



rueda

# ALL ROADS lead to rueda

Patricia Langton examines why investment has flooded into Rueda in recent years and looks at the reasons for considering this region for Spanish white wine

**BEFORE LA** crisis arrived life was rosy if you were a grape grower in Rueda, especially if you had Verdejo grapes to sell. Demand for the region's wines in Spain was strong and overseas producers could also capitalise on consumers' thirst for contemporary styles of easy-drinking white wines. In many ways the region had never had it so good and nearly every major Spanish wine group wanted a piece of the action.

As well as high grape prices there was also the incentive of EU subsidies to "improve" vineyard management (now largely a thing of the past). Extensive new vineyards sprang up featuring modern trellising systems favouring higher yields and geared to machine harvesting.

## Belontrade y Lurton's Verdejo shows the variety's extraordinary ageing potential in the right winemaking hands

By the time the world economy crashed these new vineyards were coming on stream at eyebrow raising speed (see box, page 22). Meanwhile sales in the all-important on-trade in Spain fell dramatically as consumers tightened their belts. In a short period of time scarcity turned to glut for Rueda bringing with it the related headaches of price wars,

compromises on quality and the threat of the region's reputation being dented by cheapies flooding the market.

### RUEDA'S GREATEST ASSET

The region now faces some tough challenges, but despite this Rueda has a number of strengths. Its greatest asset is the Verdejo grape. Such is its popularity that the variety can be found beyond its traditional homeland, but Rueda is where the grape excels thanks to a combination of climate, soils and know-how. Verdejo has dominated new plantings in recent years and now accounts for around 80% of white varieties planted.

The grape is remarkably versatile and capable of producing some of Spain's finest whites – good examples offer great aromatic quality and rich tropical fruit with great structure. Many nod to Burgundy in style, such as Belontrade y Lurton's Rueda and K-Naia from Bodegas Naia. Belontrade y Lurton's wine, a Verdejo with a longer track record having made its debut in the 1990s, also shows the variety's extraordinary ageing potential in the right winemaking hands.

These and many other fine Ruedas come from the prime higher altitude areas of La Seca, Rueda and Serrada, known as The Golden Triangle, bordering Segovia which feature gravely soil. Verdejo thrives in these much sought-after vineyards.

More traditional unoaked blends of Verdejo with Sauvignon and Viura fulfil the role of affordable, easy-drinking styles which can be well suited for by-the-glass listings in the on-trade. A

### Feature findings

- ▶ Pre-crisis Rueda's wine industry was thriving and major wine groups were investing in new vineyards.
- ▶ Following the crash, scarcity turned to glut and Rueda has some serious challenges ahead.
- ▶ Rueda's greatest asset is Verdejo, which accounts for 80% of white varieties planted and produces some of Spain's finest whites. Both Martínez Blanco and Ramón Bilbao have chosen Rueda over Rioja for new white wine projects.
- ▶ Outside investment from the likes of Lurton and Chivite will contribute to overall quality in the long term.
- ▶ Local winemakers believe that Rueda needs to uproot vines or reduce yields to rebalance supply and demand.
- ▶ Rueda is still relatively unknown in the UK and more work needs to be done in the on- and off-trade.

middle tier, usually made exclusively from Verdejo wines but sometimes with a splash of Sauvignon Blanc with a few months on the lees, is also gaining momentum. Good examples of the latter are Oro de Castilla Verdejo from Bodega Hermanos del Villar, José Pariente, Codorníu's Legaris and two newcomers from Rioja-based producers: Finca Montepedroso from Familia Martínez Bujanda and Monte Blanco from Ramón Bilbao. Martínez Bujanda and Ramón Bilbao have both chosen Rueda over Rioja for new white wine projects and follow a precedent set by fellow Rioja producer Marqués de Riscal back in the 1970s.





Valladolid, Cupula del Milenio (Millennium Dome)

**Foreign consumers are demanding fresh, fruity wines and Verdejo-based Rueda wines are unbeatable in that respect and they offer great value for money**

Ramón Bilbao's Antonio Salinas explains the bodega's current thinking: "For the time being we have stopped producing white wines in Rioja. Both Spanish and foreign consumers are demanding fresh, fruity wines and Verdejo-based Rueda wines are unbeatable in that respect and they offer great value for money. Rioja whites offer great complexity when fermented in the barrel or aged in oak but again, the market for whites is very fruit driven."

Investors from outside the region – others include Chivite with Baluarte Verdejo, the innovative Jacques Lurton and United Wineries with Vega de Reina

– can bring a welcome boost through their marketing muscle both on the domestic market and, importantly, abroad. Investment in bodegas and vineyards suggests that they are in Rueda for the long haul and are therefore likely to contribute to the region's overall reputation through quality-orientated viticulture and modern winery facilities.

### Rueda: hectares under vine & yield

Source: Consejo Regulador de Rueda

Year	2000	2005	2008	2010	2011
Hectares	5,668	7,765	9,946	11,739	12,410
Yield (kg)	29.8m	33.6m	53.6m	74.2m	pending*

Both the area under vine and the yearly crop more than doubled between 2000 and 2010

\* The harvest for 2011 is forecast to be similar or greater than last year's in view of new plantings coming on stream

Ramón Bilbao has teamed up with a local co-op and can tap into local know-how and the growers' rich resource of Verdejo vines, a large part of which is located in the previously mentioned prime areas. Salinas also explains that "Rioja practices" such as lower yields per hectare have been brought to the project.

This approach will be music to the ears of some of the local quality-orientated producers who voice concerns over what they feel are excessively high yields and bland wines which are doing the region no favours.

## The wines of the DO should not try to compete with La Mancha or Penedés on price... Rueda's wines are different

The current yield limitations stipulated by the region's Consejo Regulador are 8,000kg/ha for Verdejo and Sauvignon Blanc and 10,000kg/ha for Viura and Palomino from traditional bush vines. Yields can go up to 10,000kg/ha for most white varieties (including Verdejo) trained on trellises and this group takes in many vineyards that are still very

much in their youth. Compare this with Rioja where authorities set the maximum yield at 5,850kg/ha for red grapes in the 2010 harvest.


### LACKING DEFINITION

Richard Sanz, of Sitios de Bodega, is a leading local winemaker and the name behind wines such as Con Class and Verdejo Old Vines V3. He believes that the region needs to either reduce yields or uproot vines to allow Rueda to rebalance supply and demand and refocus on quality. Too many wines are "formulaic" and lack definition, he says.

Pablo Villar, at Bodega Hermanos del Villar, is also concerned by the current state of affairs. He says: "It will probably take a couple of years for the region to resolve its problems through better management and by adopting the position that the wines of the DO should not try to compete with La Mancha or Penedés on price... Rueda's wines are different."

Over in the UK Rueda's fortunes could best be described as mixed although Verdejo in various guises – from DO Rueda and Vino de la Tierra – is making headway. More numerous listings of better Rueda wines in the off-trade and perhaps the independent trade will be where this happens rather than the more competitive supermarket aisle.

Noel Young, of Noel Young Wines, is, for now, one of the few independents to back Rueda Verdejo wholeheartedly with a range of wines from £6-£20+ including K-Naia. He believes that the region's Verdejo wines generally have more definition and better flavour than in the past. Young also welcomes "more sensible pricing"; however, he says that Rueda's profile is still relatively low among customers.

There is also work to be done in the on-trade. The quality of wines poured in many pubs and restaurants can disappoint especially compared to Albariño wines. On-trade operators could be missing a trick given that there are Rueda wines which are well suited for by-the-glass sales without food as well as those with greater depth and structure to enjoy with food and prices can be keen. Doesn't that tick most boxes? 

## Verdejo in Spain

**Rueda:** Verdejo's traditional home is Rueda. Established in 1980, the DO covers 72 towns and villages around Valladolid, Avila and Segovia in Castilla & León in north-west Spain. Production of Verdejo grapes has risen dramatically from around three million kilograms in 1994 to over 60m kg in 2010. The trend has been the reverse for Viura and Palomino, while Sauvignon Blanc accounted for 6.67% of the white varieties harvested in 2010.

**Other areas of Castilla & León:** Verdejo plantings have increased throughout Castilla & León and varietal wines or

blends containing Verdejo are increasingly appearing under as Vino de la Tierra wines. Verdejo is now also one of the grapes permitted by DO La Mancha.

**Rioja:** Authorities in Rioja gave cautious approval to Verdejo in 2007, but plantings were put on hold soon afterwards in view of the adverse economic situation. There are around 76 hectares of Verdejo currently planted in Rioja, a small fraction of the region's total plantings, which are over 60,000 hectares. The variety can only be used as a part of blends with Viura making up at least 50%



Medieval outer wall that protects and surrounds the city of Avila