

Written by

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Fashionable Valdeorras

TASTING ARTICLES SPAIN GALICIA GODELLO

Galicia's other white wine district Valdeorras is experiencing a not-totally-successful land grab from outsiders. The village of O Bolo is seen here.

In the 1990s Rías Baixas was all the rage as Albariño became the white wine of choice for trend-conscious fans of Spanish wine. Then Albariño became a bit ho-hum and the precision of Verdejo and Sauvignon Blanc grapes from Rueda took over the spotlight. Now, it seems, it is the turn of Valdeorras. Once known for its mines, Valdeorras is increasingly known for its wines, particularly those made from its signature grape Godello – although the quality of its Mencía-based reds is steadily increasing. These two grape varieties are now sufficiently fashionable to be found in inexpensive varietal form in British supermarkets, grown any old where.

The charm and majesty of Godello from Valdeorras is nothing new for visitors to JancisRobinson.com. The first mention of the variety here was in 2007, more or less when I chose Rafael Palacios' first vintage of As Sortes as one of a handful of wines to show in London to demonstrate the Spanish wine revolution that was already well underway. If you put Godello into our super-fast new Articles search box, you will find 75 results.

But Godello is an insider's secret no longer. Rafael, youngest brother of Álvaro of Priorat (L'Ermita etc – see [our guide to the Palacios family](#)), was the first outsider to arrive, in 2004. Telmo Rodriguez followed. But much more recently they have been joined by CVNE of Rioja, whose debut releases under the Virgen del Galir label are reviewed below, and Pago de los Capellanes of Ribera del Duero, whose Valdeorras bodega O Luar do Sil was established in 2015. The result of all this attention (and of a severely frosted harvest in 2017) has been a

doubling in price of Godello grapes, and heavy courting of local vineyard owners. But, this being Galicia, very few locals are prepared to sell.

According to Borja Prada, in charge of the long-standing local wine producer **Valdesil**, such is Galician love of the land that only those without sons are prepared to contemplate selling even a handkerchief-sized plot – even if the owners are living in South America or Switzerland, as is quite likely. ‘They don’t want to sell plots, just exchange them, rather like Burgundy’, he told me on a recent visit to London. ‘Of 48 Valdeorras wineries, only four are owned by people not from the area.’

Prada’s father came back to his native region from Rioja in 1982 with the intention of resurrecting Valdeorras. It was his famous great-grandfather who, in the 1970s, urged on by the co-operative in the village of O Barco, planted the first single-varietal vineyard in north-west Spain and made the first varietal wine, and he had happened on Godello almost by chance. Horacio Fernández Presa, co-founder of local wine producer Godeval, is now credited with being the ‘father of Godello’, having rescued it from near-extinction. It comprised just 0.05% of all vines planted in the 1970s. Godeval therefore feel rather proprietorial about the variety.

Prada, who commented about his Pezas de Portela bottling, ‘there are more cows than people in Portela’, claims that so popular has Godello become that some nurseries are selling less rare Verdejo plants as Godello. He points out that Godello’s parents are Traminer and Castellana Blanca, but reckons there must be some red wine vine genes in there because the canes are reddish brown.

Godello is apparently very sensitive to rot, disease and the Solano wind from North Africa which can shrivel the grapes in an hour. (I raised the subject of the sodden climate in Galicia, only to be told that Cadiz in Andalucía can also see up to 900 mm/35 in of rain a year.) Prada claims it is partly climate change (drier autumns are producing much riper grapes even in Galicia, apparently), and partly the diversity of soil types, that is luring outsiders to Valdeorras.

Rafa Palacios (above) may not be Galician (he was brought up on the family winery in Rioja Oriental) but he could not be more entwined with the fortunes of the Valdeorras DO. It was the outstanding quality of his wines – pioneering the current approach of focusing on terroir rather than on the grape – that

drew the attention of the outside world to Valdeorras, where he is now the biggest wine producer.

I met up with him in May in Madrid, where he organised for me an amazing vertical tasting of the wines described below. He explained that he doesn't have many seriously old bottles in his cellar because, in the beginning, he was so delighted by orders from the likes of elBulli and Can Roca, Spain's famous restaurants, that he didn't like to refuse them. He, incidentally, likes to drink wines from the Jura, Burgundy (though is often disappointed), Saumur and Riesling, especially Keller's. Red wines were not mentioned.

His US importer is Eric Solomon of European Cellars while Berry Bros & Rudd import his wines into the UK and Pearl of Burgundy of Hong Kong look after his interests in Asia. He also has importers in Belgium, Germany, Ireland and Japan. When he started out, exports accounted for about 40% of sales. They are currently 50% but he is aiming for 60%.

He is obviously and intensely bound up in his search for quality, always trying to do better – as witness the immaculately terraced O Soro vineyard above, and the launch of Sorte Antiga. There was little small talk, but a lot of talk about the detail of the wines, as you will see below. He was clearly still reeling from the effects of the frosts of 2017, which apparently had a knock-on effect on yields in 2018, which, as elsewhere, was plagued by downy mildew. He did profess himself happy (so far) with 2019, and contrasted the relative precocity of wines from the small harvest of 2017 with the 2016s.

'Today the estate is 15 years old but we still need more experience to find the real identity of each vineyard. In 2010 to 2012 I wasn't in a clear way, but I'm glad to see that the international consumer is appreciating the wines from the last five or six years more and more. And among Spanish consumers, white wine appreciation is evolving.'

It was because of the extreme heat of September 2006, causing sunburn in some grapes, that he's deliberately looking for the coolest places now, and protecting the grapes deliberately with the canopy.

He picks at the end of September and the beginning of October but the As Sortes vines are so high that in the best years the grapes are not picked until the beginning of November. He likes to pick when the grapes are still green but the

pips are ripe and potential alcohol levels are high. Godello is very good at retaining acidity, with a high proportion of tartaric. He never does malo. 'It would be complicated to do it because the pH is always so low, always below 3 with a typical total acidity of 7.5 g/l.' (Champagne pH is generally around 2.85.) 'We used to have just acid and saltiness. But now we have a third ingredient, spine and texture', he added.

I was particularly happy to hear that a group of Chinese wine lovers had made the pilgrimage to Valdeorras on the basis of one of his wines I had presented at a tasting of some of my favourite Spanish wines in Shanghai last February. He admits they have too many visitors, however, even though for the last year he has been assisted by Pablo Blanco, a Galician winemaker with experience at Roulot in Burgundy, in New Zealand and elsewhere in Spain.

Knowing how relatively isolated Valdeorras is, I asked whether he was ever lonely. 'Not really, even though I'm not really in Valdeorras. Most other producers are at around 300–400 m (985–1,310 ft) altitude whereas we're around 700. But I have no time to feel isolated. I have very good friends but they are not usually wine producers. My family is important of course. But I'm really happier exporting than working on the Spanish market. Too many Spanish writers are obsessed by French wines.'

I suggested that he ought to do a blind tasting of his wines with other remarkable whites. (I'd like him to include some Pulignys, with which I see parallels...) When I asked him which Spanish whites he admired, he mentioned the more recent vintages of Ossian most readily.

'Galicia generally for whites of course, especially Ribeiro and Rías Baixas. Finally people understand that it's not just about volume. Albariño and Treixadura are as impressive as Riesling but the wines can be rather short. And of course the whites of the Canary Islands. Their problem is the early vegetative cycle; they often harvest in August.'

I asked about Godello in Portugal, where the variety is known as Gouveio. 'Some Bairrada examples can be good', he allowed. Praise indeed.

Virgen del Galir

Valdesil

Virgen del Galir

This is the new bodega owned by CVNE of Rioja, named after the Virgin who overlooks the village of Éntoma where they are based. Of the three very distinct quality levels, the simplest Maruxa entry-level bottlings are particularly stylishly labelled. The top bottlings, white and red, described below, are not yet finished.

Virgen del Galir, Maruxa Godello 2018 Valdeorras 16

Maruxa is the Galician equivalent of Maria, the name of the founder of the winery's mother – and, I suppose, also a nod to the Virgen that overlooks the village of Éntoma. A blend of ripe Godello grapes from this new CVNE-owned company's vineyards in Éntoma, Regueirón and O Serro. Mainly slate.

Wine seems pretty open and accessible already without quite the nerve of a top Valdeorras Godello but it's certainly broad and lively.

QGV but not for long keeping. 14%

Drink 2019 – 2020

£13 RRP

Virgen del Galir, Pagos del Galir Godello 2018 Valdeorras 16.5

A selection of grapes from mainly slate slopes around Éntoma, Regueirón and O Serro. Aged for four months on lees.

Some light creaminess of texture and more freshness and concentration than its stablemate Maruxa Blanca. Very clean and precise even if without the absolute depth and obvious ageing potential of Palacios' bottlings. But this is the debut vintage (a good one) of CVNE's new Valdeorras enterprise so I'm sure future vintages will be even better. I'd say it's worth paying the premium for this wine with more 'cut' and no suggestion of fermentation aromas. 13.5%

Drink 2019 – 2022

£16 RRP

Aged 50% in concrete, 50% in oak. Clay-loam and slate vineyards around Éntoma.

Light struck-match character on the nose and definite texture on the palate – though certainly no overt oak character. Real lift to this wine with fine acidity and some elegance. Citrus notes. A beginning, middle and end to a wine that shows some potential for ageing. Definitely more to than the Pagos de Galir bottling. 13.5%

Drink 2019 – 2023

£25RRP

Virgen del Galir, Maruxa Mencía 2018 Valdeorras

16

Grapes from terraced vineyards around Éntoma, Valderrosal and Valdemioto on clay and decomposed schist. Cold soak and native yeast.

Wonderfully perfumed and round. So easy to like! Hardly any tannin but very pure varietal flavours. Lap this up young. Pretty convincingly confident, fruity finish. Excellent balance. Far from a complex, ageworthy wine but one that eloquently demonstrates that Valdeorras does not have to be white. **GV** but very straightforward. 14%

Drink 2019 – 2021

£13 RRP

Virgen del Galir, Pagos del Galir Mencía 2018 Valdeorras

16

A selection from CVNE's vineyards on mainly slate soils around Éntoma, Soutiño Novo and Valemioto. 48-hour cold soak and native yeast before eight months in French and American oak.

Dark healthy crimson. Very direct, winning purple-fruit aromas with only the additional structure and length to distinguish it from the Maruxa red. Not quite as fine as its white Godello stablemate but a well-made wine. 13.5%

Drink 2019 – 2023

£16 RRP

From centenarian vines on granite terraces in Las Ermitas on the southern banks of the Bibei River.

Not crimson but a deep cherry red. Whole bunch with some oak after native ferment. Peppery and juicy with, still, a little hint of fermentation aromas and a hint of oak. Serve this cool. And wait a little while for it to resolve. At the moment it's a little unformed but it should provide juicy, friendly drinking eventually, even if not the most 'serious' red. Certainly much more serious than most Valdeorras reds. 13.5%

Drink 2020 – 2024

£25 RRP

Valdesil

The 1990 vintage was the first to be aged on lees (*sobre lías*). Valdesil's plain white, typography-driven labels look almost spookily similar to those of Rafael Palacios nowadays.

Valdesil, Sobre Lías Godello 2018 Valdeorras

16

On relatively young slate. It was here that the Romans established a big gold mine, then Franco supplied Wolframite to the Germans in World War 2 (for armament production). Copper and 80% of the world's slate comes from Valdeorras. Six months on lees. Unoaked. Cool year.

Pretty simple but clear and crisp. Very slightly simple but fresh.

Drink 2019 – 2022

Valdesil, Sobre Lías Godello 2010 Valdeorras

16.5

Six months on lees. Unoaked.

Deeper gold than the 2018. Just on the way to being old but still with some finesse. Broad and green flavoured. Fine but fully mature. Some depth and length.

Drink 2014 – 2020

Valdesil, Pezas da Portela Godello 2016 Valdeorras

17

Selected from 11 different mini-parcels/pezas (in Galician pezas means 'pagos' or 'plots'). Picked in the last week of September (compared with 2017's last week of August). 24 hours' skin contact, manual press. Barrel fermentation, six months on lees and 12 months in tank. Rain at first in summer.

Really lively. Lovely tension and very complete.

Drink 2018 – 2023

Valdesil, Pezas da Portela Godello 2008 Valdeorras

16

2008 was the coldest year in the 21st century.

Bit sweet and dull. I miss the life of the 2016! But it's certainly not dead.

Drink 2010 – 2015

Valdesil, O Chao Godello 2016 Valdeorras

15.5 +

Single peza (plot). Sand on granite, planted in 1941. One new 500-litre barrel.

Full and broad. Sweet and a bit loose. Soft, and needs time. Bit dull.

Drink 2021 – 2026

Valdesil, O Chao Godello 2012 Valdeorras

17

Single plot, sand on granite. Vines planted 1941. Valdesil had a particularly good team when this was made. Now labour is a big problem. No sulphur for this particular vintage (very clean winery needed) which makes the wine very distinctive.

Creamy and a little international, but tense and quite mineral. Racy and mineral. Exciting and nervy.

Drink 2015 – 2021

Valdesil, O Chao Godello 2011 Valdeorras

16

Chalky nose. Bit neutral and flat, but long.

Drink 2015 – 2020

Valdesil, Pedrouzos Godello 2015 Valdeorras

17

Single peza/plot, vines over 130 years old planted in 1885 on schist (with cover crops). Bottled only in magnums. Picked early September.

Big and tangy and lively. Saline and fresh. So fresh! Admirable and distinctive tension.

Drink 2018 – 2027

Valdesil, Pedrouzos Godello 2007 Valdeorras

16

130-year-old vines, bottled only in magnum.

Deep amber. Broad and sweet.

Drink 2011 – 2018

Rafael Palacios

Rafa used to make a wine called Bolo (sometimes Louro de Bolo, confusingly) but it is no longer made 'because 60% of the fruit was bought in and that's not interesting for me'.

Louro

Louro is Palacios' most basic wine but is still absolutely glorious and can age pretty well. It costs only about €15–16 in Spanish retail. The current vintage in the UK, where importers are Berry Bros, is the frost-struck 2017, which is drinking well already and can be found for £18.95 at Vin Cognito. I suspect that if Palacios' more ambitious bottlings didn't exist, we'd be falling over ourselves with superlatives for this wine.

Based on 18 different parcels of vines, particularly around O Bolo, typically at an elevation of 600 m (1,970 ft) and mainly on granite with some clay. Average age of the vines is about 25 years. The wine is fermented in large 35-hl foudres and aged there for four months on fine lees. About 140,000 bottles are made and occasionally as many as 180,000 so it shouldn't be too difficult to find.

Rafael Palacios, Louro Godello 2018 Valdeorras

16.5 +

Four months in foudres. Launched April 2019.

Almost water white. Clean, fruity with some fermentation aromas still but a wonderful undertow of structure and finesse. Great attack.

Coincidentally this was the white wine served later that day at the *Financial Times* 'Business of Luxury Summit' gala dinner at the Madrid Casino. 14%

Drink 2020 – 2026

Rafael Palacios, Louro Godello 2017 Valdeorras

17

They lost 40% of the potential Louro crop to frost (as well as 60% of the potential As Sortes crop).

Very concentrated nose and this smells more than a year older than the 2018. Some impression of sweetness – certainly ripeness. Impressively long. 14%

Drink 2019 – 2024

Rafael Palacios, Louro Godello 2016 Valdeorras

17.5

More savoury than the 2017 on the nose. Very refined and cool and beautifully balanced. Subtle. Long slow maturation and great phenolic maturation. Subtle, juicy and lightly salty with some granite influence. Great food wine! Nervy. 13.5%

Drink 2018 – 2025

Rafael Palacios, Louro Godello 2015 Valdeorras

17 -

Some of the riper aromas as seen in the 2017. Quite rich and broad on the palate. A tiny bit of alcohol on the end. A good easy introduction to the style and still very fresh. Still a little chewy so serve with food.

Big and bold. 14%

Drink 2018 – 2023

Rafael Palacios, Louro Godello 2014 Valdeorras

17

Green gold. Very expressive nose and opulent, broad, fruit-dominated palate. This is surely at its peak. Rafa loves this. Proof there is no hurry to drink even this level of wine from this producer – although can you keep your hands off it for long enough? Impressively persistent. According to Wine-Searcher, you can find this in Valencia for less than €15. **VGV** 13.5%

Drink 2016 – 2022

As Sortes

'Louro is a very good introduction but As Sortes has the real character of the Valle del Bibei. It's not a varietal but a terroir wine', Rafa told me. The big difference is altitude, and it's all granite – no clay – here. The six parcels just west of O Bolo on which As Sortes is based are all above 680 m (2,230 ft) and some are as high as 740 m. The vines were already 28 and 35 years old in 2004 when he started. The wine is made in 500-litre one- and two-year-old barrels and rests on fine lees for seven to eight months.

As Sortes is €34 in Spanish retail. So slow to unfurl is this wine that Rafa decanted the wines tasted below several hours before my tasting.

About 20,000 bottles and occasionally 35,000 are produced.

Rafael Palacios, As Sortes 2017 Valdeorras

18 +

The 2018 of this wine is still in barrel.

Dense and very concentrated indeed. So long and captivating! Already very appealing – unusually so for such a youthful As Sortes. Creamy.

14%

Drink 2019 – 2028

Rafael Palacios, As Sortes 2016 Valdeorras

18

Very pale gold straw. Broad and with a green note and fantastic structure and balance. Extremely juicy. Grip on the end. Very long.

Precision and finesse. 14%

Drink 2019 – 2029

Rafael Palacios, As Sortes 2015 Valdeorras

17.5

Ripe year. Almost spicy, Grüner Veltliner-like nose but with much more grip on the palate. (I subsequently discovered that Rafa sees parallels between Godello and Grüner Veltliner.) Slight bitterness on the end. Strong green thread through the palate after a particularly ripe nose. 14%

Drink 2018 – 2027

Rafael Palacios, As Sortes 2014 Valdeorras

17.5

Broad – almost fat. I find this less acid but certainly more saline than the other vintages but then at the end it's immensely powerful. A burgundian peacock's tail on the finish. Lots of evolution on the rim like the Louro 2014. 13.5%

Drink 2017 – 2025

Rafael Palacios, As Sortes 2012 Valdeorras

17.5

Cold and dry year with very small grapes.

Very slight wet-wool nose. Then a suggestion of spearmint. Broad and fully mature. 13.5%

Drink 2015 – 2022

O Soro

O Soro is made only in suitable vintages and is his only single-vineyard wine. The vineyard is no higher than those for As Sortes but the granite is particularly pure and the resulting wines particularly saline. It's made in 100% new 500-litre French oak barrels so needs a bit of time in bottle.

Production is about 3,000 bottles, each of them selling for about €120 euros in Spain.

Rafael Palacios, Sorte O Soro Val do Bibei 2016 Valdeorras

18.5

Green and salty and very juicy. Very young. Great texture. Soars away.
This is surely his grand cru! 14%
Drink 2015 – 2022

Rafael Palacios, Sorte O Soro Val do Bibei 2015
Valdeorras

18 +

Really quite rich and yet with nerve and finesse but just the same structure as one of the Montrachet grands crus. Muscular. Very long. A floral note. 14%
Drink 2020 – 2030

Rafael Palacios, Sorte O Soro Val do Bibei 2014
Valdeorras

18.5

Very pure, directed, and different from and fresher than the other two 2014s. So pure! Some real minerality and bite. Just great! Massive energy. 14%
Drink 2018 – 2028

Rafael Palacios, Sorte O Soro Val do Bibei 2011
Valdeorras

18.5

Medium straw. Already a very complex nose and many layers. Some hazelnuts and yet great vibrancy. Long and surely at its peak. 14%
Drink 2015 – 2025

Rafael Palacios, Sorte O Soro Val do Bibei 2009
Valdeorras

17.5

900 bottles made. Never released.

Old chablis nose. Apparently this was picked as a Vincent Dauvissat-Camus 2009 in a blind tasting once! Bite and dry on the end and very distinctive. This has really evolved. Sweet start and dry finish. Vindication for Rafa. Less refreshing than some. 14%
Drink 2012 – 2022

Sorte Antiga

Rafael Palacios, Sorte Antiga 2016 Valdeorras

16.5 ++

New style. First vintage. 0.25 ha planted in 1920. Partly old bush vines (100 years old), the rest are trained. 600–800 bottles produced. Four-year-old barrels from As Sortes are used. Skins are so good that Rafa thinks it's sad to send them to the distillery so they were blended into As Sortes. Low sulphur.

His idea of a traditional wine. Very chewy and quite unyielding. Pale straw. Smells like a chenille mat. Very chewy and masses of acid. A baby but not extreme and well made. Serious wine – demanding.

13.5%

Drink 2022 – 2029

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