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VINS ET EXPÉRIENCES

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TRAVELLERS TO EL BIERZO HAVE A VARIETY OF OPTIONS. MANY WILL ARRIVE FROM MADRID, TAKING THE LONG DRIVE NORTH-WEST THROUGH THE FLAT, ARID LANDS OF CASTILLE AND LEÓN.

Others will come in from the coast, be that down from Gijón and Oviedo over the Cantabrian mountains or across the heather-clad hills from A Compostela, rising through passes over 1000m before dropping into the basin of the River Xil. The really adventurous might attempt the twisty mountain roads from Vigo or Porto in the West, following the course of the Douro or the Minho as they disappear into the wilderness of the border land. And then there is the Camino itself, the ancient track that has carried pilgrims from the East for more than a millenium. Even today, an estimated 350,000 will make that journey, passing through Bierzo in search of Santiago.

José Antonio García has also taken a long, demanding journey. Born and raised in Barcelona, José began working in his parents' restaurants, forming an important connection early on with food and wine. Holidays, however, were often spent in El Bierzo: his mother originated from the village of Valtuille de Abajo and his father from Corullón, an even smaller village across the River Burbia on the hillsides. There both sets of grandparents continued with their tradition of tending vines in their small holdings while their children had sought their futures almost 900km away in the dynamic Catalan capital.



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When the financial crisis of 2008-09 hit Barcelona, the restaurants were severely impacted and José was forced to look for work elsewhere. With his grandparents not getting any younger, he chose to relocate back to Bierzo with the idea of learning viticulture alongside them and making his own wines. The region had started to re-emerge as a serious potential source of quality wine during the previous ten years. Álvaro Palacios and his nephew, Ricardo Pérez Palacios are credited with leading the charge from the outside but inside the region, Raúl Pérez, a native of Valtuille de Abajo has been a key figure. Indeed Palacios made his first Bierzo wines under Raúl's guidance and he has continued to mentor many young winemakers. José was one such apprentice, quickly linking up with his neighbour and developing both a close friendship as well as a professional mentorship.

The family's vines had always been tended organically although in the years preceding José's return, the demands of that regime on his elderly grandfather had become apparent in the vineyards, meaning that there was considerable work to do. In Corullón in particular, these are on very steep slopes rising from 500m to 900m in altitude, divided between tiny plots. Mechanisation is impossible here and the work is as backbreaking as one can imagine.

Under Raúl's guidance, José's first micro-cuvées, from the 2010 vintage, found some modest success and slowly he began to build his operation. Working alongside him is his wife, Julia. Today they are tending 165 separate plots of vines across 17 hectares of vineyard, producing around 70,000 bottles of wine. Their base is in the small village of Valtuille de Abajo, where they have installed their compact winery. The latest investments include a state of the art bottling line- "the best in the appellation!" according to José- and a beautiful horse, who is being patiently taught ploughing by Julia.

Any new project needs a strong entry-level wine that can attract customers in both local and export markets. **Unculín** is the name for the cuvée, coming from a Galician slang expression for 'a little drop'. It is a blend of 85% Mencía with the balance comprising both red and white varieties, as is the local practice. José believes strongly that Mencía, naturally with low-mid levels of acidity, benefits from these little additions of other native varieties and is not an advocate for mono-varietal Mencía. The grapes for Unculín are sourced across the undulating, sand and clay hills around Valtuille from bush vines typically 80 to 100 years of age, all tended organically. After a manual harvest and sorting, most are destemmed before being fermented with wild yeasts on skins for 20 days. Élevage is in large old oak foudres with the wine being racked into tank before bottling.

José then presents a wine named **Julia** from a 2.6ha single vineyard in the neighbouring village of Villafranca del Bierzo. The vineyard is at 550m and co-planted approximately two thirds Mencía and one third white varieties Godello, Doña Blanca and Palomino. The vines were planted in the early 1960s and are farmed organically. At harvest everything is retained as whole clusters, which are then foot trodden and given a short 5-6 day maceration. The juice and solids are then pressed pneumatically and moved into foudres by gravity for fermentation. Once that is complete, the cuvée splits its élevage between foudres and 500-litre barrels. It is a beautiful, elegant and stylish wine of around 12.5° alcohol which offers immediate drinking pleasure.

We then move into the vinos de villa, best understood as 'village wines' produced from a blend of several plots within the same commune. **Valtuille de Abajo**, their home village, is naturally a very important wine for them. The grapes come from tiny plots with varying amounts of sand, loam, clay and gravel.



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Such poor soils encourage the vines to work hard and these beautiful old bush vines, mostly planted between 1920 and 1940, yield small quantities of fabulous fruit, 85% being Mencía with the balance a mixture of other indigenous reds and whites. Once again, this is kept as whole clusters but with a longer 30-day maceration in foudres before an élevage in a variety of wooden vessels for at least a year before bottling. This is a finely structured, serious and contemplative wine.

Moving across the River Burbia, we climb into the hills. José points out several of his tiny parcels dotted around these vertiginous slopes, around the village of **Corullón**. Chunks of slate and quartz lie scattered over the chalky soils of the vineyard. Old vines are again in evidence everywhere. At these altitudes, harvest is normally a little later than down in the valley. The winemaking is the same as for Valtuille but the resulting wine speaks unmistakably of its location: floral perfumes, enhanced energy and a lifted, vital feel with a savoury bite to the fruit. This is wonderful and will appeal to those who seek power without weight in their wines.

José has also begun to advance with single vineyard wines that he hopes will qualify for classification within time. He doesn't make them every year but has plans for three in Valtuille de Abajo and two in Corullón, of which **Fontoulina** has already appeared in tiny quantities. He insists that for the moment this is just for interest- volumes of 300-600 bottles are hardly commercial- but they are indicative of the future direction for his project.

Four white wines are presented, the first being a simple, regional **Bierzo Blanco** blend of 70% Godello and 30% Doña Blanca. We then take a step up with the terrific **Godello Viñas Viejas**, coming from old vines on sandy soils in Valtuille de Abajo. The grapes see 24 hours of skin contact before fermentation in old foudres on the gross lees before one year in barrel without batonnage. The resulting wine has excellent aromatic range, plenty of acidity and just enough roundness from the barrel without a trace of oak.

Two further single-varietal cuvées complete the whites. For the **Doña Blanca**, José goes further with the skin contact, giving this 90 days on the skins. The resulting wine is straw-coloured, rich in aromas of melon and dried apricot and with a noticeable tannic element but also impressive length of flavour. For the **Corullón Vino de Villa Palomino**, José takes old vine Palomino and leaves it to macerate on the skins for 8 days before pressing in an old basket press. After fermentation in barrel it remains on its lees for a year. The combination of the chalky, slaty soils of Corullón and the high acidity of Palomino give a very dry, assertive wine with plenty of character. Typically only two barrels will be made.

In 2016, at a time when José was looking to quickly build his business, he stumbled across another regional curiosity: old vine Prieto Picudo, a rare, indigenous variety just outside of the boundaries of El Bierzo in the zone of El Páramo about 90 minutes to the east from Valtuille. The climate here is noticeably more continental and the clay soils are scattered with large stones, recalling Châteauneuf du Pape.



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JOSÉ AND JULIA ARE A CHARMING, DEDICATED, HARD-WORKING COUPLE WHOSE SUCCESS IS FULLY DESERVED. AS PART OF A SMALL BAND WHO HAVE WORKED TIRELESSLY TO UNDERSTAND THEIR SOILS AND PUT THEIR REGION BACK ONTO THE MAP, THEY ARE HARNESSING THE AMAZING HERITAGE OF THE REGION'S OLD VINES.

An old farmer in the commune of Villacalbiel had been lovingly tending some small, historic family vineyards organically and now, well past retirement age in a zone completely below the radar, the interest in his old vines from José quickly lead to an agreement.

Two wines, both 100% Prieto Picudo, have been produced.

Cubos del Páramo, simply carrying the appellation 'Tierra de León', is a remarkable wine at this price point. At 770m of altitude, there are extremes of climatic condition here but the soft, alluring, slightly peppery style of this wine is pure pleasure. Its sibling, **Villacalbiel**, is made in a more structured style, spending a year in oak barrel. Sourced from a single 0.6ha parcel, it is spicy, rich, dense and chewy with an abundance of gamey, animal notes that would be perfect with a winter stew.

José and Julia are a charming, dedicated, hard-working couple whose success is fully deserved. As part of a small band who have worked tirelessly to understand their soils and put their region back onto the map, they are harnessing the amazing heritage of the region's old vines. In a world that is pushing back from industrial homogenisation towards local, indigenous, handmade and sustainable, they are fully in tune with the priorities of today's discerning wine lovers.

