

ROBERSON WINE PRESENTS
THE WINES OF
FINCA
ALLENDE
WITH MIGUEL-ANGEL DE GREGORIO

Thursday 13th May 2010

Finca Allende

As one of the world's most well established wine regions, Rioja is not short on tradition. The archetype of dusty, leathery red wine aged to death in American oak barrels is still common today, but for those who are passionate about the region and its wines, there is far more to it than dried out Gran Reservas in wire covered bottles. Step forward Miguel-Angel de Gregorio of Finca Allende (not to mention Benjamin Romeo and Miguel Merino among others). His name is at the forefront of 'new wave' Rioja, winemakers that are intent on changing the perception of their region by going back to the vineyard to produce wines of terroir, complexity and profundity. The tag is not one that Miguel is fond of, as he believes that his wines are far more representative of what Rioja should be than the mediocre mass-market wines of the mid-late 20th century. The drift away from terroir driven wines with a sense of place, towards those that were marked by superficial fruit and excessive oaky flavours is something that Miguel witnessed at close quarters. His father was vineyard manager at Marques de Murrieta for 40 years, affording Miguel the opportunity to taste every vintage of Murrieta back to the 1880s and learn all there is to know about the traditional concept of how to make Rioja. Although the quality of wine at Murrieta has always been high, the region at large was losing its way and after Miguel graduated from Madrid University with a Masters degree in Oenology, he set about trying to change things.

His first winemaking job was at Bodegas Bretón, where Miguel pioneered the idea of single-vineyard, terroir driven Rioja with wines like 'Dominio de Conde'. This ground breaking model was the idea behind Finca Allende, a project that began when Miguel started buying vineyard plots with his sister in 1986 and has culminated in wines like Calvario - a single vineyard cuvée that demonstrates what can be achieved by those in pursuit of perfection. Miguel feels that for a wine to be truly great it must have come from a special site and all the technology in the world can't change the fact that "great wine is made in the vineyard" – as long as it's the right vineyard. Of course, this idea is nothing new - low yields, dedicated viticulture with minimal use of chemicals, high density planting, hand harvesting and rigorous sorting have been part of the repertoire at top European wineries for a long time. However, the classic model in Rioja has been for the large producers (Murrieta, Faustino, Riscal etc) to buy in fruit from disparate growers across the region, making it difficult to control every aspect of the process and masking the qualities of specific vineyard sites. At Allende, all the fruit is either from the estate or a small network of growers that work very closely with Miguel to ensure the quality and integrity of their fruit.

While Miguel has made terroir the cornerstone of Allende's philosophy, he is also an innovator in the winery and became one of the first producers in the region to focus exclusively on French oak for the maturation of his wines. He feels that the quest for depth, complexity, minerality and elegance is best served by the more subtle influences imparted by barrels from the renowned Burgundian cooperage Francois Freres. It appears that this quest is well on the way to being fulfilled, with critical acclaim raining in from all sides for the entire Finca Allende portfolio. Jancis Robinson described the Allende Blanco as *"The finest white Rioja I have ever tasted"*, while the Rioja Tinto and single vineyard wines have been given massive scores by the Wine Spectator and Robert Parker's Wine Advocate (98 points for Aurus '05).

"What has been referred to as classic Rioja, I prefer to call common Rioja."

The region

Rioja is a region divided into three distinct areas - Rioja Baja, Alavesa and Alta. Alta is (as the name would suggest) the highest of the three and is home to many of Rioja's most exciting producers, including Finca Allende. They are based in Briones, a small town that is getting a big reputation for the quality of the old Tempranillo and Graciano vines in the locality. Miguel knew all about the potential around Briones from his time at Bodegas Bretón and when the time came for him to begin accumulating parcels it was there that he focused his attention.

The climate in Rioja Alta is cooler than other parts of the region. Having the Atlantic ocean only 37 miles away provides a cooling wind that keeps rot at bay, making regular treatments in the vineyard unnecessary. Soils tend to be rich in iron, limestone and clay, but it is a diverse area that throws up a number of geological combinations. The team at Finca Allende have been analysing these differences in detail since 1998 and they have now identified 92 distinct parcels that they work with, a process that brought the qualities of vineyards like Calvario to their attention.

The prevalence of old vines around Briones has also thrown up an interesting legal issue as much of the prime vineyard land is planted to a very high density, which violates the modern DOC legislation. Higher density planting actually leads to naturally lower yielding vines and higher quality fruit, so the more recent plantings by the team at Allende have followed this model. As the wines operate outside of the regular Rioja categories (Crianza, Reserva etc), Miguel doesn't appear to be worried about towing the authority's line!

Allende Blanco & Tinto

The 'house' Riojas of Finca Allende are anything but entry-level wines. They are the foundation on which the success of the estate is built and they have justifiably forged a reputation as shining examples of what can be achieved with great terroir and a commitment to quality.

Allende Blanco is a blend of Viura and Malvasia - Miguel elects to bypass the international varietals that have been allowed into the blend in recent years. Initially the wine is lightly pressed and then fermented in new Allier French oak barrels, undergoing the process of batonnage for 6 months. Following this the wine is aged for 16 months in barrel and the result is a wine of immense depth and complexity of which only 1500 cases are produced. Tonight we will taste the 2007, which was a tricky vintage in Rioja but has proved to be a real success for Miguel and the team at Finca Allende. Allende Tinto is classified as a Rioja 'Joven' (the category that precedes Crianza in the hierarchy), despite the fact that the 100% Tempranillo is aged for over a year in French oak. The fruit is hand picked and the wine bottled unfiltered, resulting in a concentrated, mineral laden Rioja. Tonight we will taste the superb 2004, a vintage that is one of the very best in living memory (well, my living memory at least).

Finally in this flight, we will taste a wine from Miguel's other estate in La Mancha, a region that his family were based in for hundreds of years before his father moved to Rioja. The 46ha estate was purchased by Miguel in 1986 and the continental climate (very hot summers, cold winters) gives fruit of wonderful ripeness and concentration. Coronado is a blend of Tempranillo (30%), Cabernet Sauvignon (30%), Syrah (20%), Merlot (10%) and Petit Verdot (10%) and we will taste the 2004.

		Available	Retail price	Tasting special bottle price
1: 2007 Rioja Blanco 14% ABV	**we only have the 2006 vintage available**	27	£ 19.95	£17.96
1: 2007 Rioja Tinto 13.5% ABV		30	£ 18.95	£17.06
2: 2004 Coronado; La Mancha 14% ABV		(Only available by the case of 12)		Tasting special bottle price £16.45

Calvario

The Calvario vineyard sites on a hillside just outside Briones and the single-vineyard cuvée that is made from the best Tempranillo, Garnacha and Graciano that the 1.5ha site produces from vines planted in 1945. The exact recipe changes according to the vintage, but the wine is harvested at miniscule yields, fully destemmed and aged in Allier French oak barrels for around 16 months. Final production is minute, 600-700 cases in most vintages.

Tonight we will taste Calvario from four different vintages. 2001 was a wonderful year across Spain but particularly excellent in Rioja where the Tempranillo fruit performed very well. Many producers predict that '01 will go on to be one of the all time great vintages and Robert Parker called the '01 Calvario a 'full throttle' wine that will age effortlessly for 15 years.

2002 was a very different affair and a tricky year that required dedication in the vineyard to avoid disaster. On that basis Calvario was a resounding success and one of the wines of the vintage.

2004 rivals '01 as the best vintage of the decade and a number of wonderful wines were produced including what is, according to the Wine Advocate, one of the best Calvarios to date. 2005 was similarly good for Allende, although the late rains meant the general feeling was not quite as positive as its predecessor.

4: 2005 Calvario 14% ABV	(Only available by the case of 6)	Tasting special bottle price £67.95
5: 2004 Calvario 14% ABV	(Only available by the case of 6)	Tasting special bottle price £59.95
6: 2002 Calvario 14% ABV	(Only available by the case of 6)	Tasting special bottle price £52.95
7: 2001 Calvario 14% ABV		Tasting special bottle price n/a

FLIGHT THREE

Aurus

Of the fruit that is destined for the Rioja Tinto, the very best from the oldest vines is held back and made into Aurus. The blend of (usually) 85% Tempranillo and 15% Graciano comes from estate vineyards and is completely destemmed, macerated for a prolonged period, spends 24 months in new Troncais oak before being bottled without filtration. Yields and therefore production volumes vary each year, but typically Finca Allende will produce around 500 cases of a wine that is well established as one of Spain's very best.

Tonight we will taste Aurus from four vintages. 1999 was a very good year in Rioja, but yields were savaged by early frosts that damaged the crop. Late rains derailed what was otherwise an excellent summer and many producers were left wondering what could've been. Aurus was a relative success, if perhaps a little lighter than subsequent years.

2000 was a very hot year and although the wines had great concentration of fruit, many lacked the elegance and balance that the best vintages bring.

The excellent 2004 and very good 2005 vintages were a success for Finca Allende across the board, but in particular for Aurus, which received a massive 98 points from the Wine Advocate for the '05.

8: 2005 Calvario 14% ABV	(Only available by the case of 6)	Tasting special bottle price £107.00
9: 2004 Calvario 14% ABV	(Only available by the case of 6)	Tasting special bottle price £96.95
10: 2002 Calvario 14% ABV		Tasting special bottle price n/a
11: 2001 Calvario 14% ABV		Tasting special bottle price n/a