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HOME BIRD - Albariño & Rias Baixas

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During a recent visit to Galicia in north western Spain, it was remarked by a prominent local producer that the “best white wine is a bad red wine”. Presumably this was said in jest and meant to suggest that no matter how good white wine can be it will never be equal to red wine. Joking aside, it made me curious as to how the other producers on our itinerary really felt about the famous white wines of this region. At this point let me add that (almost) all of the red wine we did taste ranged from forgettable to dire. I suspect that this has little to do with the ability to grow quality red grapes in the D.O. of Rias Baixas and more to do with the pressure of maintaining the scripted focus on the region’s success story, Albariño.

Rias Baixas is beautiful and photogenic, full of jagged pine forested hills and steep valleys that end up in the Atlantic Ocean. The air is clean, fresh and salty. All of this is juxtaposed by stands of lofty slender eucalyptus trees,
bamboo and kiwi fruit farms. Thick morning fogs eventually give way to brilliant blue skies and direct sun. Apart from the sun and blue skies it does not resemble most of the stereotypical images of Spain and although there have been lots of comparisons made with Ireland, in fact it looks nothing like the Emerald Isle either. The climate is perfect for growing vines and in particular Albariño, a grape which as of yet, has been reluctant to move out of home. It is planted in just a few select places; primarily north western Spain and Portugal, some limited plantings in California with mixed success and has also had quite a rocky start in Australia, where Sauvagnin has been mistakenly planted and sold as Albariño. It’s a home bird and the Northern Atlantic edge of the Iberian Peninsula is its sanctuary.

Over ninety per cent of the wine produced in the region is white, and mainly from one grape. Such is the focus on Albariño; it can be a challenge to find other wines to taste with intent. Compare that with Alsace, another region
that produces over ninety per cent white wine but in doing so utilises half a dozen grape varieties in expert fashion with an array of styles. Yet the wines of Alsace do not fly off the shelves in the same way that Spanish Albariño does.

When we were offered other varietals to taste, it was usually with a degree of half-heartedness. These offerings however came as a welcome alternative (as there is only so much Albariño you can taste in a single morning). Yet few producers seemed overly proud or keen to push other wines and those that did, presented them as a curiosity or a niche development. Rarely were we encouraged to avert our gaze away from the many ‘lees aged’ bottles of Albariño on show.

It is important to point out that there is essentially nothing wrong with a wine region focusing on a single grape varietal; rather in a globalised world it supposes a romantic sense of place for Albariño, a place with roots. To quote the great agrarian writer Wendell Berry, - “If you don’t know where you’re from, you’ll have a hard time saying where you’re going.”
But just where is this region going? Rias Baixas is for all intents and purposes running in a one horse race. The D.O. is young (1988) but is a leading light in the Spanish wine industry and boasts the most expensive grapes in the state. Albariño is a quality grape and makes very attractive wines; its global popularity is a testament to that. Major markets include the U.S., Britain, Ireland, Denmark and increasingly Asia. As you taste your way through the wines and meet the people who make them it doesn’t take long before realising that everyone here is selling the exact same story. With very few willing to deviate from this successful tale of “freshness, acidity, minerality and ocean saltiness”, it can become a bit humdrum. Even in different valleys where the wines should be a bit more floral, peachy and rounded in style nobody really had anything different to say, preferring to stick to the script. Amazingly another very prominent producer actually told us, “we are all doing the same thing here but where we differ is our terroir and lees aging”. These two points may hold some weight but overall this comment just added to a now growing collection of unusual admissions.

There are many who would disagree with my sentiments on this, preferring a region that they can easily grasp, one that offers certainty. As someone who loves a good story, history and alternatives, I longed to meet the new radicals lining up against the grumpy old traditionalists. I wondered where the diversity in styles was and how about the older vintages? The bitter fight that often divides many well-known wine regions over true wine style does not appear to have a place in Rias Baixas, whereas marketing and image seem the more important factors. Of the producers that we visited the same questions were put to the group, “What do your Irish customers think of screw caps?” and “How does this label appear to you?” The issue of screw caps seems to be very pertinent in the effort to make the wines as market ready and attractive as possible.
Vines trained high on concrete posts which encourages air circulation and in this case allows this organic vineyard to flourish underneath.

The reality of today’s wine market is that it most likely has a life-cycle. Wine drinkers die and new ones are born; palates develop in complexity and move on. Most of the wines we tasted (and their back stories) were very similar. Surely if an entire wine region is going to focus on primarily one grape varietal, is it not more important that there is diversity of style amongst the producers as opposed to everyone doing the same thing? Perhaps Rias Baixas is content with having a constant stream of new customers and less so with retaining long term loyal ones much like tourist restaurants do.
Wine has been proudly produced in Spain for a very long time. Since joining the E.E.C. in 1986 and tapping into the economic well that comes with membership, the country has quickly risen to become the New World of Old World wine countries. They have embraced modern technologies, vineyard irrigation and fruit driven styles. Modern architecture suffuses the bodegas and market friendly labelling is commonplace. Grape varietals take pride of place and enthusiastic marketing has led to unprecedented growth and global popularity. The modernisation of the wine industry brings many positives and there can be no doubt that technology has brought increased quality to winemaking. It has also brought homogenisation. To the not so bothered wine customer this is great news. A bottle of wine is easier to approach, more reliable and often times tastier than it used to be. This gives customer’s confidence. A marketers dream but to the adventurous wine drinker it has less to offer.
Albariño, at least in Spain, is generally drunk as a young wine. Very few talk of how older vintages. Almost nobody keeps it, or perhaps it all sells so quickly there is none to keep. The first bodega on our trip, Zarate (located in Pontevedra), offered up great promise for the region as we tasted older vintages from 2004, 2009 and 2010 alongside the more recent years. I had never tasted Albariño older than a couple of years that wasn’t completely dead in the glass. The 2004 was a revelation with honey, oatmeal and stewed apple notes, pitch perfect acidity and the freshness had remained. The other vintages from specific vineyards displayed salted lemons, herbs and smokiness. Above all the wines were complex and thought-provoking. Why are more producers here not making wines that taste and age like this? Because the market has come to expect the other, and what the market wants the market gets. Our host, the friendly and unassuming Eulogio Pomares, calmly but defiantly explained to us that this is a grape that can age. And furthermore with the right handling it can be very successfully oaked. Zarate’s wines are truly great and offer genuine expressions of not only the region but of someone who is less willing to conform to the script. He was shy to offer opinions on other producer’s wines but his gentle smile showed that he is content doing things his way.
In my experience every wine region has mavericks and conformists but usually there is plenty of each typecast. Regardless Rias Baixas makes great wine, even if diversity is not its strongest point. We did come across some Caíño blanco (and tinto), a few interesting blends of Albariño, Loureira blanca and Treixadura and even a little Godello, a wonderful grape that is more at home in nearby D.O. Bierzo. We ate stunning local food and received warm hospitality. The weather was excellent. The people and place superlative. And the wine? The wine was fine.