

Ep 177: Native white grapes of Spain (Part 1)



Janina Doyle 00:00:07 Welcome to Eat Sleep Wine Repeat, a podcast for all you wine lovers, who, if you're like me, just cannot get enough of the good stuff. I'm Janina Doyle, your host, Brand Ambassador, Wine Educator, and Sommelier. So, stick with me as we dive deeper into this ever evolving, wonderful world of wine. And wherever you are listening to this, cheers to you!

Hello wine lovers and welcome back to another episode which has been inspired by one of my regular listeners. So, shout out, hello Mark Drendel. Thank you for today's suggestion. So, after the release of episode 170 on Cava and Priorat, Mark asked me for an episode on the white grape varieties of Spain.

And so, it was already on my radar and then the universe led me into W.H. Smiths. I bought myself the February edition of Decanter magazine and it turned out that their spotlight that month was on Spain and they'd done this whole blind tasting section on Spanish indigenous whites. So, I went through some of the highest scored whites. I picked out what I felt were ones that would be really interesting to taste and now I'm going to go through them on this episode.

Janina Doyle 00:01:30 It seems there is this real re-emergence of just amazing wines being made from different native grape varieties and considering Spain is often thought of as the red wine producer, you know, namely wines of Rioja or Ribera del Duero, it's so exciting now that more and more interesting wines are popping up from unknown varietals or unexpected white grapes. And it also seems that there's loads of experimentation going on when it comes to white winemaking.

So, this is a country that I think we all should be exploring and with nearly a hundred native grapes at the last count I believe, although of course that includes the reds too, we all have some work to do. So, this episode would never end if I started going through them all.

So, I'm not going to touch on the more well-known grapes of Albariño, Godello, Verdejo, Viura or Garnacha Blanca in this episode. In fact, Albariño got its focus on episode 148, if you want to go back. And Viura being the main white of Rioja gets a little bit of a focus in episode 163.

So, instead, we are going to take a little deeper look into the native grapes of Xarel·lo, Airén, Treixadura, Albillo Real, Hondarrabi Zuri, and Vijariego Blanco. Don't forget there is a transcript, thank goodness. So you can just go to my show notes for the link or visit

<https://eatsleepwinerepeat.co.uk/podcasts/> to download.

If you are getting value out of these episodes, please do support all of my drinking efforts by leaving a quick review on the podcast app you're listening to or sharing the podcast across your socials or with your wine loving friends. I hope you enjoy today's journey around Spain. Pour yourself that glass of Spanish wine and let's go.

Janina Doyle 00:03:45 So, I'm going to start with Xarel·lo, a Catalan variety. This is the grape that I was getting very passionate about a few episodes ago, so number 170, when we were talking about Cava.

So, Xarel·lo, it's the backbone of Cava. It is one of the main components alongside Parellada and Macabeo. Macabeo also being another name for Viura. But it is doing super things as a 100% varietal. Now, many of you will already remember me talking about this grape variety, which is recognized for having this really high acidity and has these unique flavours of lemon with nutty spices. So think ginger spice, but there's savoury vibes going on and maybe even a little green herbs.

Now, sometimes people can describe it unfairly as rubber and even a kind of cabbage. Do not let that put you off because this is a wine that has really good structure, has a real ability to age and it's just more about the texture than the aromatics and it is just so good. It is also very high in phenolic content. So, what that means, health lovers, is that this grape is actually high in resveratrol and therefore antioxidants making it one of the healthiest white grapes out there.

Janina Doyle 00:05:15 Now you're most likely going to find a bottle of Xarel·lo from Penedes which makes sense because this is where most of the Cava is made. However there are three sub-zones of Penedes. There's Baix Penedes which is the lowest. So, the warmest region so you're going to get fuller bodied examples. You've got central Penedes and that is actually the heartland of Cava production, so loads of Xarel·lo will be found here. That's about 450 to 500 metres above sea level. And then you've got the Alt Penedes, which goes up to about 800 metres, meaning you're gonna find more delicate examples.

However, if you go about 15 minutes out of Barcelona to a DO called Alella, a very small DO. This is about 1.5 kilometres from the coastline. It's also got slightly different sandier soils, more acidic soils and you find more saline examples and there they call the Xarel·lo Pansa Blanca.

So, put this on your list and keep an eye out for it. So, the wine that I have received 93 points during the Decanter tasting. It is the Xarel·lo Vinya del Noguera Alt. Thank God for the transcript, everyone. It is a 2021 vintage and it's from Vins Pepe Raventós. You can get this wine, if you're interested, for around £32 - £34 from Hedonism and Shrine to the Vine.

Now when I say the name Raventós, many of you may think this sounds familiar and you would not be wrong. Raventós I Blanc go back as wine growers since 1497. So, 21 generations later, they are still farming the same land in Sant Sadurn d'Anoia. So, this is the heart of Cava land. Now their family has been part of the Codorníu Empire. However, they wanted to step away to produce something that was entirely focused on quality and that is where the Raventós I Blanc winery was born.

Now it's Pepe Raventós who's running things now and he believes that Xarel·lo is king. And so Vins Pepe Raventós, the winery is his side project where he's making micro-vinifications with indigenous old vines.

Janina Doyle 00:07:45 So, these Xarel·lo vines were planted in 1970. I know that they've been aged on the skins and also had time in ceramic amphora. So, let's taste the first wine. Okay. So, on the nose, there is this real like an egg custard tart and you get these bruised red apples and, gosh, even some stewed rhubarb.

So, there's this real herbaceous earthy edge, as there should be, to this wine. And it smells fleshy even. I love it. I love how this doesn't taste on the palate like just any other wines I've tried. It's unique. So, when you're looking for something different this is a perfect one to try.

Okay, this is so good. It's medium bodied and it's beeswaxy. So, it has this distinct kind of flinty, smoky, slightly rubbery finish, everyone. There you go. There's the rubber and it's good. It's got baked apple, cinnamon, and a sweet spice vibe.

Honestly, anyone who loves being in the country, fireplace on, eating apple crumble, is just going to feel the vibes of this wine. It has a lovely acid structure. The length is really, really long. Honestly, I'm very excited about this wine. You should try it.

Janina Doyle 00:09:35 So, now we are going to look at Airén. So, this is Spain's most widely planted grape and it is typically thought of as the workhorse grape variety. It's very heat resistant. It's also used a lot in Spanish brandy because, well, according to the textbooks, this is a variety of high acid and just neutral flavour. It doesn't really sound like anything that we would care to try.

However, those that seem to give this variety a little bit more attention describe the grape to have this delicate citrus lemon lime flavours, freshness, crispness with some undertones of floral notes too.

So, let me introduce you to the next wine that got 92 points with Decanter. So, this is by Bodegas Garcia De Lara. The wine is called Finca Villalobillos Pie Franco Airén, the grape, 2019. So, if you like the sound of this, this is £17.95 from Drinksmith.

Now, Pie Franco is the Spanish term that translates to un-grafted in English. So, this is a family winery that goes back to 1878. However, it was the granddad that planted these Airén vines back in 1935 on the family farm called Villalobillos in a place called Corral de Almaguer in Toledo. Now Toledo, an awesome place to go and visit, is about one hour southwest of Madrid. So, this wine, not one of the big D.Os. It's known as Vino de la Tierra De Castilla.

Now, although the vineyards go way back, as does the history of this winery, it's the latest generation who are trying to bring back the winery to the modern day and they're trying to be true to its history, identity, and the character of each vine.

And seeing as Airén does not get a very good rap, but this wine did so well on Decanter, I was super keen to try this wine and talk about this one because quite clearly it doesn't taste of nothing. So, let's give this one a go.

Oh, my gosh! Honestly, okay, everybody, just pause. Actually, I'm going to pause and I'm going to come back to this recording. Hang on. Okay, I am back and I want to tell you that this wine has its own personality.

Janina Doyle 00:12:10 So, it's musky and floral. Happy that it's got that floral vibe, but it's also a little woody. Mildly woody. It has this scent of kind of some lilies and then a little bit of lemon sherbet. So, it's actually like smelling a perfume, like a good one, I might add. And then, there's this black currant note. I don't know if that is just me, but it's divine.

Right, well, okay. On the palate, I'm getting that black currant again, but also like Parma Violets. Then there's this chalky edge. Okay, I'm so confused because I have never tasted it. I just haven't tasted Airén. Why would I? It's the workhorse grape. But this is medium bodied. It's soft. It's delicate. It's a little bit spicy, but then there's this fruit zing on the finish and it just continues on the mouth.

I would absolutely encourage all of you to give this wine a try. Honestly, this is so fun to be able to just challenge the narrative. And anyone who's a wine lover is going to want to explore something like this. And I think this just goes to show what old vines can do when they concentrate flavours. Okay, if you try this wine let me know. I want to hear your thoughts on this. This was magical.

Janina Doyle 00:13:35 So, to my next wine. I have got in front of me from Adegas Pazo do Mar the Torre do Olivar Treixadura 2021. So Treixadura is the grape variety. It is £14.99 from Strictly Wines and in the Decanter tasting, they gave this 93 points.

So, Treixadura, it's a white grape variety from Ribeiro which, fun fact, is Galicia's oldest designation of origin. So, we are now in the north west of Spain in Galicia and you can find this grape in all of the wine regions of Galicia. In fact it's the second most planted grape variety of Galicia after, as many of you may be able to guess, the more famous Albariño. But you could also find this grape in Portugal where it's called Trajadura.

Now, Ribeiro, so you can locate it in your mind, is east of the more famous Rías Baixas and it is inland. So, it's warmer and it's less rainy. It's also west of Ribeira Sacra. Now, it's quite an aromatic grape variety, Treixadura, but you don't often get to taste it on its own because it's very often blended with other native varieties.

So, you'll find in Ribeiro Torrontés, Godello, Loureiro and of course Albariño. By the way, Torrontés does not share any relation to the Torrontés in Argentina. So, this is its own grape variety in its own right.

Now back to the Treixadura, along with being aromatic, it's fruity and it's floral. Think kind of citrus and white flowers. And it can add body to a blend so it can give you this creaminess. Now the Pazo do Mar group, they're a family business, they go back about 40 years and they have Pazo do Mar in Ribeiro, Veiga da Princesa in Rias Baixas and Pazo das Tapias in Monterrei. So, they're spread all across Galicia working with just the native varieties of this area. So, perhaps a good winery to go and investigate.

Janina Doyle 00:15:54 Now, so in comparison to the other two, this is much fruitier. This is going towards mango on the nose, yellow fruits. Do you know what? It smells the colour golden. This is a golden wine, so it's riper. It's sunkissed. It has a creaminess to it. It's really nice actually looking at what the grape variety should offer and then tasting each individual wine and seeing if I can pick out those notes.

So, it's interesting that it smells creamy. So, the palate, it's textural, it's full bodied, it's unctuous actually, but still very fresh. Now there's some grapefruit in there to keep it vibrant, especially with the acidity. There's this nice citrus zing, but this is a really, like a really giving wine. It's yummy. It's fun. It's generous. And you know what? The palate is long and fleshy. Yum.

Janina Doyle 00:17:00 How many of you have heard of Albillo Real? So, this is the next grape. So the wine I've got in front of me is a wine from Las Pedreras and it's called Linarejos Vino Blanco de Assemblage 2022. So, this is about £37 from Salisbury Wine Store.

So, the grapes come from a 100 year old vineyard planted to the white grape Albillo Real. So, Albillo Real is the Gredos variety of Albillo, but is different from Albillo Mayor in Ribera del Duero. However, Albillo Mayor is a white you should definitely go and investigate.

So, Tim Atkin was recently on the podcast praising this variety when talking about the wines of the Ribera del Duero region. So, if you want to get to know this variety better, go back to episode 164. But this moment we are talking about Albillo Real. Well, actually kind of both because they both hail from the provinces of Madrid and Castilla-Leon. But it seems now, whilst Albillo Mayor is finding a very happy home in Ribera del Duero, Albillo Real seems to be doing some exciting things in Sierra de Gredos, which is west of Madrid.

It's a really exciting region, yet sadly does not have a DO and gosh, there's a lot of talk about why it doesn't have a DO. I'll leave you to investigate that yourself. But it's the granitic and slate terroirs of the Gredos Mountains are just perfect for producing either the Pinot Noir like Grenache, so beautifully elegant. And now also the very fresh and complex Albillo Real.

So, this is a place of real experimentation. It has quite a bit of a natural scene going on. The grapes for this wine come from Cebreros, which is one of the exciting wine regions within the Sierra de Gredos. And you should look out for that on a label. That is a DO.

Now I've looked up this wine. It has spent three days of skin contact. It has been fermented in used 225 litre barrels. Now, interestingly enough, they have said that because Albillo Real can be quite opulent and rich to give it a more drier, energetic and longer finish, they have added, wait for it, a touch of Manzanilla. So, let's see how this tastes.

Gosh, it's so deep and golden in the glass. Wow! Okay. This tasting is the most genuinely interesting tasting of whites I have done possibly ever. This is another nose that just feels alien to me from what I'm normally sniffing.

Janina Doyle 00:20:12 Okay, I can smell that it's more on the natural side because it's had oxygen. That's what it smells like, but it's not funky. Nor is it like apple cider or all mousy, I might add. It's got this bruised apple apricot jam, but it's got these cloves. So, it's savoury and spicy, but then spices I might often pick up on a red wine.

I mean, it almost feels exotic with its ripeness, but then it's kind of wrapped up by this wild muskiness and like this slightly dried tangerine peel. Gosh, all right. Wow, okay, liquid gold. Boom. It's smooth, but it's light.

With the skin contact, this is nudging towards an orange wine, but it's kind of not. Well, okay, not in the sense of dry tannins, but in the sense of flavours on the palate. So, I'm getting orange and then tangerine peel, ginger, and then almost this almond paste, a little bit of brioche.

Gosh, okay, I understand why this wine, by the way, was the number one. This was the winner with Decanter. It earned 96 points. But I'm so shocked by how complex and layered and different it is. I

almost feel like this wine should be savoured entirely on its own to discover its nuances patiently. Just nothing. No food. However, okay. I'm thinking because of how it's made, what food would you pair with this because there is something different about this wine. You need to really process it.

I think something like maybe a grilled halibut where you've got citrus salsa or if you went with like a Moroccan tagine or like this kind of apricot glazed chicken, you need to think of something that's like mixing sweet and savoury and then also like a little bit smoked. You've got to think this wine is more than three-dimensional so you've got to find a dish that also has that with its flavours and textures. Okay. This is another one that for anyone really wanting to try something different, get a bottle, email me, let me know what you think.

Janina Doyle 00:22:31 I am having so much fun doing this tasting. So, right now we are going to the Basque Country. So, what I have in front of me is the Txakolina 2023 from Hiruzta. This is £18 from Strictly Wines and Wine Republic. And this was just one point less than the last wine. So, 95 points with Decanter.

So, this local wine is called Txakolina or Txakoli. And it is one of the funnest wines to pour. There is so much drama with this wine. So, what you're supposed to do is that you pour it from great heights so that it splashes down into your glass and just get some oxygen on the way down. And even more traditionally in the area, you might find this wine is poured from a porron.

It looks a bit like a watering can so you just need to google it so you know what I mean. And it is totally a summer wine. So, think bright, tangy and then just a tad bit bubbly. It's an effervescence so you can't consider it a sparkling wine.

It's mainly made from the local grapes called Hondarrabi Zuri. Zuri means white in Basque. And Hondarrabi Beltza. Beltza means black in Basque. But depending on who's making it, they might throw in a little bit of some other grapes but typically it's these two.

Now it can be made as a rosé sometimes but most often it's a white and very occasionally you could find a red example. Now this is awesome for summer because so many of the Txakoli wines you are going to find, they are light, they are low in alcohol, so they're going to be around 10-11%. And then, they often have this saline and mineral vibe. It just makes you think about the sea. And as I already mentioned, this little bit of effervescence.

Janina Doyle 00:24:35 And because this is a coastal wine that's much cooler climate and it's just damper in the Basque Country than the rest of inland Spain or further down south, the grapes can really give you this tartyness and this tanginess.

Now, if you're wanting to explore or to, in fact, go and visit, there are three regions in the Basque Country that make Txakolí. So, there's Getariako, Bizkaiko, and Álava but the one that you're going to see the most is Getariako Txakolina or Txakoli from Getaria. So, it depends on how they want to say it, which makes the most of this wine being the most historic of the DOs but it's worth keeping in mind that the description I've given for Txakoli is probably the fairest description for this specific DO.

However, if you tried a Bizkaiko Txakolina or Txakoli de Bizkaia, they're in fact trying to challenge the tradition. They're looking at longer lees ageing. They're looking at wood influence. So, don't expect the effervescence with some of these wines and then the smallest DO of them all is Arabako

Txakolina or Txakoli de Alava and this is the youngest and it's also the smallest. Only a few wineries are here and they're the most inland of all, so least sea influence, possibly the least saline. It's a slightly more continental dry climate so richer styles are going to come out of here.

Janina Doyle 00:26:10 So keep that in mind that although I've described the typical Txakolina or Txakoli, there are still differences to the wine. So, this one in front of me is from the most well-known DO Getariako Txakolina and is using the Hondarrabi Zuri grape.

So, oh my god, as I said, so much fun to pour, although I am not pouring from a height because I am in front of the laptop and it'll ruin everything. But anyway, I will be doing it later. So of course, in the glass completely is this absolute layer of froth, this effervescence. So, this is that little touch of CO2 that gives you the crisp, zippiness. Again, this is such a different wine.

Smelling this compared to everything else I've tried so far, this is the greenest of them all. It's not the most intense nose. You get green apples, fresh white blossoms. It's just really clean. What I love about Txakoli is that it's just dry-dry. It's crisp. It's cleansing. This tastes like mineral, lemon salt. Even oyster shells. It feels like I'm drinking something by the sea. And then it has this nice melon edge and it's like a steely, cool finish.

This is a very cool wine. Oh God, it's really gorgeous. And it just has that real fresh seaside vibe. And who doesn't want a wine which you can pour from extravagant heights?

Janina Doyle 00:27:50 So sad, this is the last wine I'm going to try on this episode and this is an aromatic variety that is found in the Canary Islands, very often on the DO El Hierro and then Tenerife. So, I'm talking about the grape variety Vijariego Blanco.

Now the Canary Islands is this amazing place to visit if you want to find new and obscure grape varieties to explore. And this is one of the few places, Chile being the other one and Cyprus also, I believe, there's never ever suffered from phylloxera, so that evil louse that feeds on the roots of vines.

And so, you can enjoy so many different wines from old, ungrafted vines of unique and ancient grape varieties when you start exploring the Canary Islands. Now I recorded an episode. It was an amazing one with wine educator Jimmy Smith, all about the wines of Tenerife so if you've missed that one go back to episode 124.

But for now, let's talk about this variety, Vijariego Blanco. It has great acid structure. Lots of the synonyms are similar for this wine so you might see Vijiriego, or Verijadiego but then there's also Diego and Bujariego. But this specific wine in front of me, this is the 2022 Vijariego Blanco from Viñátigo. You can get it for about £28 from Hick Wine Merchants and also Strictly Wines.

Viñátigo. Wow. Okay. This is led by the super passionate and groundbreaking Juan Jesús Méndez Siverio, or maybe it's easier to say and remember Dr. Grape. And the reason for his easier title is that since the mid 90s, he's been super focused to bring back these old school grape varieties from Tenerife.

So, he's teamed up with a bunch of universities and research places. And so far has found over 80 grape varieties. A bunch of these forgotten grape varieties are now growing at Viñátigo and they're

making wines like this, Vijariego Blanco. But if you were to go through their portfolio, you'd also be able to taste indigenous whites like Gual, Listan Blanco, and Marmajuelo.

Janina Doyle 00:30:20 Now, the uniqueness of these wines are also enhanced by the volcanic soils of the island which give this really strong mineral character. So, I am very excited to try this one. Wow, I'm just so happy that I picked this wine. Another completely different wine.

Yes, Spain! You are freaking rocking it with your whites. There is so much versatility. I'm excited and I'm also so happy right now that after recording this I can take my time with all of these wines properly.

So, this nose is toasty but actually even more smoky. It's smouldering. Think campfire-esque. However, maybe I'm not selling it because it's actually sweeter than that. It's got this buttery and then slightly burnt toast. But oh, God, it's so inviting. And then alongside the smoke and maybe this incense stick vibes is like an apricot.

I mean, let's taste the palate. So, it's full bodied, rounded, and it's got this beautiful mouth coating. There is much more fruit on the palate than there was on the nose. Super peachy. And then there's this touch of dried thyme.

I mean the texture on my tongue, this is a silky wine. It's quite pretty. And actually, there's only the tiniest suggestion of that ashiness on the palate. So, nose is so inviting, but the palate is rounded, silky, and fruity. This got 90 points from Decanter, but actually, you know what? I would give it more. I'm going to give it at least 92.

Janina Doyle 00:32:15 Okay, that was so fun. I hope that's got you guys excited and energised to go out and explore and try more white varieties from Spain. If you want me to do part two, let me know because I just realised there's so many more that we could touch on.

But for now, I hope that you are able to go out and maybe source some of those wines that I've just tried so you can give them a go as well. I know that not all of them are that cheap. Also, remember my incredible sponsor, [Wickhams Wine](#), their link is in the show notes. If you use my code "EATSLEEP10," you'll get 10% off your first order. So, have a look and see what they have on their site.

Now to finish off a wine quote, as always. And this is from Miguel de Cervantes, who is the author of Don Quixote, and he once famously said:

"He who drinks water, I've been told, has turned into a beast. So drink wine and you'll become divine."

I can definitely get on board with that one. Now next week, wine friends, I am talking with Marc Hochar of Chateau Musar, the iconic cult wine of the Middle East. So, we are going to Lebanon, where you will learn more about this region, about the unconventional grape varieties that they use in their blends, the incredible ageing potential of these wines, and the resilience.

This is a winery through civil unrest and war has maintained its commitment to winemaking and their whole story is incredible. So, may you also have an incredible week, be happy, drink well, and may I see you all back here next Monday. Until then, wine friends, cheers to you!