

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

Welcome to Sajazarra, in Rioja's 'Wild West'



Husband-and-wife, Oscar Alegre and Eva Valgañon fashion exquisite, wonderful value wines, according to their personal, place-specific and historically-informed philosophies. Their wines are at odds with everything many would know or expect from so-called "Rioja wines". In the Alegre y Valgañon world, the spurious place language of Rioja Alta-etcetera has no place; nor the soulless industrialism of *Reserva-Gran Reservas*; nor even the ubiquitous French-derivative 225L *barrica*. In place of these, we get, well, *place*. Place, thought and beauty.

Their intention is to make gentle, natural wines expressing the earth and air in their sector of Rioja, which is a bundle of micro-municipalities near the tiny town of Sajazarra. This is the north-western corner of la Rioja, under Montes Obarenes – a sub-section of the broader Sierra Cantabria.

Their winery is an old *Bodega* on the bank of tiny Rio Ea, which frames Sajazarra (Sa-Ha-Tha-Rrra), a gorgeous, tiny *pueblo* in Rioja's north-west. Along Rio Ea, 43 *bodegas* ringed Sajazarra back in the day, however all but one of these are now abandoned. Oscar and Eva have that one. The population of 130 is fed by just one shop, serving as café, bar and restaurant to all. Apart from that, there's a daily bread delivery by van from another town nearby. The village is all sandstone, and adorned with roses and geraniums. Dry, open high hills and a miles-high sky frame all views from Sajazarra.

Oscar and Eva are recovering a village and its history, one tiny old field-blend *parcela* at a time.

Repairing la Rioja from "The Second Phylloxera"

"The Second Phylloxera" is Oscar's term for the industrialisation of la Rioja, which started in the 1970s and 1980s, and continues apace now. During this time, the ongoing amalgamation of Rioja's patchwork of traditionally small, village-based land holdings into industrial-scale hectares has generated a sleep-scape of generic wines. Over-planting of local genetics to easy-grow nursery clones of Tempranillo has furthered the drift into blandness. Rioja's diverse wealth of discrete valleys with their own genetics in small, low-cropped *parcelas* have become the source of high volume, oaky *Reservas*, tasting of nowhere at all.

By the 1980s, village names (and therefore all valid geographical identity) had been banned from Riojan wine labels by a corrupt authority. DOCa Rioja sold out Rioja's genetic legacy to a clavern of industrial thugs, who are only interested in exploiting growers for cheap kilos to be fabricated as *Reservas-etcetera*. 40 years hence, Rioja has increased from 60-600 bottling bodegas, increased its area under vine by 60% and almost doubled its production to 300 million litres (average crop levels have more than doubled). Most of this is "viral Tempranillo" (Álvaro Palacios's term for the muck going into the London supermarket scene, for example). Garnacha has shrivelled from near 30% of the region's plantings to around 5%. All of this is happily organised by the Consejo Regulador, for whom Rioja's 400 million kilos means that, quoting Oscar, "the lottery comes every year" ... the higher you crop it, the more kilos there are from which the DO can clip its tithe!

Oscar and Eva in the hillslopes of Rioja's North and South

Against this trend, Oscar and Eva take a village approach to making Rioja wines. From their winery base in Sajazarra, they work 25 hectares in organics, making their own bio-preps, in the cold, poor soils in a handful of small *pueblos* in the foothills of the Montes Obarenes in Rioja's remote north-west. All their work is done in historical *parcelas*, discrete little vineyards cobbled around the *pueblos* of the Obarenes sub-zone, the *Valle de Rio Tiron Alta*. The vineyards are at around 600 metres altitude, and the limestone/sandstone soils here are chalkier than the marls in Riojan villages flanking the shores of Rio Ebro further east. This is hilly country, with lots of stone in cold soil, producing light and fluid wines with excellent acid structure.



These little hamlets (rather than towns) include Sajazarra of course, with Cihuri to the east of Saja, while VilaSeca and Galbárruli are a handful of kilometres north. Eva's birth town Fonzaletche (6km west of Saja), is home to Rioja's last, or western-most vineyards. All AV's *parcelas* are dry-grown, extremely low-yielding old bush vines. Most have been significantly recuperated by Eva after years of neglect, including restoration of organic/bio viti.

Oscar and Eva also work in the lee of Rioja's southern range, the massive Sierra de la Demanda (which, as part of the Sistema Iberica, separates Rioja from its high altitude neighbour to the south, Ribera del Duero). 45kms south-east of Sajazarra is the Najerilla valley, home to the village of Cárdenas. This is a beautiful part of southern Rioja: its cold, poor, pale clay soils russet with ferrous components are perfect for Garnacha. Here is also the historical home of blending Garnacha with Viura to make *Claretes*: 'clar' or clear wines, red-flavoured but with the mouthfeel of properly elaborated white wine tannin.

The wines of Alegre y Valgañon

Oscar and Eva interpret a full spectrum of Riojas from their zone of interest: varietal Tempranillo and Garnacha, blends of both, (some fashioned, some in natural field blends); sandstone, limestone, chalk, white and red clays; regional, village and special vineyard wines.

They start with their 'house wines', a Tinto and a Blanco.

- The AV Tinto blends Atlantic and Continental, Tempranillo and Garnacha, the foothills of the north and those of the south, chalk and ferrous clay to produce an authentic, historical "Rioja on a human scale". This wine was first produced in the 2012 vintage.
- After the 2015 harvest came the first ever Alegre y Valgañon Blanco, made from Viura-predominant old field blends growing in the extremely poor chalk soils of hamlets in and around Sajazarra.

Along with these core wines, there are a number of site-specific expressions:

- the Viuras become a tryptic exploring both local sites and traditional Riojan ageing.
- there's a Garnacha from two discrete *parcelas*: red clay meets white, south meets north.
- from Fonzaletche village comes the single vineyard varietal Tempranillo of *Parcela la Calleja*.
- 'la Bahierrá' is a field blend *Tinto* from *Parcela Ponzabala*.
- and there's a field blend *Clarete* (in the guise of serious light dry red) from the *Parcela Carra de Santa Domingo*.

ALEGRE y VALGAÑON Viuras de los Obarenes

montes obarenes, valle de rio tiron alto

Eva makes a three-tiered expression of Riojan Viura-based whites, each increasingly filled with material detail and underscored with more oxidative maturation time, and more skins. These are Alegre y Valgañon Blanco, aged 9 months, single vineyard Las Llanas (24 months ageing) and extra-aged 'la Freak' (42 months ageing).

ALEGRE y VALGAÑON Viura Blanco

The 'estate' wine, if you will, is from old bush-vines from the Obarenes villages, Galbárruli (la Calera vineyard), Sajazarra (las Llanas) and Fonzaleche (Bahiarra and Carra Santa Domingo). These have average ages of 50 years old and grow at around 600m altitude. It's Viura with 10% Garnacha Blanca. Very gently vertically pressed, only 55% of the must is retained (4500 kg yielded just 2200 litres). A cool fermentation starts in vat and after a week continues in large French oak (1,000 litre foudres in the main), where the wine stays nine months with occasional batonnage. Skin contact depends on the parcel in question, and also on the nature of each vintage, so anywhere upwards of six days maceration is possible. 2021 spent thirty days in contact with skins and 30% of stems after full malolactic conversion. This is a long-lived, complex, great value and gorgeously textural white. Decant to assist the textural depth of the wine to express fully. 3.35pH. It gets a touch of bentonite and a 3 micron polish.

ALEGRE y VALGAÑON Viura Blanco



Sweet-sour and herbal in a savoury register, with a green-gold interplay and wonderful acidity in a wine that went fully through malo and had eight months on lees. A touch of pear, tart lemonade fruit, grapefruit, lemon barley, cereal, all scored by chalky minerality. All at once, juicy, tangy, acid, more tang, salt, and sapid, in among wonderful folds and layers of fruit and earth. There's plenty of textural material, subtle richness and power.

ALEGRE y VALGAÑON Viura de Parcela Las Llanas, sajazarra

In another life, Eva might be a rescuer of lost puppies, wounded eagles and the like. We get to enjoy her work in a similar mode rescuing and reviving neglected old vineyards in and under the Obarenes. She spent 4 years restoring Las Llanas before making a first tiny release from the 2018 harvest. Very near to the bodega in Sajazarra, Las Llanas is a field blend of 100yo whites – Viura, mainly, with Rojal, Calagraño and Garnacha Blanca (to quote Oscar: "it contains all the white grapes allowed and more"). These grown in poor, chalky sandstone which retains moisture beautifully. The name means 'The Plateaus'. There's not enough fruit to put through a vertical press, so the wine ferments in an open 500 litre French oak barrel, with skins but no stems and is pressed off after five weeks of fermentation and maceration. One 400 litre barrel was filled and the wine aged here a while before resting in Clayver ceramic (24 months in total), and was then bottled unfiltered and unfinned. Please decant. 530 bottles made.



ALEGRE y VALGAÑON Viura Finca las Llanas

A profound wine redolent of lush grasses, deep, sweet semi-dry herbs and honeysuckle. Rounded lemon-barley richness is cut with rind, and the wine bubbles with pebbly mineral life, running out on a chalk soil surf crunch. Salted apples abound in a wine of great length and intensity.

ALEGRE y VALGAÑON Tercera Año Viura blanco, aka 'The Freak'

This special wine replicates a historical style called *Tercera Año* ... a wine bottled after its 3rd year of maturation. Like Las Llanas it's from tiny old, low-yielding vineyards which Eva purchased and rescued from neglect. The fruit is from Cihuri and Sajazarra, and like the others predominantly Viura with Garnacha Blanca. Old vines, high acid and low pH structure a wine that handles extreme oxidative ageing before bottling and which then has extraordinary ageing potential in the bottle.