

Spain's great red surprise

Garnacha has always gone under the radar, overshadowed as it is by Spain's star Tempranillo wines. So why is it the grape on everyone's lips now? Sarah Jane Evans MW investigates

FOR FAR TOO long Garnacha was Spain's wild child. It was the unruly teenager the family had to put up with, but tried not to bring out in public. Just take a look at it now. That naughty child has turned into a cool and stylish adult. Suddenly everyone wants a part of the Garnacha action.

And the word is Garnacha, take note. This variety may be the same as France's Grenache, but Spanish Aragón is the grape's homeland.

So what is it about Garnacha that made it such a reliable workhorse across so many parts of Spain? For a start, the bush vines are sturdy, wind-resistant, long-suffering, capable of putting up with dry conditions better than most. It's also reasonably resistant to oidium (powdery mildew), though it is sensitive to millerandage (uneven-sized berries). It has a long ripening cycle which, combined with high-altitude vineyards, can make for fine elegance. It produces sugar easily and in former times this ability to make alcoholic wines was a real advantage. Cheap and cheerful was its charm.

But attitudes have changed. As Tom >

Photograph: Mike Prior





Above: Garnacha vines near Laguardia, in the Rioja Alavesa area

Puyaubert of Bodegas Exopto in Rioja expresses it: ‘Garnacha is the most challenging variety in the winery. It changes – and it can turn into a candy shop.’ It’s that potential sweetness that caused Garnacha to lose favour; it can be just too heartily alcoholic. It was also widely spurned by collectors and sommeliers because it made wines that were pale in colour and that oxidised readily. Yet that pale colour is superb in the new generation of lightly coloured but full-flavoured rosados. And that ease of oxidation, which can be avoided with care in the winery, makes for the glorious rancio flavours.

20th century: decline & fall

Navarra had a great and honourable history of reds and rosados in Garnacha. Up to the end of the 1970s it was 90% of the Navarra vineyard. Yet the DO turned itself over to Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot to give it a point of difference from its neighbour Rioja. Thus there are only isolated parcels left. If there’s one part of Garnacha’s history that has a tragic aspect, then it’s Navarra; in just two decades, plantings have slumped from 24,000ha (hectares) to just over 3,000ha.

The first winemakers in modern times to put over a clear, contemporary message about the variety were the pioneers in Priorat. While Navarra was still denouncing Garnacha, the gang of five who took the first steps in reviving Priorat found the variety was key to their wines. They blended it, first with international varieties and later with Cariñena. Garnacha is still the dominant variety there today.

The wild child has always had a part to play in the classical wines of Rioja, though as a lesser partner. Garnacha had the benefit of lowering a wine’s pH; a tweak of Garnacha could also be guaranteed to supply the generosity and the fruit. A wine such as La Rioja Alta’s Viña Ardanza typifies that classic approach, though in this case the blend includes 20% Garnacha, rather than the more typical 5%. Ardanza’s Garnacha comes from the favoured site of Tudelilla in Rioja Baja.

Two important areas remain. First around Madrid, north and west to the Sierra de Gredos; and second its birthplace of Aragon. The Gredos mountains offer a network of valleys and slopes, aspects and gradients and are part of Spain’s history of abandoned vines. A key figure in this story is Telmo Rodriguez,

who has been behind the recovery and revival of vineyards and wine styles from Malaga to Rioja. ‘I bought vineyards back in the late 1990s near Cebreros,’ he recalls. And with that he triggered a form of viticultural gold rush.

21st century: rising star

Let’s wind the clock forward to the present, and start with the home of Garnacha: Aragón. Here – in the DOs of Calatayud, Campo de Borja, Cariñena and the newer IGP of Valdejalón – young, honest Garnacha can be at its most delicious. This industrious region, dominated by co-operatives, is a popular hunting ground for retailers looking for the best-value wines in Europe. Pierre Mansour, head of buying at The Wine Society, says: ‘If my customers are looking for young Spanish reds, I tell them to buy Garnacha. It’s much more pleasurable than young Tempranillo.’

The producers’ focus here has to be on raising the variety’s reputation. While it may be a treat for the consumer, it’s hardly sustainable to be known for producing Spain’s best cheap wines. Of the three, Cariñena is currently the least exciting region, though winemaker Jorge Navascués and his father >

Garnacha around Spain

Rioja

A mix of soils, but limestone is important. Especially successful in Rioja Baja, particularly Monte Yerga and Tudelilla. Wines offer supple red fruit. Successful ageing in American or French oak and blending with other Rioja varieties.

Catalonia

Priorat: mixed brown and blue slate soils as well as clay. Bold wines with tannins, often showing pure mineral influence and frequently blended with Cariñena. Wines are typically aged in French oak rather than American, but amphorae and concrete are also used. *Montsant:* try the wines of Acústic, Espectacle and Alfredo Arribas – both white and red.

Navarra

Once a very promising prospect, but few Garnacha vines now. Clay, limestone and some plots of slate. Old bush vines, low yields. Ripe, generous fruit, well structured and

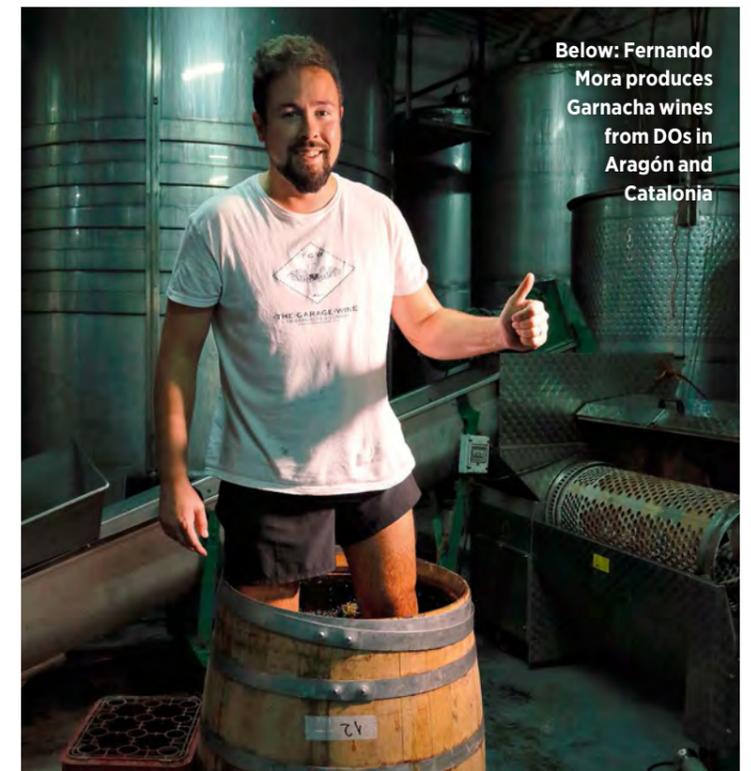
aromatic. Producers to look for: Artazu, La Calandria Pura.

Gredos

Old bush vines on granite, granitic sand, schist and quartz –granite soils give more aromatic, less fruity, more mineral wines. Winemaking affects style, so whole-bunch fermentation is used, and wines are more structured, lighter and more Burgundian. Look to this area for delicacy. Wines to try: Bernabeleva (Vinos de Madrid and Canopy (Méntrida).

Aragón

Grey slate, limestone and clay soils. Bush vines, with some more than 100 years old. Ripe but fresh wines – fuller bodied on lower sites with clay soils, and lighter styles from higher-altitude slate vineyards. Wines to try: Ateca (Calatayud); Aragonesas, Borsao, Alto Moncayo (Campo de Borja); Mancuso (IGP Valdejalón); Secastilla, both white and red (Somontano).



Below: Fernando Mora produces Garnacha wines from DOs in Aragón and Catalonia



Above: Tom Puyaubert tends vines at Bodegas Exopto in Rioja

Javier, are the ones to watch, both here in Cariñena and in IGP Valdejalón.

Campo de Borja is the self-proclaimed 'Empire of Garnacha'. It is engaged on a terroir study, which could certainly assist with the definition of quality. Summers are hot here. Fernando Mora, who runs his own project, Frontonio, based in nearby Valdejalón, says the work begins in the vineyard: 'It is essential to avoid sunburned grapes.' Like winemakers across the country, Mora likes to use concrete vats for fermenting, as 'it makes for a more elegant profile than new oak'.

Mora is an enthusiast for his DO: 'Garnacha will work wonders in the future here,' he insists. Indeed, the best wines from Campo de Borja are really promising, and it is the people making the wines who will get them known.

The Garnachas of today are all about personality. The variety is a calling card for the new generation of Spain's young growers and winemakers. They tell their own, or their vineyard's, life stories on the label. They have travelled, made wine around the world, and are ready to question received wisdom.

One winemaker who fits that bill is the Scottish-born, New Zealand-qualified, Calatayud-resident Norrel Robertson MW, self-styled El Escocés Volante, or Flying Scotsman (as in flying winemaker), who has plenty of views, boldly expressed on his labels. From the roughly translated 'Needs Must' and 'Stick to Your Guns', the names of his Garnachas hint at the debate he has had with the wine regulators.

Robertson is one of the original international consultants who have done so much to raise the quality of Aragón's wines. The difference is that he is the one who chose to stay. As he buys up old vineyards and new concrete eggs, there is plenty of promise, and he can be sure to gain attention for the variety, as well as for his wines.

Into the spotlight

To the west, in Rioja, the traditional role of Garnacha as 'seasoning' in a wine blend is changing. Winemakers and marketers have caught the single-varietal disease, and a number of producers – big brands and small – are bringing out their own versions. Look to Baigorri, Campo Viejo, Contino, Ramón Bilbao as well as Sierra Cantabria. Also Alvaro Palacios, whose work at the family winery of Palacios Remondo is returning Rioja Baja, the sub-region that has excellent Garnachas, to its deserved pedestal.

The new generation doesn't necessarily do away with all the old ways, though. Further east, in Laguardia, in his garage (hidden away, like many of the new generation, within a trading estate) Frenchman Tom Puyaubert sees his Bozeto, a predominantly Garnacha blend, as his 'tribute' to Garnacha. 'It reflects the old way of winemaking, when the growers made their own Garnacha,' he says. 'I ferment in large concrete vats, and totally destem, but I don't crush.'

Another couple who were drawn to old bush vines are Elisa Ucar and her husband >

Right: barrel cellar at Scala Dei in Priorat, whose single-vineyard expressions are labelled using the Catalan spelling of Garnatxa



Enrique Basarte in Navarra. They came from career backgrounds in wine and recognised the outstanding quality of the vineyards in Navarra that were so rapidly disappearing. At Domaines Lupier, they make just two wines, La Dama and El Terroir. The couple's pure expression of Garnacha has gained attention in the international arena, and raised the profile of their region. When I ask Ucar if they were always intending to work with Garnacha, like so many of today's 'Garnachistas', she demurs, saying simply: 'Enrique and I found something exceptional in these vines, and we had to rescue the parcels before they disappeared entirely.'

To better understand Garnacha, it's always illuminating to talk to the converts. Ricard Rofes, for instance, now a real expert in the variety, came to Scala Dei in Priorat from nearby Montsant in 2007. His expertise was in Cariñena. Ten years on, he's more than comfortable. He manages 40 plots in all, some on sites planted long ago by the long-departed Carthusian monks. The ancient building that contains the Scala Dei winery has an array of small and large tanks, as well as concrete lagares. The open tops to the fermenters are a straightforward device to blow off the alcohol.

For anyone interested in Garnatxa – the Catalan spelling on the label of this Catalan winery – his trio of bottlings is a delight. Three separate wines from three separate vineyards,

each on different soils: St Antoni (clay at 600m), Artigots (boulders at 550m) and La Creueta (schist at 500m). One of the most interesting things learned from the tasting is that slate is not always the best in Priorat.

That's the astonishing transformation of Garnacha – from a naughty child in a sweetie shop, through the awkward teenage years with rough edges, to the trendiest variety in Iberia. Now it's confidently grown up, with growers and producers dedicated to singing its praises to an increasingly receptive global audience. **D**

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Evans' top Spanish Garnachas to try



Bodegas Bilbainas, Viña Pomal, Brut Reserva Blanc de Noirs, Cava 2013 88
£16.99 **Amps, Noble Green, Noel Young, Soho Wine Supply**

First ever Blanc de Noirs cava made from Garnacha in Rioja. Bilbainas is a member of the Codorniu Raventós group, so they had plenty of in-house expertise. Could be a little crunchier, but a very promising first effort. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alcohol** 12%

Scala Dei, Plá dels Angels Rosado, Priorat, 2015 89

£13.95 **Hanginditch, Noel Young, The New Wine Shop, The Wine Society**
Bursting with flavour. Nothing like the

gumdrop Garnacha rosados of the past; this serious and elegant wine, but maybe coming to the end of its best. Look out for the 2016 vintage. **Drink** 2017 **Alc** 14.5%



Alvaro Palacios, Finca Dofi, Priorat 2013 95
£45.99-£52 **AG Wines, Berry Bros & Rudd, Fields Morris & Verdin, Hedonism, Woodwinters**

I'm cheating a bit as this has 5% of Cariñena. But, generous flood of Garnacha aromas: brambles, fine cedar and garrigue. Plump, juicy and even more expressive in the mouth than the aroma suggests. Dark plum fruit with a refined, leathery edge. Very fine balance between the juice of

concentrated bush vines and the calming time in oak. This is a wine that speaks of its origin – a unique personality. **Drink** 2017-2023 **Alc** 14.5%



Arrayán, La Suerte, Métrida 2012 94
£15 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Old Chapel Cellars**

From sandy soils at 700m. Métrida is undoubtedly a forgotten region, but thankfully revived, in this case with the help of Australian vine expert Dr Richard Smart and Finca Allende's Miguel Angel de Gregorio. Perfumed, floral, elegant, and showing great promise. **Drink** 2017-2024 **Alc** 14.5% ➤

Evans' top Spanish Garnachas to try (continued)



Viñedos de Norrel Robertson, En Sus Trece, Spain 2013 94
 £9.99 **Majestic**
 Declassified DO Calatayud. Full of aromas of dense red fruits with a note of liquorice – the very essence of Garnacha. The palate is refreshing, not like the overheated style of some

wines produced in the region. Savoury and vibrant, with dark red fruits, spices and liquorice, and balanced alcohol. Bursting with character, it's great value. **Drink 2017-2021 Alcohol 14.5%**

Telmo Rodriguez, Pegaso Granito, Castilla y Leon 2010 92

£28.99 **AG Wines, Fields Morris & Verdin**
 Finely aromatic berry fruit and delicate oak. Supple, savoury tannins give structure to the generous fruit. Plump mid-palate, with a red fruit impression. Fine, bright acidity is refreshing while tobacco and liquorice notes round out the warming finish. Brother wine to Pizarra, grown on slate, both from vines in Cebreros, in the Sierra de Gredos. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 14.5%**



CVNE, Contino Garnacha, Rioja 2014 91
 £27.60 **Planet of the Grapes, The Wine Reserve**
 Gloriously floral. A ripe and juicy red – this is Garnacha, for sure! With winemaker Jesús Madrazo's influence, it shows lovely complexity and style. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 14.5%**

Palacios Remondo, Propiedad, Rioja 2011 91

£22.99 **AG Wines, Fields Morris & Verdin, Woodwinters**
 Sumptuous: it jumps out of the glass! Beautifully floral, with ripe red apples and super-refined oak on the nose. Full-bodied and plump in the mouth: dark profile of fruit, with black plum elements. Doesn't quite live up to the promise of the nose. Finishes with bright acidity and a good grain of tannin; well structured. Very clearly Garnacha; very clearly Rioja. **Drink 2017-2022 Alc 14.5%**

Bodegas Frontonio, El Casetero, Finca El Rey, Campo de Borja 2012 90

N/A UK www.thegaragewine.com
 Light aromas of savoury dark fruits. The palate is powerful and super-savoury, with a punch of acidity and likeable cherry fruit. Good fine tannin and a rich mocha finish. Carries its alcohol well. Fun and generous, showing what Campo de Borja wines can be all about. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 15%**



Daniel Jiménez-Landi, Las Uvas de la Ira, Métrida 2014 90

£23 **Selfridges, The Sampler**
 Meaning 'The Grapes of Wrath': typical of the light, fresh and crunchy style of Garnacha, and so typical of Gredos region. From the Tiétar Valley, grown on sandy granite. Underlying bright fruit at the core, but with a fine structure of tannin. Good savoury character on the finish. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 14.5%**

Proyecto Garnachas de España, La Garnacha Olvidada de Aragón, Calatayud 2013 90

£10.99 **Cambridge Wine Merchants**
 1940s bush vines planted at a chilly 850m on ferrous clay soil with stones, east-facing in the Valle del Ribota. Fermented in concrete and then aged in oak. It is part of a project creating a range of old-vine Garnachas across six different DOs. **Drink 2017-2023 Alc 15%**



Viñedos de Norrel Robertson, Manda Huevos, Vino de Parcelas, Caña Andrea, Spain 2014 90

£19.99 **Alliance**
 Declassified DO Calatayud and the first vintage. Made from two parcels, the upper one planted in 1908 and the lower in 1970. Fermented in open vats, then 10 months on lees in 900-litre concrete eggs. Clear, pure fruit, with a savoury, saline overlay – it's almost chalky – on a delicate, balanced and remarkably light palate. Contains 15% Garnacha Blanca, Moristel and Bobal. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 14%**



Vinyes Domènech, Teixar, Montsant 2012 90

N/A UK www.vinyesdomenech.com
 One of the pioneers of the Terra de Garnatxes group (along with Clos Figueres, Masia Serra and Edetària). The president of the group is Joan Domènech, a serious defender of the variety. This wine is supple, bold and expansive with plenty of life left. **Drink 2017-2024 Alc 14.5%**



Franck Massard, El Mago, Terra Alta 2014 89

£9.99-£11.45 **Eclectic Tastes, Invinity, Winedirect**
 Frenchman Massard was the UK's top sommelier in 1996, now lives in Catalunya and travels the country making wines – organically grown, El Mago was one of his first. Unoaked, vibrant, chewy, fresh. Look out too for his Mas Amor Rosado. **Drink 2017-2019 Alc 13.5%**

Viticultores de Gredos, Laderas del Tiétar Garnacha, Gredos 2015 89

£8.50 **The Wine Society**
 Bursting with cherry fruit, and a typically delicate palate from the region. Finely structured. **Drink 2017-2022 Alc 14%**



Saò del Coster, Pim Pam Poom, Priorat 2015 88

£15.99 (2014) **The Solent Cellar**
 A fun, expressive wine that lives up to its label! From Gratallops, it's bright, jammy and spicy with oodles of energy. Enjoy that final lift of acidity with a good steak. **Drink 2017-2019 Alc 14.5%**

Vintae, La Garnacha de Hielo, Rioja 2009 89

N/A UK www.vintae.com
 A Garnacha ice wine, just to prove that this is a multipurpose variety and that it does snow and freeze in Spain. This is a delightful curiosity that shows a silky sweetness. **Drink 2017-2019 Alc 11%**

For full details of UK stockists, see p117