



VOLCANIC VITI- VINI- CULTORES

In the company of new-wave winemaker Carmelo Peña, **Darren Smith** tours the old vines, indigenous varieties, and exquisitely individualistic wines of the Canary Islands

It's the middle of August, and the perennially busy Carmelo Peña has managed to find some time for me during a brief hiatus from his island-hopping 2019 harvest. The 33-year-old chemist-turned-winemaker has just flown back home to Gran Canaria from Lanzarote, where he's been processing Malvasía Volcanica grapes for Puro Rofe, his joint venture with Canaries-based distributor Rayco Fernández.

Given how much our courses have run parallel over the past couple of years, I'm amazed that it's taken so long for us to meet. In 2018, I spent several weeks working at Dirk Niepoort's Quinta de Nápoles in the Douro Valley. Carmelo worked at Nápoles for two years and was visiting just a week before I arrived. Last year, we were both working the harvest in southern Chile—Carmelo was in Itata, while I was in Bío-Bío. At one point, we even stayed in the same hostel, missing each other by mere days.

It's taken until the Canary Islands harvest of 2019—Carmelo zipping between Gran Canaria and Lanzarote, me working in La Palma with Victoria Torres—for us to meet at last. And I'm so glad we have. For some time now, I've been intrigued to find out what this graduate of the Niepoort school of “infusion, not extraction” has been up to on this sun-blessed archipelago. (He has also worked with another favorite winemaker of mine, Raül Perez in Bierzo.) What I quickly discover during my brief trip to Gran Canaria is that Carmelo is not just a highly accomplished winemaker; he's also a driving force within a small group of dedicated Canarian producers who—following the likes of Suertes del Marqués, Envínate, Viki Torres, and Borja Perez—are busy writing the next chapter in the story of Canary Island terroir wines.

Exploring and expressing extremities

This community of young *vitivinicultores*—among them Tenerife native Pablo Matellana, who makes wine in Lanzarote and El Hierro; husband-and-wife team Juan Daniel Ramírez and Marta Labanda (Lanzarote); and sibling duo Juan Manuel and Maria Martín (Gran Canaria)—shares certain important characteristics. They are all exploring diverse and extreme volcanic terroirs; they all have access to phylloxera-free old vines and a wealth of distinctive local grape varieties; and they are all committed to recovering lost vineyard areas and lapsed Canarian winemaking traditions.

Left: Craterous bush vines amid the “almost lunar volcanic landscape of La Geria in central Lanzarote.”



They are also not afraid of hard work. Carmelo is a case in point: Not only does he produce wine on Gran Canaria and Lanzarote, he also works as a consultant winemaker for Gran Canarian winery Bodega San Juan—for which he is doing a transformational job—and collaborates on a Douro-Canaries project, Elemento, with Niepoort's Douro table-wine maker Luis Pedro Candido. All this while holding down a job as a chemistry and math lecturer.

The work that has been keeping Carmelo busy in Lanzarote since mid-July is Puro Rofe, an exciting collaboration between Rayco Fernandez, a long-term champion of Canarian wines, and four like-minded organic growers, with Carmelo as winemaker. Working from the museum-like bodega of Chicho Mota in La Geria, their idea for Puro Rofe is to follow the Burgundian quality model, for now focusing on the villages of La Geria, Tinajo, Masdache, and Testeyna but always looking to express different terroirs of Lanzarote.

Carmelo's personal project and number-one priority, however, is Bien de Altura, the first wines of which he has released under the Ikewen label—*ikewen* meaning “roots,” or “origin,” in the Amazigh language of the Canaries’ original North African settlers. Sourcing old-vine Listán Negro, Listán Prieto, Vigariago Blanco, and Listán Blanco from various high-altitude sites in Camaretas, north of San Mateo, Carmelo's intention here is “to show Gran Canaria in a bottle.”

After Carmelo shows me around the Camaretas vineyards, with their dramatic panorama, above the cloud layer, over the island's mountainous central northeast, we drive to Carmelo's place to taste his two Ikewen vintages to date, the 2017s and his 2018 red. (Problems sourcing the same fruit meant that he was unable to make a 2018 white; it's worth noting that around 80 percent of the vineyards of Gran Canaria are planted with red varieties.) To a lover of freshness and drinkability such as I am, these are thrilling wines, the 2017s already very elegant and the 2018 red possessed of an even greater level of refinement than the first.

It seems counterintuitive to find such freshness and finesse in wines from a subtropical island only some 60 miles (100km) from the North African coast, but there it is. This is partly attributable to some extraordinarily well-adapted grape varieties ripening on volcanic slopes at altitudes of more than 4,600ft (1,400m) above sea level. But it's surely more than just that, I suggest to Carmelo. It comes as no surprise to learn that he is a fan of early picking. “It's picking early in comparison with other people; I think I am picking at the right moment!” he says. He's out with his secateurs at least two weeks earlier than anyone else on the island.

To me, though, these wines are also expressions of that principle, so strikingly apparent in Niepoort table wines, of “infusion, not extraction,” a frequently bandied-about concept that means, as far as I could tell from my time working at Quinta de Nápoles, minimal punch-downs and pump-overs; at Niepoort they prefer careful *remontage* using buckets, not pumps, maintaining a lowish fermentation temperature and generally not disturbing the wine if it can be avoided. I am particularly struck by how faithfully Carmelo's Ikewen red—all sappy red fruits, volcanic pepper spice, and fine, saline minerality—transposes that infusion principle from the Douro to the Canaries. It practically shouts Niepoort.

“This for sure comes from the Niepoort philosophy,” he says. “It is the style that I like, but really you have to make wines like this in Gran Canaria. You cannot make Barolo here. If you try to make a more ripened wine here, or try more extraction, it's not easy. If you want more structure, the way is not riper grapes; it's first to go to the right soils, to the right grapes, and then to have a long maceration. For me, this is the way in Gran Canaria.”

Variety within varieties

One of those “right grapes” is Listán Negro, Gran Canaria's most planted red variety. To my mind, this “pyraziney” native variety—with its peppery, smoky qualities and, often, hints of flinty reduction—defines the reds of Suertes del Marqués in Tenerife. It's also the backbone of Carmelo's Ikewen, in which the variety's modest acidity levels are offset by early picking, long maceration, and liberal use of stems. (Beyond Niepoort, there's perhaps a debt here to Raúl Perez, with whom Carmelo worked on the 2016 vintage. “I tried some crazy macerations that at school you never think you can do,” he recalls.)

Before I'd spent time in the Canaries, if I'd had to point to a single variety that encapsulates the islands' volcanic essence, it would have been Listán Negro. But as Carmelo is quick to point out, there is not one Listán Negro in the Canary Islands but many, each defined by the archipelago's diverse terroirs.

“Each island has its special characteristics,” he explains. “In Gran Canaria, Listán Negro is maybe the most elegant grape of



all. By ‘elegant’ I mean a little bit more pure-fruited than, for example, in La Oratava [north Tenerife], where it has this typical reduction, which is very good. In La Palma, it's a little bit more rustic. In Lanzarote, it's spicy, but not in the way of white pepper, like in La Oratava. In La Oratava, it's maybe a little bit more rounded in the aromatics, so here you can use stems to give a little more spiciness.”

Listán Negro is just one of around 25 varieties in the Canary Islands that, given how long they have been growing in isolation here, may as well be considered autochthonous. Many come in the form of the sort of dry-farmed, phylloxera-free old vines that winemakers dream of. On my trip, Carmelo introduces me to his friend and fellow Gran Canarian winemaker Juan Manuel—“Juanma”—Martín who, with his sister Maria, runs the uncompromisingly named Bodega Lava up the road from San Mateo, in Santa Brígida.

Juanma is particularly focused on the high-acid red grape varieties Vigariago Negro and Baboso Negro, which are the basis for his flagship red blend Lava Tinto. In 2018, wine judge and ex-El Bulli sommelier Ferran Centelles selected Lava Tinto 2017 as one his top five Spanish wines of the year. As with Carmelo's Ikewen and Puro Rofe wines, there is a

Above and opposite: Vines destroyed by wildfires, which are only one of the many threats that make Canary Islands viticulture a constant and very uphill struggle.

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crispness and clarity, as well as a distinctly saline acidity, to the Martín's wines. Production methods are also similar: separate vinification of plots, spontaneous ferments, long macerations with temperature control, and low extraction.

Earth, wind, and fire

As luck would have it, on the day I arrive in Gran Canaria, wildfires are blazing over the central and northwest part of the island. Around 9,000 people have had to be evacuated. When Carmelo and I meet Juanma in Las Palmas, he is still reeling from the news that the 2019 crop from his prized Artenara vineyard, in the island's northwest, has been destroyed by fire.

The quality revolution will take years of concerted effort. It means recovering abandoned vineyards, attracting young people to viticulture, persuading those involved to adapt to organic cultivation, and motivating winemakers to produce wines that truly represent the islands

It's an incident that highlights an unavoidable truth about making wine in the Canaries, one that I've come to understand very clearly: It's *hard work*. As well as wildfires, there are the scorching sun, the intractable Trade Winds, and chronic drought—in the Fuencaliente region of La Palma, where I worked last year, average annual rainfall has fallen to just 4.5in (115mm), and anything below 10in (250mm) is typically classed as a desert. Beyond all that, the *picon* volcanic gravel, found to a greater or lesser extent across the Canary Islands, is the meanest of growing media. In many of the old *malpais* lava flows, it's often necessary to dig through several meters of volcanic gravel and ash in order to get the vines take root.

Wine growers such as Carmelo and Juanma—as distinct from the industrial winemakers who still dominate in the Canaries—are also fighting against major social and economic changes: an aging population, low incentive among the younger generation to take up viticulture, and an agricultural economy geared more toward high-yield, low-input industries such as banana cultivation. On top of this, there are the difficulties presented by growers. Many of them are unwilling to enter long-term arrangements, either because they are tied to contracts with their local co-op or because they are holding out for a windfall from property developers. Even when such obstacles have been overcome, it's hard to convince growers to work organically when most have only ever known the agrochemical way.

It's frustrating to think that the people who have the capability to transform the winemaking reputation of these islands are faced with such adverse circumstances. Carmelo admits the situation in Gran Canaria, which has just 500ha (1,230 acres) of land under vine, is not easy: "There is no motivation from the wine institutions to resolve this," he laments. "They are more preoccupied with the photos or the concourses than the most fundamental consideration of all: the grapes. We have to make it work better for us. If we don't, maybe in five years there will be no wine projects on the island." The full-scale quality revolution that the Canary Islands deserve requires growers to realize what treasures they have in their vineyards, and producers to do justice to them rather than settling for the low-priced industrial wines that predominate.

Still, most restaurants in the Canaries would sooner offer guests a Ribera del Duero or a Rioja than a local Listán Negro. And more often than not, even if they do offer a local wine, it will have been manipulated beyond recognition by all the weaponry in the industrial winemaker's arsenal. "There are people here planting Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah—people who say, 'Listán Negro doesn't have the enological potential to make good wines,'" says Carmelo regretfully. "But why would

you want to make a Syrah if you have Côte du Rhône? You cannot do better than they do. You have to understand what grape you have, where you are, and—very important—why you can be different. What do you have that makes the difference? Listán Negro, Listán Prieto, Marmajuelo, Malvasía Volcanica—all of *this* stuff. You just have to understand how it works."

Viva la revolución

A significant recent development in Gran Canaria was an announcement from Jonatan García of Suertes del Marqués that he is launching a new venture on the island. García and his business partner—none other than the Manchester City soccer midfielder magician and Gran Canaria native David Silva ("His palate is just as good as his feet!" García notes)—have invested in 7ha (17 acres) of vineyards, planted with eight local white varieties and a little Vijariego Negro, at 2,000ft (600m) altitude in the central part of the island. The 2020 will be their first vintage.

Further sources of optimism are provided by Carmelo's peers, Pablo Matallana, Juan Daniel Ramírez, and Marta Labanda, three exciting young producers who have shown a long-term commitment to shining a light on the viticultural treasures and winemaking traditions of Lanzarote and, in Pablo's case, El Hierro, the sparsely inhabited island to the archipelago's extreme southwest.

Like Jonatan García, 29-year-old Pablo Matellana is a native of north Tenerife, where he started his first solo project, La Bardona, in 2015. After traveling to Chile to work with Burgundian-Chilean natural wine pioneer Louis-Antoine Luyt, Pablo launched two new Canaries projects: Taro in Lanzarote, and Bimbache in El Hierro, the latter with support from Carmelo's Puro Rofe collaborator Rayco Fernández.

These are two ventures that perfectly illustrate the valuable wine heritage of the Canaries and the diverse possibilities of the islands' terroirs. In El Hierro—an island that, despite being the smallest and least developed in the Canaries, is home to 40 percent of all Canarian grape varieties—Pablo is making wines in both a modern style (focusing on low extraction, freshness, and retaining acidity) and a traditional style. "Each island is very different: the weather, the soils, and obviously the varieties," he explains. "In Lanzarote, I work with Malvasía Volcanica, Listán Blanco, Listán Negro, and Diego from different plots. Most of them are between 80 and 140 years old. I search for the freshness of the island, but the richness, too, and try to focus more on soil than on fruit. In El Hierro, the most important grape variety is Verijadiego Blanco del Hierro, which is completely different from Vijariego Blanco [Tenerife] or Diego [Lanzarote]. Verijadiego can ripen a lot while keeping very high acidity, so the wines can express themselves in very different ways."

One particular curiosity he is working on is *vino de pata*—a wine traditional to El Hierro that is made from a mix of white and red grapes harvested when extremely ripe and oxidatively aged. As with Madeira, the combination of high alcohol and high acidity means that these wines can age extremely well. Pablo speaks of *vinos de patas* that he has tasted from barrel and demijohn that are more than 80 years old.

Also in Lanzarote, island native Juan Daniel Ramírez and his partner Marta Labanda launched their Titerok-Akaet label in 2014. Having purchased their winery amid the almost lunar volcanic landscape of La Geria in central Lanzarote in 2016,



they make wines from organically cultivated Malvasía Volcanica, Listán Blanco, and Diego from two vineyard areas of the island: one in the Malpaso Valley of Haría, in the north, where Ye-Lajares is an historically important wine-growing area in which they see great potential; the other, Guatisea in La Geria.

The Canarian quality revolution is a long-term project. But these young *vinivicultores* are motivated not just by their own projects but by the future of their respective islands. Their cause is helped by Rayco Fernández, who, as the first person to promote the wines of Envínate and Suertes del Marqués a decade or so ago, understands the challenge better than most. He recalls how, when he first sold wines like El Ciruelo, La Solana, and Tāganan to local customers, they would send them back because they didn't taste of the big oaky Merlots, Cabernets, and Tempranillos they were accustomed to. Rayco combines the characteristics of an idealist and a realist; while fully invested in the cause, he recognizes the need to capitalize on the current vogue for Canary Island wine if the region is to realize its full potential.

"The work we have done means that winemakers such as Carmelo Peña and Pablo Matallana have it much easier," he says. "It was not like that when we started. Now the future looks more optimistic, but revolutions are not built on two or three projects. At present, people abroad believe that everything that is done in the Canary Islands is good because it is from the Canary Islands, but it's not like that. The reality is very hard. The potential is unlimited, but not all the wineries are good. We still find that most use non-native varieties, too much new oak, cultured yeasts, tartaric acid... That still happens too much here."

Above: El Hierro, the smallest and least developed of the Canary Islands but home to 40 percent of all Canarian grape varieties, as well as to ageworthy *vinos de patas*.

Carmelo is fully aware that the kind of quality revolution they are working for will take years of concerted effort. It means recovering abandoned vineyards, attracting young Canarian people to work in viticulture, persuading those already involved to adapt their working practices to allow for organic cultivation, and motivating current winemakers to produce wines that truly represent the islands. "The name of the Canary Islands is growing now," he says, "thanks to Envínate, thanks to Suertes del Marqués, thanks to Viki Torres. But we have to push more. We are in the first stage, but we have to work, and we have a long way to go before we reach the second stage, which is to become a world-renowned wine region. For this, we have to work together."

Before I leave Gran Canaria, Carmelo, Juanma, and I take a selection of wines to enjoy on the terrace of a seaside restaurant in Las Palmas. One of these, brought by Carmelo, is an Envínate wine I haven't tried before: Tāganan Parcela Margalagua, a red from a single parcel of co-planted centenarian vines in the rugged and extreme northeast of Tenerife. The color of pink sapphire, it is one of the most limpidly delicious Spanish wines I've tasted, with all the elegance of a great Burgundy and a mineral purity and freshness all of its own.

The message is clear: This is the standard to which Carmelo and his fellow quiet revolutionaries aspire. These are early days. It has taken Envínate about ten years to earn the reputation it now enjoys. Carmelo still works from rented cellar space at Bodega San Juan; Juanma and Maria at Bodega Lava produce only 4,000 bottles or so; Juan Daniel and Marta at Akaet, even fewer. But they are all working for the long-term future of winemaking on these islands, and their wines already provide other scintillating tastes of what, at best, the Canaries can do. ■