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Wine From a Sacred Place

Tasting Wines from Ribeira Sacra

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Wines of The Times

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If you travel widely enough around the grape-growing regions of the world, you gather ample testimony of the driving, historic human desire to make good wine. What else could explain the compulsion to plant vines on ridiculously steep hillsides in the Mosel and the Rheingau, in the northern Rhône Valley, in Priorat and the Douro, and in Ribeira Sacra in the Galicia region of northwestern Spain?

Thousands of years before the lucrative global wine economy of today, Romans carved terraces on slopes in Ribeira Sacra that rose at precipitous angles from the rivers below. They planted vines to keep themselves supplied with wine. Over the centuries, monks expanded and maintained the network of vines, which was farmed by the church and by locals, for whom grapes were just one of many subsistence crops. It was not a matter of survival — grains and produce planted on the flats saw to that. The backbreaking labor these vines required was a matter of choice.

Nor was it an economic necessity. Until fairly recently, Ribeira Sacra was largely cut off from the rest of Spain, though a few farmers shipped wine by river to Lugo, a city to the north, mostly for local consumption.

At the end of the 19th century, grape phylloxera, a ravenous aphid that preys on the roots of European vines, destroyed much of the crop. Agricultural disaster was followed by economic depression, civil war and dictatorship. Many of the historical terraces were abandoned, and the children of farmers left for work in the cities.

Then a curious thing happened. Near the end of the 20th century, people began to return to Ribeira Sacra. Disillusioned by the city, perhaps, or drawn by the promise of the slate-and-granite soils at a time when other once-obscure Spanish wine regions were developing worldwide reputations, they came back to replant the vines and renew the terraces. The hills of Ribeira Sacra came alive again.

I visited Ribeira Sacra in 2009, at a nascent point in its revival, just as its wines were beginning to make an international impact. Five years later, it seemed time for the wine panel to survey the region, so we tasted 17 red wines from recent vintages. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Ashley Santoro, wine director at the Standard East Village restaurants, including Narcissa, and Gil Avital, wine director at Tertulia in Greenwich Village.

Ordinarily we would taste 20 bottles for a cross-section of a particular region. But few Ribeira Sacra producers are imported to the United States. Even by including multiple cuvées from several producers, the best we could do was 17 bottles. But that was enough to clearly demonstrate the distinctive, unusual character of these wines.

Unlike most Spanish reds, these are cool-climate wines, defined as much by the rainy, temperate Atlantic coast as the soils, the slopes and the people who farm them. The reds are made predominantly of the mencia grape, which is also the basis for the reds of the Bierzo region to the east. But where the Bierzo wines tend to be denser and burlier, the best reds of Ribeira Sacra epitomize juicy freshness. These are lively, graceful wines, with the same sort of aromatic loveliness and lissome body that draws people to Burgundy and Barolo.

I'm speaking of the young wines. Ribeira Sacra, though ancient, is still early enough in its renewal that we don't know how the wines will age. Not that age-worthy wines are not being made. Our No. 4 wine, the 2011 El Pecado from Raúl Pérez, has the richness and intensity to age for years, while maintaining a lightness of texture that is a hallmark of Ribeira Sacra. The mystery is how it will evolve. Will it develop the complex secondary and tertiary aromas and flavors that characterize precious Burgundies and Barolos? Or will it simply endure and grow mellow, without the intricacy of a profound wine? Let's check in 15 years.

El Pecado was by far the most ambitious (and, at \$97, expensive) wine in the tasting. Our No. 1 bottle, the 2010 Lalama from Dominio do Bibei, was graceful, fresh and complex. It's a wine intended for early consumption, and it's at a joyous peak right now. Bibei also makes a more ambitious, age-worthy cuvée, Lacima, which we did not have in the tasting, though it is well worth seeking out.

Ribeira Sacra already excels at making wines like Lalama, full of deliciousness at an early stage. Our No. 2 bottle, the 2012 mencia from Algueira, was spicy and wild, with a slatelike minerality. At \$16, it was also our best value. The 2011 Viña Caneiro from D. Ventura, our No. 5 bottle, was so juicy, fruity and floral, with an underlying mineral element, that it seemed to scream, "Drink me!"

Algueira's slightly more complex mencia wine, the 2010 Pizarra, aged in old oak barrels rather than steel tanks, was our No. 3 bottle, neck and neck with the other Algueira. Perhaps it was slightly riper and more complex, but not quite as vivacious. A third Algueira wine, the 2011 Fincas, was our No. 10 bottle. Unlike the other two, this was made of the caino tinto grape, also known as borraçal. It was richer and maybe a little shriller than the mencia wines, without their delicacy and complexity.

It used to be said that mencia was related to cabernet franc. Although this has been shown genetically not to be true, it's easy to see why people may have seen a relationship when drinking a wine like our No. 6 bottle, the 2010 Capeliños from Guímaro, a fascinating, tart wine that leavened its herbaceous quality with flavors of red fruits. Guímaro also makes a simpler cuvée from the Amandi subregion. The 2011 vintage of this cuvée, our No. 9 bottle, was dark, earthy and almost exotic.

Having visited this region, and having seen firsthand the grueling labor required to farm it properly, I couldn't help developing an emotional attachment to the wines. Nonetheless, I believe that in the best wines you can taste the passion and devotion of the producers, which is part of what makes Ribeira Sacra so distinctive. While the region is known for its reds, it also produces some excellent white wines, made primarily from the godello grape. But that's another story for another time.

Tasting Report

Dominio do Bibei Ribeira Sacra Lalama 2010, \$36 ★★★ 1/2
Graceful, balanced, fresh and complex, with aromas and flavors of flowers, berries and herbs.
(De Maison Selections, Chapel Hill, N.C.)

BEST VALUE
Algueira Ribeira Sacra Mencia 2012, \$16, ★★★
Light and harmonious, with deep flavors of spicy red fruit and minerals and a touch of tannin.
(Polaner Selections, Mount Kisco, N.Y.)

Algueira Ribeira Sacra Pizarra 2010, \$45, ★★★
Ripe, fresh and lively, with lingering flavors of spicy red fruit.

(Polaner Selections)

Raúl Pérez Ribeira Sacra El Pecado 2011, \$97, ★★★
Big and rich yet not heavy, with stony flavors of red fruit and licorice.
(Patrick Mata/Olé Imports, New Rochelle, N.Y.)

D. Ventura Ribeira Sacra Viña Caneiro 2011, \$27, ★★ 1/2
Delicious and juicy, with fresh, floral, red berry flavors. "Drink me!" it screams.
(De Maison Selections, Chapel Hill, N.C.)

Guímaro Ribeira Sacra Capeliños 2010, \$60, ★★ 1/2
Well balanced and herbaceous, with unusual, tart flavors of flowers, rhubarb and red fruit.
(José Pastor/Vinos & Gourmet, Richmond, Calif.)

Abadía da Cova Ribeira Sacra Barrica 2011, \$32, ★★ 1/2
Ripe and earthy, with rich berry flavors and a touch of oak.
(Classic Wines, Stamford, Conn.)

Estrela Ribeira Sacra Amandi 2011, \$20, ★★
Fresh and juicy, with aromas and flavors of crushed berries.
(Fruit of the Vines, Long Island City, Queens)

Guímaro Ribeira Sacra Amandi 2011, \$16, ★★
Earthy, with flavors of dark fruit.
(José Pastor/Vinos & Gourmet, Richmond, Calif.)

Algueira Ribeira Sacra Fincas 2011, \$53, ★★
Quite rich, with earthy aromas and flavors of flowers, red fruit and licorice.
(Polaner Selections)

What the stars mean: Ratings, up to four stars, reflect the panel's reaction to the wines, which were tasted with names and vintages concealed. The wines represent a selection generally available in good retail shops and restaurants and on the Internet. Prices are those paid in the New York region.

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