

Bodegas y Vinedos Alnardo 'PSI' Tinto Fino

D.O. Ribera del Duero

Peter Sisseck, Pablo Rubio and a thousand growers ...

- Old vine wines without winemaking excess - honest, natural, relaxed and balanced.
- PSI is a cultural heritage project, protecting Ribera's old vine heritage genetic material (and the small owner-grower) from the twin scourges of viral Tempranillo and trellises.
- PSI's first vintage was 2007.



PSI is the brainchild of Peter Sisseck, founder of Dominio de Pingus.

The project is organised and run by winemaker Pablo Rubio. It's a sub-regional assemblage of authentic Tinto Finos, recovered from co-op production and re-imagined. These are the old bush-vine holdings of the senior citizens of Ribera del Duero (old peasant guys in the main); heritage genetics of great quality, but which have been making uninspired co-op plonk for decades. In conjunction with Pablo Rubio, Peter has re-fashioned the viticulture of these old vines, and rejuvenated the old guys' relationship with their gnarled old plots. These old, low-cropped vines of Tinto Fino have never seen chemicals. They are carefully handled and under-made in large old wood and raw concrete. The idea is to render concentrated old-vine fruit in as delicate and poetic register as possible.

'Alnardo' is a lovely tract of land near Peter's home, and is a mere namesake of the project, not its location. PSI is the 23rd letter of the Greek Alphabet (and also the initials P and Si of the maker, Señor Sisseck).

A wine of the villages

The main quality zone of Ribera del Duero is la Horra, in the centre of the appellation, above Rio Duero to the north between the village of Roa and the region's city, Aranda del Duero. The Ribera of the Duero runs south from Sierra de la Demanda (a mountain range in the Sistema Iberica), which separates Ribera from Rioja. Ribera's handful of stars (Pingus itself, Cillar de Silos, and Telmo Rodriguez) work in the la Horra zone.

Peter and Pablo by now organise seven villages to assemble PSI .

These villages radiate south, north and east towards Soria from la Horra/Aranda. The vines grow at 830-920 metres on clay-lime and sandy-gravel soils whose drainage controls excess fertility. PSI can only accept fruit from a given village once Pablo has collectivised the entire local co-op – it's all in, or nothing. The scale of this is unbelievable. From these seven villages they work 200 hectares scattered across 1200 plots (averaging less than 0.2 hectares), organised as 17 separate 'harvests'.



The villages in question are scattered south, north and east of la Horra/Aranda:

Castrillo de la Vega is below the river south-west of Aranda and la Horra and grows Garnacha at 830 metres, while Fuentenebro in the southern extreme of Ribera del Duero has deep pebbly, ferrous soils.

la Aguilera and Gumiel de Izan, are north-west and north of Aranda on calcareous gravel and sand at 900m.

To the east are the twin villages of Zazuar and Quemada, then Peñaranda de Duero (filigree calcareous soil layers).

The most important of these is Quemada - in between three different rivers, its sandy-calcareous soil has red silt and gravels. About a fifth of the wine for PSI comes from Quemada. The other six villages are all organised as one at the PSI bodega in Aranda de Duero. However, the Quemada fruit is handled on-site at the old Quemada co-op bodega, enabling Pablo more direct organisational control over the 300 growers of Quemada.

(P)re-cycled barrels

The de-stemmed fruit for PSI is fermented in large oval foudre (old 5500 litre wooden vats) although some of the fruit handled in Quemada is made in large neutral concrete vats. The wine is held in neutral 11,000 litre vats for most of its 17 months of maturation prior to release. However, for a part of the year, an intriguing barrel-regime quirk comes into play for part of the PSI assemblage ...

In another part of Ribera del Duero (the western village of Quintanilla de Onésimo), Peter Sisseck is usually ageing two vintages of Pingus and Flor de Pingus in French oak barriques (mainly Taransaud, not much of it new). I say usually, but for about 6 months of each year, in between bottling one vintage and beginning the ageing of another,

the barrels would otherwise be empty and at risk of drying out. Instead of taking hygiene and integrity risks with Dominio de Pingus's expensive oak, Peter sends Pingus's roughly 300 barrels to Pablo for use at PSI for about six months. The Pingus barrels are protected by constant fill with wine. When the next year's Pingus wines are ready for ageing, PSI is put back into large vats and Pingus gets its oak back in perfect condition. PSI, which starts and ends its maturation in big old oak vats, benefits from part of the blend gaining a modest touch of positive barrel character.



BODEGAS ALNARDO 'PSI' Tinto Fino, DO Ribera del Duero

Bodegas Alnardo 'PSI' Tinto Fino 2014

2014 is a powerful year with good balance, as a warm September followed lots of hail early in the ripening cycle, and 10% Garnacha is included to balance the Tinto Fino power.

The nose is spicy with white pepper, licorice, dark cola and rock, and a lovely thread of vegetal balsamics. A wine of great balance – the palate has plenty of warm spice and glides wonderfully without any sticking points. Delightfully low glycerol allows flow without clutter.

A note on old bush vines of Tinto Fino/Tinto del Pais

Tempranillo's local name is Tinto Fino and is also sometimes called Tinto del Pais. It is not Tempranillo by another name, but a distinct familial strain, as is Tinta de Toro, the version of 'Tempranillo' native to Toro a little to the west of Ribera. 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 Sisseck 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, just north of Aranda del Duero in the central part of Ribera del Duero were acquired and became the basis of Pingus. Similar plots constitute Flor de Pingus, and more lately the regional project PSI.

The old vines of Ribera del Duero's native strain of the Tempranillo family are rare, and becoming more so. In 1990, when Peter Sisseck arrived in the region, 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 'viral Tempranillo' grown on trellis (the term actually quotes Alvaro Palacios, but the sentiment is echoed by Peter Sisseck at every turn). Ribera del Duero is being systematically de-natured by the planting of industrial clones of higher-yielding, easier-to-grow Rioja Tempranillo. Meanwhile, the Consejo Regulador of D.O Ribera del Duero sits silently in observation, taking his tithes and keeping it zipped. I interviewed him on the matter recently and he proved an adept at shape-shifting-refusal to address the point.

HISTORICAL TASTING NOTES

Bodegas Alnardo 'PSI' Tinto Fino 2015

2015 was a dream vintage, with gentle conditions throughout and there was little work to do in vineyard or bodega. Harvest was easy and early.

Balsamic nose, herbal with red lavender and bracken ... The wine is delicate, nicely spiced and delightfully herbal, it's a real countryside wine, gently extracted with a touch of dark chocolate bitterness to finish.

Bodegas Alnardo 'PSI' Tinto Fino 2013

This smells remarkably of 'place' - red heather and dark scrubby-brushy garriga (more bark and sticks than floral-herbal) are unmistakable. The dark meaty fruit is alive, abuzz with electric minerals. The palate has a touch of ink, but is far from inky; studded with spice and briar, it has great reach and run, with a tingly-metal-mineral acid shore-wash fanning long out the back palate.

Bodegas Alnardo 'PSI' Tinto Fino 2012

Lovely purple, perfumed juice is inset with bracken-heather –brush smells typical of great Ribera del Duero (when extraction and oak regimes are tactful). Smoky blue florals (ashen bluebells), anise and roasted thyme mingle in the scrubby botanicals. Then there's the deep-set violet and bloody meat. Super-mineral, the licorice-rich fruit has wonderful ripe grape seed-and-skin features. A regionally typical maritime perfume arcs long and low way back into the palate. Mid-weight, un-sweet and low in glycerol, the wine has a gently leathery tannin grip rung through with tingling minerals. Typical of 2012s, it's in a dark register, but fine and elegant, horizontal and reaching.

2012 'PSI'

Tank sample tasted June 2013.

Leafy red fruits showing clearly the chalk and gravel soils in which they are grown, fine and very clear. 2012 has less extractive fat than 2011, more like 2010 in energy and line, beautifully spare but not sparse.

Bodegas Alnardo 'PSI' Tinto Fino 2011

PSI's 5th vintage is an open, charming delight. Cherry-choc fruit is inset with tobacco, anise, fennel, leather, kelp, bramble-heather and fine old vine woodiness. Sweet tannins, fine and silty, give run and spread back to a delta fan perfume finish. Lots of flavour, but delicately balanced with a lovely flutter-and-dance mouthfeel.

Bodegas Alnardo 'PSI' Tinto Fino 2010

Smoky purple fruits in a meat'n'beet register, red cola over meat glaze, with a pink peppercorn lift and the deep woodily-wizened smell of old, gnarly vines. Gently, beautifully earthy to smell and taste, it's full-but-bright, not heavy. Laden with dark cherry fruit, it's a fine, elegant and polished Ribera. Stylistically, it merges Burgundy and Barolo – a soft and juicy fruit entry leads into wonderful old-vine fruit tannin, with gentle acid/spice closure at palate's end. Beautifully deep, the subtle palate has wonderful fruit tannin, spice and expression of vine age. The most subtle of extraction and wood-ageing regimes makes it all possible – a great lesson to those all around the globe who routinely maul old vine gear with 'heroic winemaking'.

2010 'PSI'

Winery assemblage tasting just prior to bottling.

This will be stunning wine for a long time. Right now, it has heavily secondary aromatics – lots of tobacco (sensimilla-almost), fresh-cut brush and bracken, anise rings and hints of hung meat and clay which are lovely and very typical. Beautifully vegetal with hints of sweet-sour interplay and dark-spiced fruit set in baked earth. It's dry and elegant, with chalky and gravelly elements mingling with sweet tannin, sweetly spiced.

2009 'PSI'

2009 is a warm and dry vintage of great quality; in the sensitive hands of someone like Peter Sisseck we get wines combining power, complexity and deftness. Dry and hot from July on, September rains cooled and slowed things, and then the fruit was left to hang and harmonise quite late, being harvested in mid-to-late October. To obtain a softer extraction, the grapes of 'PSI' are vinified in large traditional concrete vats. The wine then spends a further 17 months ageing in a combination of concrete and wooden vats and oak barriques, all of which nurture and gently extract the wine's complexity and natural aromas. Winemaking (to the extent it's discernible) is incredibly dabbled and judicious.

Old vine material overly or overtly handled gets too dry and abstract, but this has been lightly handled and retains juicy deftness along with the old vine depth, extract and character. Raspberry leaf, with little clove and juniper spices, meat glaze and fine chocolate spread through typical sweet fleshy-vegetal tobaccoey tannins. Stylish indeed, the palate is self-assured, composed, deeply-rooted in its sense of place.