



Castilla y León: quality in three colours

This Spanish region's mosaic of vineyards is reaping the benefit of dynamic initiatives and a renewed passion for wine.

BY DIEGO BONNEL

TRADITION AND DYNAMISM

Castilla y León is currently an exciting wine region, with an impressive diversity of wines, dynamic winemakers and forward-thinking regulatory bodies. Located in the northwestern part of Spain and bordering Portugal, it has around 47,000 hectares of vineyards (the Ribera del Duero appellation, which was discussed in the last issue of this magazine, represents 44% of the region's vineyards). Compared to the total surface area of Spain's vineyards (1.2 million hectares), this seems relatively small. However, its modest size is not a reflection of its quality - quite the contrary.

TORO *Structured, velvety wines*

One of the main winegrowing areas in the region is the Toro *Denominación de Origen* (DO), which lies west of DO Rueda and is crossed by the River Duero in the north. This DO has significantly expanded over the last decade, attracting investment that has allowed it to grow from 2,700 hectares of vineyards and 8



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wineries in 1999 to 5,800 hectares and 50 wineries today. It has an extreme, arid continental climate, moderated by the maritime influence of the Atlantic, with annual rainfall of 350-400 millimetres and an average annual temperature of 12-13 °C: conditions that yield grapes of high quality.

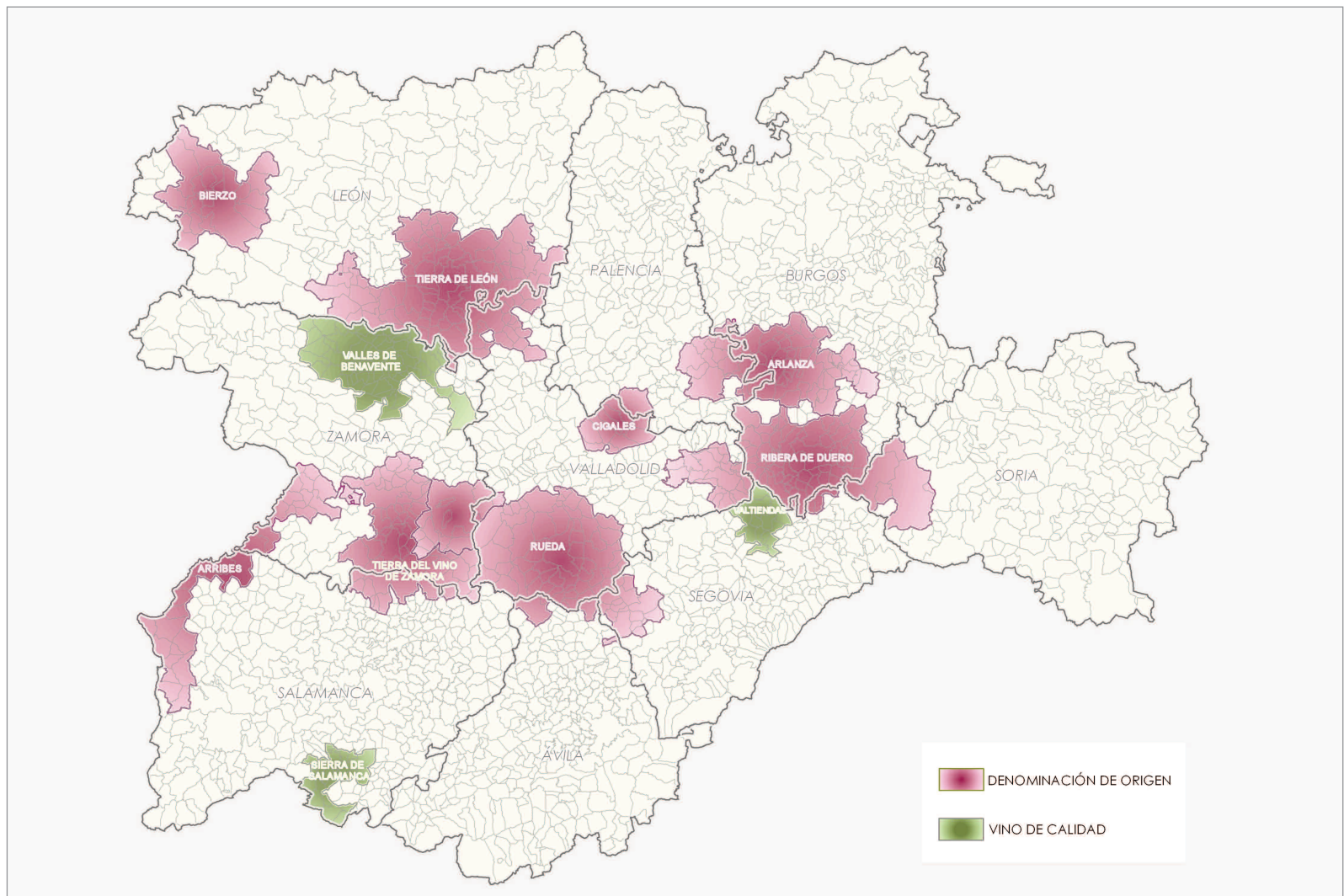
Toro's vineyards lie at altitudes of 620 - 750 metres and are planted in Tertiary limestone soils. The main grapes grown are Tinta de Toro (an adaptation of the Tempranillo grape) and Garnacha (Grenache) for reds, and Verdejo and Malvasía for whites. The area was untouched by phylloxera, so some of its vineyards are over 100 years old. Although the majority of wines produced are Tinta de Toro reds, many different styles are made within this DO.

The first winery that really put Toro on the map in Spain as well as abroad was Bodegas Fariña. Founded in 1942, in the 1960s it was taken over by the second generation of the family, Manuel Fariña, who was the principal architect of Toro's growing reputation. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the



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CASTILLA Y LEÓN HAS EIGHT DIFFERENT DENOMINACIÓN DE ORIGEN WINEGROWING AREAS AND THREE AREAS OF QUALITY WINES

1990s, a time when Rioja was the only region with any brand visibility, he was the first to launch a wine made using carbonic maceration based on the then decades-old tradition for Beaujolais Nouveau wines, which go on the market the third Thursday in November each year. Today, the family's third generation is at the helm, currently overseeing around 300 hectares of vines. Their wines are mainly sold on the off-trade market, although two of their quality wines (Gran Colegiata Campus and Gran Colegiata Roble Francés aged in French oak) can also be found in bars and restaurants.

Another of Toro's legendary producers is Mariano García, who arrived in the region in 1997 after 30 years as Vega Sicilia's chief winemaker. He currently supervises 65 hectares of vineyards, and his San Román and Prima wines are ranked among the best in DO Toro. Vega Sicilia itself launched its

Pintia project on 106 hectares in Toro in 1995, and after six years of trials, finally presented its first wine in 2001.

Toro's Liberalia Enológica winery offers a completely different style of wine, targeted mainly at the export market - more specifically, the US market. The owner Juan Antonio Fernández makes New World-style wines, for which he regularly receives high scores from Robert Parker: many of his wines have received scores of 90 and over. Among others, the 2004 Liber, the equivalent of a Gran Reserva, has received a score of 96.

Among Toro's most interesting wines are those made by the brilliant young winemaker Rosa Zarza for Bodegas y Pagos Matarredonda and Bodegas Campiña. Matarredonda's Libranza and Juan Rojo wines are very elegant and subtle, while also powerful and very well structured, with good

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OLD TINTA DE TORO VINES HAVE GIVEN TORO WINES AN INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION

ageing potential. Made from vines over 100 years old, they are an incredible combination of strength and grace. Where one might have expected full-bodied, over-extracted wines, they are soft and delicate with well-integrated, discreet oak.

The wines of Bodegas Campiña are as delicate and subtle as those of Matarredonda, but are lighter, as most come from somewhat younger vines. It is a small cooperative geared towards the production of affordable high-quality wines: their Viñas Centenarias, for example, is very good value for money.



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THE ROLLING HILLS OF DO TORO

Two outstanding biodynamic wineries - Quinta de la Quietud and Dominio del Bendito - also warrant a mention for their fruity, easy-to-drink but structured wines, which should age well.

Finally, it is worth noting that DO Toro made global headlines in February 2008, when the LVMH Group bought the Eguren family's Numanthia winery for 25 million euros, the highest price in the history of Spanish winemaking, just after the bodega's 2004 Termanthia received a score of 100 points by Jay Miller, one of Robert Parker's closest associates.

RUEDA *Cheerful, crisp, everyday wines*

The second most famous region for white wines in Spain (after Rías Baixas, known for its whites made from the Albariño grape) is Rueda. This DO was created in 1926, but was not officially recognised by the Ministry of Agriculture until January 1980. The main grape variety in Rueda has traditionally been Verdejo, which at 9,000 hectares makes up more than 75% of the total vineyards and 80% of total production. Other grapes grown here are Sauvignon Blanc, Viura (almost always associated with Verdejo-based wines) and Palomino. Although reds (based on Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Garnacha) are also made, they represent a tiny proportion of production.

This DO has also undergone spectacular development in the last ten years, with the surface dedicated to winegrowing increasing from 5,800 hectares in 1999 to 11,000 in 2010. In the same period, the number of wineries have doubled from 27 to 54.

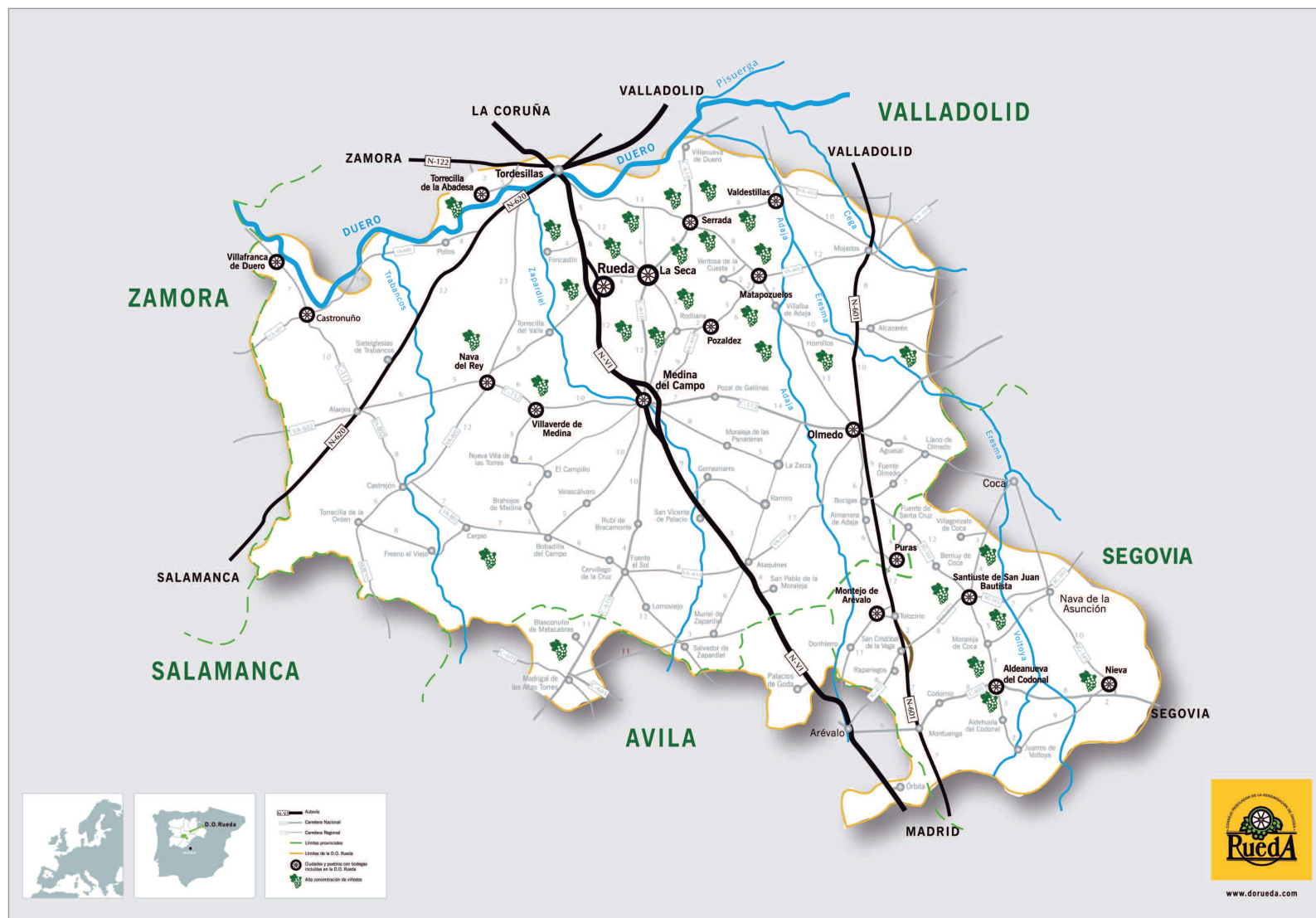
Rueda has a very similar climate to Toro: it lies at 700-800 metres above sea level and has a continental climate with long, cold winters, short springs with late frosts and dry, hot summers. Rain is scarce, with only 300-500 millimetres per year. The generally well-drained soils vary from sandy loam to loam and are rich in calcium and magnesium.

There are several big groups in Rueda which help give the DO consumer visibility: Aura (Domecq Bodegas), François Lurton, Marqués de Riscal (from Rioja), Chivite (from Navarra), Protos and Grupo Yllera (from Ribera del Duero) and Grupo Freixenet (from the Cava region in Catalonia). They generally offer good quality, reasonably priced wines that are mainly distributed in supermarkets. Although varietal character is recognisable in most cases, it is not uncommon for these



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DO RUEDA HAS 11,000 HECTARES OF VINEYARDS AND A CONTINENTAL CLIMATE WITH LONG, COLD WINTERS AND DRY, HOT SUMMERS

high-volume producers to include a small proportion of Sauvignon Blanc to make their wines more aromatic, thus distorting the true expression of the Verdejo grape with its vegetal notes of hay, fresh grass, almond and citrus.

Among other important players in Rueda is Bodegas Cuatro Rayas, which produces over 20% of all bottled wine in the DO (11 million bottles) and controls 19% of its vineyards (2,100 hectares). Its most popular wine, Cuatro Rayas, is well made, expressing Verdejo's attributes in a simple, accessible way. Their Cuatro Rayas Viñedos Centenarios (from vines over 100 years old) is more complex and closer to the true expression made possible by old vines. This winery also offers sparkling wines made from 100% Verdejo using the traditional method. But the most interesting wines come from smaller producers.

The Ermita Veracruz from Bodegas Veracruz, part of the Alvaréz y Díez group, is a fresh, vibrant, well-crafted Verdejo. The Belondrade y Lurton winery is another name to remember, with their premium Belondrade y Lurton a fine, almost Burgundy-like wine, fermented and matured in its lees in 300-litre French oak barrels for a minimum of six months. Their Quinta Apolonia is made from the unselected barrels of premium wine topped up with wines from the grapes of young vines. The winery also produces an excellent rosé that is among the very best in Spain, the Quinta Clarisa.

CIGALES

Full potential yet to be expressed

This DO, located north of Rueda and the River Duero, is crossed by the Pisuerga River and its tributaries. It also has a continental

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climate with an Atlantic maritime influence, with hot summers and cold winters that result in significant temperature variations, both during the day and over the year. The vineyards are situated at an average altitude of 750 metres, spanning an area from Valladolid in the south to Dueñas in the north. Average annual rainfall is 400 millimetres and the average annual temperature 12°C. The soils are typically lightweight over limestone subsoil.

The main red grapes grown here are Tinta del País (the local name for Tempranillo), Garnacha and Garnacha Gris. The white varieties are Verdejo and Albillo. Of the traditional DOs, it is one of the few not to have significantly increased its cultivated surface area (from 2,500 to 2,700 hectares) or its number of wineries (from 31 to 37) between 1999 and 2010. This is mainly due to the fact that Cigales has traditionally been a big producer of rosé wines, which have not attracted new investors, and that most of its winegrowers are reaching retirement age, so the trend is towards uprooting rather than planting. In the last five years, 160 hectares of vines have been pulled out. Yet recently there has been a dramatic shift in the wines produced in this DO to adapt to consumer demand: whereas 80% of Cigales wines were rosés in 1999, these now account for only 50% of total production.



THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE DO ARLANZA REGULATORY BODY



THE UNIQUE LANDSCAPE OF DO ARLANZA, WITH THE CITY OF LERMA IN THE BACKGROUND

What the DO seems to lack is a clear leader in its winemaking. Although it has some good and even very good wines, no winery stands out enough to act as a reference, which partly explains the relative stagnation of Cigales compared to Castilla y León's other DOs. The region's reaction has been to take steps to improve quality. According to Pascual Herrera, the President of the Consejo Regulador, the governing body of the DO, the future of Cigales will depend on its ability to offer higher quality wines. A project has been launched to transform the DO into a DOC (Denominación de Origen Calificada) within five years - a classification currently only held by Rioja and Priorat. The aim is to become an area known for high-quality wines that are different from those of the surrounding areas.

César Príncipe is one of the most respected wineries in Cigales and a name often heard in reference to the area. Its young 13 Cántaros Nicolás has a Ribera-like nose and a light palate with spices and subtle oak along with black pepper and black fruit. However, it has a short, rather bitter finish with stringent tannins. Another Cigales winery to take into account is Finca Museum. The 2005 Museum Reserva has a pleasant nose of dairy, coffee, toast and tobacco; the palate is less appealing, with notes of old wood, hot pepper and coffee, some stringent tannins and a bitter finish.

I was impressed with a small family-run winery, Santa Rufina, which uses old or very old vines to make elegant, delicate wines with very well-integrated oak. Their wines are not very well known, but they have everything needed to succeed: a



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IMPRESSIVE MOUNTAINS OVERLOOK THE VINEYARDS OF DO BIERZO

good approach to vineyard management (their wines are organic, though they do not have the official label), their subtle use of oak, and a deep conviction that old vines result in the best wines (they consistently seek out and buy the oldest parcels of vineyards in the area when they can). With a little extra means to invest in modernising their winery equipment, they would likely be recognised as among the best producers in the DO.

The rosés of Cigales are some of the best in Spain. Made using Verdejo, they are fresh and vibrant with fruity, herbal notes and are easy to drink and consistent.

BIERZO

Bewitching mineral wines

This outstanding region of Castilla y León has 4,000 hectares of vineyards (an increase from 3,400 hectares in 1999), and the number of registered wineries has increased more than two-fold in the same period, reaching 55 to date. The mean temperature is 12 °C, and average rainfall is around 700 millimetres per year. In the river plain the soil is alluvial (often with traces of iron) and at higher altitudes it contains slate, which gives the wines a deep, attractive mineral quality. The vines are planted at 500 - 600 metres above sea level.

The main red grape is Mencía, with Garnacha Tintorera playing only a minor role; white grapes include Doña Blanca, Malvasía, Palomino and Godello. At the WineFuture Hong

Kong event held in November 2011, Robert Parker predicted that the Mencía grape has huge potential in Spain, which could give Bierzo new global prominence.

One of the names that stand out in Bierzo is Ricardo Palacios, the nephew of Álvaro Palacios, the man behind Priorat's groundbreaking L'Ermita. Ricardo Palacios uses biodynamic methods to offer a consistent range of fruity yet structured wines. The most popular is Pétalos del Bierzo, a young, vibrant, easy-to-drink and yet complex wine. His other wines worth mentioning are Villa de Corullón, La Faraona and Las Lamas, all structured, powerful wines that need time to develop in the bottle to reach an interesting balance.

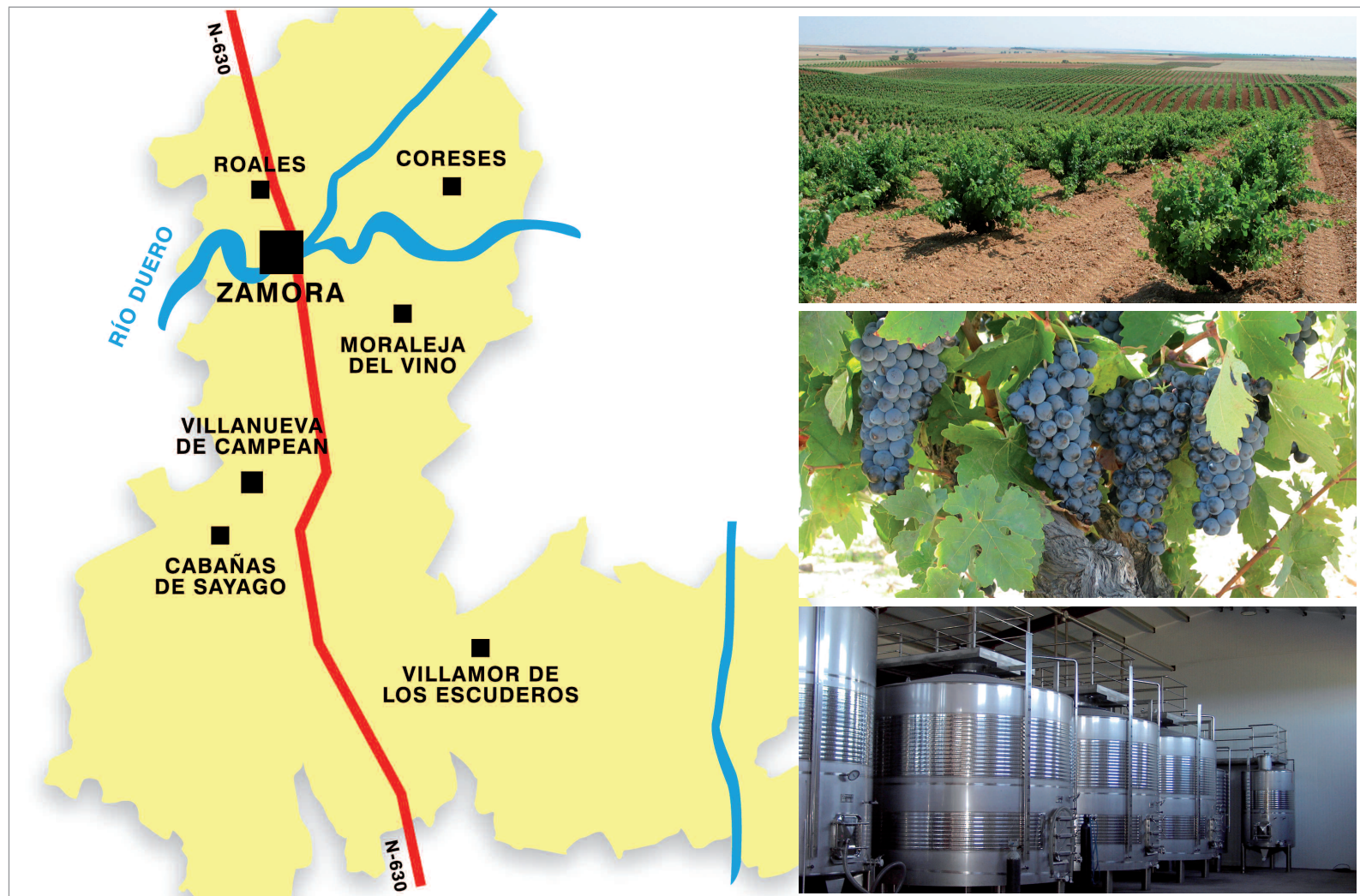
Another winemaker to note is Raúl Pérez, who was born in Valtuille de Abajo in the heart of the Bierzo wine region. He launched his first wines in 2005 without a penny, or even a winery. In the subsequent six years he has been able to make unique, sometimes extra-limited, wines that have dazzled international wine experts, Robert Parker among them. Today he is considered the most talented alchemist in Bierzo. His medium-range Ultreia wine is really outstanding, the 2008 even better than the 2009. His Valtuille Cepas Centenarias has become a reference in the DO. The 2005 that I recently tasted was subtle and elegant, with all the hallmarks of one of the rare wines able to prompt real excitement.



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THE SIGNATURE RED GRAPE OF BIERZO, MENCÍA CAN RESULT IN WINES OF INDISPUTABLE QUALITY

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**DO TIERRA DE LEÓN COVERS ALMOST 1,500 HECTARES;
ITS MOST DISTINCTIVE GRAPE IS PRIETO PICUDO**

Other worthy winemakers in Bierzo include Bodegas Casar de Burbia, which makes excellent wines in another style. Its Hombros is very representative: a superb mineral, smoky wine that reflects the slate soil of its terroir. Another is Bodegas Martín Códax, a large wine cooperative in the Rias Baixas area that has recently launched light, simple, fruity Mencía-based reds destined for the export market: Cuatro Pasos and Martín Sarmiento. I also particularly like the wines of the young French winemaker Gregory Pérez, who has settled in Bierzo and uses biodynamic methods to make his wines. His Mengoba 'Sobre Lías' white, based on Godello and Doña Blanca grapes and the Mengoba 'Mencía de Espanillo' red are outstanding.

NEW CASTILLA Y LEÓN DOS

In 2007, four new DOs (most of which were previously classified *Vino de la Tierra* – the rung just below DO) were officially

recognised: Arribes, Arlanza, Tierra de León and Tierra del Vino de Zamora. These cover a combined surface area of nearly 3,300 hectares. The use of local grapes, for example, the Juan García variety in Arribes and the Prieto Picudo in Tierra de León, makes these wines very appealing. The Juan García lends its characteristic notes of cooked cherry and blackberry, whereas the Prieto Picudo gives rise to intensely coloured wines, full of fresh fruit and herbal notes similar to those of Mencía, but with more body and tannins.

These new DOs will need time to develop and to gain recognition from the market. One thing they have in common is the presence of young, passionate winemakers, convinced that their wines will improve the quality of the DO and express its full potential; a belief that is strong, despite a lack of financial means that is likely to make their mission more difficult to achieve.