

Spain, Aragón: The Land of a Thousand (value) Garnachas
October 31, 2014

Aragón is a large region in the northeast of Spain, between Madrid and Cataluña, bordered by France and the Pyrenees to the north and the Iberian Mountains (highest peak Moncayo at 2,315 meters) to the west. It is comprised of the provinces of Zaragoza, Teruel and Huesca and is now an autonomous community that coincides with the historical kingdom of Aragón. There are four wine appellations of origin there; Calatayud, Campo de Borja, Cariñena and Somontano, the first three in Zaragoza and the last one in Huesca, plus a number of *Vinos de la Tierra*, the IGT-like appellation for regional wines. Calatayud, Campo de Borja and Cariñena are relatively close and share more characteristics, while Somontano is further away and is somehow different with its clear orientation towards French grapes. Cabernet Sauvignon arrived in Somontano after phylloxera but it was in the late 1980s when the plantings of French varieties really took off; they are also closer to France and therefore have a greater French influence, French tourism, etc.



Amazing colors in a bush-trained, old Garnacha vine

Garnacha, one of the most popular and widespread grapes in the world, was most probably born somewhere in Aragón. The rise of Châteauneuf-du-Pape on the international wine scene has undoubtedly helped the

popularity of Garnacha throughout the world. Being one of the most ubiquitous grapes it was considered, until no more than a decade ago, a minor grape destined for volume (bulk) and rosé wines, but not really for quality reds. That outlook has changed dramatically as the diversity of wines and the interest for local varieties exploded in the last few years. Once people actually thought about how to treat the grape rather than just applying a formula (how can you make a wine in a Mediterranean climate with Mediterranean grapes applying a formula from an Atlantic region where the grapes are completely different?) the quality of the wines rose.

The problem is that by then the patrimony of old vines had been catastrophically diminished. Old vine, head-pruned, dry-farmed Garnacha (and other grapes, like Cariñena or Monastrell), which in the past were so common, are not that common now. The plots that remain are there because there was no other option. The situation in places like Calatayud is catastrophic; it's now the smallest appellation in Aragón with barely 3,500 hectares of vineyards, down from the 40,000 or so it used to have in the 1940s. Moreover, a significant part of what remains is French varieties on trellises. I'm not saying that in the past all vineyards were fantastic or quality-oriented (and the wines were certainly not) but we have lost an incredible patrimony there.



Wine is ubiquitous in Aragón, present even in street art

Calatayud, Campo de Borja and Cariñena are still dominated by cooperatives (and Somontano by three large wineries), there are very few private projects and just a handful of young projects, a newer generation of quality-oriented winemakers with a good perspective of the global wine world. Everything remains quite local and static, as cooperatives do not tend to be the most dynamic kind of enterprises. All in all, it's a region producing outstanding value wines, in fact some of the best values from Spain, but with potential for much more. I'm looking for more young projects that could act as the engine to pull the appellation, something like what is happening in Gredos.

Let's dive deeper into each of these appellations, in strict alphabetical order...

Calatayud

Calatayud is nowadays a small appellation with 3,500 hectares under vine - the smallest in Aragón - when in the 1940s there were almost 40,000 hectares. Only 16 wineries currently operate in the appellation. There are two separate vineyard areas, in the north where the soils are rich in chalk, and the south where the vineyards are planted on slate at higher altitude.

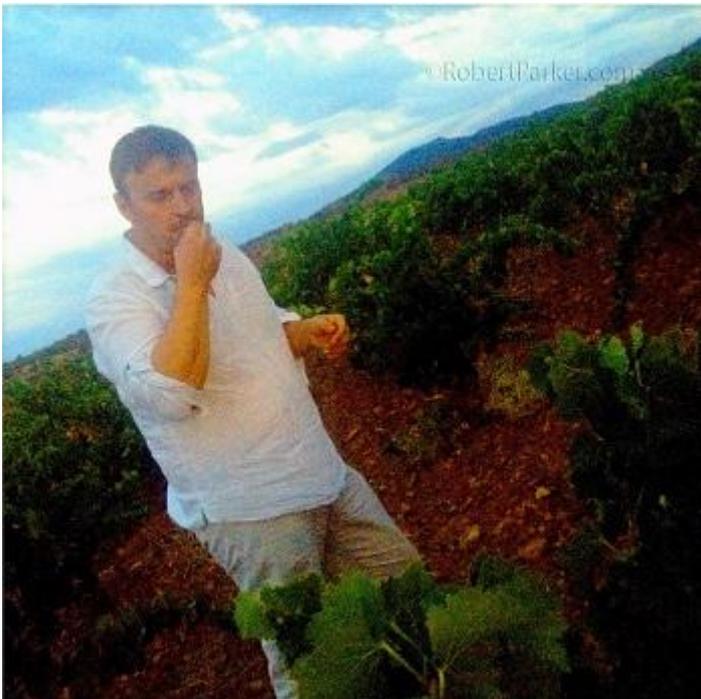


Old Garnacha in northern Calatayud on sandy soils rich in chalk

One good initiative there is that the "old vines" mentioned on labels is officially a special category of wines that, since 2009, has been controlled and regulated: to be able to call the wine "old vines" the plants have to be at least 35 years old and yield less than 4,500 kilos of grapes per hectare.

The appellation - if they do not finally rip up all of their old vineyards - has good potential, perhaps is the zone capable of producing the finest, most elegant wines in Aragón. Scotsman Norrel Robertson, a Master of Wine who arrived in the region to source wines for UK supermarkets and stayed, seems to be the quality leader. He set up shop in Calatayud and called his company *El Escocés Volante*, "The Flying Scotsman," but the name can also be a pun on the Scotsman steering wheel, as *volante* means both flying and steering wheel. He does a lot of driving in the region, a "driving winemaker". He does not limit himself to Calatayud, as he works in other appellations in Aragón, the southwest, Galicia and heaven knows where else. There are a few young names there, like Ludovic Vano, a Frenchman who has bought some vineyards there and named his company Floris Legere. He's only starting, but what he's doing looks very promising. José Antonio Ibarra, a third generation winemaker there, sells his wines under the *Augusta Bilibilis* moniker, and a small project of two friends (Javier Lázaro y Manuel Castro), which they called Pagos Altos de Acered, produces one of the few wines from high-altitude, old Garnacha vineyards

on slate soils in the south of the appellation under the name Lajas.



Norrel Robertson, the flying Scotsman, the driving Scotsman!

Campo de Borja

The appellation takes its name from the Borja family who immigrated to Italy, changed their name to Borgia, became world famous and ruled there. The boundaries run between the Ebro river and the Moncayo mountains, and the vineyards are soft slopes (4% to 10%) most of them north-facing, with altitudes

ranging from 250 to almost 800 meters, and a good mix of Atlantic (*cierzo* wind) and Mediterranean (2,800 hours of sun) characteristics. There are 6,800 hectares of vineyard (3,700 Garnacha, 2,100 of them head-pruned) currently. Most of the head-pruned vineyards are over 30 years old. In the

past they reached up to 10,000 hectares, but this is the appellation that kept their old Garnacha vineyards, not that many have been grubbed up, at least compared with others in Aragón.

Harvest is very late, into November usually, and the best harvests are those when it is cold (not cool nights, but cold nights, well below 10° C) during the picking period, that's when they feel Garnacha behaves best in the region. The appellation is currently working on defining the different soils within their vineyards: the north, closer to the Ebro River is rich in chalk. The center, the valley of the Huecha is rich in stones and grey soils, and the south with red clay and iron-rich soils where the stones are not round, but sharp. There is a small part in the very south where you find red slate.

They are definitively taking Garnacha as their flagship grape and identity, the ones doing this with most intensity in the whole of Aragón. This is the appellation with the largest extension of old-vine Garnacha, the success of Altos del Moncayo at the top end and Las Rocas de San Alejandro in the price-oriented segment has given locals renewed hopes. Most of the wines there follow the pattern of the most successful wines, very ripe fruit, jammy flavors and sweet tannins. I was told that to achieve a quality wine in the region the grape bunches need to have between 10% and 20% shriveled grapes. What you get then is very ripe fruit, very polished, sweet tannins and low-ish acidity. That's certainly a style that has been really successful, but I believe the market is demanding or is going to demand fresher wines, at least for what we can call quality wines. So it all depends on where you want to be. At the moment Borja - and most of Aragón, as a matter of fact - is the source for very good value reds.

When it comes to names, Borsao, the old Cooperativa de Campo de Borja that was no doubt pushed by importer Jorge Ordoñez, has had a quality oriented mentality offering very sound Garnacha wines at unbeatable prices. Somehow related to them, Altos del Moncayo, a joint venture between Ordoñez, Borsao, the Aussie tandem of importer Dan Philips and winemaker Chris Ringland, and some other investors have made a lot of noise with their brands Aquilon and Altos del Moncayo, big, ripe and well-oaked wines not that far removed from some examples from down under.

Cariñena

Cariñena is the largest and eldest of all the Aragón appellations, with 14,400 hectares of vineyards. Today there are 600 hectares of Cariñena grapes, but I only tasted three wines (out of 40) produced with them. In fact, for a while I thought there was no Cariñena (grapes) in Cariñena (appellation). Now I know that I was wrong. For a long time they were probably disguising the C grape in blends, kind of ashamed to still cultivate. Now I hear they are even planting it in some of the warmer zones! The Cariñena grape, whose origin is uncertain (but isn't it for all grapes?), seems to have originated somewhere in northeast Spain, but whether it was Rioja where it's known as Mazuelo or in Aragón is unclear.

At the end of the 19th century it was so dominant in Cariñena that it adopted its name. In any case, it's more widespread under its French name, Carignan in our neighboring country.

As I mentioned, the Cariñena grape represents little more than 4% in the vineyards. Yes, there is Garnacha, quite a lot of it, but there is a mixture of local red and white grapes, grapes from other regions and from France and there is such a mix of wines (whites, rosés, reds, sweets... they produced a lot of base wine for sparkling) that it's really difficult to define what a wine from Cariñena actually is. The appellation, centered on the village of the same name to the east of Calatayud and south of Zaragoza is dominated by large cooperatives and is lacking hungry young blood, entrepreneurs willing to exploit the potential of the zone, something that would give the appellation a second wind.

Somontano

Somontano, a continental climate appellation in the province of Huesca whose name means "below the mountains" is a relatively new wine region south of the Pyrenees. It had a boom in the local market at the end of the 1990s as three large wineries, Enate, Viñas del Vero and Pirineos brought out modern, well-made wines produced with French grapes, but never really had a large export business. Most of the texts and books at the time predicted this was destined to be one of the world-class wine regions in Spain. And for a while, it looked like the appellations that placed a firm bet on French grapes had a bright future (Navarra and Penedès together with Somontano), while the ones stuck with their "poor" local grapes were kind of doomed. The current picture could not be more different from that; the ones that carried on with their grapes might struggle more or less, but are certainly in a better position than the ones that went international and have to compete in a global market... on price! Calatayud had the fame for producing finer wines, Campo de Borja riper, bigger-sized and perhaps a tad more rustic, and Cariñena somewhere in between both of them, somehow lacking luster, while Somontano was referred to as "the modern success story" (Julian Jeffs, *The Wines of Spain*, Faber & Faber, 1999).



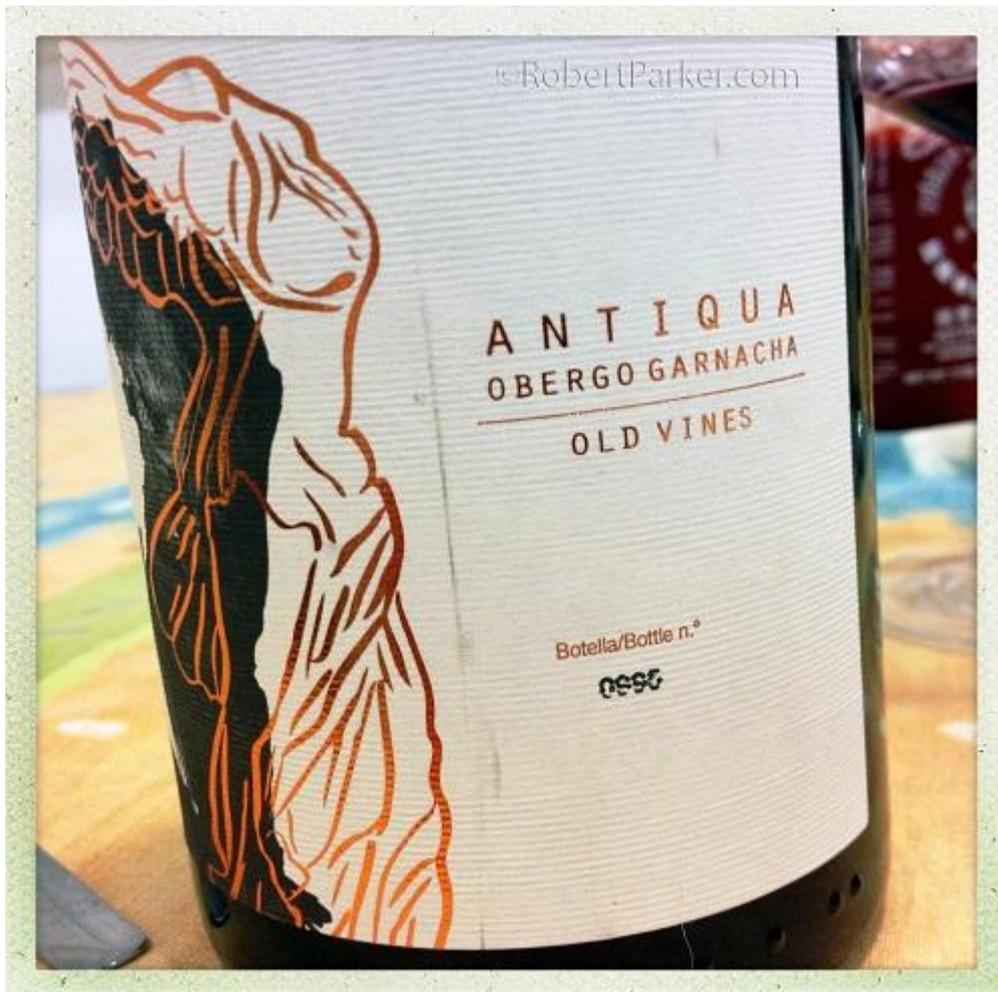
It rains a lot more in Somontano than in the other three appellations in Aragón

Today there are 4,300 hectares of vineyards. Whites, which represent 20% of the production, still sell well locally, but reds are much harder to sell. That means there are plenty of hectares of Chardonnay and Gewurztraminer whose grapes get the grower a higher price per kilo than any reds. The three large wineries still represent around 80% of the appellation, while some wineries that saw large investments are suffering and some have serious financial issues and are in the process of restructuring or changing hands.



High-altitude, old-vine Garnacha from the Secastilla valley in Somontano

I visited the Secastilla valley, a higher-altitude zone where only around 50 hectares of vineyards survive. That includes new plantings from Viñas del Vero after they arrived and purchased the very few remaining plots of old vineyards planted mostly with Garnacha (most of the old vineyards are a field blend) from which they produce a wine that carries the name of the valley. This seems to be a zone with its own personality and high potential, and I tasted another wine from there from a new, small winery called Obergo, which produces the highest-scoring wine from the appellations, a red made with old-vine Garnacha grapes from the Secastilla valley.



Obergo, a new name to follow in Somontano

A Merlot from Somontano is a hard sell. I'm not saying they should uproot the vines, as some zones are well-suited and some nice wines produced, but if you want a place in the global market rather than just fighting low-price segments for varietal wines, I think that would come with finding your identity and personality, with something that differentiates you from the mass of varietal wines produced across continents. The white Alcañón and the reds Parraleta and Moristel, and of course Garnacha - both red and white - Macabeo and perhaps Monastrell and Cariñena for the warmer zones, might provide for that.

Not surprisingly, the appellation exports only 30% of its wines mainly to Europe (Belgium and Germany) and Mexico, while for example Campo de Borja only sells that amount in the local market and exports close to 70% of its wines.



I tasted most of these wines while visiting the appellations in September 2014.

—Luis Gutiérrez