

WINES OF THE TIMES

Albariño Finds Its Inner Beauty

By Eric Asimov

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Among the first wave of new grapes that came to define today's era of diversity in wine was albariño, from the Rías Baixas region of Galicia in northwestern Spain.

The wines were a novelty when they began showing up in Spanish restaurants in the United States in the early 1990s. The occasional mentions of them through the decade required pronunciation guides: al-bar-EEN-yo and REE-yas BUY-shas. In 1995, Frank J. Prial, then The New York Times's wine columnist, cautioned, "Albariño is not an easy wine to find in this country."

In short time, though, it caught on, and helped pave the way for other then-unknown white wines to be welcomed onto the country's wine list, like grüner veltliner of Austria, fiano d'Avellino of Campania and assyrtiko of Santorini, as well as other Spanish whites like godello.

While albariño has proved consistently popular since then, it has rarely received much respect from those looking beyond crisp, cheerful (and preferably inexpensive) whites.

Except for one or two small labels, many of the wines seemed generally to be inoffensive, made by producers who had taken the temperature of what the audience wanted and given them no more than that.

As with New Zealand sauvignon blanc, which arrived slightly earlier than albariño and became even more popular, the producers could aim low because it was a cash cow, successful in the marketplace but rarely interesting to those who paid careful attention to what they were drinking.

Recently, however, several excellent bottles made me wonder whether it was time to take another look at albariños.

The wine panel recently tasted 20 bottles of albariño from Rías Baixas. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by two guests, Caitlin O'Brien, wine manager at Toro NYC in Chelsea, and Gabriela Davogusto, wine director at Clay in Harlem.

The wines largely came from the 2017 vintage, with a few from 2016 and one each from 2018 and 2015. Some, as expected, were dry, aromatic and pleasant, while others were grasping for something deeper. These wines seemed to be more textured, with great minerality and intensity. They demanded exploration.

“They are discovering who they are,” Gabriela said. “After entering the international market, they are now trying to go back and discover an identity: ‘How do the wines reflect who we are?’”

It's a fascinating question, one that could be asked of many wines from historic grape-growing regions which arrived on the international market in the last 20 years or so.

Some of these wines have traveled a parallel journey in which commercial success is followed by introspection. Commerce is crucial to sustaining a business. But wine also is an expression of culture, especially in places that have a long association with a particular grape.

These questions of identity reflect a divide in wine in which some producers measure themselves solely by what's in the glass and whether a sufficient number of customers want it. The others are likewise concerned with the aromas and flavors of the wine, but also with what the wine says about the culture and place that produced it.



Albariños have cachet in the wine-by-the-glass world. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

That's not to say that these producers are reaching back to an earlier era and presenting a preglobalization interpretation of albariño. But perhaps, rather than producing the clean, correct, possibly soulless wines possible today because of modern tools, they are returning to techniques that would not be alien to preindustrial winemakers, in an effort to make the best possible 21st-century wines.

By that I mean painstaking, labor-intensive viticulture in the best sites for albariño. Aiming for quality rather than quantity, they use methods that might have been recognizable to farmers before the mid-20th century, when “conventional agriculture” came to mean chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and routine mechanization.

Those more industrial wines were in our tasting as well. They often had tropical fruit flavors, aromatic yet, in some cases, slightly candied. Others were thin and tart. These wines did not make our top 10 list.

Our favorites showed strong mineral flavors, tangy citrus notes and lively acidity. These are wines that demand to be served with fresh seafood, the sort that would go with a zippy citrus spritz. I came to think of some of them as the citrus addition to a dish like ceviche.

Some bottles had the sort of richer textures that were evidence of barrel aging and the presence of lees, the sediment of yeast after fermentation is completed. If properly managed, the lees can add an antioxidant component to the wines, as well as a creamy texture.

Our favorite was the 2015 Do Ferreiro Cepas Vellas, which was taut, complex and deep. Cepas Vellas is a Galician term for old vines. This has been a longtime favorite of mine, and in many ways has been a standard-bearer for how good albariño can be.

Even though it was the oldest wine in the tasting, it's a bottle that typically requires aging before it begins to open up. It has years to go.

The rare Cepas Vellas costs around \$50; its less expensive Do Feirreiro sibling, about half the price, is still very good, though it was not in our tasting.

Even at \$50, the Cepas Vellas was not our most expensive bottle. That was the \$80 2017 Sketch from Raúl Pérez, a superstar winemaker in Spain who has pushed the quality limits in any number of regions.

Sketch was one of the richer albariños in the tasting, with aromas and flavors of Meyer lemons and flowers. It skirted awfully close to over-extravagance, but kept its balance nicely. Still, for \$80 you are buying scarcity, the Pérez name and, no doubt, his meticulous methods.

Nos. 2 through 4 on our list were more typically priced, around \$25 a bottle. You could probably find more than a few albariños under \$15, but I would be surprised if any were as good.

No. 2 was the 2017 Envidiacochina Tête de Cuvée from Adega Familiar Eladio Piñeiro, made from biodynamically grown grapes. It was substantial yet energetic, with citrus, floral and mineral flavors. The 2017 Aquitania from Bodegas Aquitania, textured and resonant, with citrus and savory saline flavors, ranked at No. 3.

Our fourth wine was the 2017 Albariño de Fefiñanes from Bodegas Palacio de Fefiñanes, a historic producer in Galicia, which dates its association with wine back to the 17th century. This wine was rich, textured and deeply mineral, with citrus, herbal and floral aromas and flavors as well.

No. 6 was the fresh, briny and textured 2017 from Alberto Nanclares, one of my favorite new discoveries. It was another bottle of this wine, which I tried a few months ago, that prompted my new interest in albariños. The 2018 Igrexario de Saiar from Benito Santos — tense and fresh, with saline and citrus flavors — came in at No. 7. It was also our best value at \$18.

Albariños are made in the Rías Baixas region of Galicia in northwestern Spain.
Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Other bottles highly deserving of your attention include the bright, tightly coiled 2017 Forjas del Salnes from Leirana; the rich, mineral- and lime-flavored 2017 from Bodegas La Caña; and the tangy 2017 Val do Salnes from Zarate.

As good as our favorite wines were, it has to be said that many less interesting bottles are out there, the kind that, as Caitlin said, have made albariño “a bit of a brand name” in the wine-by-the-glass world.

Yet the good ones suggest albariño from Rías Baixas has a tremendous amount of untapped potential. As more producers start to focus on quality, and aim to express the particular characteristics of the local terroirs, I would expect more excellent wines to start to appear pretty soon.

Minerally, With Citrus Flavors

★★★½ **Do Ferreiro Rías Baixas Albariño Cepas Vellas 2015 \$50**

Taut, tense, complex and deep, with great mineral flavors. Clearly benefited from extra aging. (De Maison Selections, Chapel Hill, N.C.)

★★★ **Adega Familiar Eladio Piñeiro Rías Baixas Albariño Envidiacochina Tête de Cuvée 2017 \$24**

Rich and substantial, yet tense and linear, with citrus, floral and mineral flavors. (Think Global Wines, Santa Barbara, Calif.)

★★★ **Bodegas Aquitania Rías Baixas Albariño Aquitania 2017 \$24**

Tangy, textured, resonant and deep, with citrus and saline flavors. (Regal Wine Imports, Moorestown, N.J.)

★★★ **Bodegas Palacio de Fefiñanes Rías Baixas Albariño de Fefiñanes 2017 \$25**

Rich, textured and deeply mineral, with citrus, herbal and floral aromas and flavors. (Classic Wines, Stamford, Conn.)

★★½ **Raúl Pérez Sketch Albariño 2017 \$80**

Deep and rich, with flavors of Meyer lemons and flowers. It's on the edge of overripeness, but never strays over the line. (Skurnik Wines, New York)

★★½ **Alberto Nanclares Rías Baixas Albariño 2017 \$34**

Fresh, briny and textured, with citrus, herb and mineral flavors. (José Pastor Selections/Llaurador Wines, Fairfax, Calif.)

Best Value

★★½ **Benito Santos Rías Baixas Albariño Igrexario de Saiar 2018 \$18**

Tense and fresh, with aromas of flowers and saline and citrus flavors. (David Bowler Wine, New York)

★★½ **Leirana Rías Baixas Albariño Forjas del Salnes 2017 \$30**

Bright yet tightly coiled, with steely acidity; aromas and flavors of flowers and citrus. (Olé Imports, New Rochelle, N.Y.)

★★½ **Bodegas La Caña Rías Baixas Albariño 2017 \$20**

Richly textured and deep, with lingering lime and mineral flavors. (Jorge Ordóñez Selections/Fine Estates From Spain, Dedham, Mass.)

★★½ **Zarate Rías Baixas Albariño Val do Salnes 2017 \$22**

Tangy, lively and lush with citrus and peach flavors. (The Rare Wine Company, Brisbane, Calif.)

Pairings: **Fettuccine With Lobster and Zucchini**

Though the briny notes that I frequently associate with albariños from Galicia, Spain, were less evident in the bottles we tasted, many of the wines compensated with tart citric notes and bright refreshment to spare. This pasta dish, with fresh zucchini, tomatoes, herbs and lobster, is a fine match, and feta cheese adds a bit of complementary brinness against the wine. The pasta is quickly made, with the lobster added off-heat at the end to guard against overcooking; the lobster meat is warmed just enough as it is gently tossed to acquaint all the ingredients with one another. If you are entertaining but do not prefer last-minute preparations, as this dish demands, don't hesitate to prepare it an hour in advance and serve it at room temperature, glossed with an extra glug or two of good olive oil as a final flourish.

FLORENCE FABRICANT

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Correction: July 6, 2019

An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of a winemaker. He is Alberto