

# TOP 10 SPANISH WHITES FOR YOUR CELLAR

Best known for its fresh young whites, Spain also produces more serious styles that need time in bottle to reveal their full potential. **Sarah Jane Evans MW** picks her top 10 styles from across the country that deserve a place in your cellar and will reward ageing

**S**ummertime – and that means white wine. It's something that Spain does so well. Crisp, chilly Verdejos and Albariños, salty manzanilla Sherries, these are the mainstay of a summer lunch. Yet when the sun shines we should remember that along with these vibrant young whites, Spain makes wines worth cellaring and rediscovering after several years or more in the shade.

There's a view that Spain has two great cellar-worthy white wines: Castillo Ygay, by Marqués de Murrieta; and López de Heredia's Viña Tondonia Gran Reserva. Both Riojas, they have become deeply fashionable. However their very success obscures the exciting reality of what is happening today in Spain. Nowadays there are a number of wines which need time in the cellar to reach their top character. Not as long-lived as Ygay, but determined escapees from the 'buy today, drink today or tomorrow' treadmill.

That these two long-lived icons are made predominantly from Viura (with Malvasía, 3% in the former case and 10% in the latter) is notable. For Viura, known elsewhere as Macabeo, can be disappointing and drab. This underlines a key feature to remember if you are keen to buy wines for cellaring: so much depends on the vineyard, the climate, and the producer. Even after the wine has spent years in the cellar, the influence and judgement of the people behind it remain discernible.

Wine writer and DWWA judge Cristina Alcalá spells this out: 'Spain was a traditional red wine country in production and consumption. It turned towards white wine when it discovered the power of certain native varieties. Furthermore it had producers with sensitivity, who weren't worried about experimenting or losing face, who were able to make white wines with cellaring potential.'

A great white wine starts in the vineyard. In the bottle, over time, fruit fades and tertiary characters develop. What comes to the fore is freshness, a backbone of acidity. At the outset some of the wines may seem lean, but in the manner of Semillons and Rieslings they can blossom over time and come into balance.

## Atlantic whites

Where better to find that freshness than the Atlantic coast surrounding Galicia? Rías Baixas, with its varying maritime exposures, has long proved its worth. One of the classics is the Selección de Añada Albariño from Pazo de Señorans. There's no oak on this Albariño. The key is the 30 months it spends on lees. The result is a wine that changes from the apple and peach freshness of Albariño into something more approaching the style of a serious Chardonnay.

One fan of the style is Pierre Mansour, head of wine at The Wine Society, who recently created a case for a customer of a vertical of three vintages of the Selección to showcase their development. Such is the damage done by the recent rush to produce cheap, cheerful Albariños, that there are still experienced drinkers who believe that Albariño can only be drunk young. Selección de Añada proves that view is wrong. Other Rías Baixas greats include Gerardo Méndez of Do Ferreiro, who has vines that are up to 200 years old. I'd cheerfully wait 10 years for his Cepas Vellas, though I couldn't wait 20.

Eulogio Pomares of Bodegas Zárata, one of the key producers in Rías Baixas, and blessed with exceptional family vineyards, recalls the birth of the DO in 1988. 'It always focused on the primary, aromatic aspect of Albariño, making "technological" wines, New World-style, and with great commercial success. But this style was and is criticised by the pioneers, "the oldies" – and I'm one of those,' he says. >



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## Spanish whites for cellaring



Eulogio Pomares



Above: Can Ràfols in Penedès is known for its uncommon plantings of Chenin Blanc vines

Below: David Sampedro of Bodegas Bhilar

(Though I should add that he is not in the least antique in age, or ideas.) His focus remains on the vineyard, 'low yields and massal selection of old clones'. He explains: 'The clones in use today were selected in the 1980s because producers were looking for higher yield and higher alcohols. The old clones I use have much smaller bunches and a much lower yield.'

Pomares stresses that acidity is fundamental to ageability. 'With [our] granitic and sandy soils of pH 4.5 and 5, the vine has very low vigour, and low yields, but the must is aromatic and has high acidity, especially malic acid. That's why these wines made with the old clones need to rest for a time for the acidity to integrate and to gain complexity.'

He adds: 'I don't think it's a question of needing time on lees. In fact I shun bâtonnage. Traditionally Albariño had long ageing without racking, something I do myself.'

### Spain's greatest white?

Furthest inland of the Galician DOs is Valdeorras, where Rafael Palacios has focused intently on Godello. I was going to say that he had focused 'simply' on the variety, but there's nothing simple about the way he works.

A vertical tasting at the winery, which went back more or less to the beginning, was one of the greatest experiences of my travels in wine. Surely Spain's greatest white, or one of them, is here. However, it would be a pity, as with so many of these great wines, just to hide them away, or resell for auction. In due time enjoy them. It would be a crime not to.

Palacios settled in Valdeorras, leaving the family winery in Rioja, where he had won recognition for the white wine Plácet. 'From the first moment that I decided to come to Galicia, my desire was to make whites with a capacity to age,' he says.

Remembering the fine new oak in his pristine winery, and the reputation of grand international whites structured around oak, I ask if oak is important to him for building a white for ageing. Definitely not: 'But the oak helps us to stabilise and clarify the wines in a more natural way. It also frees very concentrated wines, such as O Soro, from reduction, or very cold vintages such as 2004, 2010, 2012, 2016... This is the correct way, the use of the oak as a bridge to help the wine, not the market profile,' he adds.

Palacios also has a little Treixadura in his vineyards. Does 100% Treixadura have the same capacity to mature as Godello? 'It is not a matter of variety, it is the ability of each variety to adapt to a geo-climate,' he says.

'There are wonderful examples of Treixadura that evolve very well, such as Viña de Martín Escolma [from Luis Anxo Rodríguez Vázquez in Ribeiro], Emilio Rojo and others.' I'm delighted he references Emilio Rojo, who



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Rafael Palacios (left)



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## Evans' picks: Spanish whites to age

① **Rafael Palacios, As Sortes Godello, Valdeorras, Galicia 2017** 95

£44-£51.50 Handford, Hedonism, Noble Green, NY Wines of Cambridge, The Good Wine Shop, Q Wines

Work by Rafael Palacios since 2004 on his plots or *sortes* – traditionally inherited by growers by lot – has blossomed to a model pyramid of quality. The As Sortes sits in the middle, which could suggest moderation, however it's anything but moderate. This Godello is succulent, intense, exceptionally powerful and very long lived. Hold out for big brother Sorte O Soro if you can find it and afford it, but this is also a super-satisfactory choice. **Drink** 2021-2030  
**Alcohol** 14%

