

HONORIO RUBIO, cardenas (najerilla valley)

Honorio Rubio, the man, and the wines bearing his name, are a far cry from what is often (and erroneously) referred to as 'classical' Rioja. Honorio works in a specific sector of Rioja – the Najerilla Valley, which favours high quality Garnacha. He is both a conservator of marginal historical styles, notably the Clarete pinks of which he is the leading proponent, and also an innovator working at the margins of textural enhancement in both Viura whites and Claretes.

I met Honorio through Oscar Alegre: it was actually Honorio who made the Clarete which I have commissioned since 2015 under Oscar's Alegre y Valgañon label. I became fascinated by this barely discussed sub-region of Rioja, with its own historical pink wine culture, and the promise of great Garnacha from cool soils in the South and went to visit and learn in 2017.



Cardenas and the Najerilla Valley

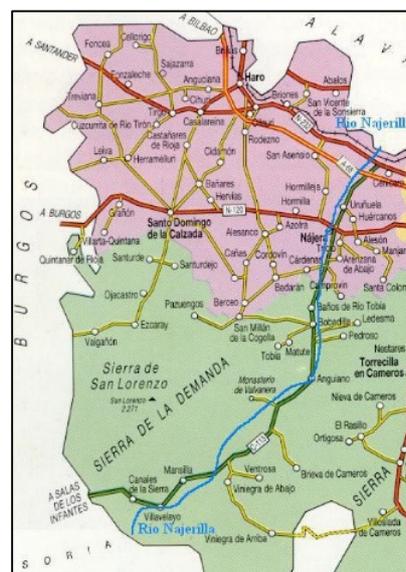
The village of Cardenas is high up in the Najerilla Valley, in the lee of Rioja's southern range, the massive Sierra de la Demanda (which, as part of the Sistema Iberica, separates Rioja from its high altitude neighbour to the south, Ribera del Duero). Starting below la Demanda and running north towards the Ebro Vega, the Najerilla valley is the most beautiful part of southern Rioja, and its cold, 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 based on Tinto but with the mouthfeel of a Blanco.

To understand this sub-region, it pays to start up on Sierra de la Demanda, looking across the Ebro to Rioja's northern boundary, the Cantabrian sierras. Here we find several rivers flowing down to the north and ultimately into the Ebro, carving valleys and therefore sub-zones along their way. From the mountain ski-fields of Valdezcaray, little Rio Oja (which obscurely gave its name to the region) flows into Rio Tiron, west of Haro. Further east along the sierra, Rios Iregua and Leza run out to join the Ebro around Logroño. Between these, Rio Najerilla carves the Najerilla Valley and meets the Ebro between Haro and Logroño.

The key villages of the Najerilla Valley, starting with the highest in the south under Sierra de la Demanda and running north and down towards the Ebro valley are:

The triangle of Badarán, Cordovín and Cárdenas, which are about 30km south of Logroño, then Najera itself, Uruñuela and finally San Asensio. The latter, while home to the very Najerillan annual 'Battle of Clarete', would more correctly be classified along with Cenicero, Fuenmayor and others as being in the Ebro Valley. Wines from the Najerilla Valley proper are grown in ferrous clay soils on free draining hill-slopes at as much as 600 metres altitude.

Honorio works within the above-mentioned triangle in the Valle de Chuerca, with his bodega in Cárdenas (population, 161), on Rio Cárdenas, a small Najerilla tributary. He makes a simple local Garnacha Tinto, the definitive local Clarete, and some more radically textural Blanco and Clarete wines with extended, quiet, lees contact.



The textural Viuras of Honorio Rubio

Honorio fashions several versions of (unfashionable) Viura Blanco, experimenting with textural enhancement through lees ageing in various materials, while also seeking freshness and life. His significantly aged and enhanced wines are simply called 'Lias Finas'. These are wines fermented in stainless steel then aged on lees for 16 months – half in 600 litre French oak and half in concrete vat.

They are rich and complex, yet entirely vital. From 2007 onward he has reserved another selection, called Añadas, in a form of solera. Long ageing in both oak and acacia wood yields a rich, abstract and complex wine which remains long, fresh and fluent.

HONORIO RUBIO Lias Finas Viura



Honorio's lees-aged Viura is a textural masterpiece. It's fairly popular right now to go for 'textural' wines, but all-too-often such wines become a cloud of material without any real shape or direction; varietal and terroir code is all-too-easily obliterated. Not so with the Lias Finas Blanco and Clarete which Honorio crafts. The Viura (2,600 bottles produced) is the product of a 72 hour cold maceration, simple fermentation below 20 degrees in stainless and then a careful ageing elaboration in two parts: half the wine is aged on its lees in concrete vats and the other half in 600 litre French oak, also on lees, both portions for around 16 months, before blending. The result?

A deep lemon-coloured wine, still with a green tinge, limpid and vividly alive. There's pear, fennel, peach skin, a citrus-cereal swirl, and a thread of salinity. The palate is indeed textural with lemonade fruits, lovely soft bitters, a layer of chalk and breathy with orange blossom. Unctuousness glides out to citric acidity. This is LOTS of fun!

The Claretes of Honorio Rubio

"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:

- Rosados are the fermentation of free-run red wine juice. Claretes have a significant admixture (anywhere from 25-75%) of white grapes.
- also unlike lightly and early pressed Rosados, Claretes have plenty of pre-fermentation skin contact, and the red component is fermented and aged 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 (a 'Clar' or clear wine) is referred to as 'Ojo de Gallo', or 'Rooster Eye'.

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 (historically, red and white grapes co-fermented in open concrete vats and aged for as much as a year in caves). However, contemporary appellations no longer have a legal definition/classification available for such a style.

It is still possible in remote corners to find Claretes. There is a mythical 'Clareteland' (I'm not making this up): the historical Clarete-production zone in the Najerilla valley between the villages of San Asensio, Cordovín and Cárdenas. There remains a local festival each July, the 'Clarete battle' of San Asensio, predictably comprised of punters eating and drinking lots, all the while 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 was 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 my 2016 research 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 imbiber of delicious liquids and their deep history. Ultimately, this all led to the village of Cárdenas and the man, Honorio Rubio, the contemporary champion of the style.

HONORIO RUBIO 'Tremendus' Clarete

50/50 Viura i Garnacha: co-picked, co-fermented, destemmed and macerated together for 2-3 days, aged on lees in stainless after a cool fermentation. Fermentation starts with the skins, but after a day or two the fermenting must is separated by gravity, un-pressed. The young Clarete spends up to a week on gross lees, and is then decanted and aged 6-9 months on fine lees. The lees are compacted by a small amount of bentonite. No further fining or filtration takes place before bottling. Fresh and crunchy with good acidity, it's chalky on entry, opens easily and closes with a delicately phenolic rim, inflected with wild strawberry and a pink grapefruit-pomelo dollop.



The look is vibrant see-through ('Clar' or clear being Clarete's defining thing!) raspberry pink. There are red rose petals, ruby grapefruit and a whack of chalky builder's lime soil aroma. There's a big hit of Saké, like polished rice washed with wild strawberry. The palate is full, open and soft on entry then a blood orange skin tannin-acid brings the zap and tang. The phenolics tuck in the middle and a squeak of builder's lime comes to finish the job. Texture yields to a wildly exciting, flavourful-perfumed acidity.

HONORIO RUBIO Lias Finas Clarete

Lias Finas Clarete is a limited run of 1200 bottles, made from 50:50 Viura and Garnacha. As with the LF Viura, the winemaking is simple at first to protect natural acidity. There's a 72 hour cold maceration before a cool fermentation in stainless steel. The wine is then aged with its lees in wood for 16 months in relatively neutral 500 litre French oak barrels.



Onion skin to look at – a vibrant and clear orange ... clarity being essential to the style. The wine is redolent of orange zest, kirsch, dried cherry, white fruits and a medley of nuts. The palate is a majestic, fascinating textural interplay of white and red, of chalk, acidity and phenolics. There is the feeling of onion skins gaining rich roundness and then resolving in a long chalky click.