

Telmo Rodriguez, DO Valdeorras

“When you drink, you make choices which make a place (you transform and confirm a certain ecology, landscape and political economy)” ... Telmo Rodriguez

Telmo Rodriguez and his partner Pablo Eguzkiza are wine-cultural historians. They contend that when you drink (and by extension, plant and grow grapes, make and mature wines), you choose and make a place; establishing its ecology, its landscape, its political economy and its lived history. You interpret, transform, confirm a certain way of things. Their intention is to interpret and confirm Valdeorras on a human, rather than industrial scale. The wines are delicate, pure, hand-made. “This is the anti-winemaking”, they proclaim.

D.O. Valdeorras

Val de Oras is the old roman name, Valley of Ore, taken from this remote place's history as a gold-mining region long ago. Valdeorras is the eastern-most wine zone in Galicia – travel further east and you end up in the high, continental hills of Bierzo in the ancient kingdom of Leon. Valdeorras runs about 30km west-east along the course of the Rio Sil, with a shallow north-south aspect of just a few kilometres. The western boundary is the adjacent DO Ribeira Sacra.

The climate is continental-Atlantic. The area is cool, hilly and dry, with a range of micro-climates provided by the alternation of poor-soiled hills with many criss-crossing rivers. The annual average temperature is about 12°C with a range between 33°C and –5°C. The annual rainfall is about 650 mm with 95 days of rain either side of a dry summer.



Telmo and Pablo's holdings in the Ladeiros do Bebei (hillslopes of the Rio Bebei, a Rio Sil tributary) in the valleys around the little village of Santa Cruz, south of the exit at A Rua, roughly halfway along the highway between Monforte de Lemos (Ribeira Sacra) and Ponferrada (Bierzo). The soils are cold and dry - a slightly acidic blend of slate and granite with some clay and sand, but predominantly granitic, which differentiates Valdeorras wines from the slate-based wines of Ribeira Sacra and the slate/clay hybrid of Bierzo.

All are organic, most are biodynamic with the balance in conversion. Vines are grown 'en parra' (bush vines trained on poles). The vineyards are between 300-500 metres altitude. The steep valley at Santa Cruz is thickly populated by the herb Cantueso, a thyme hybrid, which clearly influences the wines' aromatics. The nitrogenous yellow shrub, Toxo, is prominent, historically used in a goat-horse-cow dung mix as fertiliser.

Telmo and Pablo in Valdeorras

Telmo and Pablo actually made their first vineyard purchase here. In the early 90s, as they commenced their search for the old, hidden, lost and forgotten greatness of Spanish viticulture, Valdeorras was their first stop. Their work in other regions became well-known soon than here, however – Valdeorras is their most slowly evolving project, thanks to arduous viticultural work, both re-conditioning old, neglected vineyards, and also developing new vineyards from scratch, using the genetic material of the old parcels as source code. Near to Santa Cruz, they found a vineyard called Falcoeira, 'the Falconry'. It is an ancient vineyard of very steep terraces established by the romans 2000 years ago, but abandoned since phylloxera laid waste to Valdeorras at the end of the 19th century. The vineyard is super-steep, with 14,000 plants across 3 acres, and can only be pruned at a rate of 150 vines per worker per day. Initially, Falcoeira was at first re-planted to Godello, but has since been grafted over to Mencía and the other red wine cultivars of the valley. 20 years of viticultural hard slog and counting, one day we will actually see a finished wine from here!

An evolving range of wines are made by Telmo and Pablo in Valdeorras.

- Firstly there is a pair of simple, but very high quality regional wines of great typicity: Gaba do Xil Godello and Gaba do Xil Mencía. Although named varietally, they are made from historical field blends of several varieties of mixed red and white grapes.

- Currently in the market are a pair of Cru wines, Branco de Santa Cruz which is a Godello-based field blend white, and As Caborcas, Mencia-predominant field blend red.
- Eventually, two other specific sites will be bottled separately. Falcoeira and As Ermitas are currently undergoing deep viticultural restoration. Stay tuned.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Gaba do Xil' Godello

Gaba is Basque for evening – it was late in the day when Telmo and Pablo first walked this steep valley, whence they now make wine from 21 hectares. Gaba white is a fresh, unwooded wine, gently handled. Expect grapefruit, canned pear, pomelo, white flowers, thyme, some creamy-nutty textural weight, mineral freshness and a nip of tidying acidity.



Telmo Rodriguez 'Gaba do Xil' Godello 2015

Almond meal and blossom mix with barley water, cereal and steely green herbs in a spontaneous, unaffected nose. The palate is a fantastic running brook, far from the heavy, front-loaded broadness which often lets Godello down. A delightful, almost dashing wine, lively and filled with the herbs and grasses of the Santa Cruz valley.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Gaba do Xil' Mencia

This wine is close to definitive of Mencia's best attributes. Valdeorras is possibly the perfect natural place for Mencia – enough solar energy to ripen tannin, but cool enough to preserve its scant natural acid reserves. Gaba Mencia is unwooded and barely handled, with a great harmony of fruit, earth and the countryside.



Telmo Rodriguez 'Gaba do Xil' Mencia 2014

On the nose, soft red fruits are alive with granite and herbs. All the key Valdeorras Mencia tells are here: floral-fragrant, touches of smoke and meat, gentle fruit tannin and a herb-acid tang to finish. Gaba is energetic and fresh, rounded with lovely crunch, featuring caponata-fleshiness and also a touch of cracked white pepper.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Branco de Santa Cruz' Cru Godello

Branco de Santa Cruz is based on a little organic vineyard beneath the Valdeorras village of Santa Cruz. A Coroa is in fact the bottom part of the vineyard which gives us Telmo's extraordinary Heritage Cru Mencia, 'As Caborcas'. The lower ¼ of the terraces of this hill are planted to Godello in a very cool aspect facing north-west, while the upper reaches are a field blend of Mencia and other local red cultivars. (this photo is taken from the bottom of the vineyard, so you can see the Godello terraces in foreground, and the lower reaches of the Mencia-planted upper section.) Telmo has spent many years restoring these old vines. While we call it 'Godello', this is a typical heritage planting of old bush-vine field-blend gear, mainly Godello with Loureiro, Doña Blanca, Palomino (Jaen) and others mixed in. Grown at 500 metres' altitude, an indigenous yeast fermentation is followed by 12 months' maturation in neutral old wooden vats. The wine is labelled Branco de Santa Cruz, since it is a village wine with some other parcels around the valley supplementing the fruit from A Coroa.



TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Branco de Santa Cruz' Village Godello 2013

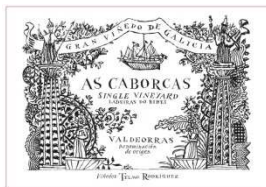
A superbly textural wine with lovely clarity, minerality and line. There's honey, wattle and crunchy gravel soil twitched up with a bunch of wild herbs. The palate has good body but lengthens beautifully, phenolics are both constructive and controlled and the whole thing is beguiling and gently expansive (but not insistent).

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'As Caborcas' Mencia

High above the Rio Burbia, facing west towards the eastern reach of DO Ribeira Sacra on the other bank, As Caborcas is Telmo and Pablo's first single vineyard release of Mencia from Valdeorras. Called 'Ladeiros do

Bebei', which means high terraces above the river, and that's exactly what it is. Organically grown, hand-planted to selections of indigenous genetic material, it's a field blend of Mencía with Mouraton, Brancellao and Sousón, facing west and north-west towards the Falcoeira vineyard on the other side of the valley. Grown at around 500m altitude and exhaustingly worked by hand, it's a 50-50 mix of 100 year old Mencía vines and a young field blend. As Caborcas yields a trifling 4 tonnes on nearly 2 hectares of relatively close-planted bush-vine. The images on the label of As Caborcas (and sister wine, Branco de Santa Cruz) are all drawn from the nearby 17th century Santurio das Ermitas. The first release of As Caborcas was 2010, as with Branco de Santa Cruz.

As Caborcas is a magical place, wild and energetic. Standing in its midst I have a chill, nape hairs erect, hearing strains of Warren Ellis's violin and Nick singing ... "I am alive, I am vibrating ... look at me now". As Caborcas is one of the purest wines I've ever had the pleasure of. Telmo's aspiration to express through the earth, rather than winemaking is profoundly achieved - the wine from this granite single vineyard barely seems made at all, but rather like some heavenly breath – an utterance of the soil. It has the roses, velvet, sour cherry and crushed fruit stone/crushed rock perfume on nose and in mouth that can only be Mencía. Deftly textured, mineral, herbal and red-fruited, it's long, open and lively with a lovely sense of space. It's expressive, expansive and utterly free.



TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'As Caborcas' Cru Mencía 2013, DO Valdeorras

Fresh clean soy with squozen rose thorns, it's perfectly typical. A little rounder than 2012, the '13 is lovely: fresh and crunchy, light, dancing and really delicious.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'As Caborcas' Cru Mencía 2012, DO Valdeorras

Fine and lingering on nose and in mouth, the fruit is red and floral not unlike the whole of a red apple the moment it is picked ripe in the orchard. The smell and taste of the vineyard runs through everything, as Telmo desires: this really is "the anti-winemaking", tasting entirely of its place.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'As Caborcas' Cru Mencía 2011, DO Valdeorras

Heathery balsamic country characters run through almost boysenberry fruit richness, cut with bright spicily-acid little red stone fruits, with the fresh clean mineral rockiness of the granite in and under and it's truly a wine of its countryside more so than something you would experience or describe through fruit descriptors as such. The palate is magnificently formed – almost mid-weight, it radiates in all directions with utmost deftness. Lingering spices run through fine, spritely water-spray-delicate, giving a sourberry thrill which is both determining and delicate, and crunchy-fine tannins are lined up into a guiderail (without knowing they've been corralled) and those little round purply-tart fruits just roll along and on ...

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'As Caborcas' Cru Mencía 2010, DO Valdeorras

Inseparable elements of earth, fruit, flower, spice and the sky. There's a subtle smell, feel and taste of carpasso herb and of the rock in which both fruit and flower are borne. There's red lavender, tobacco, lipstick, forest floor and ash in a sweetly-spiced palate marked by granulated tannin, with the grippy tell of the granite at the back.

FUTURE VINEYARD RELEASES

Soon, we will finally see wines from el Falcueira and As Ermitas, two vineyards in which Telmo and Pablo have invested exhaustive restorative viticultural efforts. Falcueira was purchased in 1992 and has not yet seen a wine under its own name, but this will soon change, with the first wine bottled from Cosecha 2012.

EL FALCUEIRA

Falcueira is an ancient vineyard whose terraces were established by the Romans 2000 years ago, and were abandoned after phylloxera. Described by Telmo as producing “wine with two balls”, it’s a hot, steep, south-facing, slope and is hell in summer (up to 55 degrees Celsius). It. There are 2.4 hectares, of which 1.9 were re-planted in 20009. It’s a predominately red grape vineyard (0.4 hectares of Godello), planted to a mix of 70% Mencia, with Merenzao, Garnacha, Caiño, Souson and others. The yield is about 1.5 kg/plant and in 2015 yielded 3500 kg of red grapes and 500 kg of white. Falcueira is worked by horse and has virtually no soil, as such: a crew of 5 workers can only plant 500 vines/year by hand in the stone (granite, with a little quartz and clay). 2 hectares will yield about 3000 bottles. (Falcueira is represented in the vineyard image at the top of this note.)

TELMO RODRIGUEZ ‘el Falcueira’ 2012

Mencia’s “beefstock and bright red florals studded with herb” gig rings loud here. Semi-round and utterly fluid, with has an amazing mineral-granite line that is not really so much tannin formation as a structural thread emanating from the rock and earth of the place.

AS ERMITAS

The newest project, this old site is 3 hectares north and north-west-facing at 450m altitude. It’s across a ridge from As Caborcas and Falcoeira and looks down on the old chapel, ‘Ermitas’, after which it is named. These are 2000 year old terraces once subject to chemical viticulture, then abandoned. There are some old vines (about 0.5 hectares safe-keeping the genetic code of this place), but substantial re-plantings are required. Telmo and Pablo are re-generating the remnant old vines and using them to as source material for authentically local new plantings (9000 massale-selected cuttings were grafted in 2015). Below a ridge planted to chesnuds and ringing with bird-song, the vines of As Ermitas grow in electrically perfumed cold air, filled with bower smells of lavender, mint and fern, chervil, broom and red parsley. It is being re-generated with the traditional Roman fertiliser of Toxo (the ubiquitous, broom-like yellow nitrogenous shrub of Galicia) blended with a mix of cow, goat and horse poo.

