



# Wine On The Edge

Ribeira Sacra's vertigo-inducing vineyards are producing some of Spain's most exciting red wines

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Camíño Novo vineyard,  
Ribeira Sacra, Galicia



**T**here are easier ways to earn a living than as a winemaker on the edge of the world. “I’m exhausted,” says Laura Lorenzo, her weathered hands, more befitting a woman double her 35 years, pressed firmly against her brow. “For the past three years I’ve worked the vineyards on my own, until last month I could finally afford to hire someone to help. He lasted just a couple of days and then he disappeared. Working vines in Ribeira Sacra is hard.” From what *Noble Rot* has seen of the precipitous drops on the way to her remote winery, Lorenzo is a master of understatement. Along with the world’s other most perilous vineyards – parts of Priorat, Mount Etna, Mosel and Northern Rhône valleys – grape growing in this untouched part of Galicia in northwest Spain is only for the courageous. Relieved just to have navigated the mountain-hugging roads before sunset, *Noble Rot* sups Laura’s 2015 Daterra Viticultores ‘Portela do Vent’ – a Mencía

blend typical of the perfumed reds that are currently making Ribeira Sacra’s name – and for a moment we relax. Now it’s only the anticipation of a rollercoaster night-drive back to our hotel that’s making us namby-pamby Londoners sweat.

The beginnings of winemaking in Ribeira Sacra lie far back in time, but it’s only in the last 20 years that a handful of artisans have spearheaded a renaissance. Two thousand years ago the Romans were the first to plant vines in the region, having arrived to mine gold. Using slave labour they constructed hundreds of terraces like giant stairways on three river gorges – the Sil, the Miño and the Bibei. Later, monks farmed the vineyards for several centuries until the devastation of Phylloxera, economic depression and the Spanish Civil War drove scores of locals to leave Ribeira Sacra to begin new, easier, lives elsewhere. The vineyards then lay abandoned and overgrown for decades. Although this tenuously began to change around the turn of

the millennium, with an influx of winemakers attracted by stocks of old vines and excellent terroir, that the average age of a vineyard worker in the region is 63 years is a concern for the future. The long-term challenge for producers here is to raise market demand and prices to cover the cost of cultivating such unforgiving land. “Many young people feel ashamed to be seen working the vineyards. They want to use a tractor rather than a spade, which isn’t possible on this kind of terrain.”

Having bought an old doctor’s house as a winery in the near-deserted town of Manzaneda with loans from relatives and the bank (“I spoke with my family and they said, ‘Making wine? Oh, no!’”), Laura offsets the expense of 5ha in Ribeira Sacra’s Bibei Valley with 1ha of vines in the easier to work, flatter neighbouring D.O. Valdeorras. “It’s not just that the Bibei vineyards are very old with lots of different grape varieties, but they’ve been looked after in many different ways by many different people. It’s complicated.” Having spent eight years making wines for the pioneering Dominio do Bibei before setting out on her own, if anyone has a chance of deciphering the untold combinations of soil, grape and microclimate, it’s Laura and her ex-employer, Javier Domínguez.

“Here in Galicia we don’t have the knowledge of other wine regions,” says Javier over the Land Rover’s straining engine. In the front seat, winemaker Gutier Seivo frantically alternates between accelerator, clutch and gears, attempting to drive the vehicle up an insanely steep vineyard slope. “We have to learn by making our own mistakes because the monks didn’t write anything down. We’re trying to define how to work this land, but it’s a 100-year project... for our children.” The Land Rover bounces over the summit with the grace of a sumo wrestler on a pogo stick, and *Noble Rot* breathes a sigh of relief. Past bush vines spiked with copious herbs, we stop outside a dilapidated *lagares* – an old stone building



(Left) Sil Canyon vineyard; (above) Laura Lorenzo, Manzaneda, 30th March 2017; (below) Laura adding a neck information label to her wines due to restrictive D.O. laws



**“To make Ribeira Sacra an important wine region we have to think long term. We’re working for our sons, not for us.” Roberto Santana, Envínate**

(Clockwise from bottom) Curro Barreño & Pablo Soldavini from Fedellos do Couto, Roberto Santana & Alfonso Torrente from Envínate, Pedro Rodríguez Perez from Guímero, Jesús Olivares from Fedellos do Couto. Sil Canyon, 31st March 2017



where workers would ferment grapes and shelter from the midday sun – and survey the magnificent landscape. “We’re looking for different terroirs, soils, altitudes and expositions for the different varieties,” says Gutier, an intense Galician who learnt his craft at estates in Bordeaux, Marlborough, Napa and Priorat. “It’s hard work, but we’re searching for the perfect expression of our varieties.”

Mencía (a lower-acid varietal that maintains good freshness) is the dominant red grape in Ribeira Sacra, a region that has a long tradition of blending. Dominio do Bibei uses other indigenous varietals such as Sousón, Mouratón, Alicante Bouschet and Caíño in their reds, reserving particular praise for the precise and spicy Brancellao, believed to have once been the most widely planted red grape in the area. For whites, Godello and Albariño dominate, with small amounts of Doña Blanca, Treixadura and Torrontés sometimes included. Soils are a mixture of granite, schist, slate and iron; grapes are de-stemmed and élevage takes place in an assortment of vessels, including modern cement eggs, *foudres* and old oak barrels. “Our wines are extremely austere – they’re not overly fruity but very expressive,” says Javier. “We taste the land, not the grape variety.”

Beginning to reclaim dozens of *abandonados* in 2002, Dominio do Bibei is the lifework of Javier – brother of fashion designer Adolfo Domínguez – and a man not given to discussing his second career in textiles. “Normally I’m the chauffeur for people who visit the winery, that’s my most important job,” he says, guiding the conversation back to grapes. Having completed their minimalist winery in 2005, the domaine owns 140ha of land, of which 32ha produces the grapes for four cuvées whose names all begin with the letter ‘L’. Two reds: ‘Lalama’, from the lower, warmest part of the valley and ‘Lacima’ from the peak. Two whites: ‘Lapena’, ‘the rock’ or ‘sadness’, and ‘Lapaula’, ‘the branch’. (“When you put



(Above, left to right) Javier Domínguez, Mark Andrew, Dan Keeling, Gutier Seivo (Left) 2002 Dominio do Bibei ‘Lalama’ (Right) Dominio do Bibei’s tasting room

together the ‘L’s they make up a cross.”) Having enjoyed the domaine’s debut 2002 ‘Lalama’ over lunch at San Sebastián restaurant Arzak the previous day (see 24 Hours in San Sebastián, p80), *Noble Rot* is impressed by its evolution. Fresh, light and perfumed, an intense bouquet of plums, cherries, minerals and herbs, evokes a hypothetical cross between high-quality Loire Cabernet Franc and red Burgundy.

“It’s very important to us that our wines age well,” says Roberto Santana of Envínate (AKA ‘Wine yourself’), a project set up by four friends to make wine in Ribeira Sacra, Extremadura, Almansa and Tenerife. “We can’t wait to open one of our bottles in 20 years’ time to see how it’s developed. That’s how you see how to improve as a winemaker.



To make Ribeira Sacra an important wine region we have to think long term. We're working for our sons, not for us." If the hallmarks of 'fine' wine include terroir and vintage variation, superlative winemaking and the potential for development in bottle, the cream of Ribeira Sacra is well on their way. Starting Envínate in 2008, Roberto, along with partners Alfonso Torrente, Laura Ramos and José Martínez, produces three cuvées of a delicious red called 'Lousas' (Galician for 'broken slate'), including one from the vertiginous terraces of 'Camiño Novo'. A blend of 90-year-old Mencía and Garnacha, 'Lousas' Parcela Camiño Novo combines peppery, mineral Northern Rhône-style aromatics with a rounded texture akin to Beaujolais Cru, and is a beautiful example of what this Galician wine renaissance can achieve. "We love wines with personality that transport you to the place they were grown," says the contemplative Roberto, citing Château Rayas, Clape and Jean-Louis Chave as inspirations. "For us, a wine has to have three things; the personality of the terroir, the character of the vintage, and the soul of the people that worked the land," he says, always crediting the names of their associated growers on their labels.

Fedellos do Couto (AKA 'Brats of Couto') is another young domaine staking their claim to be on the world's finest wine lists. Comprising Pablo Soldavini, Curro Barreño, Jesús Olivares and Luis Taboada, the amiable Brats started making wine in a tumbledown 13th-century noble's house in the village of O Couto in 2013, and produce four cuvées from 6ha of vineyards. *Noble Rot's* pick is 'Bastarda', a unique 100% Merenzao (AKA Bastardo, or Trousseau in the Jura) that combines intense, lifted aromas with a lightness of touch. "We make wines that we want to drink," says Argentinian Pablo, 40, over tortilla and pulpo a la Gallega at Brats HQ. "I like to drink a lot of wine, but I can't drink more than a glass of most Argentinian reds because they're so heavy." Leaving behind a career as a graphic designer in Punta Alta, 650km south of Buenos Aires, Pablo



(Above) Fedellos do Couto's four wines

discovered his true vocation lay in his ancestral heartland after visiting in 2000. "As soon as I arrived I knew I had to stay – I felt such a strong connection with my roots." The good-humoured Curro, also 40, splits his time working at Bodega Bernabeleva near Madrid, whilst Luis, an astrophysicist, and Jesús, are the homegrown members of the crew. "They love to talk," laughs Curro when asked what defines the typical Galician, "and they usually answer a question with another question."

Back in the perilous vineyards, another Galician, Pedro Rodríguez Pérez, looks out over thick blankets of fog obscuring the terraces below. Like a set from *Jurassic Park*, squint and it's easy to imagine a Diplodocus grazing on the banks of the river, such is the timeless feel of this land. The fourth generation to farm Ribeira Sacra vines, Pedro's grandparents also ran one of the region's few government-certified mills, where they'd wear out the soles of their shoes from operating the water wheels 24 hours a day. "Grapes were never a profitable crop here so after the civil war everyone planted grain," Pedro says. "People only used to make wine to drink themselves, until very recently." Down to earth and almost



permanently smiling, since dropping out of law school Rodríguez has taken his Guímero domaine from strength to strength, and is credited, along with sometime partner Raúl Pérez and Algueira's Fernando González Riveiro, as being among the first to draw international attention to the region. We follow Pedro down through terrace upon crooked terrace of Mencía vines to 'Finca Capeliños', a tiny plot he bottles as a gloriously perfumed single-vineyard cuvée. Around us, basic pulley systems and a railway track highlight the challenge of cultivating grapes in such a brutal environment. "When I left Ribeira Sacra for the first time I thought, 'What! People plant vines on flat land?'" he laughs. Determined and passionate, Pedro – like all of the producers we meet – surmounts overwhelming difficulties with the common dream of making great wines. There are far easier places to do that than on the edge of the world, but *Noble Rot* has the utmost admiration for those that do.

**Noble Rot's Ribeira Sacra 10**

1. 2015 Envínate 'Lousas' Parcela Camiño Novo
2. 2002 Dominio do Bibei 'Lalama'
3. 2015 Guímaro 'Finca Pombeiras'
4. 2015 Fedellos do Couto 'Bastarda'
5. 2015 Envínate 'Lousas' Parcela Seoane
6. 2002 Dominio do Bibei 'Lacima'

7. 2005 Dominio do Bibei 'Lapola' Blanco
8. 2015 Fedellos do Couto 'Conasbrancas' Blanco
9. 2015 Daterra Viticultores 'Portela do Vent'
10. 2014 Algueira Brancellão