



# RUEDA awakening

**The quality white wines from the Spanish region of Rueda, made mainly from the indigenous Verdejo grape, are ready to break out of the domestic market, as *Patrick Schmitt MW* discussed at a recent *db* masterclass in London**

**IT'S A** common belief that wine-producing countries keep the best drinks for themselves, so, while the wider world gets a taste of their mainstream offerings, the domestic market is treated to the local delicacies. After all, the effort involved in creating a following beyond your national boundaries is time consuming and costly,

and therefore deemed only worth it for large wineries with big budgets – or so the thinking goes. Then there's a feeling that exporting wine is best done with clearly branded products, employing the most famous noble grapes, not niche wines made from native varieties. With this in mind, let us introduce Rueda – a

Spanish wine region focused on whites from its indigenous grape, Verdejo. Here is an area so successful that it barely produces enough wine to satisfy its domestic market, and has become virtually synonymous with white wine in Spain. As a result, almost 85% of Rueda's entire annual production is drunk within

## A taste of Rueda

In June, members of the drinks trade in London were introduced to the wide range of wines from Spain's best-selling white wine-producing region: Rueda.

The event, which took place at Asia House, in the heart of the capital, included youthful, aromatic whites made from Sauvignon Blanc and Verdejo, as well as richer, barrel-aged examples from the latter grape, which is native to the region.

Attendees were also treated to a Dorado at the end of the masterclass, which is a rare, historic, oxidative, dry fortified wine that was once widely produced in Rueda and is now making a comeback.

Also made using the Verdejo grape, Dorado tastes a little like a slightly fruitier dry oloroso-style Sherry, and wowed the London trade with its nutty complexity and freshness, along with its potential to match a wide range of dishes, particularly those with hard-to-match flavours, such as blue cheeses.

### The wines served were:

1. Palacio de Bornos Verdejo Espumoso
2. Agrícola Castellana, Cuatro Rayas Viñedos Centenarios
3. Dominio de Verderrubí Verdejo Ecológico
4. González Byass, Beronia Verdejo
5. Javier Sanz Verdejo
6. Finca Montepedroso Verdejo
7. Castelo de Medina Sauvignon Blanc
8. Bodegas Protos Verdejo Fermentado en Barrica
9. Félix Sanz Verdejo Fermentado en Barrica
10. Hijos de Alberto Gutiérrez, De Alberto Dorado

the national borders. Despite such a strong Spanish following, the region wants to build a customer base worldwide. Unlike the scenario presented above, Rueda doesn't want to remain a well-kept secret among Spaniards, or a wonderful discovery just for those



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visiting the nation. Rueda wants to lay a more secure long-term foundation for its distinctive produce, and tap into a desire among wine loving consumers worldwide for something high quality, authentic and tied to a particular place.

Surely the world would welcome a wine with a clear regional identity, one that's fresh in style, as well as affordable?

With this in mind, in the summer *the drinks business* ran a masterclass to open the eyes of the UK trade to the character and quality of Rueda.

Taking place in London, it was hoped that Rueda would appeal to opinion formers in this market, and to do this, it was necessary to lay on a presentation showing what makes Rueda different and special, done through a talk, followed by a tasting.

Having recently spent a week in the region, it was down to me to provide the immersion in all things Rueda at an inaugural London event (Spanish wine specialist and writer Sarah Jane Evans MW gave a subsequent masterclass in Bristol in September).

To highlight Rueda's current success, I felt it important to stress the prevalence of its whites in Spain, despite the competition from other white wine producing areas in this country, most notably Galicia, Rioja and La Mancha. So, while 40% of Spain's white wine market is accounted for by Rueda, the nearest competitor region makes up just 10%.

Furthermore, the wines, which are fresh, zesty and slightly herbal, are stylistically on trend for white wine drinkers worldwide, including those in the UK. Rueda's wines also benefit from the fact that they offer something authentic, hailing from an area with a long history of wine production, while using predominantly the native Verdejo grape. Take the combination of Rueda and Verdejo, and you have something memorable. Couple this to the zesty



aromatic character of the whites, and you have a Spanish equivalent to Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc. Plus, like this latter grape-region combination, there is stylistic diversity, even when the base variety and source is maintained.

Based in the northwest of Spain, Rueda sits in the wider area known as Castilla y León, and lays claim to being this part of the country's first official wine appellation, gaining official DO status in January 1980. But the region's wine history stretches much further back. Verdejo has been grown in Rueda for more than 1,000 years.

Considered native to Rueda, according to *Wine Grapes*, Verdejo's sibling is Godello from nearby Galicia, which explains why Verdejo is sometimes called Gouveio or Verdelho – both synonyms for Godello in Portugal.

While Verdejo is mostly grown in Rueda, it is possible to find the grape growing in Castilla la Mancha, and, to a lesser extent, in Extremadura, so it is important to focus on the region, and not just search for the variety. Indeed, to draw attention to Rueda's longstanding strong reputation for wine, a 1932 document about wine production in Spain mentions

just three key regions: Rioja, Jerez and Rueda. Rueda's modern history is also important because Rueda was once more famous for fortified wines. It was in the 1970s that the change began in earnest, after famous Rioja producer Marqués de Riscal saw an opportunity in the market for dry whites from Spain, and, having employed the expertise of great French wine consultant Émile Peynaud, found that the quality potential for whites from Spain was in Rueda.

Although the region has a long history of making white wine, the region's rebirth

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follows the Riscal investment, and in the past 40 years, Rueda has attracted all of Spain's major players, from Marqués de Cáceres, to Ramón Bilbao, Bodegas Riojanas, Bujanda, Torres, Freixenet, Félix Solés, and Codorníu, as well as investors from France, such as Francois Lurton, maker of Belondrade y Lurton.

### CONSOLIDATED REGION

Today, Rueda comprises more than 70 wineries, with an average production of of 1 million to 2m bottles, and just 10 producers making fewer than 200,000 bottles. It is a relatively consolidated region, with large-scale, highly professional operators, and much growth in recent times. It has more than doubled its output from 40 million bottles to as many as 90m in the past six years.

Planting too has grown, and Rueda is now reaching its limits. The 2018 harvest was its biggest ever, representing 130 million kilograms of grapes from around 16,500ha, but new vineyards in the past three years have taken the region to a maximum vineyard area of 18,500ha.

Now that volume expansion has come to a controlled end, producers are refocusing on premiumising their

## Rueda in the UK

There are three reasons why Rueda deserves to be more than a niche category in the UK.

First, because of strict quality control by the Rueda DO, coupled with the presence of all of Spain's major wine companies in the region, whites from Rueda have a high base standard, and yet come with competitive prices.

Second, whether made with Sauvignon Blanc, or, much more likely, Verdejo, the whites from Rueda are citrus-scented, gently bitter, bright wines, making them refreshing and stylistically right on trend.

Third, with the native grape of Verdejo accounting for more than 85% of the plantings in Rueda, this region represents something that is simple and authentic; a grape-and-place combination with at least half a century of history that's easy for consumers to remember.

In essence, this area is Spain's answer to Marlborough Sauvignon, because Rueda represents a region and grape combination that is memorable, refreshing and identifiable.

production. Some of this centres on experimentation in the cellar, with wineries commonly featuring concrete eggs and French oak barrels, both employed to add texture and complexity to the wines during fermentation and ageing. Verdejo may be an aromatic grape, with some stylistic similarities to Sauvignon Blanc, but it is extremely well-suited to barriques.

It's not just cellar practices that are being used to make a more upmarket version of Verdejo from Rueda. It's also the isolation of vineyards of quality – Rueda has an amazing stock of extremely old vines.

As a result, Rueda is to create a new classification for higher-quality expressions from low-yielding historic vineyards from this vintage, which will be classed as Rueda Superior. Rueda has as many as 1,600ha of vineyards – representing around 10% of the region – that are more than 40 years old, including



some that were planted over a century ago. Other changes are coming into force soon too, with the regional government expected to approve the addition of Chardonnay and Viognier to the classification, as long as the grapes are used in a blend with Verdejo, and make up less than 50% of the wine.

It is worth noting that the region does already produce whites from other authorised grapes, and, although 87% of the output is made using Verdejo, further varieties used in the region include Viura, Palomino Fino and lovely Sauvignon Blanc too (the latter representing around 3% of production).

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So, grapes, production levels, and history aside, what else makes Rueda special? To understand this, one must consider the region's terroir. In particular, its pebble-stone soils and altitude, which ranges from around 600 metres to 950m above sea level. Inland, the area has a continental climate with extremely harsh winters, high summertime temperatures with big diurnal swings, and low rainfall (300mm-500mm). The area is home to Spain's most famous wine river, the Duero, which runs through the region from east to west

If one considers the stock of ancient bush vines on high altitude sites, along with the dry conditions, infertile pebbly soils, and distinctive native Verdejo grape, you can understand why Peynaud was drawn to Rueda, and the Spanish wine consumer has made the region its top choice for white wine today.

For the world beyond, Rueda can appeal at different levels. It can draw in the more mainstream drinker by providing youthful, bright, aromatic whites at a competitive price, and it can excite the more upmarket wine lover with its textural wines based around old vine Verdejo. But it is still a relative novelty for the global wine market. Considering the current urge among consumers to find something new and authentic, then, surely, Rueda's success is assured.