

Telmo Rodriguez, DO Toro

In Zamora province, Toro is a western Castilian wine appellation, adjacent to DO Rueda, about 1½ hours north of Madrid. Toro specialises in red wines, whereas Rueda is a white-only appellation (mainly the local Verdejo). Rueda is cooler and higher with sandy-chalk soil, whereas the extreme continental climate of Toro is blisteringly hot in Summer, with richer, heavy alluvial clay soils.



Like Rueda, DO Toro is configured by Rio Duero (an hour or so west of DO Ribera del Duero) as the Duero approaches the Portuguese border (and a name change to Douro). The main town, Toro, is in the northern part of the appellation on a northward loop of Rio Duero. A long, deep flood plain split by the river runs more or less south of Toro township. As one travels south from the township, the vineyards get higher in altitude and later in picking time, and the grapes become smaller and thicker-skinned. The western side of the valley is very heavy clay, while in the east are pockets of poorer, lighter sandy-pebbly-limestone soil.

Toro was conferred as an appellation in 1987 and the Consejo Regulador oversees 50 bodegas and 1200 winegrowers working around 8,000 hectares of vines. Rainfall is low - less than 400mm per annum on average. Vines are grown at around 700m elevation. Tinta de Toro and Garnacha reds, along with Verdejo and Malvasia whites are the authorised grapes of the region, although Tinto de Toro is routinely confused for and described as, Tempranillo. There is also a bit of Viña de Mesa white made from Albillo Mayor, albeit, as Pablo describes it, “not much, and not much good”.

Toro really is *not* wine country first-and-foremost. The majority of the soils are clay-silt alluvium, both too rich and too heavy for growing good wine grapes, but ideal for cash crops. Toro is great cereal crop country, but most of the local wines are hot, heavy and dumpy, often brutal. In much of Toro, the clay is a super-heavy, sticky, hyper-saturated, greasy red mass, which in summer dries to a crumbling biscuit base – terrible for wine grapes. However, Telmo and Pablo seek out the highest, poorest slopes with pebbly-sand soils that drain more easily, seeking to craft deft expressions of the local Tinta de Toro. Above the wheat crops and free from the heavy cracking clay of the valley, these vineyards are populated by walnut and holm oak trees, small round shrubby pines, poplars-and-elms seeking water, with pepperminty-anise, poppies, daisies, clover, camomile, calendula, thistle and various grasses. The high-note and astringent perfume of fennel in the wines directly reflects the vineyards.

Their holdings are in three pueblos (very small ‘towns’):

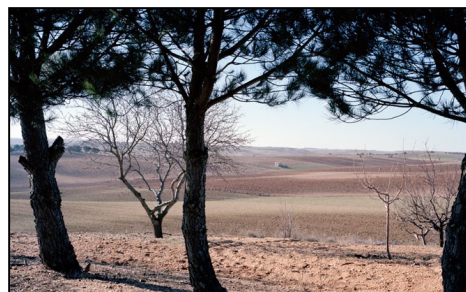
- Argujillo in the south-west, 20 small plots on sandy clay with pebbles at around 800 metres
- Morales de Toro, north of Toro (pebbly-chalky-limestone)
- Villabuena in the centre of the valley, south of Toro (clay and sand).

Telmo and Pablo take a fiercely historical-curatorial stance in Toro, as elsewhere, opposing the infiltration of Tempranillo, of trellises, of wood chips and chemical winemaking (introduced yeasts, additions of acid and tannin), seeking to preserve the local and historical. Note that in the influential “Wine Grapes” publication by Jancis Robinson et al, that Tinta de Toro and Tinto Fino (or Tinta del Pais, the Ribera del Duero variety) are dismissed as mere synonyms of Tempranillo. All the credible producers who work with and preserve the local strains of DOs Toro and Ribera del Duero argue vehemently that these are distinct, locally evolved cultivars. (For what it’s worth, I think “Wine Grapes” is flawed by a geneticist essentialism with fetishises DNA testing for supposedly Platonic varieties over the evolutionary, mutational emergence of cultivars in place over time.)

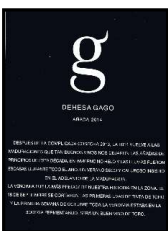


TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Dehesa Gago' Tinta de Toro

Dehesa Gago was one of Telmo and Pablo's first wines labels. In fact, the first vintage of Dehesa Gago (1999) sported the full G-Spot label now worn by big sister Gago. The 'Baby G' label came into being for the 2000, release when Gago 1999 joined the fold. Most of the fruit for Dehesa Gago comes from chalky limestone soils filled out with (really) big pebbles near Morales de Toro, north of Toro. The wine is fermented in large concrete, steel and old oak vats, and aged unwooded in stainless steel, undergoing a couple of rackings to mature the wine in air. With no additions save for a necessary touch of sulphur at bottling, Dehesa Gago is an utterly natural expression of local fruit structured by natural grape tannin and acid.



TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Dehesa Gago' Tinta de Toro



Glacé cherry and dark fruit tea, with touches of smoky brush, pepperminty and whole-of-orchard balsam and florals. There's husky spice, with the powerful silt-clay soils of Toro are in clear evidence underneath. All lovely and exuberant, but the real point with this wine is just how delicate and pared back it is compared to the Toro norm. Unwooded (aged in concrete and old wood vats) it's not fruity, not raw, not heavy, just a beautifully moderated fruit riot organised on glorious, gravelly, grip-and-release fruit tannins. Simple and special, with spread and reach, never sweet, heavy nor lumpy.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Gago' Tinta de Toro

A vibrant, gently earthy wine, Gago is slick and polished, extremely well-organised, gently oaked. Organically grown fruit is selected from parcels grown at Villanueva and Valdefincas. Fermentation is in medium-sized stainless steel Tiñas and clean old oak vats. The wine is aged around 18 months in relatively neutral French oak 225 and 600 litre barrels. Beautifully made, with great finesse and excellent integration, unifying slick fruit and Toro earthiness via lovely, typical Toro nutty tannins, Gago begs for at least 3 years' cellaring to allow regional perfume, earth, and all the many layers of complexity to really express.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Gago' Tinta de Toro



Black cherry, cassis and blue floral primary aromas are gorgeously smooth, smudged to interest with touches of game, truffle and chocolate, clove and soft dark wood spice. Silky dark, spicy fruit in the mouth is vegetal and lush, streaked with smoked heather and earthy minerals. A lively Toro-typical nutty acid-tannin structure affects a fresh, lively drink with good concentration of silky dark, spicy fruit. Elegant, with a lovely long line and terrific perfume release at end.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Pago la Jara' Tinta de Toro

PLJ is a selection blending 5 plots, aiming (unlike many top cuvees) for maximum finesse, rather than maximum impact. In Villabuena, the 'el Carnicero' ('the Butcher') plot grows low-density (2x2.5 metre spacing) bush-vines - withered tiny things, like old Nonnas, these yield a tiny 700kg/hectare. Mainly planted to Tinta de Toro, which sets very small clusters, there's a bit of 'Albillo Major' white mixed through the vineyards. In Argujillo to the south, and around the nebulous Toro/Rueda boundary (more like a frontier!), another cluster of small plots in the highest parts have deep roots penetrating clay and sand into bedrock and feature un-grafted old bush-vines which balance themselves wonderfully. One of these plots, Bamejales (2.5 hectares that yield maybe 4.5 tonnes) yields lots of Albillo white and Garnacha tinto, which Pablo uses in whole bunches to top dress the open fermentations of Tinto Fino from the other plots, like icing a cake, aiming to reduce the concentration of fruit off these very old, big, low vines.

Fermentation takes place in large old open vats, with ageing in a mix of barrique and foudre in order to develop the wine without leaving an oak signature as such. Pago la Jara features polished nutty tannins,

purple spice, wild cherry and plum fruits and a surprisingly floral-fresh, elegant and moderate overall expression, thanks to lovely balancing natural acidity.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Pago la Jara' Tinta de Toro 2013

The nose leads with anise, gentian and moss, a blue-red mix of cola and violets over cold wet rock, subtle kelp and the smell of fuzzy clay-inflected tannin. The palate has a wonderful rise-and-spread, arcing out and spreading then fading in delicately, annulated rings. Jube fruits yield to earthiness just as slick tannins carry a granular, cracked clay earthy tell.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Pago la Jara' Tinta de Toro 2012

Faux-coffee roast-chicory aromas dance over the smell of the 'garden of stones', deep, cold-damp rock, and yield to wild anise flowers and powdered cranberry. It's all down low, puckered and savoury, without any of the berserk sugary extract this warm red soiled off-shoot valley of the Duero river too often produces. Blue fruit skin perfume matches the annulated fruit tannin expression in the mouth, within-and-without which are perfume, mineral, spice, oak and earth. Pago la Jara unfolds and releases delightfully over time, becoming increasingly earthy, delicate and humbly lovely.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Pago la Jara' Tinta de Toro 2011

A beautiful amalgam of fruit tannin and very fine oak, spice and acid, the core of this wine is Toro earth given highly structured form in delicate winemaking hands. Pago la Jara has complex fruits in a dazzlingly perfumed, rather than sugar-leaden form. All is run through with lashings of anise, a tease of cacao and pretty red flowers. Both mineral and floral, melting tannins give structure and movement to the palate. PLJ signs off with an expressive perfume flourish at the back, and is a great example of a full wine which achieves ease and release.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Pago la Jara' Tinta de Toro 2010

A fine deep red sandy-clay soil-smell of Toro leaps out here, among velvety red-black fruits on the nose. An inky-boysenberry softness follows in the palate, which is balanced and harmonious in its fruit, tannin, acid progression, affecting effortlessness and persistence.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Pago la Jara' Tinta de Toro 2009

Electric nose of soft brambly fruits in a red-blue register, with licorice, blueberry skin, sweet leather and forest berry aromas. The palate is slick with silty earthen tannins, and the nicely rounded fruit has angelica, spice and a vegetal tweak. Finishing perfume is the lovely smell of spiced ripe fruit tannin.

