

Vega Sicila

Its 1864, the American civil War is raging, Union General John Sedgwick is shot dead during battle, a few seconds earlier uttering his famous last words: “They couldn’t hit an elephant from this distance!” Here at home bushranger Ben Hall is at large after a shootout with police while attempting to rob the Bang Bang Hotel. And in the sleepy high sierra of central Spain an inspired man, Eloy Lacanda y Chaves, is quietly planting a vineyard that will produce one of the most famous, most expensive and sought after red wines in the world.

Chaves first inspiration a century and a half ago was to plant varieties from outside his home region as well as the ancient indigenous variety of Tinto Fino. The varieties he planted were from Bordeaux across the Pyrenees, the great reds Cabernet sauvignon, Merlot and Malbec. The other inspiration was to understand that the region he called home, the Ribera del Duero would be perfect for long living, rich red wine. The red he made and is still produced today was labeled under the name of the winery or “Bodega” of Vega Sicilia.

For almost fifty years Chaves nurtured his vineyard and enjoyed the cool, dry climate in this region of high altitudes where the days can be 40C in high summer and the nights dramatically cold in the one 24hr period, a feature of the terrior that concentrates flavour and retains acid in the grapes. In 1900 Cosme Palacio, a successful grower and merchant from Rioja, purchased the 200 Ha of vineyard overlooking the river Duero near the city of Valladolid and put the reds of Vega Sicilia on the vinous world map. Since the days of Cosme the ownership has changed a number of time, as often happens in businesses worth a fortune, but what’s remained as his legacy is the vineyard and the philosophy around the making and maturation of the these great reds.

The great grape of Vega Sicilia is Tempranillo. Yes, I know I said that old Chaves planted Tinto Fino, but that is Tempranillo, as is Cencibel in Valdespenas. Some Spaniards will know it as Tinto Madrid, others Tinta de Toro and over the border in Portugal it’s Tinta Roriz. Confused, well don’t be, just let local

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Words **Chris Barnes** Illustration **Kate Murray**

dialect and language take over! Temp (well that’s what Aussie winemakers call it) is a noble variety and often referred to as Spain’s Cabernet Sauvignon. The grape itself is thick skinned, so can be made into tannic heavy wine if need be, and the flavours when it’s ripe are of strawberry, spice and leather. It’s a variety that can make wines that seem both sweet and savoury at the same time.

While Tempranillo, whatever you call it, is a premium variety it can be added to by some careful blending. This has been part of Vega Sicilia since its inception. Using the so-called Bordeaux varieties gives an added dimension of flavour and structure; it also helps to give the wine greater depth when aged. Today the total vineyard area on the 1000Ha property is about 240 Ha, with the percentage of these “foreign” varieties at about 20%. In 1991, to really concentrate on the local variety, the company acquired a nearby winery and created a 100% Tempranillo known as Bodega Alion, a wine that’s achieved fame in less than 20 years.

The way a winemaker handles any variety is myriad, but at Vega Sicilia, and in much of traditional Spain, aging in oak is common, and not just 12 – 18 months, but three, five or even ten years. This aging in all sorts of oak; small, large, French, American, old and new is part of the style of Vega Sicilia. They even blend a number of vintages together. Thus the final wine that bears the super prestige label of “Unico Reserva Especial” has no single vintage and is usually not released for up to 10

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years after much of the wine was made. The same aging takes place for their single vintage wine, the “Unico Gran Reserva”. Made only in the very best years, it’s a wine with a complexity and texture that is unlike any other table wine on first release. Even the Vintage “Valbuena 5º” released after “only” five years in barrels has amazing texture and complexity of old leather, red berries and smoky oak.

As you’ve already guessed these wine’s aren’t el cheapo, and in Australia quite rare. The Unico Gran Reserva 94 for example will cost you about \$500-600 at retail, and if you can find it the multi vintage Reserva Especial may even cost another two hundred! So what to look for here at home? That’s a hard one too as we have only got on to Tempranillo in the last five to ten years, so finding a wine with a great track record isn’t easy. That’s not to say you won’t see some good wines out there from produces like Lehmann of the Barossa, Mr Riggs from the Adelaide Hills and my favourite the Tar & Roses from the Goulbourn Valley. They may not have the extreme aged character of the Vega Sicilia, but at \$20-something with a plate of jamon, some olives and the Sunday afternoon bullfight on the TV, who cares! ■

