

Alegre y Valgañon

The future is now

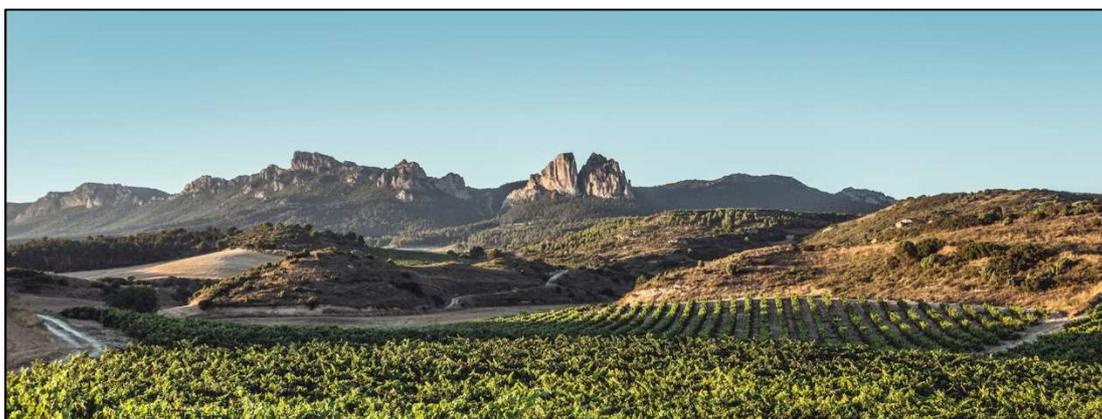
Folks, unless I radically miss my mark, the wines of Oscar Alegre and his wife Eva Valgañon will very soon be cult stars of the Riojan firmament. But, you'll see no 'heroic' winemaking from these two. You'll not be prompted to wonder which fabulously expensive oak barrels you are tasting, nor to ponder what proportion of whole bunches configures their winemaking. Alegre y Valgañon wines are far too real for such stuff.



Utterly informed by the deep history of Rioja (the wines which came before the Industrial Bodegas and chemical growing-making all too often described as "traditional Rioja"), Oscar and Eva make gentle and natural wines expressing the earth and air in their specific sector of Rioja. These are wonderful, characterful wines, and inexpensive. In 3 years' time you'll need an allocation - don't say I didn't tell you well in advance!

Oscar is a long-standing friend of TSA, having been Alvaro Palacios's export manager for a decade before stepping out into this personal venture. He's one of the top 10 most loveable rogues in the world of booze and we are proud and delighted to represent him.

The villages of Rioja's Wild West



Oscar and Eva are intent on a village-specific approach to making Rioja wines. Their key vineyard ('la Calleja') is part of the Valgañon family's farm in the little village of Fonzaleche. This pueblo of 80 people is situated in the very limit of la Rioja, way out west of Haro. This north-western sub-region is defined by the Montes Obarenes and the valley of Rio Tiron (a Rio Ebro tributary). Just 70km inland from the Atlantic (via Sierra Cantabria), this area, 'Conchas de Haro', perfectly sums western Rioja's 'Continental-Atlantic' duality. La Calleja is the last vineyard of Rioja as you depart for Burgos.

At 580 metres' altitude, Fonzaleche is one of the highest and coldest villages of Rioja. It's situated west of Rio Ebro, sheltered below the Montes Obarenes (the western range within the part of Sierra de Cantabria which frames Rioja to the north). The soils are continuous with those of Rioja Superior (the north shore of the Ebro) - predominantly chalky limestone. Oscar and Eva make a single vineyard wine from Fonzaleche - 'la Calleja' itself. Their other wines blend specific attributes of neighbouring cool hilly villages, Sajazarra (Sa-kha-tha-rrra) and Cihuri (Chee-hoo-ree), as well as the alluvial-soiled village Cardenas (a warmer site, pebbly and iron-rich), south of the Ebro, whence very special Garnacha is sourced.

Third time lucky ... (!?)

We are very much looking forward to early 2017, at which point, Oscar and Eva's full range will be available as a coherent group for the first time. 2015 yielded the first ever production of their Blanco and Clarete, while the A-V village blend Tinto dates from the cosechas of 2012 and 2014. These three wines will be in the market together by the second half of 2016, awaiting their big sister, 'la Calleja' - effectively the flagship wine. La Calleja was first made in 2010, was not made in 2013, and went missing in 2011 and 2012 vintages, so the release of 2014 is being anticipated greatly. But, back up a bit: 2011 and 2012 'went missing'? "What does that even mean, Scott (I hear you ask)?"

While setting up their wine business, Oscar and Eva also went 'the family way' twice in 3 years (they now have 3 lovely young kids, including twins). During this time, they shared winemaking duties at another bodega – a venture south of Logroño called Finca de los Arandinos. Arandinos is a nice property with a lovely hotel and dining room as well as a bodega (the wines themselves are just ok). Oscar and/or Eva (depending on baby-making and other temporal responsibilities and distractions) were contracted to oversee winemaking for Arandinos, and were allowed to make and store their own wine in the bodega.

I visited them at Arandinos in 2012, and tasted the finished 2010 as well as the soon-to-be-ready 2011. Impressive first efforts they were (although Oscar, with typical candour insisted they would really start to get there from 2012). We shipped and immediately sold a small allocation of the 2010, and after an interval I asked Oscar to sell us some 2011. No reply. A few texts, a few emails, a few un-answered phone calls later, and we still didn't have 2011 la Calleja on the water. Eventually, I got hold of Oscar and wrestled the following from him ...

Oscar: "so, I went to Arandinos one day to oversee bottling of our second vintage of la Calleja – the 2011 that you tasted already. I walked around the corner of the bodega to where our wine was resting in tank, to see ... No Tank! I grabbed the cellar hand and asked where my wine was?"

Cellar Dude: "we bottled last week".

Oscar: "I know Arandinos was bottled last week – I arranged the bottling, and now I'm here to bottle my own wine, which is meant to be ... THERE!"

Dude: "all the wine was bottled last week."

Oscar: "uffhh!"

Oscar and Eva's little gem was blended away into and bottled as part of Arandinos run-of-the-mill Crianza. La Calleja had ceased to be ...

Unbelievably, a year later, when Oscar and Eva had made 2012 la Calleja (this time made and stored in a different bodega closer to home), more-or-less the same thing happened. 2012 la Calleja was stolen from them too! Unhappy with the 2013 harvest (from which, but by choice, they also bottled no wine), Oscar and Eva have finally made a 2014 la Calleja, currently pending bottling and safely resting in a warehouse of their own in the local village, Sajazarra, where they also rent vineyards. In the meantime, they have fleshed out the range of wines they will make to interpret their little part of la Rioja. Welcome to the wines of Rioja's Wild West!

Rioja on a human scale – the wines of Alegre y Valgañon

Oscar and Eva work with 3 parcels they own, totalling 1.8 hectares. These were part of Eva's family holdings (17 parcels totalling 15 hectares of conventionally grown vineyards) and have been taken over to farm organically for Alegre y Valgañon. La Calleja is a hectare in Fonzeleche, a north-facing mountainous site (600 metres, 600 litres of rain) with stones high up in the soil, making light and fluid wines with excellent acid structure. Their other two vineyards are in nearby Sajazarra. Carra Santa Domingo is a field blend of vines over 100 years' age, 40% white, facing south at 550 metres. La Morija/La Marina has a dual north-south aspect with old tertiary-era seabed soils, deep and stony

with alluvium over limestone and quartz. They rent other vineyards to source the balance of their needs.

Oscar holds that “industrialism in Rioja constituted a second Filoxera” and says he wants to “re-establish the taste of the villages”, to make wines on a personal scale, rather than the giant agribusiness version of Rioja as administered by the Consejo Regulador, for whom Rioja’s 400 million kilos means “the lottery comes every year”! With la Calleja as a single-vineyard varietal, Oscar and Eva’s other interests are deeply historical. They make an updated version of barrel-fermented Viura Blanco. There will be a single vineyard, field blend natural Clarete wine (very loosely a part of the Rosado spectrum) which blends light and crisp Garnacha with a significant amount of white grapes to make a fresh and pale red wine that drinks like a white wine. Rounding out the portfolio is a ‘historical’ Tinto, blending the poor soils above the river with the rich soils below it to make a regional Tempranillo-Garnacha blend.

ALEGRE y VALGAÑON Tempranillo-Garnacha, Sajazarra and Cardenas

This Tinto reflects Oscar and Eva’s interest in the deep history of Rioja. The idea is to blend villages, some which suit Tempranillo and some which yield great Garnacha. Effectively this means blending the soils of Rioja Superior, the cold clay-limestone of the hills above the river, with the warmer alluvial-stone soils of the Rio Ebro delta. Thus, this is a hand-made, high-care Rioja Generico. It specifically references the significance of Garnacha in most historical Riojas, with varietal Tempranillo wines a fad since the 1970s. It’s inspired by the legendary Gran Reservas of Viña Real - back in the 1950s, the key fruit for such came from the parcels Oscar and Eva now work. The first Alegre y Valgañon was 2012, a blend of 40% own vineyards in Sajazarra with 35% Tempranillo from San Vicente and 25% Garnacha from Tudelilla. From 2014, Garnacha from the southern village of Cardenas is blended with Sajazarra fruit.

ALEGRE y VALGAÑON Tempranillo-Garnacha 2012, Sajazarra, San Vicente y Tudelilla



Aged 26 months in oak, some new (future releases will have shorter and older oak regimes). With dark, brambly fruits, a hint of roasted meat and lovely herbs, it’s satin-sheened and ravishingly spiced. Juniper and rosemary mix with cardamom, pomegranate and violet, a touch of leather, anise and fennel. It feels like a fresh and vital update on the old Viña Real Reservas that Oscar adores – bravo! The wine has a perfect ‘fit’ in the mouth: it snugs down solidly in the middle, runs out on a fine leathery line and has a wafting floral lift.

ALEGRE y VALGAÑON Clarete, Cordovin

Oscar Alegre is pictured here in ‘Carra Santa Domingo’, a south-facing vineyard in Sajazarra, planted to 40% white grown at 550m altitude. It’s a field blend of Garnacha and Viura vines well over 100 years old, and eventually Oscar will produce a Cru Clarete from this vineyard. For now, the Alegre y Valgañon Clarete is purchased from the nearby village of Cordovin, historically famous for the style.



“What (you may well ask) is a Clarete?”

“Both the history of Spanish wine, and currently illegal”, would be my obtuse shorthand reply ...

A Clarete is cursorily similar to a Rosado/Rosé but with two fundamental differences. Firstly, Rosados are the fermentation of free-run red wine juice. Claretes have a significant admixture (anywhere from 25-75%) of white grapes. Secondly, also unlike Rosados, they have pre-fermentation skin contact, maybe even fermented with the white skins. Rosados drink like light reds. Pale orange, see-

through Claretes drink like well-structured white wines with a blush. The colour of a Clarete is referred to as 'Ojo de Gallo', or 'Rooster Eye' – a sorta bleary pink, but in a (very) good way.

Claretes have been extremely important wines in Spanish history – most of Ribera del Duero, nearly all of DO Cigales and a lot of Rioja and Bierzo has been about the production and consumption of Claretes, red and white grapes co-fermented in open concrete vats and aged for as much as a year in caves. However, the appellations no longer even have a legal definition/classification available for such a style. Claretes are still made, but, sadly, are routinely labelled as Rosados, which they are not.

It is still possible in remote corners to find Claretes. The restaurant wine-list in the little Rioja village of Sajazarra has a section headed 'Clars': it lists half a dozen wines labelled as Rosado; all of which have Clarete inside. And there is a mythical 'Clareteland' (I'm not making this up): the historical Clarete-production zone in the Najerilla valley around the villages of San Asensio ('la capital del clarete'), Cardenas and Cordovin. There remains a local festival each July, the 'Clarete battle' of San Asensio, comprised of punters eating and drinking lots then spraying Clarete over one another.

Over the years, I heard whispers and snippets, here and there, over and again, about the historical importance of Clarete wines, but had never seen one. Each trip, hearing more, I've been increasingly motivated to find out about this ghost style. How could it be that a wine so significant was not only absent from the contemporary wine scene, but that there be no trace left? No old bottles to be found, no reference to read, even on the internet. On our 2016 road trip I made the Clarete question my muse point. I found the perfect collaborator in Oscar Alegre: incredibly well-versed in history, both an academic and a passionate imbibor of delicious liquids and their deep history. I asked. Oscar knew. Oscar showed me. Together we decided to do something about it. We're bringing Clarete all the way back. Now.

ALEGRE y VALGAÑON Clarete 2015

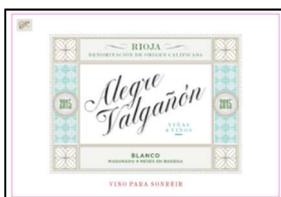


This 'see-through wine', 80% Garnacha with Viura, has a tannin grip uncommon in Rosados, and the feel, weight and run of a white. The white component contains traces of a rare local white cultivar, Calagraño (aka Cagazal or Cayetano Blanco). This is a variety (even more so than Viura or Albillo) with big berries, neutral aroma, low alcohol and high acidity: each have little character, but are excellent freshening-diluting agents. Red and white fruit (complete with the skins of both) is blended and macerated for

3 days, then pressed off skins and float-clarified ('desfangado') down to fine lees with the ungainly solids gone. The juice is fermented for 7 days, then lees-aged in stainless steel deposit for 6 months.

ALEGRE y VALGAÑON Viura Blanco, Sajazarra y Cihuri

This white contains 10% Garnacha, so it's kind of a reverse Clarete! Fruit from Villalba, Cihuri and Sajazarra (4500 kg yielded just 2200 litres).



ALEGRE y VALGAÑON Viura Blanco 2015

Aged on lees 9 months after fermentation in new oak, it's a remarkably fresh wine despite plenty of textural material. At 3.1ph, it's very high acid, long and fine, aching of chalk, with grapefruit tang and lemonade fruit sweetness.

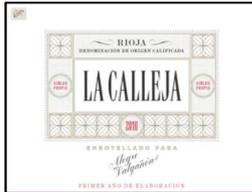
ALEGRE y VALGAÑON 'La Calleja' Single Vineyard Tempranillo, Fonzeleche

La Calleja is a plot of 1.07 hectares planted in 1992 when Eva was a little girl (she helped her father plant it). In the village of Fonzeleche, La Calleja is planted to 100% Tempranillo and typically yields 4500 litres (although the first vintage, 2010 produced just 3000 bottles). Its name means 'little

street'. Mountainous, with lots of stone in the soil, Fonzaleche village produces light and fluid wines with excellent acid structure. The vineyard is in conversion to organic and biodynamic viticulture.

Typical handling regime: lightly crushed (yield is only a half-litre per kilo of fruit), open fermentation in medium-sized old wood during 6 days, without additions, total sulphur of just 40mg/l. Gentle, medium-length maceration with pigeage and 30% whole bunches, ageing 14 months in 500 litre new, 1 and 2 year-old French oak. Ageing in 500 litres barrels means the wine can't be labeled as Crianza or Reserva (300 litres is the maximum size authorized for wood-aged appellates in Rioja).

Remarkably, la Calleja is one of just a tiny handful of legitimate Cru wines in Rioja, and is a fraction of the price charged for wines such as Telmo Rodriguez 'Las Beatas'.



ALEGRE y VALGAÑÓN 'La Calleja 2014' Tempranillo

Fruity-floral with violets, a fresh, mineral acidity and lovely texture, La Calleja is a genuine 'voice' distinct from the me-too choir of industrial-process Rioja.