

Viña Corrales *Fino en rama de parcela*, pago balbaina alta

Peter Sisseck's search for Spain's 'grand cru' white

Peter Sisseck, of Dominio de Pingus fame, has initiated a new project in Marco de Jerez. His intention?

Spain's Great Grand Cru White: specifically, a *Fino*.

Importantly, a *Fino* where the ageing process under *flor* does not over-write the origin character of the vineyard itself. *Bodega* artefact is a support act for Peter, not an end in itself.

Peter's partner here is his long-term collaborator, Carlos Oriol, owner of Hacienda Monasterio and financial backer of the other projects which Peter has headed up. Carlos's wife is from the Gonzalez Byass family, so they are certainly 'in' in Jerez. Peter and Carlos have long-believed *Fino* to be the potential grand-cru-equivalent white of Spain and have fantasised about having a project in Andalucia for nearly 25 years. In 2016, Carlos said, "If we are going to ever do it, let's just get on with it now – why not?!"

"OK, let's do it ..." said Peter.



They proceeded to seek suitable vineyards to base the project on ... but firstly, in '17 they purchased *Bodega San Francisco* in Jerez, complete with an exceptional old *soleraje* of *Fino*. Then, in '18, they bought two vineyards, one of which was from the same *pago* (*Balbaina*) that had historically fed the *solera* of *Fino* they'd just bought. They engaged an experienced *capataz* (cellar manager) and set about renovating the inherited *soleras*, working towards realising their own *Fino*.

Atop Pago Balbaina Baja (at 93m altitude on village land of Puerto de Santa Maria), they purchased 8 hectares of the 'los Corrales' vineyard. Corrales faces across a saddle valley to 'los Cuadrados' on the opposite hilltop, one of el Marco's most famous addresses. In Corrales, they also inherited a hilltop *cortijo* (an old worker's house) which will be restored, to become a vinification plant so that *mostos* can be handled on-site before going to the Jerez *bodega* for ageing. This was the historical practise in the best vineyards atop key *pagos*: fine, fresh, young wines were made where they were picked.

Corrales is cropped very low by current standards at 5 tonnes/ha, and is slowly being re-planted from 'California' to Palomino de Jerez (the cuttings come from a friend's nearby old vineyard). Naturally low-yielding Palomino de Jerez has both higher acid and higher alcoholic degree, thus allowing ripe-but-fresh wine with minimal need of fortification. Balbaina Baja is a quite coastal *pago*, and its base wine is racy, fine, pure and nervous. The existing vines were planted in 1989 and face south-west: an interesting exposure combining warmth *and* freshness, open to the *poniente* coming in off the Atlantic.

Peter and Carlos have also purchased a *parcela* in Pago Macharnudo. For now, the story is all about Viña Corrales, but there will eventually be a second *Fino* from La Cruz, at between 53-70 metres, with a surface layer of heavy *aglomerado* (stone-clay-limestone) over *tosca cerrada* and *barajuelas*.



In late 2020 the first *saca* of *Fino* from the Viña Corrales *parcela* in Pago Balbaina Alta was released. There's to be a single annual *saca* annually thereafter, probably in march-april as the wine wakes up after winter.

Peter Sisseck on el Marco

“With all these young people pushing the envelope I think this is the most exciting vineyard area in the world.”

One of Peter’s motivations in entering the wine world of el Marco lay in the fact that it has the world’s oldest continuous vineyard classifications. Even although the big company corruptors have done all they can to erase the signature of the land on its wines over the past 50 years, the *pagos* remain, known and named for many hundreds of years, if not respected much of late. And, Peter was totally fed up with the corruption and ignorance in his main place of work - Ribera del Deuro. Ribera (as with la Rioja) refuses to allow vineyard identity: “I could not get my stone-headed compatriots in Ribera to accept vineyard classifications, so I thought - fuck! - why don’t I go down to Jerez to revive this vineyard classification”.



As outlined, he then sought a very specific terroir to represent. The next step was using organics and biodynamics to renovate the soil, redeeming the vineyard’s identity from “this voodoo shit that we do”, referring to the chemically beaten up microbiology of soils afflicted by 20th century practises.

Peter’s strongest point is that, despite its deep heritage, the region is marred by the production of bland wines relying on and reverent of technology and processes, rather than seeking to reflect the land (here he points at the worst of Champagne as an obvious reference). *Finos* coming from specific *pagos* and from specific vineyard designations within them (*parcelas*) are wine’s oldest land classification. This is a heritage ripe for redemption.

A new signature on old *soleras* of 10yo *Fino*

Bodega San Francisco is a beautiful boutique on the *poniente* side of Jerez (in Calle San Francisco), built around the turn of the 20th century. The *capataz* is an old, wise hand, Miguel Calvo. The bodega had been functioning as an *Almacenista*¹, with an established solera system of some 444 *botas* of *Fino* from Pago Balbaina and a small *solera* of *Fino* from Macharnudo. In renovating the *solera* towards Peter’s standards, a complex range of processes have been undertaken concurrently:

- The *solera* barrels have been directly fed by young wine from the recent harvests, skipping the various *criadera* and pumping fresh and very high quality material into the ready wine.
- A new Balbaina *solera* was established on the basis of 6 *botas* of material harvested in 2019, currently being statically aged.
- A new *solera* of just 4 *bota* based in Macharnudo was established, which will house the *Fino* from *parcela* La Cruz (in partnership with an existing Macharnudo *soleraje* of 120 *bota*).
- Some inherited wine will be fortified and sold off as (exceptionally good!) *Amontillado* to create room for young wine in the *soleras*.
- Another *bodega*, Real Tesoro (owned by Valdespino) has been commissioned to distill Bodega San Francisco’s own fortifying spirit, from Peter’s own locally grown Palomino fruit. Without fortification by brandy from another appellation and distilled from exogenous varieties), *Fino* Viña Corrales will be authentic Jerezano GI at every level. This own terroir spirit will be *holandas* at around 70%, rather than highly rectified spirit, as Peter believes this will enhance the terroir imprint of Corrales on its *Fino*.
- The next developmental stage (paralleling reformations in the vineyard) will be the purchase of three buildings adjoining Bodega San Francisco to facilitate in-house vinification (which currently takes place at Gonzalez Byass).

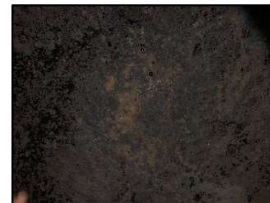
¹Angel Zamorano ran BSF as an *almacenista* from 1977-2006. Angel was known to curate *botas* with great care. Then Angel sold to construction developer Juan Piñero, who for a time ran his *Fino*, Camborio, out of the *bodega*, however inadequate care was taken during these years, until Miguel and Ramiro Ibañez took over its maintenance and restored quality and condition.

From *Mosto* to *Sobretablas*

The *sobretablas* is young fortified wine ready to enter the *soleras*. The term literally means 'under wood', but it's quite common for the new wine to be simply handled in stainless steel. Managing this young wine is a really important opportunity within Peter's work in applying his (read Viña Corrales') signature to Bodega San Francisco's existing *solera*. Peter's young wines are held in stainless rather than wood, as freshening the existing *fino* in the *bodega* and imprinting it with the vinous character of Corrales is critical at this renovative stage. The ripe fruit (picked at 13.5% with no *soleo*) is gently pressed and about 45% of the free run is taken. The young *mosto* is held cold for several days, then undergoes a spontaneous fermentation before *desfangado* (being taken off gross lees). It's then fortified and held in tank until it's time to be added to the youngest *criadera* where they age as *sobretablas* under a *velo de flor* with a *vacío* of 3 *arrobas*².

The yeast of Bodega San Francisco

Bodega San Francisco features some *montuliensis* (which produces high levels of acetaldehyde, and marks *finos* heavily with the artefact of biological ageing), but the dominant strain in the bodega's *flor* is *beticus*, which marks the wines less, and allows the chalk to ring out clearly in these pungent, mature, saline *finos*. The pictures here were shot with my iPhone through the bunghole of two adjacent *bota* in the Pago Balbaina *solera* in Bodega San Francisco. The one above, the dark one, is *beticus*: and this barrel is redolent of chalk, brine and paddymelon, with an excellent chew, hold and release palate progression. Below, much paler, is a *bota* marked by the *montuliensis*: with lots of aldehyde, it's funky, fat, wet and reductive, with poeey chalk, lashed with cheese rind (the wet back of an aged washed rind, oozing muck and orangey yeasty funk). This tastes blue and brassy, with orange and a great depth of heavy wet clayey chalk, soft and deep, gooey. Really characterful, but full-on! The wine released as *Fino* Viña Corrales is about 75% fine, freshness ease and length from *bota* under *beticus*, with the balance being high impact/big flavour funky *montuliensis* wine.



Tasting the scales – getting to know Pago Balbaina *fino*, from young to ready

- 12 months old *sobretablas*, young Corrales wine without any ageing overlay as yet: apple cucumber, a sharp tang of yeast and a distinct camomile florality, with paddymelon skin. It's beautifully mid-weight and quite spicy, gently soft and rich, with a mouth of ripe nashi and a touch of meyer lemon pith bitterness. It's blue steel maritime with a lovely easy release.
- Somewhat older wine at around 3 years is round and graceful, with the house trademark bitterness at the 3/4 point of palate before release. Even more mature *bota* have *fino* that's starting to laminate, and the wine's more linear with increasing definition and drive.
- *Fino* direct from the *solera* (just bottled and tasted in November 2019): here comes the ozone and lantana, bitter melon, delicately smoked steel. There's outstanding richness to the ¾ mark and then a classical bite, stick and release to end.
- At the same time I tasted the 2018 trial bottling with 13 months in bottle (I had tasted this exact wine direct from cask as they were preparing to bottle it): apple, wax and cereal-flavoured wine with great lamination, like a wonderfully-made martini. Spice-chalk-yeast come together as another thing, an emergent property. There's a dot of *cabezuelas* (spent floral yeast bitters) to finish, which releases into a memory of chalk deep down in the layers of one's tongue.

²*Vacio* or vacancy refers to the ullage volume: the more ullage, the more *flor*. An *arroba* is el Marco's arcane language for measurement of liquid volume in *bota*. An *arroba* is a measure of 16.67 litres, which is the standard size of the gorgeous stainless steel *jarras* (jugs) commonly seen in the bodegas. The *bota* in BSF are of 36 *arrobas*, and typically contain 33 *arrobas* of liquid and have a *vacío* (ullage) of 3 *arrobas*. The annual evaporation from any given *bota* is around 1 *arroba*.

“A wine aged between life and death”

Peter’s extremely neat rendition of how *Finos* grow in relation to *flor* – the wine lives between the *velo de flor* (live yeast) atop it, and the *cabezuelas* (spent yeast lees) underneath. The live yeast atop the barrel eats glycerol, acetic acid and alcohol, reducing volume in the mouth, rendering the wine’s bony skeletal edge (and imparting its floral scent). The dead yeast lees which sediment the floor of the barrel give back coating mouthfeel and texture. The *cabezuelas* are particularly deep in the Bodega San Francisco *solera*, adding heaps of mouthfeel and texture. Peter feels that these days the *cabezuelas* are disrespected and little understood, but represent the real wealth of fine old *solerajes*.



***Fino en rama* Viña Corrales**

Peter plans an annual *saca* (removal of wine from barrel – *sacar* is to take) every spring, only taking about 80 litres per *bota*. From a one-off autumnal *saca* in October 2020, we are delighted to release Viña Corrales *Fino en rama saca ii!*



Lemon rind, dandelion, thyme balm, melon tendril, persimmon, straw, parmesan rind on the nose. The mouth’s flavoured with deep chalk, iodine, scents of a rockpool, with a hit of spice to finish - white pepper and anise. It’s gently graduated, the spice rolls beautifully, a hit of feijoa bitters is relieved by talcy tannin and acid twines in gently towards the end. It’s a wine of slow, profound reveal and resolve; there’s great clarity of purpose and journey, without force and it’s deceptively easy for a wine of considerable power.