

Olivier Rivière

Rioja and Arlanza from Olivier Rivière in Cardenas.

Profile

Olivier Rivière, a native of Cognac, studied enology in Montagne St-Emilion, worked briefly with Elian Da Ros in Côtes-du-Marmandais, then at Domaine Leroy in Vosne-Romanée. His main interest there was to learn about biodynamic methods. He went on to Domaine de Chassorney in St-Romain to see how unsulfited wines are made, then spent two years managing the now defunct Domaine de la Combe in Pommard.

His dream was to start his own estate in Fitou, but that did not pan out for lack of money, so in 2004 Olivier took a job with an estate in Rioja Alavesa to convert its vines into biodynamic culture. This was not a happy experience, but Olivier decided to stay in Rioja and started looking for vines tended organically, with the goal to buy grapes. He found a grower in the tiny village of Cárdenas, and bought and vinified his grapes. He was able to rent a 1.20HA plot from another person, and had his first harvest in 2006.

His grapes come from three types of soils: the Graciano vines and part of the Tempranillo for the bottling of Rayos Uva grow on alluvial soils, sandy with round stones; the old vines Garnacha (65 to 90 years) that go into Ganko grow on red soil, with marl and sand colored by ferrous oxides, at an altitude of 600 meters in Rioja Alta; the best Tempranillo vines (25 years old) are in Rioja Alavesa, on clay and limestone soils at 650 meters. Altitude is extremely important to Rivière, the cool nights keep acidity in the grapes, so he can make much fresher wines than most in the region.

His red bottlings are Rayos Uva, all Tempranillo aged in vats; Ganko, half and half Garnacha and Tempranillo aged in barrels; and Gabacho that is 50% Tempranillo, 35 Garnacha, and 15 Graciano. Rivière also produces a cuvée of white wine called Jéquitibá from old vines of Viura, made in barrels on lees, and a Rosé of Garnacha and Tempranillo called La Vida en Rosa.

Since vines in Rioja are exorbitantly expensive, Olivier turned to another area to purchase 1HA of old Tempranillo vines at 1000 meters of altitude. These are in the village of Cavarrubias, in the Burgos province, in the AOC Arlanza. The vines are very old, and Rivière thinks he'll be able to make a long-lived, yet fresh wine from them.

Interview

This interview with Olivier Rivière took place at L'Herbe Rouge in February, 2012.

Tell us about the history of estate.

It's a fairly recent endeavor. I started in 2006, and I'm in Rioja. I started with very little land; all of my Rioja wines are produced with purchased fruit that I source from three "subsections" of the

D.O.C: Rioja Alta, Rioja Alavesa and Rioja Baja. Each terroir and variety produces different wines. For example, the *Rayos Uva* is produced with Tempranillo, Graciano and Grenache from Rioja Baja. The whites are from Rioja Alavesa and the reds for the *Ganko* and part of the *Gabacho* are from Rioja Alta.

In 2009, I purchased some very old vines in Arlanza.

As a frenchman, why did you decide to start your estate in Spain?

It's simple. I studied oenology and viticulture in Bordeaux. This led to work in some very nice estates in Bordeaux and Burgundy, and eventually I got an offer to work in Spain. I wanted to live a new experience and see something new, so I left in 2004. I worked at a Spanish estate for two years before deciding to start making my own wine. I believe there is a tremendous potential in Spain, and that all too often the wines aren't worked and made to reach their full potential. I wanted to make wines that highlight the terroir and qualities of a region I believe in.

What do you mean by wines not reaching their full potential?

It's obviously a very personal issue. For me it corresponds to a work ethic where everything is generalized and simplified as much as possible: a lot of American oak, a lot of extraction, mixing grapes from great vines with bad ones... Of course this is not always the case.

What's the work in the vines like?

There are two ways this works. I have the three guys I buy fruit from in Rioja. None of them are certified organic, but they all work very well; every year the vines are cleaner and cleaner. At this point, it's down to one herbicide treatment a year in most parcels, and one of them performs one chemical treatment a year against fungal illness. What you have to understand with Rioja, and in fact all of Spain, is that it's extremely common to buy grapes. There are guys growing organic grapes, but they keep them for themselves!

As far as the vines I own, everything is worked organically and with the inclusion of many biodynamic practices. I'm not going to claim to have converted these vineyards; I'm only continuing what was already happening. Arlanza has always been a very poor region, and people have always been making "organic" wine by default. The price of grapes has always been so so low that investing in modern winemaking technology and chemicals was too expensive. They worked the soil simply because it was the cheapest option.

Can you tell us more about the vines you own?

The vines I purchased are very old, and in great shape. The land is balanced and there is incredible microbiological life in the soil. It's not like I have 40 years of herbicide abuse to worry about. This represents 4 hectares now, and I'm very happy about this. The youngest vines are 50 and the oldest are 110. I'm about to buy some fruit from the area from younger vines; I'll be paying a lot more than is usually asked for, but the guy works organically so I'm fine with it.

What about in the cellar?

It's pretty simple. We work with native yeasts, cold macerations, slow fermentations. Most wines are aged in barrique (the white and *Rayos Uva* is all stainless). Nothing is fined or filtered, except for the stainless steel wines.

Let's talk about "natural wine". Where do you stand?

Everywhere I've ever worked, with the exception of the occasional internship here and there, was organic or biodynamic. I want to continue working in this direction, because to me it's the only way to really express a terroir. "Natural Wine" is something that I have a hard time with. There is no definition of natural wine, and I feel some people are hiding behind this claim.

As far as I'm concerned, no wine is natural. If you leave grape juice in a tank and do nothing, very rarely do you get any wine. If you don't work them, control them and help them out, the grapes aren't going to produce anything but vinegar. Wine is made through human intervention; it is not a byproduct of nature. What I focus on is working organically and biodynamically, to have the cleanest, purest grapes and to know how to transform these into a quality wine.

I guess people would classify me as a natural winemaker. What annoys me is that many of the vigneronos who are the most adamant and outspoken about making natural wines are using this term as an excuse to sell flawed, bad wine. "This is natural, so it's good." That's just unfortunate. I'd rather accentuate "wines of terroir", "vigneronos wines" and "good wine" than "natural wine", "technological wine", "modern wine", etc...

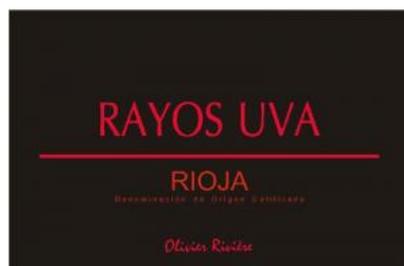
Wines



D.O.C Rioja "Gabacho"



D.O.C Rioja "Ganko El Cabezota"



D.O.C Rioja "Rayos Uva"



D.O.C Rioja "Rochère"



D.O.C Rioja "Rochère Selecto"