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A RETURN TO THE ROOTS

Rioja might be the biggest name in Spanish winemaking. But one small-sized producer is on a mission to look beyond quantity and embark on a new era of quality.

REAL RIOJA
The hope is to move from mass production to wines that speak to place.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX MITCHESON AND COURTESY OF ALEGRE VALGAÑÓN.

The mountain range and scattered valley light before us don't quite look real. More like a picture-perfect screensaver. The township of Sajazarra punctuates this imposing escarpment – the Obarenes Mountains – with its amber-hued buildings and spires, lending the outlook an unmistakable sense of distance, size and majesty. It's incredibly dry here in this very north-western corner of La Rioja, Spain. This is a place where, if you do your homework you'll know only too well, these stirring vistas have been a backdrop to nearly two millennia of winemaking.

"Just out the back of these mountains, you'll find one of the snowiest parts of Spain – in winter, it's an extremely cold terroir," says Oscar Alegre, our host and first-generation winemaker. A light breeze shuffles the grenache vines beside us. Despite this barren landscape situated at 800 metres in altitude, and with vineyards criss-crossing vast expanses of golden wheat fields, as an oenophile, there is a shameless romanticism in accepting that you are standing somewhere special. It's palpable. After all, this is the heartland of arguably one of the world's most recognisable wines.

To serious wine drinkers the world over, Rioja means something. It conjures up images of a steadfast and reliable red wine, inexpensively attractive, from a region that garners points for exotic appeal – particularly with a New World audience. From Shanghai to Surry Hills, Montreal to Madrid, the reputation of this relatively small wine district is indisputable. Classic enough to be known, but often just missing the requisite quality to be adored. Rioja is a wine that won't lose you any friends. Nevertheless, it is a wine that can (sometimes) polarise opinion.

Oscar Alegre and Eva Valgañón know of this notion only too well, yet they believe fervently in their small corner of Spain. Both born and raised in Rioja, this husband-and-wife winemaking team first began honing their craft in 2010 before releasing their first vintage to the public in 2012, under the label **Alegre Valgañón**. During a decade of buying and exporting wine to markets worldwide, Alegre became acutely aware of the potential behind this region while pouring its aged wines alongside the more evidently famed Bordeaux.

And yet, as he observed, people were taken aback by the quality. Indeed, the gravity of these reactions, coupled with their impartiality, was impossible to ignore. Today in their modestly sized bodega under the label Alegre Valgañón, Oscar and Eva are a part of a band of what some might refer to as the avant-garde winemakers in the area. That's fine, they say, they're content to go against the grain, enthusiastic about reviving tradition, while ardent about showing the world a different side of their most cherished dirt.

To fully understand Rioja, you need to appreciate the devastating effects of phylloxera throughout France in the 1850s. Before this destructive outbreak, French winemaking techniques – namely prolonged ageing on oak – had already begun to infiltrate northern Spain. Now, however, the opportunity arose to fully embrace these practices; wine from Rioja was all of a sudden in huge demand. Almost overnight, the character of Rioja wines changed. Wineries made a significant effort to mimic Burgundy and Bordeaux. By Alegre's reckoning, Rioja lost 100 years' worth of cultural identity and individuality in the process.

"In a way, we were born fake. Rioja wines were always light and expressive. The success of industrial Rioja has created an anonymous wine. Returning to our roots – to the 19th-century pre-phylloxera – is our future," he says. "There's little doubt the direction and name Rioja has made for itself is [synonymous with] mass production and big wineries."

Being a small-sized bodega with no family heritage and finding themselves amongst fourth- and fifth-generation winemakers doesn't faze Alegre, though. He sees it as an advantage. "If I try to emulate my father's wine, then I don't have the freedom to explore and think about what I want to do. Not having these conditions means we can try new things," he says.

The addition of white wine to a red wine is forbidden in this region, while co-fermenting is out of the question. Yet, by acquiring some unwanted, stone-walled blocks and terraces that were left discarded across Rioja, Alegre and Valgañón find themselves with row upon row of white and red vines happily co-existing side by side. Surely, they thought, this could carry over to the final product, too? Alegre has no qualms in stating some of his reds do indeed have white in them. "Any revolution can be made either by confrontation or by leading a movement where things improve. For us, by doing this, it's obvious. I'm certain the rules will change in the future."

As we taste, it becomes evident that this process goes some way to temper tannin extraction and give lift to the overall aroma. There's no deception here, merely a jaunt left of centre, all in the name of deliciousness. One of their most eminent single vineyard wines, **Bahierra**, (an old Basque name for 'beehive'), is one such example, a 100+-year-old, 0.45 block with tempranillo, garnacha and viura growing in cold, rocky, limestone-based soil. The yield is small, at around a tonne, with 15% whole bunches undergoing fermentation with native yeasts before ageing in French oak foudre, and left unfiltered and unfined. The result is an undeniable taste of place: bright, savoury, delicately floral while radiating deep, powerful fruit.

From the crest of Bahierra, your gaze is drawn to the arresting, jagged bluff of Cellorigo and its sepia-speckled village. The stillness and splendour are lost on no one, especially Alegre.

"I want to make these unwanted vineyards beautiful. I want to recover the landscape... it's not only about making wine, for me. I feel like having a beautiful landscape is inspiring in itself."

Whether you believe the adage or not, this little outcrop doesn't just prove beautiful places make beautiful wine – it cements it.

However, recovering these vineyards is no easy feat. Everything is done by hand, with regenerative soil management and bio-fertilisers key facets. The two work to form the resolute stance of treating vineyards as an agro-ecosystem, with soil management of utmost importance. Vines are not just a crop – they're a single part of the winemaking process. Borrowing a lot from permaculture, these practices have a broad toolbelt of methods available, such as using specific plants to fix soil deficiencies and building wildlife corridors to redirect problematic animals. There are shared components with organic viticulture, but there are differences, too – namely avoiding all herbicides and any use of tillage or cultivation. Maintaining soil structure and a healthy equilibrium for the entire growing site is the intention.

Unlike manicured rows, taking in Alegre Valgañón's varied blocks of bush vines reminds me of when I first laid eyes on assyrtiko in the crumbly volcanic soils of Santorini. You can't help but question their effectiveness. The major difference is these sturdy unsupported vines stand upright, albeit relatively low to the ground, requiring little to no pruning as harvest approaches.

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It's worth pointing out that being closer to the ground means moisture and nutrients have a smaller distance to travel. Also, as there is little to no humidity to avoid in Rioja, trellis training and labour-intensive canopy management are mostly redundant. Moreover, in a warm to hot Mediterranean climate with intense sunshine, a thicker foliage is an ally. Once you reflect on these finer points of Rioja winemaking, you can easily grasp the fitness of the bush vine in this distinct terroir and climate. It simply works.

Rioja doesn't only consist of red wine. In the first half of the 20th century, production of white wine was close to 30%. Things have changed, though; the last calculation puts it at a nudge over 9%. Viura – or macabeo as it is more widely known – is the region's most extensively grown white grape, displacing malvasia and garnacha blanca with a prominent heat tolerance and ability to withstand oxidation. It's perhaps this latter aptitude which makes Alegre Valgañón's foray into natural skin-contact whites so appealing. Their straight viura – the **Alegre Valgañón Blanco** – comes from several sites of old bush vines. It is gently pressed before undergoing ferment in steel and moving into oak for nine months. Weekly batonnage adds intentional texture and aroma. This style of wine walks a tightrope between fresh tangy charm and rich textural power. There's subtle minerality layered with generous grapefruit, dried lemon and a backbone of crunchy saline acidity holding it all together. Decanting is the only way to bring the expressive side of such a wine fully into the open.

Another of the white wines is from a single vineyard named **Las Llanas**, composed of a small parcel of viura, rojal, calagraño and garnacha blanca rescued from utter neglect by Valgañón. Destemmed fruit ferments and macerates for four weeks before an eventual press and maturation in ceramic.

"The wine asked us to act differently, so we did," Alegre says without hesitation. It results in a gentle herbal base on which red apple, lemon, and dried grass flavours run rife. The convincing intensity and long finish are a nod to the unconventional winemaking techniques the pair employ, and their willingness to adapt to vintage conditions. Sadly, don't expect to come across this drop easily – only 500 or so bottles are made each vintage.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of Alegre Valgañón's portfolio is the clarete, a pink wine with a pale orange tinge that has drifted into obscurity. Even though it looks like a rosé, clarete is vinified like reds, with red and white grapes co-fermented together on skins. Although there is a minimum requirement of 25% red grapes, the style is primarily white.

Further south in the Najerilla Valley, this style once flourished, but today it can be hard to find. The clarete (named **Clarito**) is produced with fruit from this area, with equal viura and garnacha from 80-year-old vines. Whites are destemmed while whole-bunch reds undergo barrel-ageing with a soft malolactic fermentation. The garnacha takes on an oxidative character acquiring an orange tinge.

"We are still learning with this one," Oscar says. "But, each time, we take it to the limit and create a wine that is serious". On the nose and palate, you may be forgiven for thinking you've stumbled across the crazy skin-contact love child of a Bandol rosé and an Etna rosato that oozes intricacy. This is a wine for serious rosé buffs.

A moot point for Alegre and is how the many personalities of Rioja and the potential to use a village-style system are left unutilised.

Alegre laments: "In the past, we had qualified sites and parcels, say, like Burgundy. But after phylloxera and the industrialisation of Rioja, we don't market ourselves this way – mostly because we were imitating a taste. When modernity came, our roots and potential to be unique disappeared.

"We need to fragment and start talking about villages, and the character and flavours they create. Maybe not single vineyards. But the move needs to be away from blending and making uninteresting wines. We have such diversity in our terroir, and we should be expressing it."

But swaying the crowd and getting these appellation changes in motion isn't going to happen overnight. The pair talk of how acquiring these disregarded yet remarkable growing sites is often hindered by bigger wineries who block the acquisitions and do all they can to make their operations difficult. These aren't explicit enemies but traditionalists with a firm belief in the maxim – if it isn't broken, what is there to fix?

Despite being a small operation and only employing two vineyard/cellar hands, the worker-to-bottle ratio at Alegre Valgañón is still dramatically higher than the vast neighbouring estates. This intimacy with the vines hinges on respect for La Rioja and acknowledging mass-produced wine as a disservice to their home.

"Huge co-operatives create people who grow grapes and don't like or understand wine. They simply drop off their fruit for the money. There is no motivation for quality," Alegre sighs before flashing a grin and nodding steadily. "The real future of Rioja must be embedded in passion. Our biggest ambition is to make wines that show this is a blessed land".

The crux of this dilemma is appetite: the unappeasable desire to squeeze every drop of potential from something, even when a hampering tide is going the other way.

It rallies the age-old question of quality over quantity. And at what point do the two meet? From grape-growers to wine merchants to sommeliers to the everyday drinker: everyone's opinion will differ. However, Alegre Valgañón's vision isn't one of a highly sought-after or fawned-upon Rioja – no, it's a place where realising potential and holding reverence for this region go hand in hand. ▮

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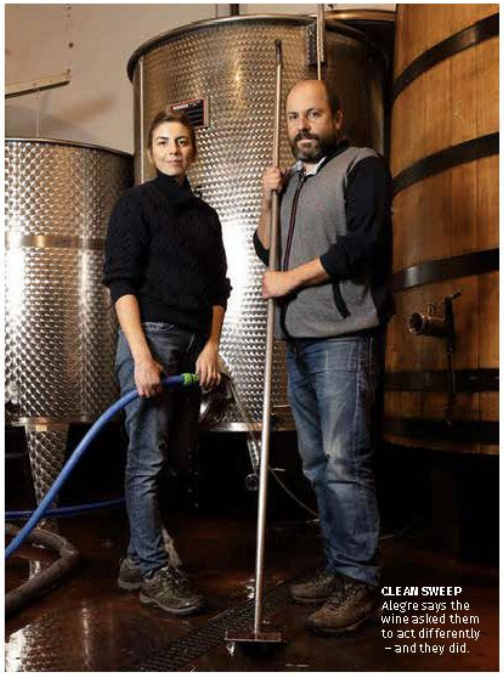

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