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Tasting : Unique Spanish Wine for Connoisseurs

Dec 20: Antonio Huertes Garcia, owner of Bodega Ribera de Pelazas in the Province of Salamanca on the western border of Spain in Castilla Y Leon was in Delhi last week with his export Manager Raquel Vela Pato to promote his Arribes DO and other wines and met Subhash Arora who was really enamoured with their unique wines made from the indigenous grapes Bruñal and Juan Garcia

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Photo By:: Adil Arora



It was supposed to be a courtesy call when Raquel Vela Pato had requested a meeting with me since Mr. Antonio Huertes Garcia, his father-in-law and owner of the winery in Salamanca in the region of Castilla Y León was visiting India. Castilla Lyon is the largest region of Spain and one of the largest in European Union. But when I think of wines from this region, I am instantly transported to Ribera del Duero, Toro, Bierzo and Rueda but I had no clue about DO Arribes wines and I had my doubts about their success in the short term.

As an interpreter for Antonio she started to explain the background of the 12 year old winery Bodegas Ribera de Pelazas which produces only premium wines. Antonio already has had another winery producing low-end, volume wines. As she was talking about the grapes in this area, I was all ears when she said that Antonio had taken the advice in 2002 of my good friend, a fellow judge and the well known Spanish

wine expert Isabel Mijares who had told him about the then dying grape variety Bruñal which was then already a miniscule part as the field blend.

Isabel inspired him into to reviving the grape that used to grow only in that region. Today only a handful of farmers and Antonio are growing this grape in the whole world making them unique wines. Bodegas Ribera de Pelazas makes only 3000 bottles from this low-yielding grape with tight bunches and very small berries and costs over €70 a bottle. With a yield of less than 1 ton/hA and grown on vines between 60-100 years old the quantity of grapes available is very limited and expensive. I was impressed to know that the prestigious Wine Report 2007 rated it the second best wine in Spain.

There is another interesting indigenous grape Juan Garcia (it has nothing to do with Antonio Garcia!) which takes the rest of the vine space in the 15 hA of vineyard the Garcias own. *Abadengo Special Selection 2004-* a Reserve wine, a bottle of which they had carried with them, is a blend of 85% of this grape, the balance 15% being the rarer Bruñal. Another interesting wine, it matures in French and Romanian oak barrels for 24 months and then is rested for at least 36 months more in the bottle before being released.

The total production in this winery producing only premium wines, is 100,000 bottles a year out of which only 3000 bottles account for 100% Bruñal and 8000 bottles are Abadengo with Bruñal (15%) and Juan Garcia (85%) blend while the rest are all Juan Garcia varietal and cheaper. Although earlier 40% wines were exported, in recent years there had to be more aggressive marketing overseas resulting in 60% share with a drop in the local and European demand. Europe, USA, UK, Japan and China are the bigger markets though Canada is also importing and shipments will start to Columbia next month.

Bodegas Ribera de Pelazas is located in the small village of Pereña de la Ribera in Salamanca, in the heart of the beautiful Natural Park of Arribes del Duero. With Duero meandering through a length of 160 kms and separating the Douro region in Portugal from this region, the landscape appears to be dotted with cliffs, waterfalls, banks and has a long history, tradition and wine. It has now joined my wish-list for a visit in the near future.

I hope these unique wines from Antonio Garcia would find a place in India for connoisseurs and discerning hotels- they would not be wines for the masses for a long time. Raquel and Antonio are aware of it based on their Chinese experience. Two years ago China imported one container but now they import 10 containers a year, says Raquel who lived there for two years. 'Of course, they buy mostly cheaper wines from our first winery -if they buy a container of low end wines, only one pallet would be of these premium wines.' She stresses however that these are not wines from Castilla Mancha (the wine lake of Spain where one can buy wines even as low as around €1 a bottle. Of late, the quality has improved tremendously though the reputation has not) and that they cannot compete with them because of their better quality.

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Subhash Arora

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