

## **ALICANTE, the MEDITERRANEAN and PEPE MENDOZA**

### **Bodegas Enrique Mendoza**

#### **PEPE MENDOZA Casa Agricola**

Pepe Mendoza is the star winemaker of DO Alicante, on the southern part of Spain's Mediterranean coast. He is responsible for his family's label, named for his father, Enrique. Of late, he has also developed a smaller, personal project, in conjunction with his wife, Pepa.

Pepe Mendoza Casa Agricola represents a transition for Pepe, beyond what is possible in the larger family project. Specifically, the aim is to utilise the opportunity afforded by low-cropped old vines to make wines with minimal intervention.

#### **PEPE MENDOZA Casa Agricola**

Pepe has spent the past few years developing a personal project, alongside his commitment to the family estate. Pepe Mendoza Casa Agricola (PMCA) is a collaboration with his wife, Pepa, and represents his challenge to himself to stay on the edge, nervous yet free from economical frameworks.

The mission statement goes (more or less):

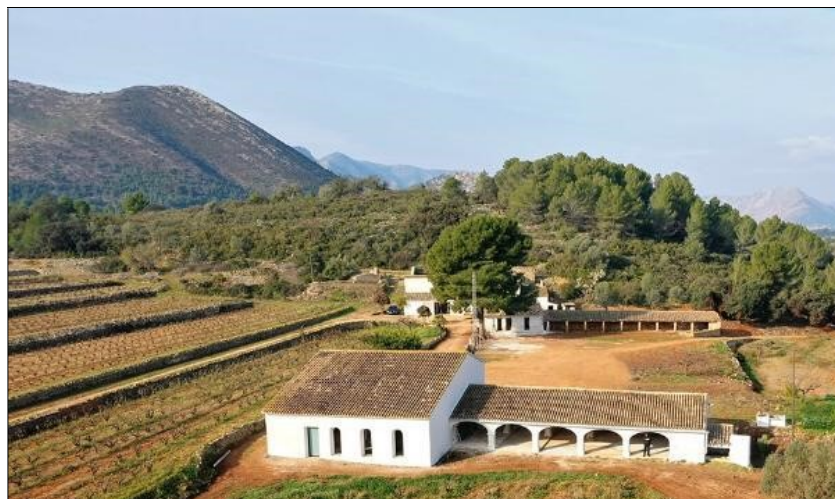
*"We can afford to make a little or lose a little, but we can't afford to sit pat".*

As with the family property, PMCA is a mix of 12 hectares of coastal vineyard (Giró and Moscatel) in Marina Biixa and another 10 hectares inland in Alto Vinalopó, near Villena (Monastrell, Garnacha Tintoreira, Airén, Macabeo). Some wines are released as PMCA, and other experimental or very small run (here today, then gone) wines are released under a parallel label, 'Pequeñas Producciones Vinícolas'.

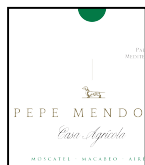
Here, even more than with Bodegas Enrique Mendoza, Pepe is wary of over-ripeness, seeking cool, gentle, delicate, low-intervention, wines. The wines are made free, and Pepe's not afraid of risk. If a given wine doesn't work out, that's the price he's prepared to pay in order to achieve radical successes. The wines are made in old *riuras* – arched raising huts, abandoned since phylloxera. PMCA is a definitive break with default notions of Alicante Monastrell as wines of 'fig and black olive'.

There's a deliberate duality in these wines.

DO Alicante is part-coastal and part-inland high country, and Pepe harnesses both. Some wines are 'Marina' – wines from the coastal strip, fresh, salty and light. Some are from 100km inland in the upper reaches of Rio Vinalopó. The entry white and red blend both sub-regions to stunning effect. You feel the sun and light of the Mediterranean, salt and balsamic scrub, and everything is effortless and deft. These are artisanal small production, minimum intervention wines, conceived for and defined by Mediterranean freshness. Wild, free and ... .. delicious!



### PMCA 'Paisaje Mediterraneo' Blanco de Moscatel Romano-Macabeo-Airen



Pepe's desire is to represent the mountains and the sea, the Mediterranean-and-interior duality of DO Alicante. It's a blend of *Parcela Benimei (Marina)* and *Parcela Serra Forta (Tierras de Alta Vinalopó)*. Organically farmed fruit is temperature-control fermented with natural vineyard yeasts in 5,000 litre tanks, then ages on lees. 40% Moscatel (coastal) and from the interior, 40% Macabeo, with Airen. It's a flowing wine, mid weight, smelling of fennel pollen, dandelion, wild field herbs, camomile. Sapid, saline, with granite-like acidity, nettle astringency, stones, artichoke and pollen through and through.

*The smell of talc expresses fragrant white tannin, and there's lemon balm, marine saline and mandarin blossom against a background of cut green grape. Coastal Moscatel gives jasmine, rose petal and orange skin, while the hinterland fruit gives lavender, fennel, camomile. The palate's mineral-metal tangy, chalky with lemon oil and mandarin skin. Excellent spice runs a diagonal staple through the round fruit heart, and everything is guided until it's damned well grounded. Salt, lemon balm and white tannin repeat the nose perfectly and the green, grapey, perfumed fruit wriggles like a fish on a stick.*

### PMCA 'Pureza' Moscatel en anfora



Based on coastal 'Tierras de la Marina' *parcelas Pla de Lliber and Benimei*. It's macerated for 6 days on skins, then fermented with stems and skins in *anfora* of 220-300 litres (local clay made by Juan Padilla). After pressing, it returns to *anfora* 6 months, then is bottled direct, neither fined nor filtered. White wine with a red wine soul, it's as far from potpourri Moscatel as one can get! The name?: *PURITY!*

*With a heady jasmine scent, nuanced with menthol, the nose is skiny, spicy, oily and layered. There's dried rose petal, preserved lemon, cardamom-curry, fermented lime skin and a touch of the 'choke' of artichoke (serving suggestion!). The clay buzz of the anfora meets the brine buzz of the Mediterranean. Short of mid-weight but deeply textured, expansive, savoury-salty, skiny, delicate and open. OMFG.*

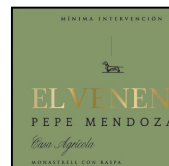
### PMCA 'Paisaje Mediterraneo' Tinto de Monastrell-Giró



Monastrell (70%), 20% Giró and touches of with Syrah and Garnacha Tintoreira (Alicante Henri Bouchet). The Giró is coastal from *Abargues*, the rest from dry grown bush vines in Alto Vinalopó from '*Parcela el Veneno*' and '*Parcela Los Burros*'. Organic viticulture, whole fruit with 20% stems, fermented naturally in 1,000 litre tank at 21 degrees. 20% is aged in 500L French oak, most rests in tank.

*Magnificently fresh, fiercely Mediterranean in its scrubland balsamic aromas. Ultra-pure, light and flowing wine of rosemary, pine, laurel, thyme, resin, scrub. Mulberry leaves, stones and red dates in a mix of orchard and maritime smells. A saline thread lines the gently spiced cherry lipstick fruit, which is less than mid-weight, with gentle tannin and subdued glycerol. Delicate acidity is soft, freshly on point. Ease of passage, balsamic lift, balance and light are the thing. The palate's more flutter than chew, beautifully laid out and running.*

### PMCA Monastrell de parcela 'el Veneno'



'El Veneno' is a mountain *parcela* in Alto Vinalopó. The name means a bad man, literally 'venemous' ... the vineyard was planted by a guy famous for his foul temper. The vineyard is a beautiful parcel of goblet-trained Monastrell, rain-fed in dry, stony marl. Aged 12 months in 500l French barrels, after a gentle maceration of whole fruit with 50% stems and fermentation in 5<sup>th</sup> use oak (1,000 litre vats). Since 2017.

*A super-fresh and nimble wine of Mediterranean garriga, sweet spices and strands of fine, briary tannins running through delicate red fruit. Smells and tastes of wild green fennel, rosemary, fresh tobacco, mulberry leaves, red date and brined olive. There's the smell of hands damp with potting clay, and a hint of leather. An opening riff of beautiful little skiny wild red cherries gains spices to finish dry and nutty as the acid takes the show to a gently fading, long and delicate close.*

## PMCA Giró de parcela 'Abargues'



Giró is a variety you will hear more and more about. Nearby on Mallorca, 4 Kilos, Eloi Cedo and Galmes-Ribot are also into this local grape being recuperated, and Àlvaro Palacios has just planted a dedicated Giró plot just above the back of his winery in Gratallops (Àlvaro has been waiting 15 years to get *derechos* – planting permission – for this *parcela*). Pepe has 10 hectares of 80yo Giró vines in Lliber and Xaló (aka Pop Valley) in Tierras de la Marina. It's fermented with 30% stems.

So, what is Giró?

Right now, this is simply a matter for debate. Some argue it's a Garnatxa derivative, with a 'hairy' back, possibly related to Garnatxa Peluda? Others think it may be related to the Girò of Sardegna. Giró/Girò? We do know that in Mallorca they have three distinct Girós: Giró Blanc, Giróros (with very low anthocyanin count in skins, this makes a natural pink) and Giró Tinto (currently maybe 7 hectares of this). Perhaps the key to identity theory comes down to historical population shifts. After expulsion of the Moors from Alicante in 1608 and post bubonic plague, Alicante was re-populated by one wave of immigrants, the Navarrese from Aragon, who may have brought Garnacha with them. A second re-population came over the water in the form of an influx of Mallorquines. Strengthening the Sardegna/Mallorca/Alicante theory (the argument against it being a form of Garnacha), is that Sardegna was a Spanish colony during the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Either way, it's another victim in the all-too-familiar story of loss post-phylloxera and post-Civil War: 80% of Spain's interesting local varieties were abandoned because they were vulnerable to diseases like oidium, or because of poor yields, or because they only produced interesting wines if low-cropped and from old vines. It's a variety with large clusters of low colour content in the skins. Its wines are very Mediterranean, aromatically delicate with some body and good structure, age-worthy.

*It's gorgeous: floral-scrubby-briary, smelling of mint, pine and menthol garriga, essential oil, cepes and wild sour herbs and nuggets of spice in electric red earth. Pure and giving wine, smelling of its surrounds, wandering on delicate tannin. Woodsy florals hold the wine beautifully open, reaching to the sky. It's round, but lean in glycerol, with a light slick of cherry tannin, a stoney structure, finishing fresh.*

## PEQUEÑAS PRODUCCIONES VINICOLAS Merseguera 2017

With 5% moscatel. Merseguera CAN (contra the books) have good aroma and acidity, if the kilos are kept down and viticulture is organic (less than 1.5 kg/plant). This is from Sierras de la Marina, parcels Lliber and Finca de Abargues. 6 months in *anfora* with *velo de flor* but no ullage.

*Chamomile pollen on buttered toast, citronella, lemon skin, a delicate touch of honeycomb-cell waxiness and a touch amargo bitter. Resolves long and gentle with grip in the centre and a fantastic slide-by-slide movie-still release to finish. This is really, really lovely.*



## Bodegas Enrique Mendoza

For the past 20 years, Pepe Mendoza has headed his family's *bodega*, a project founded by and named after his father, Enrique. The winery is located on the coast in Alfaz del Pi, roughly halfway between the major cities of Valencia and Alicante. On the saline soils near the coast some Moscatel is grown, but most of their action is in red wine, which is grown 100 winding kilometres up-and-inland near Villena. Villena is the main *pueblo* in the Val do Rio Vinalopó, at around 600 metres' altitude, under the Sierra Mariola which separates Alicante from its northern neighbour DO Valencia. This is the Alto Vinalopó – the river snakes down from here and out to the coast in the south-eastern corner of the Alicante DO. Here there are hot summers and very cold winters, but always cold nights (a 38 degree day will be only 12 in the evening). Despite the heat and extreme dryness, outstanding viticulture can attain a balance of concentration, aromatic vitality and overall freshness. For Pepe, achieving this is more moral necessity than mere possibility.



The Mendozas, firstly Enrique and more-so Pepe, have spent 30 years de-vigouring the local Monastrell and replenishing its prestige. Once cropped at 4kg/bush vine (but now at a mere 1/8<sup>th</sup> of that), Monastrell suffered a cultural cringe identity crisis, whereby the naturally adapted local variety was viewed as rustic and inferior, whereas French grapes were identified with 'quality'. Better viticulture, capital and confidence (and a lot of hard work) has set the fix.

The business commenced in 1984 when Pepe's father Enrique planted 20 hectares, mainly to French grapes grown *en espaldera* (on trellis). By 2014, they had 80 hectares of vines, increasingly planted to local Monastrell. Low-density planting of goblet-pruned bush-vines (1000 plants/hectare) is preferred. Growing low to the ground, the leaves spread and protect the fruit during the day, with the shade preserving refreshing humidity.

All of Pepe's focus is viticultural, with yields down around ½ kg/vine. The farming is 'biological-radical': mildew management via dandelion infusions, cinnamon powder for spiders, with camomile, nettle and other infusions also used for pest and disease control. Pepe likes to work the soil, not the canopy. Soils are opened to receive water in winter and closed a little in summer to retain it. French grapes live on a drip, but Monastrell's deep old vine roots and parsimonious nature allows for totally dry growing. Pruning is done on the rising new moon, when all the energy is going into the roots.

There are two major problems affecting viticulture:

Wood rot fungus (*Eutypiosis*) is a major problem in the vineyards, often necessitating vine replacement. *Lobesia Botrana*, (*Polilla del Racimo*), or grape moth is the other. With long vegetative cycles and late harvests, Monastrell and Cabernet are susceptible to botrytis, which is facilitated by grape moths: they eat and breed in the berries, leaving them open to rot. It's a 'Mediterranean problem' Pepe says, from Jerez to Priorat. 'The University' wants them to spray chemical killers three times per year, which is not selective and kills all biological balance in the vineyards. Instead, Pepe deploys an organic defence - sexual confusion pheromones: one in three plants are hung with pheromone diffusers – if everything smells female, the male moths can't find an actual female moth to mate and propagate with.

Pruning cuts are painted with mastic gum and copper sulphur: "a half a million wounds kept clean", Pepe says, as he aims to keep energy centred in the plant and shut out disease. "The more energy I get into the wine out here, the less stuff I have to do in the winery". His plants balance at 500-600 grams of fruit. Enough but not excess vineyard stress results in flavour and texture development in combination with good pH and acid freshness.

Everything in the winery is done by hand, including pigeage. No Pumps. The combination of wood, air and anthocyanins from grape-skins develop colour, structure and stability, compared say to micro-oxidation which may open green tannins but sooner than later the wine will appear over-worked and tire very easily. Wood is low-to-mid toast Nadalie in the main, very low impact, in larger formats and only newish. Pepe is



playing with new square box fermenters with removable panels which make for easy cleaning and reduce the likelihood of wines “going in bad directions” (acquiring brettanomyces).

## VILLENA

In the Val do Rio Vinalopó, in the north-western corner of DO Alicante, 100km inland from Alfaz del Pi, Villena is home to Pepe’s red grape vineyards. Here is the interior limit of the mountains which rise up from the coast; further inland the land opens out to become the high *meseta* of La Mancha. Bodegas Enrique Mendoza have 80 hectares at Villena, mainly Monastrell and Cabernet, but also 5 hectares planted to the local white, Merseguera – you can look forward to seeing this elaborated one day soon.

40 million years ago, Villena was under sea; the basin of the valley is an old sea salt-lake bed. There are three soils in inverted layers: soft, poor *arenas* (sand); *argila* (clay); and chalky-pebbly stone soils. Here, Pepe’s “little bonsai plants” have a natural yield restriction to less than 600 grams/bush-vine, and there’s no need for green harvest - balance takes place in the field.

There are four main vineyards:

**El Xaconero** (or Chaconero in *castellano*) is in the middle of the valley, with maritime soils planted to Monastrell and French varieties. The hills around this valley basin contain three vineyards planted to varietal Monastrell: Estrecho in the south-west, La Tremenda to the south-east and Las Quebradas in the north-east.

**Estrecho** has a dual north-south aspect. The ‘*estrecho*’ is the saddle between the base of two nearby hills. It is a 10 hectare plot of 70yo organically-farmed bush-vines at up to 700 metres altitude. The soil is poor sand, chalk and old river alluvium. It yields about 700kg/hectare on 2mx2m plantings. The very warm south-facing section of the vineyard yields down around 200 grams per plant. If this material over-ripens, it becomes the source fruit for *Fondillon*.

**La Tremenda** is an organic vineyard of 30yo bush-vines grown at 600m altitude, facing west. La Tremenda was planted by Pepe in 1990, and is a 13 hectare plot which blends three soils types: *aglomerado* (clay and pebble), *arenas* (sand) and *calissa* (chalk) ... one powerful, one relaxed, one fresh.

**Las Quebradas** (the broken lands) has multi-faceted exposures, predominantly facing south towards el Chaconero in the valley. Quebradas is very dry, with water run-off stressing the 75yo vines, yielding only 300grams/plant, or 800kg/hectare from the 9ha property. The soil is very stony - big pebbles mix with *argila* (clay), *calissa* (chalk) and *silex* (flinty sand).

## WHAT TO EXPECT IN A GLASS OF PEPE’S REDS?

Sprinkles of bushy Mediterranean herbs decorate the surface of lovely, subtle dark fruits. There’s nothing liquorous or heavy, nor any heat. There are touches of saline among the scrubby herb, controlled richness and body, sweet-floral licorice tannins and gentle-rounded finishing acidity ... these descriptors hold equally for Pepe’s Cabernets as for his Monastrells!

### Enrique Mendoza ‘La Tremenda’ Single Vineyard Monastrell, DO Alicante

La Tremenda was planted by Pepe and is a 13 hectare plot which blends three soils types: agglomerate clay and pebble, sand and chalk ... one powerful, one relaxed, one fresh. 1/3 is barrel-aged, with freshness promoted by 2/3 unwooded fruit.

### Enrique Mendoza ‘La Tremenda’ Single Vineyard Monastrell, DO Alicante

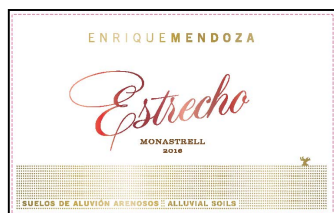


*Dried dates and figs, honey, rosemary, lavender, bay and dried hide, studded with angelica and licorice ... the Monastrell varietal roll-call! There’s gently balsamic redwood, earthy, black rock aromatics and tar. The dark fruits flourish a potpourri of dried herbs. Neither fruity nor dry, the palate is plush, with mineral freshness lifting the dark, leathery fruits. Very soft, dry-savoury fruit tannins run things. It’s dark, soft and satisfying, never heavy, with nice lift, good length and a fresh spicy exit.*

### **Enrique Mendoza 'Estrecho' Single Vineyard Monastrell, DO Alicante**

**Estrecho** sits above the valley in the south-west and has a dual north-south aspect. Here, Pepe explicitly seeks "the delicacy and elegance of the variety", avoiding over-extraction or compression in winemaking. Aged 14 months in new to 3yo 500 litre French wood (mainly low toast, low impact Nadalie).

#### Enrique Mendoza 'Estrecho' Single Vineyard Monastrell, DO Alicante



*Balsamic, with date, plum, fig, mature wood, pippy-glazed fruits and red spice lifting slowly out of a deep sense of earth. Savoury leathery, earthen tannins drive the show, then mingle and release into a sweet, fresh acid finish. Dark lozenge fruit is marked by shrubby woodsiness, tobacco and anise. With nice volume, it's round with mineral vitality and has very good movement in the mouth. There's subtle spice in gentle tannin-acid framed by mature pips and stems, finishing perfumed, fresh with laurel-herbal balsalm.*

### **Enrique Mendoza 'Las Quebradas' Single Vineyard Monastrell, DO Alicante**

A super-stony vineyard, Quebradas' was first released from the 2010 harvest. Wild yeast, un-pumped, fermented with hand-plunged cap in an open-ended 500 litre barrel (later closed for regular ageing) avoiding batonnage in preference to gentle extraction. Pressed off before fermentation completes, the last 30 grams of sugar ferments out in the maturation barrels. Un-racked.

#### Enrique Mendoza 'Las Quebradas' Single Vineyard Monastrell, DO Alicante



*Gamier, sweeter and rounder than Estrecho. The tannins a little more upright and tense, with the vineyard's chalkiness entirely configuring the tannin profile. The juice carries beautifully, flowing long and languorous at the back over the tannin squareness. Sweet pippy acidity dances the tannin off, opening and releasing the wine into OJ-juicy freeness. It's squarer and more structured than Estrecho but neither heavy nor closed.*

### **Enrique Mendoza 'el Xaconero' Single Vineyard Monastrell, DO Alicante**

90% Monastrell, with 5% each of Garnacha and Syrah, this valley floor *parcela* was planted by Pepe himself in 2009. It's made in stainless and then 'tuned' in older Allier barrels for 12 months. The name means 'land of January ponds', referring to the waters which pool after post-harvest heavy rains.

#### Enrique Mendoza 'el Xaconero' Single Vineyard Monastrell, DO Alicante



*This is a really elegant, soft, delicate and easy Monastrell, and very much marked by Mediterranean balsam. The lovely, gentle red-black currant fruit is herb-flecked, with thyme leading and a touch of rosemary, and green garlic stem. The wild herb emulsion has a touch of peppermint and a lash of smoky, bramble and brush. The wine's clean and flowing, of real purity with a perfect tannin-acid fresh-and-glide combo in play. It's Monastrell/Mourvedre on the most deft level of silk, great fruit and style.*

## **D.O. Alicante – Monastrell y Mas**

Located in the Autonomous Community of Valencia, down Spain's Mediterranean east coast, D.O. Alicante produces elegant warm country wines, predominantly dry reds from Monastrell and sweet whites from Moscatel. Vines were introduced to the area by the Phoenicians around 1000BC, and a further influx of vines and wine culture came with the Romans. The region has long benefitted from the manifold Phoenician-Roman gifts of wheat, oil, wine and amphorae.

Alicante is the driest Spanish wine region, with 300mm or so rainfall per year. The winters are short and the summers are long, hot and nearly rainless. High altitude, however, with its dramatic diurnal temperature range, facilitates retention of acidity and the ability to maintain relative delicacy, definition and finesse. Alicante was the last place in Spain to get phylloxera. Some parts with very sandy soils remained louse-free.

The Alicante D.O. of around 10,000 hectares (just 55 producers) is divided into two sub-regions: coastal La Marina, just inland from the area's popular beach towns such as Benidorm is home to Moscatel del Mar.

Alicante subzone (northwest, inland from the capital, Alicante) is where the Monastrell is grown. The main red wine growing area is the Vinalopó valley at up to 700 metres' altitude. Crop limits are 9.5 tonnes/ha.

Alicante, along with Yecla and Jumilla (D.O.s further inland) is home to Monastrell (aka Mourvedre in Southern France, where a rather tougher derivative of the variety is grown). Yecla and Jumilla have tertiary soils yielding a sweet, strong, creamy Monastrell. Alicante has several advantages over these. Its poor quaternary soils, its freshening breezes from the sea during summer, and its overall mountainous nature promote fruit with depth of flavour, freshness and finesse at lower alcohol degree than its neighbours. Long, slow ripening, with harvest in mid-to-late October and slow, careful winery elaboration can yield Monastrell wines with great structure *and* freshness.

Grape varieties in production include:

White: Merseguera, Airen, Macabeo, Verdil, Chardonnay, Moscatel and others.

Red: Monastrell, Garnacha, Garnacha Tintoreira, Tempranillo, Bobal (blech!), Cabernet, Syrah and others.

### **Monastrell**

Known also as Mourvedre or Mataro, Monastrell is native to the south-east of Spain, in regions like Alicante, Jumilla and Yecla. Old plantings on poor-soiled slopes feature the meat, tar, berry, floral and muscular tannin typical of Mourvedre. It is rather a more successful straight varietal on home turf, however – often showing plentiful red/black berry juiciness which the variety rarely achieves elsewhere.

You will see plenty of skins and tannin in these wines. Their IPT (indication of total polyphenol) is in the 45-60 range, compared to Rioja at around 30). Monastrell has not long been held in high regard, even locally. Once seen (in large part, no doubt, due to the privations and perverse effects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on Spanish regional confidence, economy and outlook) as rustic, oxidative, short-lived and un-special, it is undergoing a significant renaissance. Vigour management is critical, as Monastrell can be cropped at up to 4kg/vine, yielding unexceptional wine. While some have taken an industrial approach to improving quality with technical yeasts, enzyme treatments and so on, reduction of yields is the first and best strategy.

It is rumoured that Monastrell was brought to the area from a mission against the Greeks in 12-13<sup>th</sup> centuries by Corona Aragon (the Aragonese king), who returned to Camp de Morvedre, near Valencia and from here it migrated to the southern Rhone, where it makes tougher wines.

### **Fondillón**

An unfortified local specialty wine style. For many years, the local wine, known simply as Alicante, was a radical style, now called Fondillón, a Monastrell-based rancio wine - purposely oxidized and very slightly sweet. It had nearly become extinct but the style has been preserved by half a dozen small family bodegas, particularly Primitivo Quiles. Enrique Mendoza have a new Fondillón solera in development right now. Fondillón is unfortified and barrel-aged at least ten years and often more than twenty before release.

