things, like a single village or single vineyard."

What really stands out when you travel from Rioja Alta across to Alavesa is the visual change in the vineyards. Old bush vines abound and the soil takes on a distinctive white appearance. The limestone soils are key to the freshness and minerality found in the wines from Bhilar. So too is the age of the vines.

One of David's prized possessions is a half-hectare Tempranillo vineyard he calls Phincalali, which was planted in 1910 and passed down to him through his family. This vineyard produces a miniscule 900 bottles each year.

Yields are low across the entire range. A side effect of working sustainably in the vineyards. All of the 9.9ha estate-owned vineyards are farmed biodynamically, a philosophy that David believes in passionately. Yet in the beginning things were not easy.

"The challenge when you try to do something new for the area, is that you are the crazy man. When I stopped working with chemicals, people thought that all my vineyards would die. I was the worst viticulturist in the town because I had weeds in the vineyards. When I started to use horses in the vineyard, all 200 people in the town came down to have a look. Yet the people in the town that are 70 years old had seen it years before. It was how it used to be done, and it's the right way," David says.

These sustainable methods are slowly catching on. And while David believes that a lot of the larger wineries are making organic or biodynamic wines simply out of marketing necessity, there is a small band of younger vignerons who are true believers. "We were working this way before it was trendy, but thankfully there is a new group of 30 to 40 year old winemakers in the area who are also working like this," he says.

And you can tell the difference in the grapes. When I tasted them from the vine back in September they were juicy, concentrated and vibrant. “Like tasting a tomato you grow at home compared to one you buy from a supermarket,” David explains.

Most of the wines from Bhilar are a selection of individual plots, vinified together to express the individual site, regardless of grape variety. In fact some of the vineyards contain up to five different varieties. Yet one grape variety that David is keen to champion is Graciano (like Vivanco). Here in Rioja Alavesa the variety is extremely rare, as it is often tricky to achieve full ripeness. His Lagrimas de Graciano Rioja almost resembles Cabernet Franc and is miles away from what people would traditionally think of in Rioja. “It is an entry-level wine so people can understand Graciano in its pure state. No oak; no nothing,” he says.

David realises that his wines are not for everyone. When asked how he would describe his wines he explained it like this: “At a recent Decanter tasting a 60-year-old couple came to me and said they are not very familiar with Rioja. What would I recommend? I told them you are not in the right place. Here you will find something different, something unique. To find out about typical Rioja start with the big wineries. Then come to us for something different.”

Let’s hope this small but significant shift in ideology continues to gather pace.



Photo by Gilbert Bages

New from Rioja

Located in Rioja Alavesa, Baigorri recently joined our wine portfolio.

Neither modern nor classic Rioja, Baigorri crafts terroir-driven wines with a unique freshness and elegance. Founded in 2002 and owned by the Martinez Hernandez family, their 100ha of old vines are planted on calcareous clay soils at high altitudes.

The winery is one of the most characteristic buildings in Rioja Alavesa: designed by prestigious architect Jesus Aspiazua, it is impressive and elegant on the outside, while equally spectacular and functional on the inside. The modern, state-of-the-art facilities reach 30m underground, enabling winemaker Simon Arina to rely completely on gravity.

CHAMPAGNE DECONSTRUCTED

by Cergely Barsi Szabo, Bibendum fine wine sales



“So do you want to taste a real zero dosage?” Xavier Berdin, Champagne Palmer & Co. cellar master walked over to one of the pupitres and grabbed a bottle that spent the previous weeks in an upside down position with all the sediment gathering in its neck. It was a magnum to be precise. A magnum from Palmer’s 1996 vintage.

Xavier stepped to a candle-lit metal box, holding the bottle upside down, and with a quick movement he got rid of the crown cap, the sediment shooting out from the bottle into the metal box with a hissing sound. He used a slightly bent and very battered looking opener, with a wooden handle – he later explained that the little bend on the opener gives the perfect angle to save all the Champagne during disgorgement.

The drink was delicious, but in a sense, still raw. The zero sugar meant a completely lean body – ultra-dry, mineral and yeasty (in a good way), with zingy acidity and unbelievable freshness. Let’s not forget, we’re talking about a 22-year-old wine!



Visiting Champagne Palmer & Co.

By comparison, Xavier quickly opened a bottle of the same vintage, which has already been disgorged and re-corked, sitting on one of the shelves underground. A year or two with cork did magnificent work of polishing and smoothing the wine. It still had a tremendous amount of freshness, especially being 22 years old!

The Underground

By that time we've walked a few kilometres underground. We were in the cellars of Champagne Palmer, 20 metres under the city of Reims. Deep in the chalk. The cellars are a mysterious place. The air feels soft. The chalk that the long corridors and storage halls were carved into is extremely soft and it can hold a lot of water. I have had the chance to walk around in all sort of cellars before, carved in volcanic rock or granite, but the air in the Champagne ones felt almost soothing.

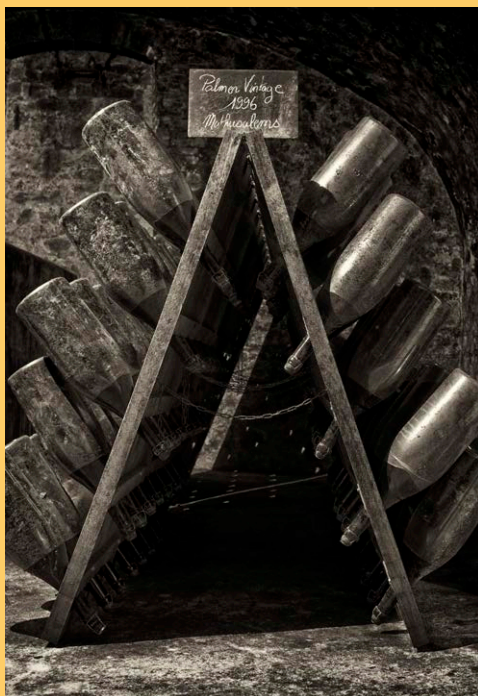
The rock is full of humidity and if you touch the walls they are cool, the porous chalk feeling like very solid clay. Thanks to this softness all the sounds are muffled underground. These cellars don't echo like other holes carved in rock. But they are full of history. Aside from all the decades and decades of wine stored all around, a lot of people left their mark on these walls – literally. The rock is soft, so you could carve shapes into it with your fingernails or pocket knife. Some of these markings are patriotic, some obscene, while some are just names and dates. These walls contain about 8km of graffiti spanning the last 200 years of France.

All in good time

Palmer seems to consider 'time' among the factors that make a good Champagne. Throughout the long walk underground we saw 20-30 year old Nebuchadnezzars and Methusalems still laying on the lees. All the Blanc de Blancs Magnums get at least 10 years of ageing. Palmer is very keen on large formats:

they like to refer to regular 75cl Champagne bottles as "half magnums". They never transfer, therefore the larger bottles are used to contain the second fermentation... with all the logistical challenges it comes with.

The previous night we sampled the whole range and learned that it takes exactly a magnum of Palmer Blanc de Blancs for five people to get to Paris from St Pancras. The best way to measure distance and time, is a magnum of Champagne.



Back to basics

Coming back to level ground, we carried on exploring. It's a rare occasion to be presented with a flight without bubbles in Reims, but that's what we were treated with. Tasting Vin Clair is one of the most exciting things when it comes to sampling any wine – this is the raw material, the wine before the blending, the base of Champagne. When you taste Vin Clair you can directly taste the different terroirs that complement each other in the final product.

Xavier poured us Trepail Chardonnay from the 2017 vintage: it is lively with a massive amount of lemon, lime and a kick of minerality. The Cote de Sezanne Chardonnay was richer, more tropical, with generally more warmth to it. It was clear that this is the wine giving the body and the balance, while the Trepail works more on the nose and with the structure.

"We want the discreet aromas," said Xavier, "when making the base wine for Champagne. Different rules apply than just harvesting regular grapes for a still wine. And again, time is important – the blends are not made of a single vintage; consistency always comes from multiple vintages."

At Palmer they are using a unique method to add more 'time' to the wine: they use a solera system. The solera Chardonnay is in its 25th vintage. It is very deep and complex, but super fresh at the same time. Lots of creaminess and a touch of honey works really well with the fresh citrus and apple. The red wine solera for the rosé blends have been running for 40 years. On the nose it is pure forest berries, and on the

palate a perfumy cherry bomb. The tannins are soft and gentle – it could easily be mistaken for something from the proximity of Gevrey-Chambertin.

"It is not magic, just hard work and time," concludes Xavier. With all the hand harvesting, winemaking, blending, riddling and decades in the chalk cellars, he is right.



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