

# Why I make wine in Spain

One roaming winemaker, with a passion for small-batch, low-intervention wines, explains why Spain is among the most exciting places in the world to be making wine at the moment

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When I started my nomadic winemaking project, in 2018 at Niepoort Vinhos in Portugal's Douro region, I had no idea how large a part Spain would go on to play – I certainly never intended to make it the locus of my project. So how did it happen? Yes, there was an element of chance and taking opportunities where they arose. But also, among the talented winemakers to whom I pitched collaborations, I sensed an openness and a readiness to collaborate which seemed particular to Spain.

Held in June last year, the iNNoble wine festival (*innoble.es*) in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, in southern Spain's 'Sherry triangle' region, was a true smorgasbord of what's hot and happening in Spanish wine. Named with a certain ironic nod to the relatively staid Vinoble wine festival in nearby Jerez, iNNoble is hosted by wine luminaries Luis Gutiérrez (the moustachioed wine critic with surprisingly good DJ skills) and Barbadillo head of innovation Armando Guerra, alongside Canary Islands producer Rayco Fernández (*see p36*). The event sees some of Spain's finest young winemaking talent rubbing shoulders, sharing ideas and generally having a good time.

Lucky guests in 2021 – among which I appeared to be a more or less solitary one from the UK – were treated to terroir-focused wines from winemakers across the panoply of Spanish regions, including Raúl Pérez in Bierzo, Oxer Bastegieta in the Basque Country and Rioja, Miguel Castro in the Sierra de Montilla, Laura Lorenzo (Datterra Viticultores) in Ribeira Sacra, and Catalonia new-wavers Oriol Artigas, Albert Navarro (Celler Tuets) and Francesc Ferré (Celler Frisach)... There could hardly have been a more telling symbol of the vitality of Spanish wine. For me, iNNoble 2021 felt like a pivotal moment.

## TURNING POINT

This country holds so many sources of inspiration for a project like mine – one which thrives on newness, diversity, nicheness. What I have discovered from the time I've spent in the Canary Islands, Murcia and Andalucía is that, for the coming together of tradition and innovation, for the talent, the diversity of terroirs, and the wealth of lesser-known grape varieties, Spain as a whole is an inexhaustible treasure.

Spain has also become a lens through which I understand the wine industry and what is

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Clockwise from top: bringing in the Monastrell grapes in Moratalla, Murcia province; Darren Smith in Riveros, Fuencaliente de La Palma; Smith in winemaking mode; sourcing grapes from a farmer in El Tion, Fuencaliente

From left: Victoria Torres Pecis; Smith in Pecis' Las Machuqueras parcel where ungrafted Listán Blanco grows low on pure volcanic gravel; Julia Casado at her winery in Murcia



changing in it. What I see happening in Spain – and it's demonstrably happening across the world – is a dramatic rise in natural or low-intervention winemaking, and a change in values affecting not just small-scale artisan winemakers, but also the bigger players. Farming is changing. An attitude of ecological awareness is taking hold. In pursuit of terroir expression and new qualitative heights, young winemakers are gaining experience around the world, then returning to their home region equipped not just with knowledge but a sense of stewardship to their family land, a sense of responsibility for abandoned vineyards, forgotten grape varieties and lapsed winemaking traditions.

I think of Dani Landi and Fernando García (pictured p38), who have made the old-vine mountain Garnacha of the Sierra de Gredos such a prized commodity; of Alvar de Dios in Arribes del Duero producing scintillating wines from small mixed plots of indigenous varieties such as Bastardo and Doña Blanca; Pablo Matallana and Rayco Fernández of Bimbache Vinícola shining a spotlight on the little-known Canary Island of El Hierro; Verónica Ortega in the northern limits of Bierzo, in Cobrana, where she makes beautifully fragrant and light wine from old field-blend plots of red and white grapes; Jorge Monzón in Burgos

‘Spain is enjoying a renaissance after so much homogenisation’

reviving the almost forgotten clarete wine style of Ribera del Duero; Ale Muchada in Sanlúcar, absorbing the generations-old knowledge of the old farmers of the Marco de Jerez area to make unfortified Palominos of extraordinarily high quality. These are just a snapshot.

#### STARTING OUT

For *The Finest Wines Available to Humanity* (it's a line taken from my favourite film *Withnail & I*, by the way, not a big-headed claim to greatness), my journey started in La Palma in 2018-19, with Victoria Torres. I learned from her the resilience it takes to succeed as a vineyard-focused winemaker when all around you cooperatives, big-volume, conventional production and climatic extremes such as chronic drought and searing heatwaves prevail (not to mention record-breaking volcanic eruptions). I also learned from Torres that with the best raw materials, the patient 'less is more' approach can produce the most profound wines.

In Murcia with Julia Casado, I learned that there can be far more to winemaking than making and selling wine. In 2016, Casado constructed a small modular winery in the middle of a nature reserve in Bullas to make aromatic, fresh styles of Monastrell. She has since moved her winery to a regenerative farm on the Murcian border with Andalucía, where a community of young environmentalists works daily to restore the plant life and biodiversity of a semi-arid

landscape that has long-since been reduced to an intensively farmed, featureless plain for growing cereals. Last year, Casado and the farm team planted 4ha of vines that form part of a wider educational project looking at the longer-term health of the local ecosystem rather than simply exploiting the land for commercial gain.

So many of the new generation of Spanish winemakers I'm fortunate enough to meet are so outward-looking. This hasn't always been the case. Let's not forget that Franco's regime – with all the isolationism, co-op-based bulk production and grubbing up of less-productive grape varieties which that entailed – only ended a couple of generations ago. Now, more so than most wine regions of the world, Spain is enjoying a renaissance, a return to diversity and terroir after so much homogenisation. We see a revival of many forgotten grape varieties and neglected, low-yielding but very interesting clones.

After working with super-low-yielding Listán Blanco in La Palma, I have been drawn to winemakers in the Marco de Jerez who are demonstrating the true character of Palomino (genetically the same as Listán Blanco) in unfortified whites made from lower-yielding old clones of this grape. A grape variety I would dearly love to work with is Merenzao (also known as Bastardo or Trousseau) – a fiddly, disease-prone variety which nevertheless can make mouthwatering and deliciously perfumed light reds, particularly in northwest Spain.

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#### THE FUTURE

What next for my own winemaking project? Well, partially inspired by the buzz around the biennial iNoble festival, this year I shall be heading back to Andalucía to make an unfortified Palomino with Raúl Moreno. A former sommelier and master of viticulture and wine science, Moreno is one of the most switched-on winemakers I've ever met. He spent years working for wineries in Australia, and in Portugal. For a time in 2014, he was also assistant winemaker at Domaine Dujac in Burgundy.

With his broad experience of Old and New World approaches to winemaking, coupled with his expertise in organic farming, biodynamics, permaculture and his willingness to do things differently (whether that's experimenting with flor, extended skin maceration, multi-region blends or the use of different amphorae), Moreno has the perfect profile for a 'TFWATH' collaboration. But he is just one of many winemaking adventurers who make Spain such an inspiration to someone like me.

The nomadic nature of my project dictates that I am always on the move, but Spain is a country that I will keep coming back to.

# Smith's eight: Spanish wines that inspired me

## ① Muchada-Léclapart, Lumière, Andalucía 2018 97

£37 (ib) GB Wine Shippers, Lay & Wheeler  
From old, low-yielding vines on albariza soil on a biodynamically farmed plot in the pago Miraflores in Sanlúcar. Ale Muchada puts a huge effort into farming, learning from the old generation of Sanlúcar growers to produce Palomino of the highest quality, which he expertly transforms into the most pure and crystalline of wines.  
**Drink 2022-2031 Alcohol 13%**

## Victoria Torres Pecis, Las Machuqueras, La Palma 2018 94

POA Modal Wines  
I have spent more time in La Palma in the Canary Islands than anywhere else in Spain – three harvests, one pruning season. I love the island and the wines of Victoria Torres. Las Machuqueras is her prized parcel of ungrafted Listán Blanco bajo (low-growing, pictured p37) on pure volcanic gravel in the island's southeast. It produces an unforgettable wine: briny, concentrated and alive. **Drink 2022-2028 Alc 13%**

## ② Vinos Oceánicos, Las Cepas de Paco El Reflejo, Jerez 2018 94

£32.49-£34 Les Caves de Pyrene, The Solent Cellar  
Raúl Moreno brings an Old World appreciation of terroir and a New World 'anything's possible' inventiveness to his work. Golden in colour and profoundly complex in flavour, his amphora-aged



Dani Landi and Fernando García

El Reflejo skin-macerated Palomino is like no other wine I have tried from Jerez.  
**Drink 2022-2028 Alc 12%**

## ③ Dominio del Aguila, Pícaro del Aguila Viñas Viejas Clarete, Ribera del Duero 2019 94

£26-£35.50 Hedonism, Highbury Vintners, Salisbury Winestore, The Sourcing Table  
Clarete is a traditional style of wine, especially in northern Spain, made of co-fermented white and red grapes. It had been largely forgotten in Ribera del Duero until Jorge Monzón (formerly of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti) succeeded in his campaign to have the style recognised in the Ribera DO. Barrel-aged, with plenty of ageing potential, this is a category-defining wine. Organic. **Drink 2022-2028 Alc 14%**

## Envínate, Táganan Parcela Margalagua, Tenerife 2018 97

£46 Vin Cognito

Margalagua is the name of a small, super-steep coastal vineyard parcel in northern Tenerife. The vineyard is co-planted with many different indigenous grape varieties, including Negra Mole and Listán Negro, and vines are ungrafted. Pure, mineral and red-fruited, this is one of the best red wines I've ever tasted from Spain.  
**Drink 2022-2031 Alc 12%**

## Raúl Pérez, Pan y Carne, Bierzo, Castilla y León 2019 92

N/A UK raulperez.com  
Raúl Pérez is one of the most influential winemakers in Spain, full-stop. So many other winemakers have worked with him and gone on to do great things, and I am not too shy to say that I would love to work with him! His Pan y Carne is a rare bird: made from Merenzao – a grape only recently admitted into the appellation of Bierzo by the consejo regulador, but giving the sort of vibrant, pale red-fruited and herbal character that I love to a wine.  
**Drink 2022-2031 Alc N/A**

## ④ Comando G, La Bruja de Rozas, Sierra de Gredos 2020 91

£24.49 Christopher Keiller, Cru, Les Caves de Pyrene, Parched Wines, The Solent Cellar, Vinified Wine, Wine & Greene

Dani Landi and Fernando García have done more than anyone to transform the fortunes of central Spain's Sierra de Gredos, investing so much of their energy into its abandoned and semi-abandoned old vineyard plots. It's thanks to them that we have witnessed the stratospheric rise of Pinot-esque Gredos Garnacha.

**Drink 2022-2028 Alc 14%**

## ⑤ La del Terreno, Bullas, Murcia 2018 90

£32 Dynamic Vines  
Julia Casado has ploughed her own furrow like no other winemaker I know, seeking out old-vine Monastrell from the elevated areas of Bullas, to make beautifully aromatic and characterful natural wines. Casado's flagship wine, La del Terreno (the local name for Monastrell) exemplifies her lightness of touch with this variety, which she describes as 'tough... but with a really tender heart, like wood enveloping a flower'. **Drink 2022-2026 Alc 13%** 

