

Dominio de Pingus, DO Ribera del Duero

Wines: Flor de Pingus and Pingus

Owner/winemaker: Peter Sisseck

Dominio de Pingus – early days

Pingus was established in 1995 by Peter Sisseck, Danish-born, French-trained, with significant experience in Bordeaux and Sonoma. Simi Winery and Chateau Landiras (run by his uncle Peter Vinding) were his winemaking testing ground, beyond which he also has qualifications in agricultural engineering. Peter has been working in Ribera del Duero since 1990. A brief-seeming consultancy gig resulted in a deep fascination at the untapped potential of this extreme and contradictory region, which has become very much 'home'. Peter also runs his own Bordeaux domaine.



Peter was acquired as winemaker-manager by the original owners of a then-new project in Ribera del Duero. Hacienda Monasterio was an ambitious Bordeaux-styled estate purchased and planted from scratch to Tinto Fino plus French and Italian varieties in the Valladolid sector in the west of the DO. The Monasterio project has struggled from day 1, never really reaching its ambitions. The wines are still in production, but are very expensive and not as good as they need to be. Peter has since 're-done' the idea behind Hacienda Monasterio, getting it right by building it from the ground up himself ... the relatively young Quinta Sardonía estate succeeds marvellously in realising Monasterio's aim of an estate using mixed Tempranillo+Bordeaux varieties. But that's a separate story (please read elsewhere on our website to get the low-down on Peter's other two ventures in the region, Quinta Sardonía and PSI).

Frustrated from the ownership level, Peter eventually severed ties with Monasterio, by which time Dominio de Pingus was well and truly alive. Monasterio did, however, give him the needed introduction to the grassroots (well, vine roots, actually) of Ribera del Duero. In seeking to get Monasterio right, he refused the usual way of the flying or consulting winemaker (importing certainties and technologies from elsewhere). Rather, he got as close to the ground as he could to see what really made Ribera del Duero tick. Not surprisingly, soil, site and viticultural stock were his key research interests. This 'blow-in' ended up doing more to identify and understand authentic Tinto Fino in Ribera del Duero than had previously been achieved.

Ribera del Duero and 'Tempranillo'

Tempranillo's local name is Tinto Fino and is also sometimes called Tinto del País. It is not Tempranillo by another name, but a distinct familial strain, as is Tinta de Toro, the version of 'Tempranillo' native to Toro, west along the Ribera of Rio Douro. These familial distinctions are more significant than clonal variations, which occur at a local level. So, sniffing around the old plantings, and talking to the old-timers of Ribera during the early 90s, Peter did his own work in identifying Tinto Fino, distinguishing it from 'Tempranillo', and identifying several key clonal variations within the local Tinto Fino. Likewise he combed the various sub-regions looking at different soil and micro-climates and eventually located what he thought was the ideal combination of site, clonal selection of Tinto Fino and old bush vines pruned 'en vaso'. Three ancient plots near to one another in the 'La Horra' zone between Roa and Aranda del Duero in the central part of Ribera del Duero were acquired and became the basis of Pingus (one nowadays is the base of Flor de Pingus). Similar plots constitute Flor de Pingus, and more lately the regional project PSI. Altitude is 800-850 metres.

The wines of Dominio de Pingus are essentially acts of vine husbandry. The gnarled old vines have been carefully husbanded back to health - the trunks straightened, lowered, and pruned back to 1-2 buds per stump. Yields tend to an incredibly low 9 hl/ha. "Tinto Fino is important," he explains. "A lot of cuttings of Tempranillo have come in from Rioja, so not all vineyards in Ribera del Duero are Tinto Fino. There is a difference. All the vines in my plots are very old. They have never been fertilised nor treated with pesticides and all grow following the traditional en vaso system. They are perfect."

The old vines of Ribera del Duero's native strain of the Tempranillo family are rare, and becoming more so. In 1990, there were only 9000 hectares under vine in the DO and 6000 of these were old Tinto Fino bush-vines planted en vaso. Nowadays, there are 22000 ha and only 4000 of these are old locals. Worse, much of the new industrial planting is 'Tempranillo' grown on trellis – higher-yielding, easy-to-grow generic clones from Rioja. Ribera del Duero is being de-natured just as it becomes popular ... and the 'Conejo Regulador' (the official bunny of the big companies, the CRDO or Consejo Regulador DO Ribera del Duero) sits silently in observation, taking his tithes and keeping it zipped. I attempted to interview him on the matter and he proved an adept at shape-shifting-refusal to address the point.

Thus, Pingus (and PSI) are not just bottles of amazing booze - they are a regional-cultural legacy, a heritage conservation project.

Pingus wines now

Pingus commenced with the 1995 harvest, and immediately gained great repute, aided by the sinking in Azores of a ship containing part of the minute yield of '95 to the US. It must be made clear that Peter does not, and never has, associate his wine's value with Parker points, among other pundits. His simple view was that it should be a wine that stood as a head and shoulders equal to the 'Super Seconds' of Bordeaux, and he priced it thus from the get-go.

There has been a bit of loose journalistic talk about Pingus in the past – labelling it as a 'garagiste' wine, rabbiting on about 200% new oak and various other bits. The truth is rather simpler - here are a few factoids.

Firstly, the name – "Pingus" was Peter's childhood nickname growing up in Copenhagen.

Secondly, wood and winemaking.

Pingus (especially in its second phase from 2007 onward) is close to the perfect exemplar of the 'grown, not made' philosophy. The early Pingus wines were made in a garage, not from philosophy but lack of cash; nowadays, the winery remains on the same site in the village of Quintanilla de Onesimo, but is a nice, simple, proper affair, purpose-built with its own laboratory. Small changes have accompanied the shift from garage to winery, as you'd expect during the crucial first 15 years' evolution of a quality project. The basics of handling – or rather, basically NOT handling the wine remain the key principle outside of vineyard concerns. Over recent years, oak has been pulled back and the wines ever more textural, perfumed and sophisticated. The days of double maturation in new wood, one set for malo and one for ageing, were largely mythical and at any rate are now long gone. Open fermentation in large oak foudre is followed by ageing around 18 months in new and 1yo ultra-high-quality oak with reduced toast (barrels are 500 litre Darnajou and 225 litre Taransaud). This oak is never dry, by the way – after Pingus is bottled, the Pingus barrels are sent over to the PSI project, where they are lent to PSI (otherwise unwooded) for a few months, benefitting the structure of PSI and ensuring the Pingus barrels remain filled, wine-wet and perfect at all times.

Ultimately, the oak regime is even more gentle and subtle than this – in 2014 and 2015 Pingus itself saw no new oak, and had a second crianza in older 500 litre barrels. The wines are topped regularly, un-handled, unfiltered, egg-fined, using selected vineyard yeasts for fermentation, following viticulture which is entirely organic-biodynamic (B-D conversion was completed in 2002). Hand-picked, hand-made, individual berry plucked and sorted, Pingus and Flor de Pingus receive the highest imaginable levels of skilled nurture from berry to bottle. Flor being largely fermented in small stainless is the only significant variation in approach.

And Parker.

The first ever Pingus was 1995 (Flor first appeared in 1996), and very early on a sample went the way of Robert Parker Junior, who gave it a 96-100 score and instant notoriety. Parity-priced with Bordeaux super-seconds, and rightly so, hopefully Pingus nowadays gains its status from its intrinsic wine value as one of the handful of great and truly distinct wine 'voices' in wine, and not via the questionable allocations of a pointer-head. To the extent that 'Parker wines' is an epithet to many, the wines of Dominio de Pingus are simply not 'Parkery'. Noisome oak, sugar and extract are no part of what's on display in Pingus. Sometimes it's just a happy coincidence that genuinely great wines get 100 points from the clunky palates at The Wine Advocate.

Flor de Pingus



Flor is a village wine from 16 parcels across 21 hectares and various soil types in and around La Horra, between Roa and Aranda de Deuro. Each parcel is fermented separately by indigenous yeasts selected from the Pingus vineyards. 16 small stainless steel foudre are then blended, go through malo in barrique and are then aged 16 months or so in 40% new barrels, and the rest 1-3 years old. Production is around 5000 dozen.

Truffle and tobacco nose with sour-cherry, ink, heather, licorice. There's a wash of gamey hide and a gathering purple storm raining minerals. Fine and radiant, with cool blue fruits, powder-tannined, nutty, inky and mineral in the mouth, this is Ribera del Duero from on high. Majestic wine, it's fluid on entry and all power is balanced by freshness. Long, lush, fine and focused, beautifully polished.

Dominio de Pingus 'Pingus' Tinto Fino



Pingus is based on two clos vineyards of great age and perfect natural balance, pretty much adjacent to one another affect an 'estate' of 4.5 hectares just south-west of La Horra on the way to Roa. 'Barroso' is old gravel-sands over silt and calcareous bedrock near the Duero, and higher up 'San Cristobal' is a south-west facing clay slope. Peter actually treats them as five separate parcels made in 5 old wood Tinajas (2000 litre foudre), then aged as per Flor. One of these, 'Amelia' is a small ungrafted section of San Cristobal (otherwise on Riparia rootstocks) which yields a single barrel. Barroso yields deeper, lighter, long and finesseful fruit, compared to the fuller-blockier fruit from the gravel-silt slope of San Cristobal, planted around 1910.

Around 500 dozen are produced. Part of the fruit is de-stemmed by hand and goes through an individual berry selection; some of the fruit is selected for a version of whole-bunch fermentation, whereby exemplary parts of the bunch are selected and cut for fermentation with stems. The natural yeast fermentations are cultures selected from the two Pingus vineyards and then inoculated across all fermentations.

Masculine and serious, tight and deep, with satsuma plum and black cherry jubey fruits. Inky and layered, meaty and tannic. Rich, tight, focused palate, restrained power and great balance, fine long expansive tannins glinting with deep-set minerality.



FLOR de PINGUS NOTES

Flor de Pingus 2011

Gliding, open and soft already with a tannin breadth typical of 2011s phenolic maturity. It's mineral, vegetal and marine-fossily with dark, fennel-flecked fruit and fine chocolatey tannin. Leathery with dry clove spice and sweet pimiento, deeply, luxuriously vegetal.

Flor de Pingus 2012

Silky wine beset with purple florals, tobacco, some stalky grip with lovely fine, long sweet tannins and lots of lovely sweet silty earthiness.

Flor de Pingus 2014

Floral, red wood fungus perfume, touch of white pepper, touch of delicate dark chocolate, and an excellent relation between volume and length, juicy release and flourish at end, lovely bitterness

Flor de Pingus 2015

Fresh, vital, peppery, tropical almost, juicy and round and delicately perfumed

DOMINIO de PINGUS NOTES

Pingus 2011

Red fruits, carob, angelica and tobacco rise from the deepest possible sense of the earth. Silky, purple, mineral and spicy, with a typical tannin-floral-tobacco-vegetal sweet-fleshy -spicy mouth-feel of great depth and complexity.

Pingus 2012

Deepset and reserved, fuller, more earthy, deeper and broader than Flor.

Pingus 2014

40% lost to frost; picked in October

Lovely mature tannin-earth nose with sweet vegetal herbal-tobacco florals; clearly gently worked, graceful and settled already; great roundness, lively and deeply perfumed.

Pingus 2015

Scintillating gliding, round and really up and about – a wine of truly excellent movement; full soft and chocolatey tannin with really nice acidity.