

# **Modern and Traditional Winemaking Practises in Northern Spain**

by

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Grupo Codorniu is one of the largest wine companies in Spain, owning wineries in 10 regions in Spain and beyond. Legaris is one of their more modern wineries, located in Ribera Del Duero, which is itself a fairly new DO, having been founded in 1982.

The DO regulations proscribe that wines from Ribera should contain at least 75% tempranillo, so this is by far the most planted variety at Legaris, with 93.5ha planted. Following the example set by Vega Sicilia, there are also 15ha of cabernet sauvignon, but as winemaker Jorge notes, this is not necessarily a useful variety here as they have failed to ripen in two of the last four years. Because Tempranillo ripens much earlier, it is this variety that has been used exclusively in all of the currently available vintages of their wines.

Being a relatively modern DO, the rules on viticultural method are more flexible which has allowed Legaris to experiment with modern, new-world methods. The vines here are planted on flat land, along wires to allow machine harvesting, and improved canopy management compared with the gobelet system found in more traditional regions of Spain. Also in action here is a Regulated Deficit Irrigation (RDI) system, where computer monitoring is used to ensure that vines are kept in a state of slight water stress at key moments in the growing cycle, but watered just enough to keep them healthy. There is also an on-site weather station to help predict when frost and mildew might become a problem, which avoids the overuse of pesticides, and tells the viticulturalist when the frost prevention system should be used.

In the winery the modern techniques are continued with large stainless steel tanks used for fermentation and storage. The use of oak ageing is very important, and the winemakers here experiment with barrels from more than 20 different coopers, as each producer will make a slightly different barrel which will affect the wine in a slightly different way. After maturing in the barrel, both the Crianza and the Reserva are bottled and matured for a further period in the temperature controlled warehouse area on site, before being released when ready to drink.

A different approach is taken at Bodegas Bilbainas, in Rioja, where progressive techniques are balanced by the long traditions of the winery and the Rioja DOCa. Rioja was traditionally a wine aged for a number of years in old American oak barrels, but this somewhat at odds with the modern preference for fruity wines. To bring Rioja more up to date with drinker's palates, the winery has introduced modern techniques such as leaf stripping, satellite mapping of the vineyard to monitor vine vigour, and pest control by use of pheromones. In the winery new American oak barrels are used, and they are experimenting with the use of French oak, improving colour extraction techniques and looking for improved Tempranillo clones. This modernisation programme has led to the style of their flagship Vina Pomal wine evolving to have a more overt fruit character to balance with the traditional high acidity and savoury vanilla notes of the wine. They have also introduced a Crianza version of the wine, which spends less time in oak, and is released younger to preserve the fruit character.

The logical conclusion of these developments is the release of their Vina Zaco label, a single vineyard wine designed to express the varietal character of Tempranillo. Unlike traditional Rioja, this wine does not have an age classification such as Crianza or Reserva, but is aged in oak just long enough to compliment the tempranillo. Also unusually, the wine is aged in a mix of American and

French oak barrels, and the fermentation takes place at a lower temperature than usual (24°C rather than the more normal 28-30°C), resulting in greater preservation of the varietal character. There is also less tannin extraction, which is important as this wine is designed for drinking younger than their Reserva and Gran Reserva wines, and so does not have as much opportunity for the tannins to soften with age.

The innovations being used at Legaris and Bodegas Bilbaina were actually pretty much all pioneered by their sister winery Raimat, and satellite imaging, weather stations and using pheromones to control pests were all developed here. Located in Costers De Segre DO, Raimat was initially founded to provide grapes for Cava production at Codorniu, but due to the very flexible rules allowed by this very young DO, it has proved to be a good place to try out new techniques. A very dry continental climate means that unlike many wine regions in the EU, irrigation is allowed, so the vines can be managed using partial root drying techniques. It is also striking how Raimat looks more like a new world vineyard than a Spanish one. All the vines are grown on widely spaced rows, trained along wires (as opposed to the traditional gobelet method of pruning), and on relatively flat ground, which allows for machine harvesting. Raimat is also This is viticulture on a large scale, with the 2245 hectares of vines that Raimat own stretching to the horizon. A number of Spanish and International varieties are grown, and are sold in modern, varietally labelled bottles.

The contrast with Raimat could not be greater at Scala Dei. While the vineyards at Raimat are planted on wide open plains, in Priorat they nestle on terraces in between the steep slate slopes of the Tarragona province. Where as Raimat had 2245 hectares of vines, Scala Dei has just 90 hectares, and due to the terrain, all the grapes are harvested by hand. Only four varieties are grown, the traditional Garnacha and Carinena and the more modern arrivals of Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon, and these are all used in various proportions in just three wines. The winery has had modern stainless steel fermenting vats, but these are used exclusively for the youthful, Scala Dei Negra, where it is important to preserve the fresh fruit character. This wine is bottled unoaked. The more serious premium Crianza and Cartoixa wines are fermented in the older concrete vats, as these are thicker and thus more insulated, and help provide a steady temperature for fermentation, before being matured in American and French oak barrels, some of which are old, and some new, to increase the complexity of the wines.

If there is one winery in Spain that embodies both the traditional and the modern aspects of winemaking, then Codorniu would probably be it. Owned by the same family since being founded in 1551, Codorniu has been instrumental in the development of Cava. The first recorded Spanish company to make a traditional method sparkling wine, Codorniu have also exercised their considerable influence to develop the DO Cava rules so as to allow international grape varieties such as Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in the blend. They pioneered the growing of Cava grapes in Costers Del Segre at what is now Raimat. They were the first in Spain to produce a 100% Pinot Noir sparkling rose, and have recently released a new wine as the first white cava to be made predominantly from Pinot Noir, in a “Blanc De Noirs” style. After 9-18 months of lees aging (depending upon the cuvee). Gyropalates are used to disgorge the wines, which takes about 24hrs, rather than a number of weeks were it to be done by hand.