

## **Méntrida - Grenache in the shadow Toledo**

By Miquel Hudin

The Grenache belt of southern Europe slithers around the blue waters of the Mediterranean until it snaps sharply to the centre of Spain. There, this belt ends with a weatherworn buckle of a region just south of Madrid called, Méntrida.

While relatively unknown on the international wine stage, Méntrida has seen a small glimmer of light cast its way as of late. There's a group of producers who, 10-15 years ago stopped selling their grapes to the cooperatives and set out on their own projects at a time when such adventures seemed insane for a region in decline. In these rolling hills that are extremely wealthy in great swaths of nothingness, the winemakers have found success in crafting small production, single vineyard wines using high altitude, old-vine Grenache as a foundation.

One thinks of bold as an adjective when Grenache is mentioned due to the hallmarks of wines from Châteauneuf-du-Pape or Priorat. With Méntrida, you would hardly recognize these wines as coming from the same grape. Considerably paler in colour and lighter in body, it's been said they resemble Pinot Noir more than Grenache. As ludicrous as it may seem, the comparisons are indeed apt. The lively floral notes, acidity, countless levels of complexity along with balanced fruit and Grenache's famous alcoholic qualities being severely downplayed is what make these wines not just different but delectable.

Fists are thumped defiantly when winemakers such as Martín Padin of Bodegas Tavera or Eva Martín of the Carmarena cooperative state, "Grenache is our queen", but they have quite a few other grapes in their palette these days. Various EU vine-pull schemes over the decades unfortunately only served to eradicate many old, hard-to-work Grenache vines, more than halving their regional production from 70 million kg 20 years ago to 28 million currently. Grenache was targeted again in the early 1990s when the regional Castilla government paid growers to rip out the old-vine Grenache and plant the international varieties, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, and Merlot.

Varietal wines of Grenache as well as the rather rare white grape, Albillo Real, are typical from the region when a vineyard warrants being showcased. The larger portion of the production focuses on younger wines though that are typically blended with a small amount of the newcomers to the region. One winery said an importer in the US encouraged them to add a bit of Tempranillo to one of their younger wines just to give it more saleability as a "Spanish" wine for consumers.

As is the case with the rest of Spain, *vitis vinifera* arrived to Méntrida with the Romans and for the last 400 years the wines have been held in high regard, at least regionally. They were served in the royal courts, and the region's proximity to Madrid and Toledo gave growers access to a thirsty market. With time, this proximity was and still is a large part of the undoing of the region, as people leave the villages for the cities.

The majority of the growers who remain sell to the cooperatives who only pay 0.20€/kg and make no distinction between young and old vines. One day, when visiting some of the remote vineyards high up in the Sierra de Gredos owned by Bodegas Canopy, Alfonso Chacón told me, 'At 0.20€/kg, if you have a hectare of old vines that produce under half a kilo each, you can't even pay for the petrol to come up here and work the land, let alone make a living from this. It's no wonder the vines are being abandoned.'

One morning, when heading out to the vineyards of the lower hills around La Torre de Estaban Hambrán with DO President and winemaker Juan Alonso, he points out the small, futile fences around the vineyards used in an attempt to fight their worst plague, rabbits. He makes little mention, however, of Europe's most historic epidemic in the vineyards, phylloxera. While the root louse arrived in Méntrida like everywhere in Europe, it wasn't able to take hold due to the sandy soils which define the region.

The hills between the Tajo and Alberche Rivers have a clay base while high up in Gredos it's granite and a bit of slate but it's all crumbly sand that looks like a beach of vines. A large percentage of the old Grenache vines are planted on their original roots which contributes to the unique profile of the grape in the region. Also shaping the wine style are the huge diurnal shifts that can range upwards of 20°C difference during the summer. This helps explain the wines' characteristic excellent acidity.

While the lower hills are relatively homogenous, Sierra de Gredos should be a region unto itself, but it spans three appellations (DO Méntrida, DO Vinos de Madrid, & IGT Castilla y León), and three different administrative regions (Castilla-La Mancha, Madrid, & Castilla y León.) This means that despite the majority of the wines from these mountains sharing a commonality of being majority Grenache, floral, fresh, and lively, they have to be marketed under three different regional names.

The wines of Bernabeleva or Commando G are under neighbouring DO Vinos de Madrid but have considerably more in common stylistically with the Méntrida wines than those produced in the eastern part of their legal appellation. Due to this, the wineries of the Gredos region joined forces in 2013 to create a 'Garnachas de Gredos' association.

As DO President Juan Alonso was happy to say, 'We work together because we share the strengths and weaknesses of this region.' The commonalities they share are clearly apparent. Organic farming is widespread. The small producers are for the most part making use of spontaneous fermentation from ambient yeasts. There is also a surprisingly high number of women in charge, giving balance and additional perspective to what has traditionally been a boy's club in Spain.

The wineries of Canopy, Jiménez-Landi, Arrayán (see box) and others came on to the market at a time when extracted, oaky wines were declining in popularity. This has worked in their favour, given the style of wine that they can make from their grapes. Both aromatically as well as on the palate, the wines frame themselves as fresh and

expressive; a wholly different kind of Spanish wine than what people may be used to from Rioja, Ribera de Duero, or the older style of Priorat.

As it is for any successful winery in Spain, the exciting growers of Méntrida are aware of the greater wine world. They realise that having old Grenache vines in Spain isn't enough and that they have to paint themselves in a unique light. While winemaking is always a work in progress, these winemakers have arrived to a point where they're creating complex wines from an excellent region for winemaking. If you've been turned off by Grenache or wines from the centre of Spain in the past, what is being crafted in Méntrida these days is very much worthy of a taste and your further exploration.

## **Six names to know**

### **Jiménez-Landi**

José has gained renown--at least on a cult level. Having poured a great deal of his recent life into revitalising the family cellar, he produces several excellent Grenache wines from small parcels near the Alberche River as well as in Gredos. They carry all of the best modern elements of the Méntrida wines including floral aromatics and a light, fresh body.

### **Arrayán**

While the founder, José María Entrecañales passed away in 2008, his widow Maria Marsans decided to continue with the winery. She's pushed onward and very much upward with enologist Maite Sánchez taking over the winemaking in 2009. Their main vineyards were planted in 1999 with foreign varieties of which their Petite Verdot is a very surprising and wondrous star. Naturally, their single-vineyard Grenache from Gredos shines as well as the limited production Albillo Real white.

### **Canopy**

One of the original wineries of the new wave for the region, Alfonso Chacón & Belarmino Fernández have worked to reclaim vineyards in the Gredos area that were in danger of fading into oblivion. A project driven more by passion than anything else, their single vineyard wines are of special note with a denser, more textured style than others in the region. Tres Patas is the most alluring and admired by their fellow winemakers as well.

### **Alonso Cuesta**

While president of the DO, Juan Alonso also runs his family's winery. They've had a lengthy winemaking history in the region but he manages to walk that fine line between the traditional style and the newer, expressive aspect. He emphasizes extreme selection in the field via hand harvesting that results in using only 10% of the total production they have in their vineyards and selling the rest to the co-ops.

### **Agrovillarta**

While laying claim to 150ha of vineyards and selling 82% of their resulting wines as bulk, Gabriela Calero del Olmo, who took over as director seven years ago, has been

steadily pushing for more quality bottles each year. Her personal tastes are decidedly in favour of neutral aging and as such, she works with her enologist to produce clean, direct wines that show the territory minus overt aging notes.

### **Bernabeleva**

They're just outside of DO Méntrida in Vinos de Madrid but this is due only to arbitrary political boundaries. Enologist Marc Isart is making wines in very much the same vein as those a hop across the appellation line. The family of Juan Diez lay claim to healthy tracts of old Grenache and Abillo Real vines from which Marc's steady hand is able to create graceful, beautiful wines.

### **Méntrida at a glance:**

Area under vine: 5,800ha

Annual production: 30 million kg of grapes

Sub-regions: Talavera, Torrijos, and Sagra-Toledo

Soils: Sandy with clay or granite/slate base

Main Grapes:

Reds (81%)

Grenache (75% of all red vines), Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, Merlot, Graciano, Petit Verdot

Whites (3%)

Abillo Real, Chardonnay, Muscat Blanc à Petit Grains, Sauvignon Blanc, Verdejo, Macabeo

Rosés (16%)

Number of wineries: 27

Number of viticulturists: 1,243

Published in Decanter

Contact Amy Wislocki [amy\\_wislocki@decanter.com](mailto:amy_wislocki@decanter.com)