

TALES FROM THE

Sacred Shore

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS ADRIAN MCMANUS



Grape picking at Adegas Moure.
PHOTO: Adegas Moure



PHOTO: Adegas Via Romana



THE STATUS OF WINES from the *Ribeira Sacra* area of Galicia *is on the rise*, sometimes equalling the quality of Rioja.
Adrian McManus takes a tour of some family run vineyards.

Winemaking in Galicia has long been associated with the tart, fruity white wines from the Ribeiro, Valdeorras and Rias Baixas appellations. Until very recently, Spanish and foreign tourists alike could be seen ordering classic Spanish reds such as Rioja in the region's bars and restaurants, whilst snootily turning their noses up when offered un buen tinto gallego, or a good Galician red wine. Thankfully, situations like this are now being consigned to the past, largely due to the heroic efforts of a number of pioneering individuals from the Ribeira Sacra, a wine producing area situated near the small agricultural town of Chantada, known as the Heart of Galicia.

Vertigo to go

Loosely translated, Ribeira Sacra means something like sacred shore or sacred river bank. The River Miño, as it winds its way east from Ourense, cuts an ever deepening gorge into the countryside. Oak, pine and chestnut forested slopes, dotted with precariously perched dwellings and the odd Romanesque church, plunge right down to the water line, and it's on these vertigo-inducing slopes, on tiny granite terraces known locally as bancadas, that the local grape variety and flagship of the appellation Mencia is grown. In places the vertiente, or slope, is so steep that the only way to 'evacuate' the grapes is by boat, traditionally a flat bottomed, rectangular wooden vessel.

The area has long been synonymous with the grape. During Roman times, wines from Amandi, today one of the appellation's five sub-zones, were regularly shipped to Rome to be served at the Emperor's table, along

with that other great Miño delicacy, lamprey. By the middle ages, the upper Miño began to attract monastic communities who carried on the tradition of planting vines and producing wines to be sold to inns and hospices along the nearby Camino de Santiago.

Fish farm pumps

After breakfast, we were met by the Deputy Mayor of the town of Chantada, Ildefonso Piñeiro. As our first port of call, he took us to a small vineyard belonging to his father-in-law. This was where we were able to catch the first of many stunning panoramic views of the Ribeira Sacra. Along the route he told us of the friendly rivalry that had always existed between the ribeiraos, vineyard owners, on both sides of the river.

Tongue-in-cheek insults would fly between paperos, or papists, on the Chantada side and rabudos (rabbis) on the Saviñao side. A typical case of back-breaking work made a little lighter with a little cross-river verbal jousting, he confided.

After a few minutes meandering up and down twisting lanes, we pulled up at the gates of Adegas Via Romana, a beautiful stone building dating back to the 16th century. The owner-director José Luís Méndez Rojo warmly greeted us, ushering us inside for a tour of the grape reception area, fermentation tanks, labelling and bottling facility, and the wonderful salon with its jaw-dropping views of the Miño. Juan Luis's approach to wine making is firmly rooted in the pursuit of quality over quantity, a constant of all the wineries I was to visit throughout the trip. This guarantee of quality is achieved by an exhaustive poda en verde, or pruning of the fruit >

TOP FROM LEFT Adegas Via Romana was formed in 1997 growing the Mencia grape, which makes a scented and fruity red wine in the town of Chantada. BELOW Spring time vines.





Adegas de Garda



The hub of the wine-making process.

PHOTO: Adegas Mouré



PHOTO: Adegas Mouré

before it reaches maturity, manual selection of the grapes and, somewhat bizarrely, the use of fish-farm pumps to protect the seeds during fermentation. Damaged or bruised seeds can cause an unwanted, mouth-puckering astringency in the wine, so fish-farm pumps were evidently a wise investment for this innovative wine maker. The rest, he told us, was down to the six months of absolute peace and tranquility the wine spends in a controlled environment. About 10% of his production of Via Romana Mencía and Via Romana Selección Añada 1999 goes abroad, mainly to the USA, but more recently to Japan and Russia, with new markets being explored every month.

A rightful place

Next on the route was Bodega Pincelo. Though the family has been making wine since the 1840s, in 1985 Bodega Pincelo became the first legally constituted winery in the province of Lugo, a crucial step in the 1993 founding of the appellation D.O. Ribeira Sacra. The owner Alfonso Regal Teijeiro said that there was still quite a way to go on the road to D.O. Ribeira Sacra earning its rightful place among the prime movers of the Spanish wine scene. Statistics still show that many of his paisanos or countrymen in Galicia, when ordering red wine, order Rioja instead of Ribeira Sacra Mencía. Alfonso specialises in Viño Artesano, or artisan's wine, and Pincelo, Viña Portotide and the oak-aged 1985 are three fine examples of the genre. With an ever keen eye on the future, Bodega Pincelo is now dedicating around six hectares of its vines to the experimental production of Viños Ecolóxicos, or organic red and white wines.

Quaffing and nibbling

It was soon time to move on again and the next stop was Adegas Lareu, another family winery run by the eminently hospitable Primitivo Lareu. To describe his place as lovely would be to do it a gross injustice. The setting for this charming winery is a beautiful 18th century granite farmhouse, surrounded by huge, gnarled chestnut trees and lush fields. Our genial host showed us into the traditional Adegas de Garda or storage winery, now a wine-museum, with its trodden earth floor and doors oriented to the east and tiny aperture on the west wall allowing for ventilation and a shaft of light. An ancient wooden estruxadora or wine press sat on one side, and two or three huge cubas or storage casks on the other. A couple of pellexos or animal skins, used centuries ago to



Young vines at the start of the season are just beginning to grow.



The dramatic Cabo de Mundo, home to Adegas Moure.

WINERIES (Visits by appointment only)

Adegas Lareu

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www.adegaslareu.com
lareu@adegaslareu.com
 T. +34 616 561820

Adegas Moure

Escairón (Lugo), Galicia
www.adegasmoure.com
abadiadacova@adegasmoure.com
 T. +34 982 452031

Bodega Pincelo

La Sariña, Chantada (Lugo), Galicia
www.bodegapincelo.com
info@bodegapincelo.com
 T. +34 982 441660

Adegas y Viñedos Vía Romana

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www.viaromana.es
juanluis@viaromana.es
 T. +34 982 454005

factFILE

GETTING THERE

There are three main airports in Galicia. **Ryanair** flies from Stansted to Santiago de Compostela, but there are far less flights operating in winter. **Iberia** takes you from London Heathrow to La Coruna, and **Clickair** from Gatwick to Vigo. Otherwise you can fly to Madrid or Barcelona and take a connecting flight to one of the Galicia airports.

STAYING THERE

HOTEL MOGAY

C/ Antonio Lourenzana, 3
 17500 Chantada (Lugo)
 Galicia (+34 982 440 847,
www.mogay.com,
hotelmogay@mogay.com)

A relatively modern hotel situated in the centre of town and right next to the Casco Antiguo, the old quarter. Jacobo Lorenzo Gay, the perfect host, seems to know just about everybody and is always on hand with keen advice

on all things gastronomic in the hotel's excellent restaurant. He can also arrange appointments with wineries.

O CATAVIÑOS

Alameda, Chantada
 This superb vinoteca down by the River Asma packs them in nightly with an impressive display of free pintxos laid out on the bar. You can choose from over 60 Spanish wines from over 20 different D.O.s or appellations, with Galician wines understandably taking pride of place.

MORE INFORMATION

The Galicia Tourist Board.
www.turgalicia.es
 The Ribeira Sacra Tourist Board and also the D.O. Ribeira Sacra.
www.ribeirasacra.org
 The town of Chantada.
 (In Galician and Spanish only).
www.concellodechantada.org

transport wine, completed the display. The rest of the evening was spent quaffing his excellent Sabatelius Branco white, Sabatelius red and Sabatelius Carballo oak-aged red, whilst nibbling away on some memorable home-made smoked chorizo. Unfortunately, all good things had to come to an end, and after some fond farewells, we set out for our last but definitely not least port of call, Adegas Moure in the enigmatically named Cabo do Mundo.

The Sacred River Shore

Cabo do Mundo means the Edge of the World. The course of the Miño here takes a dramatic 180° turn and Adegas Moure, clearly defying the laws of gravity, surveys all this awe-inspiring beauty, totally confident in the knowledge that there must be very few vineyards on this Earth that can compete with them in terms of the sheer drama of the setting. If that wasn't enough, they're also sweeping up award after award on the international wine circuit, with medal-snatching vinos like Abadía da Cova, Mencía Barrica, Fuga and an excellent Albariño that recently scored an impressive 90 points in Wine & Spirit Magazine.

Evaristo Rodríguez López, Vice-President of the D.O. Ribeira Sacra and our contact at Adegas Moure echoed the words of the other wine makers we met along this most 'sacred of river shores.' He said, "Our vineyards that descend so steeply along the Ribeira Sacra, are hundreds of years old. We're absolutely determined to preserve our time-honoured traditions, all the things that make our wines unique, but at the same time we're looking forward, constantly striving for the highest possible quality, investing in technology and innovation and of course, focusing our efforts exclusively on improving with each new vintage." If seeing and tasting is believing, then this appellation has every reason to be justifiably proud of its caldos (wines), so the next time you're in this part of the world, make sure it's a Ribeira Sacra, you'll be instantly smitten.

FLAVOURS OF SPAIN

For good Galician food and wines including Mencía Vía Romana from the Ribeira Sacra. (www.flavoursofspain.co.uk)