

Telmo Rodriguez

Garnachas de Cebreros, Tierras de Castilla y Leon (Sierra de Gredos)

'Pegaso Barrancos de Pizzara' Garnacha

'Pegaso Granito' Garnacha

Telmo, Cebreros and Garnacha

Telmo Rodriguez and his viticultural partner, Pablo Eguzkiza, have several small patches of amazing old vine Garnacha high above the little village of Cebreros ("Seb-ray-dos"), about 90 minutes west and north of Madrid, in the province of Avila.



Cebreros is not part of a recognised D.O. The appellation is simply Vinos de Tierras de Castilla y Leon, but there is gathering recognition that the hills of Cebreros and surrounds (the Sierra de Gredos) are a special wine place and there is a possibility of a more local appellation one day soon.



However, the wine from here has significant history. Many will be familiar with the process of "Hermitag e" where Burgundies used to be beefed up with Northern Rhone Syrah (notionally from Hermitage) ... well, historically the Garnacha from the mountains above Cebreros were the "Hermitag e" equivalent for weak wines from La Rioja. Full, delicious and structural Cebreros Garnacha was trucked spy-style in the night to needy Riojans, and was transplanted into otherwise feeble Gran Reservas without acknowledgement. However, economic shifts led to a real breakdown in the local economy, and the wines of the area have been in disrepair, and many vineyards were abandoned outright.

As with many other Spanish wine regions, the decline has been a three-phase process. Firstly, the huge hit by phylloxera in the late 19th century. Only a fraction of the region's historical vineyards were replanted before the second disruption – the Civil War and the subsequent Fascist-Catholic alliance's terror regime lasting nearly a half century. This was exacerbated by a third factor – post-WW2 capitalism's industrial shift completing the emptying out of the countryside, with a pursuant devaluation of real viticulture.

The town of Cebreros and the mountain vineyards above it are nestled in the slopes of the Sierra de Gredos, with grapes grown at up to 1200 metres' altitude. Most of the vineyards are fashioned from quartz-flecked brown slate with no actual soil. A profusion of green herbs, lavender and fennel grow wild throughout the dry, widely spaced vineyards. It's freezing in winter, blazing hot in summer and very dry. Garnacha is well adapted to wind and heat, and quite resistant to oidium, so it's perfectly adapted for the area.

Telmo and Pablo have a minor partner in the Pegaso project. The bodega is on a property owned by former F1 driver (and current owner of Real Madrid), Carlos Saez. Maybe this is why Telmo says it's just an hour west out of Madrid – it takes me nearly two! "Pegaso" is actually a Spanish truck brand, and a little joke of Telmo's – it's rustic, ubiquitous, primitive and functions at up to 1200 metres, just like Garnacha!

Vineyards and Viticulture

The project began in the mid-90s with the purchase of two south-facing vineyards, 'Galayo' and 'Arrebatacapos'. They are planted to a mere 1000 or so vines/hectare and the yields are pitifully low, averaging a tonne per hectare (2 tonnes to the 3.5 hectares of Galayo). The low yields are further threatened by local game, as the remote vineyards serve as lunch for wild boar, goats and deer. All are 'en vaso' (goblet-pruned bush vines), grown on Rupestres rootstocks.

Telmo discovered Galayo by following his nose to the smell of vinegar coming from the old co-op winery at the base of Cebreros. Intrigued, he went for a ramble up to the top and found a wonderful old vineyard of

bush-vine Garnacha, which took the form of a 'clos', a dry-stone-walled enclosed vineyard ... when the vineyard was abandoned, the gate was sealed by an old bed-spring mattress, now immortalised on the label (the original decorates Telmo's Madrid apartment as a form of wall art). The vineyard was uncared-for and un-productive. Telmo and Pablo spent 5 years renovating it before releasing their first Pegaso, the 1999. There was no 2000 Pegaso release, as wild boars decimated the already tiny harvest.

There are in fact two Pegaso wines, differentiated by the soil profiles in which they grow:

- The predominant local soil is schist (brown slate), grown at up to 1200 metres. Thus, the first Pegaso was known as Pegaso 'Pizzara de Barrancos' (literally, 'crazy slopes of schist'), from a selection of 6 Pizzara soil parcels high above Cebreiros.
- Telmo and Pablo later purchased a granite single vineyard - Robledillo - nestled among Green Oaks and Parasol Pines. This gives us Pegaso 'Granito', first released in 2006.

Organic and Biodynamic viticulture is renovating the soil after decades of abuse by chemical fertilisers and herbicides. Powdered sulphur is applied if there is risk of oidium, and very occasionally there's a bit of copper spray prior to sulphur. Poo is added for soil energy every 3 years or so.

All vineyard work is done by hand and horse – including hand-digging a dung hole in rock to fertilise each bush vine. Most of the work is in digging in the grasses and herbs. 3 passes are made with a little digger-tractor and a further 2 by hand close to the vines. Vineyard manager, Julian, at 84 years old does all this work, managing 15 hectares with two assistants – hand-tending 15,000 vines. As he says, "In the slopes, always is better, always is harder".

Winemaking

Pablo says:

"everything depends" ...

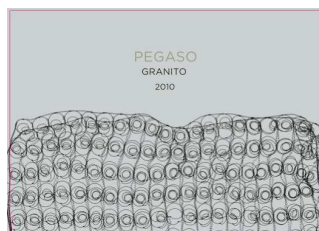
There's no set process, certainly no recipe: whole bunch, malolactic, fermentation mode and vessel ... it's a horses-for-courses game every year. For example, the granite vineyard Robledillo which is usually fermented in stainless steel open cube Tinajas was made in 'Tiñajas' (amphorae) and foudre after the 2012 harvest. Generally speaking though, under-extracting and gently fermenting is the aim, with making and ageing conducted in an older, larger wood and clay regime. Fermentation is in a mix of Tinajas, Foudre, Amphorae and raw concrete vessels, and most maturation is in 400 and 600 litre used French oak for around 2 years.



Telmo Rodriguez 'Pegaso Granito' Garnacha

The granite vineyard Robledillo is at high altitude (over 1000m), but flatter in profile than the schist slopes and is oriented to the north. The cold mineral soil and cool orientation promotes amazing finesse and delicacy in the fruit of these centenarian goblet-pruned bush vines. Originally, Telmo thought Pegaso 'Granito' would be an 'intro' wine at a lower price, a prelude to Pegaso 'Barrancos de Pizzara', but once the fruit became finished wine it was clearly different-but-equal to the wines from schist.

Pegaso Granito

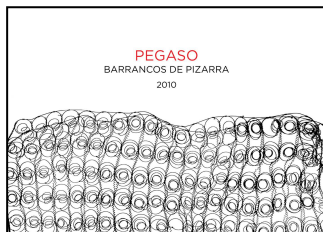


Orange juice and Tahitian lime enliven the nose, which has a layer of bracken over pimentón-spiced tiny red berry fruit, with dried rose and briar. There's good volume on entry to the palate, which is long, subtle and balanced, forming a delta fan out and back in the mouth, without ever getting big. The large, older barrels used are perfectly integrated with the old wood character of these centenarian vines – careful extraction has promoted delicacy and harmony, where too often such characters become caricatures; very long-lived.

Telmo Rodriguez 'Pegaso Barrancos de Pizarra' Garnacha

A 'barranco' is a radical vineyard, and these really are: 6 small parcels of brown schist, vertiginous slopes at nearly 1000m altitude. There is no actual 'soil' to speak of, just crumbled soft schist, very minerally with lots of quartz. Spectacularly barren, these vineyards in remote hills have a timeless, wild, forlorn beauty.

Pegaso Barrancos de Pizarra



The nose is a mix of glorious red fruits (wild cherry, leathery plum, boysenberry), with small flowers, angelica, the bitter oils of herbaceous scrub, thyme honey and a cold metal minerality from the slate soil. Despite great vine age and fruit concentration, Pegaso smells fresh and lively with great balance between red fruit sweetness and savoury earth aspects. The balsam and mineral smells of place inflect the mouth too, along with a peeled orange citric acid thrill. The palate is textured by a thread of beautifully mature tannin, tingling with minerals and vibrant with bright acidity. The structure of the savoury mid-palate releases to a juicy ease at end, lingering wonderfully and releasing with a perfume waft.