



# THE WISDOM OF HISTORY

Nothing much has changed at Bodegas López de Heredia for the past 140 years, the ultimate bastion of tradition in a region swept by modernisation. Dan Keeling on Viña Tondonia, Telmo Rodriguez and the struggle for Rioja's soul

Photos by Juan Trujillo Andrades

Childhood memories are powerful things, especially when they're made somewhere like Bodegas López de Heredia. Located deep beneath Haro's cobbled streets, the cellars of this most traditional of Rioja houses are the stuff of fairytales – a dank labyrinth of pungent stone chambers that might even convince *Fungus the Bogeyman* it was time for a spring clean. Walls cascade with patchworks of mould in hues of grey, black and green. Copious cobwebs sparkle like distant galaxies across damp ceilings and every chamber has a slightly different aroma to the last – a unique blend of old oak, rock, mushrooms and decay. If Chanel were to bottle it they might call it *Ashes to Ashes*, such is the sensation of being returned to the earth. For any wine lover fortunate enough to visit, it's the sweet smell of anticipation.

“Our father would send us down here when we were children to fetch wines saying, ‘You can break your heads but not the bottle,’” María José López de Heredia, the bodega's co-owner, says from amid the subterranean gloom. For the past hour *Noble Rot* has been trying to keep pace with the unrelenting María José – a warm, petite lady for whom commas, full stops and paragraphs seem to have lost any practical application –

María José López de Heredia  
'at the office'





"If you build a cellar and mould doesn't  
grow, build another cellar elsewhere."  
Old winemaker's proverb

(This page) Inside the cellars at Bodegas López de Heredia

(Opposite) Viewpoint over vineyards, Rioja Alavesa



as she relates what it was like growing up on the estate affectionately known by many simply as Tondonia. “People ask me about my vocation, but for me it was not about taking over the family business,” she explains, surveying a stack of bottles completely subsumed by mould. “It was clear from day one that what I really wanted to do was to help my dad, and the way to help him

was to continue with the family business.” She pauses momentarily, dewy eyed from the memories of her father Pedro’s passing three years ago, at the age of 84. “Did I want to be like him? In many ways, yes,” she admits. “My father was so passionate and such a happy man doing what he did. But in family businesses you go through so many moments when you really want to give up.”

López de Heredia is nothing if not a family business. Having been handed down through four generations to its present custodians María José, sister Mercedes, and brother Julio César, its old-school techniques and elegant, age-worthy wines have remained steadfast through wars, fashions and advances in technology. Even during the 1980s and 1990s, when it



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María José López de Heredia

The arrival of the railroad in the late 19th century was of huge importance to Rioja's exports. Many producers built bodegas next to Haro station, including López de Heredia's distinctive 'bird house' tower (centre left)



would have been far easier to embrace modernisation and ensuing vinous homogeneity like the majority of Rioja bodegas, they stayed true to the principles laid down by María José's great-grandfather, Rafael López de Heredia y Landeta, when he established the winery in 1877. Today it remains one of Spain's greatest estates.

An educated Chilean immigrant, Rafael López de Heredia y Landeta was just 21 years old when he set up in Haro during a boom for supplying a French market whose own vineyards had been ravaged by phylloxera. Like his fellow Rioja pioneers, Marqués de Riscal and Marqués de Murrieta (who'd both fought in the Carlist War on the opposing side, but later became his friends), Rafael took inspiration from the influential Bordeaux châteaux when establishing his eponymous bodega. "There were no brands like Château Margaux in Spain at the time, so Rafael wanted to create something that could appeal to customers in a similar way," says María José of her young ancestor's marketing nous. Seeking guidance from Château Margaux, Château

Haut Brion, Château d'Issan and Château Lafite, Rafael set about purchasing sites around the town based on their suitability to emulate the regions that he and his new Gallic customer base admired. Up to as recently as 1953 the wines of López de Heredia were branded with names like 'Rioja Cepa-Médoc', 'Rioja Cepa-Graves', 'Rioja Cepa-Borgoña' or 'Blanco Cepa-Barsac' before reverting to their specific vineyard classifications from 1954 on. "He took their advice over what vineyards to buy to make a style that was more Bordeaux, more Burgundy or more Graves," María José explains. Rafael even experimented with plantings of Bordeaux's Cabernet Sauvignon in Rioja, to little success, though his adoption of second-hand French oak barrels (later American due to availability) was to be of profound importance. Over the next few years Rioja's wine exports would become so successful that Rafael and the two Marquéses soon had new, very modern challenges to overcome. "The Rioja appellation was created in 1927 to fight the forgeries that people began producing around the turn of the

century," says María José. "Every time something is successful in Spain people want to sell more of it, but because they didn't have enough wine they would fake it. There was even a book published in 1905 that taught people how to make wines in the style of Marqués de Riscal."

López de Heredia's flagship reds are 'Viña Tondonia' (100ha) and 'Viña Bosconia' (from 15ha of vineyard called El Bosque), sold in Bordeaux and Burgundy-shaped bottles respectively. 'Viña Tondonia' is produced in a "softer, more elegant Médoc style," a blend of Tempranillo, Garnacha, Mazuelo and Graciano grown on limestone and clay. 'Viña Bosconia' is a similar blend (with more Mazuelo and Graciano), from clay-dominant soils, picked over two weeks after Tondonia, producing powerful wines with more colour, body and ripeness. "If it's true about global warming, we need to grow a higher percentage of Mazuelo and Graciano in order to maintain the high acidity and moderate alcohol of traditional Rioja," María José says of the two lesser-grown grapes, whose own

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María José López de Heredia



Sunday lunch crowds in Haro

estate vines are older and earlier-maturing. Elsewhere in López de Heredia's bountiful portfolio is an entry level 'tapas' red called 'Viña Cubillo', and a gorgeous rosado (rosé) which is only released to market an astonishing 10 years following the vintage. Like the bodega's white wines (blends of Viura and Malvasia grown in Tondonia and Viña Zaconia, a short hop over the river Ebro which neighbours the winery), these are two of the world's most extraordinary fine wines.

"In winemaking school they'd never teach you to make a white or a rosé like we do," says María José, citing the time her class visited a Catalan winery and were told that it was impossible to make white wines that could age. "Everyone turned and stared at me," she chuckles reflecting on a period when there was scant demand for López de Heredia's now highly sought-after *blancos*. "We would receive congratulations from all over the world for our white wines, but it was like Sherry – everybody said how marvellous it is but hardly anyone drinks it," she shrugs. "We had so much stock of it that we thought they would last 100 years, so we reduced the amount we produced. Now it's the complete opposite. Everyone wants to buy old vintages and we don't have any to sell." Whether

caused by a shift in the zeitgeist for consumers demanding authentic products or by them simply waking up to López de Heredia's outstanding quality-to-price ratio (you can buy their entry-level white with 10 years bottle age for as little as £13), the bodega's recent fashionability isn't an easy fit with the unassuming María José. "When I go to bed at night I always think, 'Another day, another 3000 emails in my inbox,'" she sighs before recalling a story that perfectly illustrates this unforeseen growth in demand. "Years ago (revered Basque chef) Juan Mari Arzak called my father and said, 'Pedro, I've got so much 1954 Viña Tondonia in my cellar that my grandfather bought and I can't sell it – please can you replace it?'" she explains. "So my father asked me to go to San Sebastián to see Arzak and tell him that we don't re-buy our wine, we only sell it. I thought how am I going to tell Arzak that? So I called my friend Telmo Rodríguez and asked him to come with me for support. We had the most incredible lunch in Arzak's kitchen and we left without buying back the wine. Now the sommelier from Arzak always calls me asking for more wine and the whole world has gone crazy. I keep on telling him, 'I regret not buying those old wines back!'"

## THE GRAND CRUS OF RIOJA

Telmo Rodríguez straightens the cuff on his immaculate blue shirt and gazes out over an ocean of vines at Remelluri, his family's estate. "I don't want to sound pretentious," he begins carefully, "but our idea is to

bring back to life what should have been the most pure and delicate taste of Rioja. I travel a lot and I always ask people what their idea of Rioja is. When they talk about bodegas like Faustino or Paternina I think my god, we're so far from the real taste." Once regarded as the

*enfant terrible* of the Spanish fine wine scene, Rodríguez is now established as one of the country's most forward-thinking producers, having set up successful domaines in numerous regions with business partner Pablo Eguzkiza. From Galicia to Málaga, Toro, Rueda, Cigales,

Valdeorras, Cebreiros, Ávila, Alicante and Ribera del Duero, for the last 20 years Telmo and Pablo's game plan has been to begin working with local producers in the most promising areas to produce good, low-cost wines, before identifying the finest vineyards available to make



Telmo Rodríguez, Remelluri Estate, Rioja Alavesa. 16th May 2016

high-quality cuvées. “Yesterday I was talking to a few young guys, saying that if they had the sensibility they can still buy the best vineyards in Spain,” Telmo explains of the strategy. “Young people today can still buy the most beautiful vineyards in Rioja because nobody cares about them; we’re very lucky.” Although Compañía de Vinos Telmo Rodríguez now owns 70ha+ of organic vineyards across

Spain it’s still his native Rioja where he remains passionately committed to pushing what can be achieved.

A student of local 17th-century viticulture, Telmo employs traditional techniques like high-density planting, field blends and a Burgundian-style focus on terroir rather than Rioja’s easy to understand but increasingly outdated oak ageing classification system

(Jóven, Crianza, Reserva, Gran Reserva, etc.) Although Grand Crus and Premier Crus don’t technically exist in the modern DOC (under *Consejo Regulator* laws it is illegal to cite specific place names on labels), village wines like Telmo’s ‘Lanzaga’ and single sites like the

(Left) French-influenced pre-1954 bottle labels

(Right) Telmo Rodríguez Las Beatas 2012



Photograph DK

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Telmo Rodríguez

future classic ‘Las Beatas’ are taking Rioja back to a time when wine was – to coin a modern cliché – made in the vineyard rather than the winery. If Rioja wants to take its place at the top table of the world’s greatest wine regions, apart from all-encompassing regional classifications, surely an acknowledgement of origin and terroir is what is required? “The big industrial wineries were the destruction of Rioja,” the charismatic Telmo explains, passing *Noble Rot* a platter of barbecued lamb over lunch. “López de Heredia and Bodegas Bilbaínas used to own their own vineyards, but all the rest weren’t interested. They were making wines to send to France because of phylloxera, and they wanted cheap rent – that’s why they produce a million bottles today. Those companies are responsible for the loss of the traditional field blends, the bush vines and the great agriculture. I say to people if they want to be part of this [new artisanal] movement, don’t sell any more mass-produced brands in your restaurants. Sell growers. Sell places.”

The extraordinary 2012 ‘Las Beatas’ – only the second vintage produced from a vineyard he purchased 15 years ago – makes a compelling case for Rodríguez’s philosophy. Its complex, ethereal

bouquet blends violets and dark cherries with a fresh, salty tang, whilst its lacy texture and ultra-fine tannins give it a rounded refinement diametrically opposed to the oak-saturated commercial wines pumped out in millions of litres in Rioja today. Elsewhere in his portfolio the Remelluri *blanco* (which he co-manages with his sister Amaia) is of particular note, although much more experimental for the region. A beautifully balanced blend of nine different grape varieties aged in oak for 12 months, it doffs its cap at the finest whites of the Northern Rhône and betrays Telmo’s apprenticeships with some of Southern France’s finest. “To work a vineyard in the Médoc is easy, but in Hermitage you have to be a hero to fight for your place,” he says of his time alongside Gerard Chave, when the master of Hermitage would generously open vintages stretching back to the 1930s to teach an impressionable Telmo how to make wine. After studying at Bordeaux Wine School Telmo also did stints with A-listers Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Cos d’Estournel in Bordeaux and his long-term mentor, Eloi Dürrbach at Trevallon in Provence.

“López de Heredia is the only winery that I think has the quality of winemaking like 150 years ago,” continues Telmo, pouring another glass of his impressive ‘Altos

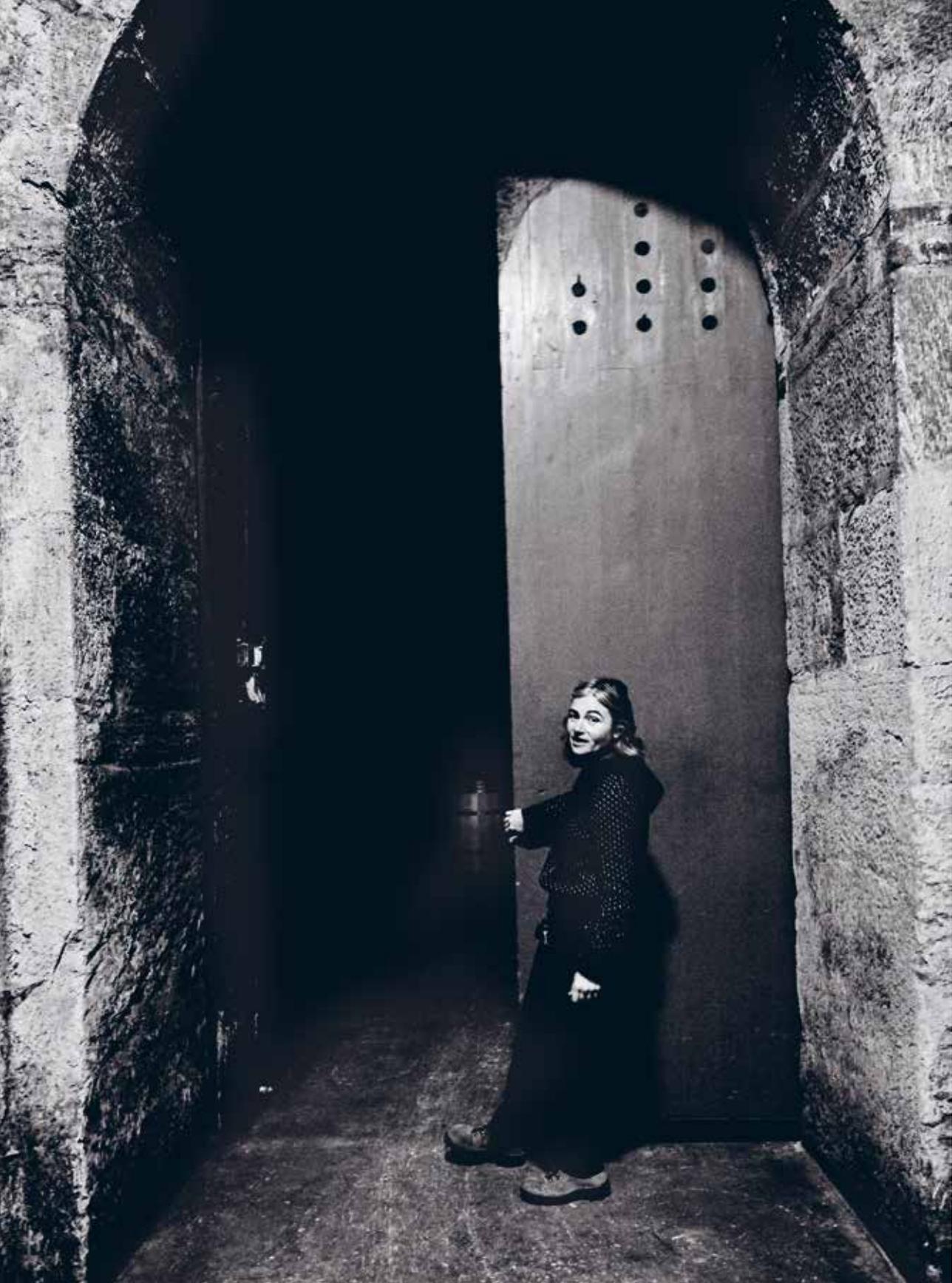
Lanzaga’ village wine. “I love Tondonia because it represents a very interesting moment in Rioja and is very important. But even today many sommeliers argue it’s the original style of Rioja when in fact there was something much more pure. In the end the process – the winery – is still very important with Tondonia. The challenge for us was to try and find the amazing old vineyards, and when you see ‘Las Beatas’ you realise that those terraces were the Grand Crus. Rioja became a wine that is made more in the winery, but the challenge of ‘Las Beatas’ is to make it in the great places, the Grand Crus of Rioja.”

#### THE CEMETERY

Back in the labyrinth of *calados* (drilled tunnels) under Bodegas López de Heredia, *Noble Rot* is en route to a very special room. “Sometimes Telmo wants to be more traditionalist than the traditionalists,” María José says of her old friend. “When he talks about recuperating the history of Rioja he doesn’t mean the 19th century history that made Rioja well known, but the previous history – the 17th century. I tell him that we don’t know much about how they worked then because there are very few records left. But this is what he wants to do; he’s a person



'The Cemetery', where López de Heredia's oldest and rarest wines are kept



(Right) Viña Tondonia blanco Reserva 1964

who loves the history of the area and he dreams of making great wine.” We turn a corner past two cellar men cleaning barrels and then rolling them over grooves cut into the floor, eerily animating them in the half-light like they’ve taken on a life-force of their own. “Please be gentle,” she quietly remonstrates, “the *barriques* need to be looked after.” Employing a full-time cooperage on site means the bodega maintains its stocks of used barrels for as long as possible – the taste of new oak is not something welcomed here. “Everyone talks about Rioja in terms of oak maturation – *Crianza*, *Reserva* – but that’s so boring,” María José says of many drinkers’ desire for wood flavours. “Oak shouldn’t give character to the wines. It was originally only a container for stabilising the

wine but this has changed through history”. We arrive at an iron gate and after a moment identifying the correct key, María José unlocks the door and beckons us in. Despite great-grandfather Rafael’s wishes, this otherworldly inner sanctum became known as ‘The Cemetery’ and is the place where stocks of López de Heredia’s rarest bottles – from the legendary 1964’s, 1947’s and 1934’s back to 1885 – are stored. “Telmo used to tell me to re-cork the bottles, but the whole point of wine is to be drunk,” María José says, selecting a mottled bottle of 1964 *blanco Reserva* – the ‘vintage of the century’. Our host hacks away the crumbling wax seal from the neck of the bottle, and as she carefully begins pouring glasses of golden elixir, reminisces about the times her grandfather would present his children with unidentified glasses of ‘Tondonia’ and ‘Bosconia’ and ask them to distinguish between them by smell. “I didn’t start to love wine until I was fairly old, but I learnt to respect it when I was very young,” María José smiles, and as wafts of roasted nuts, wax floors and smoked crème brûlée mingle with the cellar’s earthy decay, sweet anticipation is replaced by wonder.

