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THE WINE MAGAZINE

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VERDEJO

A White Wine Reborn

Long a byword for fresh, forgettable whites, Verdejo is being reworked by Rueda's most ambitious producers into something with structure, texture and the capacity to age. **Ruma Singh** asks whether it can now join the world's great white grapes



Although previously undervalued, Verdejo is the grape behind Spain's top white wine

A bold tagline on the website for DO Rueda caught my eye: "Verdejo, the World's Next Great White Wine."

I am familiar with Verdejo, the grape behind Spain's top white wine, as are many. Most have quaffed it at a soirée: fresh, crisp and approachable. But the next great white? Intrigued, I signed up for a DO (Denominación de Origen) Rueda tasting in London, where the region's top producers would be present.

It was an eye-opener. The first wine I tasted was a 100% Verdejo showing layers of ripe fruit and delicate floral notes, but also texture, depth of flavour and a long finish – qualities not usually associated with the wines available in the market. Moving from stand to stand, I found more gems: Verdejo in different guises, from deliciously moreish sips to layered, complex wines. This was a whole new Verdejo.

For decades, Verdejo has been undervalued. Its home, Spain, has traditionally been celebrated for red wine, while Castilla y León, where Rueda is located, is better known for Ribera del Duero, Toro and Bierzo. Then came the giddy New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc boom of the 1980s, when an aromatic white grape captured consumers' imaginations.

Rueda, formed as a DO in 1980, was not initially associated with premium wine production. Its early commercial success was built on an affordable, fresh style, with exports focused on value rather than prestige. Consumers rarely encountered age worthy examples or heard much about terroir.

RUEDA IS CHANGING

Fast-forward to 2026 and Rueda is changing its proposition. Unforeseen weather events have created multiple problems for producers – harvest dates are earlier; the diurnal range is narrowing while vineyard diseases like mildew are major threats. The light at the end of this tunnel remains the consumer inclination to trade up. Indigenous grapes, especially whites, are seeing a resurgence in interest that other

categories currently lack, according to IWSR, the leading source of industry data and intelligence.

DO Rueda has responded by giving producers greater flexibility within its rules while keeping Verdejo firmly at the centre. In 2020, it introduced the Gran Vino de Rueda classification for wines from vines over 30 years old, with a capped yield of 6,500 kg per hectare and a strict juice extraction limit of 65%, aimed at producing more concentrated, age worthy wines. Vinos de Pueblo (village wines) could mention their origin on the label, helping to highlight Rueda's different sub-zones and terroirs.

The rules have also evolved in response to climate change. Selective irrigation is permitted, while many traditional bush-trained vineyards have been replanted to trellised vines. Additional varieties – including Sauvignon Blanc, Viura, Chardonnay and Viognier, with limited quantities of Riesling, Muscat and Gewürztraminer were authorised to give producers greater flexibility. Many

Protos Verdejo. The winery produces several styles, from an accessible expression to organic and Reserva bottlings



leading producers have also turned organic or biodynamic.

These new rules became game changers. In 2024, DO Rueda exported 15.8 million bottles, up 5.4% on 2023: significant growth given the current global scenario with tariff disputes, interest in No- and Low-alcohol and a shrinking wine market. IWSR has also identified Verdejo among the world's fastest growing and increasingly popular grape varieties, alongside Viognier, Albariño, Riesling and Assyrtiko.

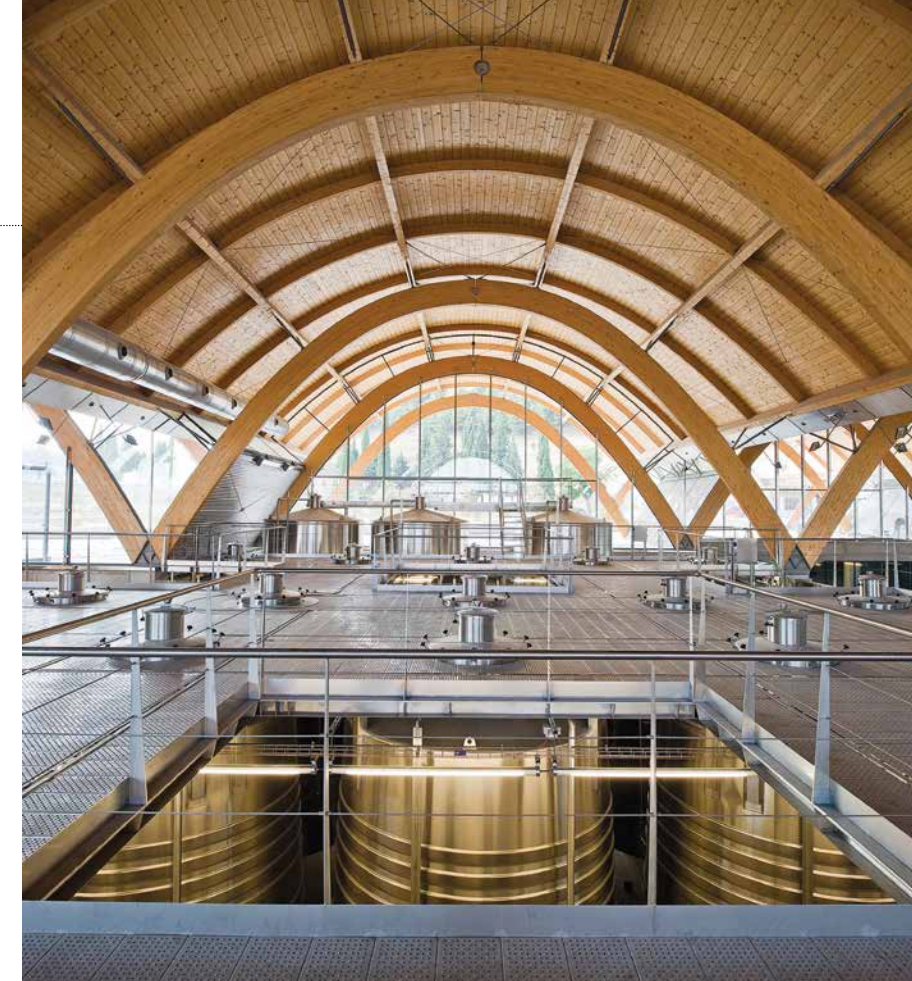
VERDEJO: THE REINVENTION

Rueda's producers are capitalising on Verdejo's natural resilience. Its thick skins and deep roots help it withstand intense heat, drought and high UV exposure. Its versatility in the cellar – from oak to concrete and amphora – is also helping to redefine its image.

“Verdejo is a grape of extraordinary ageing capacity,” says Juan de Benito, owner of Bodegas Alvarez y Diez, established in 1941. “It is capable of reflecting terroir, far removed from a profile of flat, industrialised wine.”

Producers, he says, are increasingly focusing on soil-specific vinification and bottling, to showcase Rueda's mosaic of soils and using alternative fermentation vessels such as concrete eggs and large foudres that allow micro-oxygenation to add complexity, and the recovery of pre-phyllloxera vineyards. The result is a new generation of more structured and complex wines. At the same time, Verdejo's freshness, versatility and competitive pricing make it an attractive gateway wine for younger drinkers.

Rueda has also attracted producers from outside the region. François Lurton, from one of Bordeaux's influential wine families, recognised the potential early. His Bodegas Campo Eliseo (meaning Elysian Fields), established in Valladolid in 2000 with Michel Rolland, has treated Verdejo with the kind of care and ambition more commonly associated with premium white Bordeaux.



Protos established a dedicated white-wine facility in Rueda's La Seca bringing its expertise to white winemaking

Rueda's producers are capitalising on Verdejo's natural resilience. Its thick skins and deep roots help it withstand intense heat, and drought

Its Cuvée Alegre, a 100% Verdejo, became the first DO Rueda wine to enter the Wine Spectator Top 100 in 2019. The flagship Campo Eliseo Blanc is cold-macerated on its skins, fermented in 600-litre French oak barrels and aged on fine lees with regular bâtonnage (yeast stirring) before further maturation in oak.

“What we get here in Rueda that differs from the Bordeaux whites is the high acidity and complexity of aromas,” says winemaker Mariate Sanz. “Plus texture and minerality.” Describing a recent Verdejo tasting conducted for a group of restaurant sommeliers, Mariate recalls their amazement at the depth of the wines they tasted. “They found our wines, especially our Verdejo, on the same lines as white wines from Burgundy.”

Increasingly, producers from other Spanish regions are taking Verdejo seriously. At the London tasting were wines from Marqués de Riscal, credited with helping modernise Rueda in the 1970s, as well as Rioja's Bodegas Beronia and Ramón Bilbao, and Ribera del Duero's pioneering Bodegas Protos.

Protos established a dedicated white-wine facility in Rueda's La Seca in 2006, bringing its expertise to white winemaking and focusing wholly on Verdejo. Its vineyards, at 700–800 metres, benefit from large diurnal temperature swings that help preserve the grape's characteristic acidity and freshness. The winery produces several styles, from an accessible expression to organic and Reserva bottlings.

“Being Rueda's indigenous grape, Verdejo has a home advantage,” says export manager Luisa de Paz. “It shows a typicity of its own: aromas of citrus and green apple, pear and white flowers, with fennel and herbal notes – all this with a distinctive mineral undertone.”

These different expressions help explain why Verdejo has become Spain's leading white wine by consumption over the past 15 years, despite the growing popularity of Albariño. Yet Rueda still has work to do if it wants Verdejo to achieve the international recognition enjoyed by varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc.

MANY ADVANTAGES

Can Verdejo really become the next great white? Perhaps, not by attempting to replicate Sauvignon Blanc's success but by embracing what it already has: old vines, distinctive terroir,

natural resilience, gastronomic versatility and the capacity to make wines capable of ageing.

What struck me at the London tasting was that no two producers described Verdejo in quite the same way. One spoke of texture and longevity, another of freshness. Collectively, the picture that emerged was of a grape far more nuanced than its commercial image suggests.

Whether Verdejo achieves premium global recognition will depend less on quality – which many producers argue it already possesses – than on sustained storytelling, clearer positioning and convincing consumers that it belongs in the same conversation as internationally respected white varieties. Chef José Andrés has already called it, “one of the absolute best wines for food”.

Premium wine status emerges when growers, producers, critics and consumers begin speaking the same language about place, identity and quality. Verdejo appears closer to that moment than at any point in its modern history.

“Despite changing climate and consumption trends, what Rueda must never compromise on is the balance of its identity,” believes Juan de Benito. And Verdejo remains its ultimate treasure. ♦

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Verdejo vines at Bodegas Alvarez y Diez, established in 1941

