

Telmo Rodriguez, DO Valdeorras

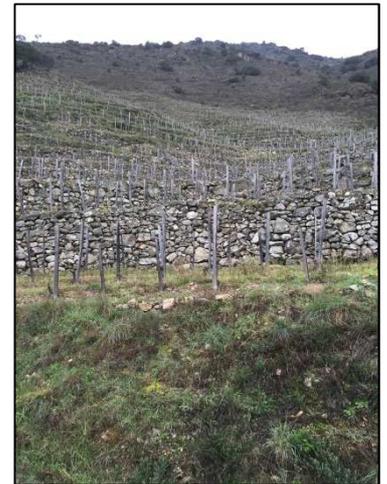
“When you drink, you make choices which make a place (you transform and confirm a certain ecology, landscape and political economy)” ... Telmo Rodriguez

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 Ladeiras 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 Mencia 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 Mencia. Although named varietally, they are made from historical field blends of several varieties of mixed red and white grapes.
- Currently in the market is a village white - Branco de Santa Cruz, a Godello-based field blend based on A Coroa, the vineyard at the bottom of As Caborcas.
- There are 3 field blend red wine sites bottled separately: As Caborcas, Falcoeira and O Diviso.

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 across 4 Parajes (lieus-dits): A Tougueira, As Caborcas, O Pando and A Pedreira. Gaba white is a fresh, unwooded wine, gently handled. Expect grapefruit, canned pear, pomelo, white flowers, thyme, creamy-nutty textural weight, mineral freshness, a nip of tidying acid.

Telmo Rodriguez 'Gaba do Xil' Godello



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.

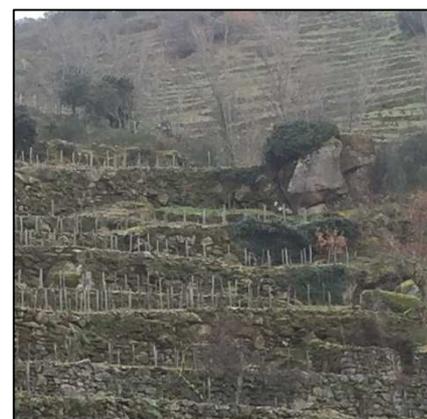
Telmo Rodriguez 'Gaba do Xil' Mencia



Gaba is a wine of soft red fruit alive with granite and herbs, arranged around gentle fruit tannin and a herb-acid tang. The nose is roasted meat, rhubarb, fennel, white strawberry, thyme; shining red fruit in a pastoral setting, aromatic bitters, a touch of brush. Sweet and sour agrodulce bifolds off a fleshily vegetal palate, nicely rounded in the middle, gently radiating down and out to all parts of the mouth.

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 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



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 and Pablo's Grans Viñedos de Galicia – Single Vineyard Mencias

After 25 years' owning and working vineyards in the valleys of Rio Bibei at Santa Cruz, Telmo and Pablo have finally codified a set of single vineyard releases, each Gran Viñedo having a naturally distinct structural expression. Between the three, the possibility of 'Mencia' here seems perfectly harnessed. We call these wines Mencia as a short-hand only. The vineyards contain significant admixture of other red and white varieties, which for the most part are picked together in order to fully harness an expression of place. Also, this Mencia is not some clonal universal: it is the evolved genetic ID of this valley, untouched by nurseries.

These vineyards are: As Caborcas, el Falcoeira and O Diviso, and were first released in 2010, 2012 and 2014 respectively, although Telmo and Pablo started buying land here in 1992 (Falcoeira). Each share similar

perfume and structural descriptors, all in tracery: herb, briar, medicinal bitters, orange rind, sour cherry, hung meat, beefstock, granite, iron; sweet-and-sour (agrodulce), floral, fleshy, ashy, earthen, vegetal and velvety. All three are delicate wines, the product of wild, remote valleys, open to the sky and deeply earthen. Each is structurally distinct: As Caborcas is the most open, ethereal wine and lifts roundly up the sky; Falcoeira's more solid tannin core defines a wine which drives deep into the earth; while the steely-herbal tang of O Diviso drives in a straight line out and away ...

2015 single vineyards

2015 was the driest vintage in Valdeorras since 2015. 2015s are relatively ripe and rich, still balanced with an Atlantic edge. Old vines such as those of the coolly-oriented As Caborcas were able to manage their water supply without shut-down. The hotter orientation of Falcoeira, facing dead south, presented more challenges, especially with younger, more shallow-rooted vines. Telmo and Pablo are amazed at how rich, luminous and velvet-expressive the resultant wine is.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'As Caborcas' Gran Viñedo de Galicia

High above Rio Burbia, facing west towards the eastern reach of DO Ribeira Sacra on the other bank, As Caborcas was Telmo and Pablo's first single vineyard release of Mencia from Valdeorras. It is labelled as '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 Mencia with Merenzao, Brancellao, Garnacha Tintorera, Godello and Sousón, facing west and north-west towards the Falcoeira vineyard on the other side of the valley. Grown at 550-600m altitude and exhaustingly worked by hand, it's a 50-50 mix of 100 year-old Mencia vines and a young field blend. As Caborcas yields a trifling 4 tonnes on 2.5 hectares of relatively close-planted bush-vines grown in shallow, poor granite sands. It is fermented in a mix of neutral large oak and stainless steel vats and aged 12 months in large old oak casks.



The images on the label of As Caborcas 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, the white from the lower part of the hill of As Caborcas. It's 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. Pablo and Telmo's aspiration to express through the earth, rather than winemaking is profoundly achieved here: the wine from this granite vineyard barely seems made at all, but rather like some heavenly breath – an utterance of the soil. It has the roses, velvet, sour cherry, fruit stone and crushed rock perfume which can only be Mencia. Deftly textured, mineral, herbal and red-fruited, it's long, open and lively with a sense of space. Expressive, expansive and utterly free.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'As Caborcas' Cru Mencia 2015, DO Valdeorras



Ashy-floral, the nose is a fruit-earth continuum, dark but bright, lively but composed. There are touches of meat and various peppers, rosehip, herb and orchard in the fruit, all brilliantly expressed within countryside tells! Entirely non-frutale, it's a pure terroir-expressed Mencia. Soy or Roses? Who cares, it's neither and both at once. Among these oppositions, it's a wine of stunning unity and selfness. Not even mid-weight, it's utterly satisfying as it radiates to all parts. It's like one of those social geniuses who can walk through a room leaving a smile, nod or look of thoughtful agreement on the face of all who pass, without apparent effort.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ Falcoeira 'a Capilla' Gran Viñedo de Galicia

Falcoeira is an ancient vineyard whose terraces were established by the Romans 2000 years ago, 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). There are 2.75 hectares, of which 1.9 were re-planted in 2009. It's a predominately red grape vineyard (0.4 hectares of Godello), planted to a mix of 70% Mencia, with Merenzao, Garnacha Tintorera, 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. Falcoeira 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). Winemaking is simple, as with As Caborcas, always looking to promote freshness and harness the expression of site. 'A Capilla' means facing to the chapel, referring to the ancient church below the village of Santa Cruz at the southern end of the valley. A Capilla also refers to the lower section of Falcoeira, in particular – historically where the best wines of the valley came from.



TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Falcoeira a Capilla' Gran Viñedo de Galicia 2014



Intensely mineral with a deep driving ironstone line: the nose takes you all the way in - Jules Verne deep. Along the way, bracken, ripe orange rind, moss and soft velveteen red fruit radiate. Round and nearly mid-weight, it fans out gently over the journey, sweetly vegetal fruit flowing over rich, plush granite-lined tannins towards an arrowhead finish. The amazing 'tannin' line is a thread emanating from the rock and earth of the place.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'O Diviso' Gran Viñedo de Galicia

This old site is 3 hectares north and north-west-facing at 450m altitude. Around a bend in Rio Bibei and thus across a ridge from As Caborcas and Falcoeira, it towers atop a valley on the other side of Santa Cruz. 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 genetics of this place), and substantial massale plantings have re-generated the entire vineyard with its own code. Below a ridge line bower of chesnuts ringing with bird-song, the vines grow in electrically perfumed cold air, filled with smells of lavender, mint and fern, chervil, broom and red parsley. 'O Diviso' is "the division", and is the historical place name of this vineyard.



TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'O Diviso' Gran Viñedo de Galicia 2014



Bitter medicinal herbs (this little terrace is full of them) like the leanest of old-fashioned, yield to a flush of red flowers, smoked canes and cherry pith fruitfulness nestled in deep-set granite. It's wild and savoury, redolent with the purity of the mountain air in this remote valley. Steely, linear, sweet-and-sour a wine of very fine line and length and has delicately swishing fruit camisoling around the core.



TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Falcoeira a Capilla' Gran Viñedo de Galicia 2014

More peppery, more vegetal than Caborcas, and a really deep and sumptuous nose compared to its sisters linear, lean regality. Meaty, spiced, playing King to the Caborcan Queen. Darker, lozenge fruit here, but the fruit still exists only to tell the smell of soil and site. Ever so slightly softer and rounder than Caborcas and a little more in a palate progression format, fruit, then tannin then acid that the mind-boggle oneness of its sister. Umami and savoury, damp brown earth, lavender stem.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'Falcoeira a Capilla' Gran Viñedo de Galicia 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 Caborcas 'ladeiras do bibei' Gran Viñedo de Galicia 2014

Typically meaty at first, blood quickly reveals beautiful soft earthen smells, and unfold further to myriad mountain herbs, all delicate tracery, with a whisker of tobacco, a touch of orange bitters and a runnel of ash. Round, delicate, shimmering ... a fleshy, gently moving, ashy-earthen beauty with florals lifting skyward.

TELMO RODRIGUEZ 'As Caborcas' Cru Mencia 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 Mencia 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 Mencia 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 Mencia 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.