

# Ep 184 - Roots of Heritage: Exploring Jumilla's Monastrell Old Vines



**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 friends, and welcome back to another episode. So, several weeks ago I returned from what was actually a really eye-opening wine field trip with the Old Vine Conference. Now this is the second time I've been lucky enough to geek out and just get to know vine soil and the intrinsic link between wines and humanity in a much deeper profound way.

So, if you missed that first episode I did on old vines go back, it's episode 144 and that's where I'm talking about why old vines are so special. Their deeper root systems, their genetic adaptations and how they can really help us in the future. So, check that one out first if you missed it.

But whereas that trip, the first one was all about me absorbing the mystical energy from 200 year old Aglianico vines in the regions of Taurasi, which is in Campania. This last trip took me to a much lesser known region in Spain called Jumilla. Now do check out the transcript for spellings. Many people may call this Jumilla because it's spelt with a 'J' but Jumilla is its name and it's certainly not one of the most well known regions in Spain.

You can find this PDO, so Protected Designation of Origin, in the southeast of the country, crossing over two provinces which I only just realised on my trip. So, 40% of the vines are planted in the northern part of Murcia. And then, the remaining 60% can be found in the southeastern part of Albacete.

Now many of you may have spent a summer holiday or two along the Mediterranean coast having flown into either Murcia or Alicante. And had you wanted to go and visit the Jumilla region from either airport. It's a little over an hour and 15 minutes from either of them going inland.

**Janina Doyle 00:02:25** So, in this episode, I hope to inspire you to go off and seek some of this wine, or in fact, look to visit next time you're booking your 'Murcian' vacation. I'll of course be talking about the powerful old bush vines, and I will let you know about my personal learnings from this trip.

So, ideally, grab yourself a bottle of Monastrell Wine. If you are in the UK, going across to my sponsor's website, [wickhamwine.co.uk](http://wickhamwine.co.uk), they do have a bottle of organic Monastrell from Paco Mulera. But note, this is not old vine Monastrell, which is what I will be talking about throughout the episode. But remember, if it's your first time there, use the code "EATSLEEP10" for 10% off your order. Right? Pour yourself that glass of wine and enjoy the episode.

**Janina Doyle 00:03:38** So firstly, I want to start with what I thought I knew about Jumilla. You can also maybe do the same and compare. And then I'm going to tell you what I now know. So, in my head, hot, arid, Mediterranean-like climate. It's just about Monastrell grapes. Pretty much all of those wines are just red, bold, powerful wines. They're very nice. They're juicy. And then that's about it. I don't have much more. Or at least I didn't have much more to add to that before this trip.

So, let me correct many of these things. Firstly, this is actually one of the oldest appellations in Spain, so I'm really happy to be shedding some more light on it. The region is close to the Mediterranean, so we're talking about 100 km or so, but it's actually quite a continental climate. But it is still semi-arid, seeing as there's so little rain. Which, of course, when I was there, it rained. It's like a classic Brit thing. Wherever we go, we bring that magical rain.

Actually, they were so insanely grateful for it falling down. We, not so much. Anyway, to give you an idea of that annual rain, it's only about 300 millimetres a year. Now, if you compare that to Rias Baixas in the north west of Spain, they get about 1,700 millimetres of rain a year. However, that's extreme. If you take Rioja, it's 400 to 600 millimetres of rain.

So along with being super dry, it can be about 40° Celsius during the summer at certain times, which is exactly what I had in my head. But what I didn't realise is that it can get to -10° Celsius in the winter. So, note to everyone, and note to yourself, do not go visiting Jumilla during the winter months.

Now, I always talk about Provence and the south of France getting 3,000 hours of sunshine a year, but this is the same for Jumilla. So, don't forget your sunscreen. There's a lot of wind as well, which I certainly experienced myself, but the amazing thing is that it's really great for healthy vines.

And so, fun fact. 70% of the vines are certified as organic. Which, as I mentioned, that wine with Wickhams wines earlier on is organic. It's actually easy to find in this region. So, I guess in my head, I always assumed also that Jumilla was quite flat. Totally wrong.

So, the landscape. It goes from around 400 metres above sea level to around 1000 when we're talking altitude. So you can imagine how this allows for quite a lot of diversity with flavours, the intensity, the body that you can get with the Monastrell that you are tasting.

And there's loads of mountains and valleys. This is part of the prebaetic system. So, when you get there, you feel like you are stepping into a scene from the wild, wild west. So, to imagine, you have these kinds of open plains, now they stretch out under what seems to be this endless sky.

Now the terrain is dry and rugged, you've got your vines, you've got your olive trees, your almond trees. But whereas you have this real openness of land, as I said, you then have these rather dramatic silhouettes of the mountain ranges all around you. So, Santa Ana being one of the mountains for pilgrimages, the Peña Rubia, I mean this is a place you can really go hiking or mountain biking but it's that contrast. The contrast of the flat plains with those humbling mountains and it's just a place of contemplation, which brings me on to talking about these vines.

**Janina Doyle 00:07:39** So, nearly 80% of all vines in Jumilla are going to be Monastrell. So, this is the grape that can handle hot, arid conditions and 75% of Jumilla's vines are goblet pruned. So, bush vines and unirrigated.

Now as I already mentioned there's just something so expansive, it's very thought-provoking when you're there and very grounding when you stand in a vineyard that is all bush vines, so everything is low to the earth, they are planted in these straight rows, but planted so far apart so each vine can have space for its roots to dig deep to find what it needs to survive in this really pretty inhospitable place.

So, the vineyard just feels like it goes on forever. And then, even better, when you are in this vineyard of old vines, with their thick, gnarled trunks and their twisted limbs, you feel that story of resilience and endurance.

So, about 12% of the vineyards of Jumilla are old vines and to qualify for that, the vines have to be over 35 years old. So, of these old vines, I hope you're taking note now, 95% are Monastrell. Now that's followed in second place by the white grape Airén, which was a huge discovery for me. And then red skinned and red fleshed, Garnacha Tintorera is in third place. And note, this is the Spanish name for Alicante Bouschet. So, learn that so you don't get caught out thinking that the wine will be Garnacha.

Now before I blabber on about the Monastrell vines as obviously this needs the utmost focus, I want to touch on Airén. Now only a few episodes ago I was talking about the native white varieties of Spain and I tasted my very first premium example of Airén. This was the Finca Villalobillos Pie Franco Airén and that was from old vines planted in Toledo, which is southwest of Madrid. Now if you see Pie Franco on a Spanish label, this means ungrafted. Now I will get on to ungrafted in a moment.

**Janina Doyle 00:10:10** So to know more about that wine, go and check out episode 177. But now I've tasted several more. And quite clearly, the key to tasting really delicious Airén is the age of the vine.

So, this is when the yields become much lower, but the ripeness, the concentration and the complexity of fruit is all enhanced. So Airén, it's still a delicate but fruity variety and it has lots of these little citrus note flavours in it. It seems that many of these producers though, and especially in Jumilla, they're taking this variety and they're giving it a little bit of time on skins.

So skin contact, what it does, it can impart a little extra colour to the grape but also some grip, some tannin along with extra flavour and aromas, which all result in a more complex and textured style of wine. So, keep an eye out for that. But back to Monastrell, of course.

So, Monastrell, a thick-skinned, late budding and late ripening variety that is indigenous to Spain. It's known as Mourvèdre in the south of France and Mataro over in Australia. But what does it taste like? So, from tasting enough of them, I think it's fair to say expect some raspberries and plums and figs with that little bit of liquorice and chocolate and rosemary, something a little bit herby in there as well. And then it depends on oak ageing because that's going to give you a little bit of vanilla and that toasted oaky notes.

But one big discovery for me is that not all Monastrell is big and bold. I've been putting Monastrell in just one category until now. It's still true, you get really big, juicy, full bodied examples and actually that is the norm in my opinion, but you can get so many different lighter, fresher styles, less oak and it is not just red Monastrell wine, they make rosé, and most surprisingly sweet and fortified Monastrell wines as well, and wines that can really age. And that takes me to one of my biggest

discoveries whilst on the trip, and that is Bodegas Olivares, who you could name as the Sauternes of Jumilla. Now the reason for that, they make Dulce Monastrell, and they are making this from ungrafted Monastrell vines over 55 years old. They have about 110 hectares. And I said I was going to come back to ungrafted. So, as a reminder, if you see Pie Franco on a label, this is an ungrafted vine. They are planted with their own rootstocks.

**Janina Doyle 00:13:05** So, most European vineyards all around the world now, we've taken our *Vitis vinifera* vines, so our European vines, and we have grafted them onto American rootstocks or some sort of hybrid rootstock that is resistant to phylloxera. So, that evil louse that came across from America in the 1800s that we've spoken about many times, you need to have a resistant rootstock for your vine to grow. Unless you are lucky enough to be in some sort of soil that phylloxera does not like.

And this is one of the exciting things about Jumilla. Well, this semi-arid climate that is incredibly hostile, that is incredibly dry, that has a lot of sandy soils, but also extremely high calcium content is perfect for keeping phylloxera away.

So, this bug actually prefers a lot of water and it can't find it here. It struggles to travel through those sandy soils or even volcanic soils, which is also another soil type that you can find here in Jumilla. And also because it is so hard for the vines to find the nutrients that they need. They are planted, as I mentioned earlier on, typically quite far apart. So, again, having low density plantings is ideal for keeping phylloxera away.

And in fact, these ungrafted vines are really special because since the 1980s, it's actually been prohibited to be able to plant directly into the soil with original rootstocks. So, back in the past what they would have done is they would have done a technique, quite a traditional way of layering the vines. It's called Acodo (A-C-O-D-O). That's what they call it in Spain.

Now this is where you bend a branch from the vine into the ground. You bury it and so, it's still attached to the parent plant. And then over time that buried section, it will develop roots. And then once it's sufficiently rooted, this new vine can then be severed from the parent vine.

But to do this, they needed to have incredibly strong wood. However, regardless of this technique, it is not allowed today. Hence why we need to cherish these old vines that are ungrafted. And it's also worth keeping in mind that there are threats to these old vines because while they have some of the lowest yields in the world, they can produce just one kilo sometimes per bush vine. And of course, this is not unique to just Jumilla, but the shortage of labour.

Remember bush vines, they can't be mechanised. You need to hand pick. So, you need to find that labour. But then equally, I mentioned those olive trees and almond trees. They're actually more profitable and actually so are table grapes. Now broccoli and lettuce are apparently becoming a new crop that people want to put in the ground. People are putting more solar panels in the ground, so of course taking out old vines.

And equally anyway, if an old vine is left unattended, it doesn't always mean then it's going to be good quality. And of course, it may need time to recover. So, there has to be the vignerons, the incentive to be able to go out to the vineyards and continue protecting and taking care of these old vines.

Okay, I have got very deep and profound with this, so let's try and make the podcast a little bit more light-hearted again. So, I'm going to bring us back to the sweet Monastrell that I discovered from Bodegas Olivares.

Now these guys, they have their Finca Hoya De Santa Ana in the north-western part of Jumilla. It's at high altitude. So, they're about 825 metres above sea level, which means they're gonna have cooler nights, so they're gonna have lovely freshness in the grapes. They've also got a longer growing season, so it means that they can get far more nuances and concentration in their fruit.

But for them to make this delicious sweet wine, they're only making it about five times every decade, and the reason for that is they need to leave their grapes on the vine for much longer into autumn. They can't raisin. That's not the point here. There needs to be beautiful freshness and they're picking either at the end of October or the beginning of November. They need to make sure that there's no botrytis. But when they get it right, my gosh!

**Janina Doyle 00:17:45** Okay. This wine in the UK is about £23 a bottle with Terra wines and is served in El Celler de Can Roca, just to give you an idea of how delicious it is. But I tasted wines that were tank samples, so not even ready, all the way back to 1996, which was their first vintage and doesn't even have Jumilla on the label because at that point sweet wine wasn't even part of the DO.

But my gosh, I'm looking at my tasting notes now and coffee, chocolate, hazelnuts, treacle, this lovely chalky texture that's mentioned many times, softness on the finish, striking acidity, all with energy. There's molasses with some of the older ones, a slightly spicy finish.

Then certainly in some of the younger ones, a little bit more even tomato leaf and a bit of lavender, some herbiness. Honestly, this is a gem. Those of you that like your stickies, your sweet wines, you need to check these out because this is the first time I have discovered them. So, I can assume that so many of you listening, this might be the first time this has been brought to your attention.

Now, going back to dry Monastrell. I was lucky enough to be able to taste lots of examples of old vine wines and so I thought I'd tell you some of my favourites so you can keep an eye out for them. And so number one, Juan Gil Etiqueta Azul. Now Juan Gil, they are under the umbrella of Gil family estate, so also there are the wines El Nido which are incredible. Quite costly but wow. Okay, so check out both Juan Gil and El Nido and you can definitely go and visit them when you are in the area. But this Etiqueta Azul, this blue label, it's about £30 in the UK at Hedonism. Not 100% Monastrell, so 60% Monastrell and there's a little bit of Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah in there. But it's big, it's delicious, it's plush, it's rounded, absolutely stunning.

Now another rather voluptuous, powerful style that I adored with lovely intense fruits was from Bodegas Carchelo. Now I actually visited this winery about, I don't know, 15 years ago when I was only just starting to like wine. So, I can highly recommend them and their whole range of wines are always fantastic. So, this specific wine is about £40 in the UK with Lightfoot Wines and it's called Muri Veteres Pie Franco. Now this is 100% Monastrell and the vines are at least 60 years old.

**Janina Doyle 00:20:15** Now if you like the idea of the fresher, more textural, softer, brighter, more restrained styles, I absolutely loved Bodegas BSI, Gemina Pie Franco, the Finca El Volcan. Now Gemina apparently is the old name for Jumilla. Fun fact.

Now, this wine, I can't seem to find it in the UK so you're gonna have to go all the way to Spain to try this or maybe in the country you are listening in, you can find it. Definitely hunt this one down it's at least 40 year old Monastrell vines and this one was all about, as I said, perfume and this chalky, even iodine mineral complexity.

Now if you love terroir driven wines you need to get on the Bodega Cerrón wines, especially their Stratum range. They're made from super old vineyards dating back to 1930s, abandoned plots, ungrafted. These are some of the organic biodynamic pioneers of the region. It is three siblings, fourth generation, and they have this young project to recuperate these old vines.

Now, one thing that's worth mentioning. First of all, I've never walked around vineyards so sandy. You just fall into the soil. But equally so rocky. Now also at Bodega Cerrón, they're really focused on conserving the heritage of the area and they've been focused on learning the traditional way and it was fascinating walking across these rocks and them explaining that actually they are a natural anti-erosion and actually keep that very important moisture in.

Now whereas today, quick farming, using machinery, they are smashing up all of these rocks so they can shove in new vines and this is really bad for the conservation and the future of long-standing vines.

So, this is something that they're fighting for. And it was here we understood a little bit deeper why Monastrell and a few other varieties, when it's so arid and so dry, can actually survive in these soils. So, bear with me because we are about to geek out just a little bit.

**Janina Doyle 00:22:50** So, it's these very special soils that have this incredible water holding capacity. They have these special horizons in the soil that we saw as they dug these huge soil pits. Basically what they are, they're these hard calcic layers. Basically, they prevent the water from being able to evaporate so quickly. And then on top of that, you have these rocks as well.

So, it's just insane to think of how incredible nature is and how it's figured everything out by itself. And the more we do less, the better it might be. So, if you like the sound of their focus and their project, their wines are available in the UK at [greatwine.co.uk](http://greatwine.co.uk).

And I'm going to end this episode talking about one other winery, beautiful, slightly more restrained wines as well, but an absolutely incredible place for you all to go and visit. Now this is Viña Elena. This is a family-run organic winery with lots of experimentation of how Monastrell reacts with different soil types.

These were the wines in which when I tasted them, I felt like I tasted a soul. Yep, I'm weird. So, I'll leave it there with less of a description. But when you go to visit them, you will be able to dine at La Casa de los Abuelos. So, the house of the grandparents.

This is the old bodega that they have renovated. This is the most amazing architecture of old and new. So, you've got all of this modern new walls, new floors, but they've left structures and places where you can still see the original floor, the original walls. It's kind of like stepping back in time, but it's still modern and clean, and they have these different rooms for 4 people, 12 people, 24 people. You can choose different lunches that you can have alongside their wines.

And something that has stayed with me, which was said by Elena herself, who is the winemaker, but also the CEO. She said, "Winemaking here and working with Monastrell connects their heart, their heritage and their community." It was just really beautiful and emotional listening to her. Ah, one last thing, when you go there you will be able to see the roots of a Monastrell vine that are 9 metres long. That I feel just sums it all up.

**Janina Doyle 00:25:45** I hope that has got you a little bit more interested in discovering what Jumilla has to offer and all their special gem old vine wines. I'm not going to finish off with a wine quote because well I just did one didn't I?

So, next week we're going to be talking about Bordeaux again but this time about La Place de Bordeaux. What actually is it? How does En Primeur actually fit into La Place? What's its historical significance? Where is it going? And putting a little bit of focus on the Beyond Bordeaux Wines. So, wines that are from around the world that are now sold through La Place de Bordeaux.

So, I've got Pauline Vicard, who is the co-founder of Areni Global. Now this is a think tank entirely focused on the future of fine wines. So, when it comes to Bordeaux and La Place de Bordeaux, she certainly knows what she's talking about.

Right, that is it for today. If you're enjoying the podcast, don't forget to like, share, subscribe, leave me a review, blah, blah, blah. You know it all makes the podcast more discoverable, but so many of you are listening, sending me emails, but not leaving that review.

It will just take two minutes. I will be eternally grateful. So, wishing you all a wonderful, successful and positive week, deeply rooted in resilience and growth like the oldest vines in a vineyard. Until next Monday, wine friends, cheers to you.