

When I received the itinerary for the Grupo Codorniu WSET Scholarship Trip, I confess that I had not appreciated the diversity of Codorniu's interests; in particular, in the production of still wine. I was already excited about visiting Codorniu's famous San Sadurn d'Anoia winery close to Barcelona and so the prospect of seeing Ribera del Duero, Rioja and Costers del Segre came as a welcome surprise.

Codorniu's Legaris winery in many respects reflects the evolution of wine production in Ribera del Duero. The increasing ability of man to overcome the DO's climatic challenges with science has led to huge inward investment. Legaris' huge investment in state of the art winemaking technology has been replicated elsewhere in the region by wealthy Spanish and international businessmen and explains the growth of bodegas from less than 25 in 1982, when the Denominacion de Origen (DO) was created, to more than 110 today.

At 93 hectares, Legaris is relatively small in the context of Codorniu's interests; however, despite its 'modest' size, the challenge of managing the vineyard should not be underestimated as there are fewer than 140 frost-free days per year with temperatures falling as low as -20 Centigrade. In addition to the risk of frost, Ribera del Duero is also prone to drought and hail. Fortunately, head winemaker Jorge Bombin has the advantage of an onsite weather station from which he can control state-of-the-art anti-freeze systems, Regulated Deficit Irrigation to apply water stress during the vine's growth cycle and satellite imaging systems in order to determine optimum ripeness for picking.

The commitment to science is maintained in the winery but is not slavish as the artistic input of Jorge and his team of winemakers is evident in the wines, each of which expresses individual character. The principal red variety Tinto del Pais, a clone of Tempranillo, is used exclusively to produce Legaris' Crianza and Reserva wines all of which I was fortunate enough to taste over a leisurely selection of tapas.

Legaris Reserva 2005 is an award-winning wine: deep brick red colour; packed with ripe strawberries and other red fruit; palate following the nose, spice and leather; good structure and length. It is easy to see why this wine would impress the IWSC judges. I preferred, however, the Reserva 2001 as the development of secondary aromas brought with it additional complexity and enjoyment. The wine's 15 months in French (20%) and American (80%) oak would explain the abundance of nutmeg, liquorice and tobacco nuances. At 14% ABV it did, however, leave me feeling somewhat sleepy for the long drive north to Rioja.

The change in architecture between Ribera del Duero and Rioja was as noticeable as the change in weather for as the bodegas morphed from glass and steel into distinguished golden sandstone the climate changed from the baking heat of day time extreme continental to the mild warmth of an Atlantic maritime evening.

Bodegas Bilbainas on first sight looked more like a 19th Century railway station than a winery. I later learned that this was intentional as like many other successful bodegas in Rioja its fortune had been built on the arrival of the railway in Haro; indeed, the winery even has its own railway siding albeit no longer connected to the adjacent station. Also intentional was the bodegas' immaculate condition as Grupo Codorniu has not only invested heavily in the vineyards and the winery but also in the historic building which can be seen on the labels of every bottle produced.

The range of wine is small considering the size of the vineyards. Bodegas Bilbainas' 278 hectares, mostly situated on the slopes behind the modern winery, make it the largest bodega in Rioja. In the absence of an available tractor, our driver braved the chalk and gravel of Rioja Alta in his Mercedes mini-van so that we might see the Tempranillo vines planted en vaso for ourselves and, therefore, build up an appetite for the tasting to follow.

Vina Pomal is, of course, one of Spain's most famous wines and the one on which Bodegas Bilbainas made its name. I am fortunate that my local independent wine merchant carries most of Codorniu's range as Vina Pomal Reserva is one of my favourite inexpensive wines. The 2005 had a deep ruby colour fading around the rim to brick red; red fruit and spice on the nose; similar palate with a hint of vanilla and coconut presumably from the American oak (14 months ageing); good acidity; and a long length. As with all wine tasting, there are always favourites just as there are always wines with an unfair advantage. La Vicalanda 2001 has the advantage of an optimum micro-climate and an excellent vintage: garnet core; intense nose fading from primary red fruit to secondary spices, leather and liquorice; rich palate; good structure; a long finish; and a deserving winner of a Silver Medal in the IWSC 2009.

The highlight of our visit was, however, a bottle of Bodegas Bilbainas Gran Reserva 1966 which we had with a delicious selection of tapas. The wine labelled as 'Clairette Fino' had a pale garnet colour; a Burgundian-like nose, reminiscent of home-made strawberry jam; delicious and complex palate; and a long length which seemed to stay with me long after we left for the short drive to Coster del Segre.

Julian Jeffs writes in his book “The Wines of Spain” that, ‘This DO cannot be summed up in a few words; it is too complex. Yet a great deal of it can be summed in one word: Raimat.’

Raimat’s ethos is the production of high quality wines at affordable prices with the majority of wines produced being under £10 RRP. The range includes Cabernet Sauvignon-Tempranillo rose and red wines, Chardonnay, single varietal Cabernet Sauvignon, Tempranillo, Syrah and the even the first Albarino produced in Spain outside the Rias Biaxa. The width of production is explained by Jeffs’ comments as at 2,245 hectares Raimat is the largest vineyard in Coster del Segre and, in addition, the largest family-owned single vineyard in Europe.

The original winery designed by Rubio Bellver, a pupil of Gaudi, has been retired in favour of a modern building built in 1988 by Domingo Triay. The impressive flat-topped pyramid structure includes rows of Cabernet Sauvignon vines on the roof and contains an ultra-modern winery. The tasting room is a mixture of old and new; the architecture being new and the library of wines being old. I had hoped for a ‘surprise wine’ as enjoyed at Bodegas Bilbanias; however, I had to be content with the current vintages. This did not require much sacrifice as the wines were, without exception, excellent.

From the eight or nine wines that I tasted, I particularly enjoyed Abadia Blanc de Blancs 2009, a blend of Chardonnay and Albarino: pale yellow core with greenish rim; tropical fruits and orange; crisp acidity; good structure; and a long length. The wine is an award winner and the sort of thing one might drink in the garden on a sunny day. I also enjoyed the Raimat Abadia Cabernet Sauvignon-Tempranillo 2007. I have not had this combination of grape varieties before, at least not knowingly, and was interested to do so with yet another delicious spread of tapas in the sunshine outside: vibrant red colour; rich black and red fruit on the nose; hints of dark chocolate; and a moderate length. In summary, good value for money and also good preparation for the short trip to Barcelona.

The following morning I visited Codorniu’s winery in Sant Sadurni d’Anoia. Manuel Raventos had first asked Gaudi to design the winery but decided instead on his rival Josep Puig i Cadafalch. The scale and complexity of the bodega is breathtaking. The cellars at 24 kilometres on five separate levels are the largest in the world and although our guide casually informed us that there were ‘only 45 million being stored at present, she went on to point out that they could accommodate more than 100 million if required.

The range of wines produced from Codorniu's 1,200 hectares of vines is large and includes the best selling and familiar Anna de Codorniu as well as the less familiar but interesting premium cava Jaume Codorniu. I was fortunate enough to taste the full suite on offer including a couple of experimental wines, the most impressive of which included 4% of oaked Chardonnay. I also enjoyed Reina Cristina: pale straw colour; persistent fine bubbles; fresh nose of Granny Smith apples and lemon skin; slightly nutty palate; and a long finish. I would struggle not to confuse it with good vintage Champagne if tasted blind. The tasting was followed by yet another tapas lunch, which was fitting as my trip ended as it began drinking fine wine with good food and generous hosts.