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THE POUR

Reviving Ancient Spanish Vineyards, Building New Traditions

By Eric Asimov

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NAVARREVISCA, Spain — Old vineyards dot the landscape surrounding this village about an hour west of Madrid. But to find the tiny, astounding Rumbo al Norte vineyard, where 70-year-old garnacha vines grow on granite and sandstone slopes threaded with quartz and strewn with gigantic boulders, you not only have to know someone, you have to earn his trust.

For as long as anybody can remember, old vineyards like this one in the foothills of the Sierra de Gredos mountains have been cherished by a dedicated few, who nurtured the vines through hot summers and cold winters. The work was exhausting, especially in the years before automation and automobiles. Simply getting to the vineyards, which can approach 4,000 feet above sea level, was an arduous project. Even today, they are tended almost entirely by hand.

The reward? For decades, the garnacha, as grenache is known in Spanish, went to the local cooperative, which made bulk wines that ended up in anonymous blends. Many growers lost money on their vines. But their attachment to the land was deep, transcending economics.

Beyond the elderly caretakers, whose children were seldom interested in carrying on their stewardship, not many valued these old vineyards. Twenty years ago, the few commercial wineries in the area were planting cabernet sauvignon and merlot on the flatlands in an effort to appeal to international markets.

Many of the old vineyards have been abandoned over the decades. You can

sometimes see traces of them, their ancient stone terraces fading back into the hillsides. Only in the last decade has it become apparent that the area could offer agricultural riches to those willing to seek them out.

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Nobody has searched harder for these old vineyards than Fernando García and Daniel Gómez Jiménez-Landi, two 40-ish men who make fresh, precise, delicate wines under the curious label Comando G. And nobody has worked harder to demonstrate that the grapes from these vineyards could make world-class wines.

Over the last 10 years, Mr. García and Mr. Landi have tracked down vineyards that were only legends, whispered about in taverns or in the fields. They befriended farmers and earned their trust and respect.

“We have a big, big treasure here,” Mr. Landi said. “The big heroes are those who worked and maintained these vineyards, even as they lost money selling to the cops.”

Mr. Landi, who goes by Dani, said the vineyard prospecting has required a great deal of research.

“Talking to old guys in bars,” he said. “I found when you drink beer, you find good vineyards.”



Fernando García, left, and Daniel Gómez Jiménez-Landi are the vignerons behind Comando G.
Gianfranco Tripodo for The New York Times

Today, along with Comando G, a handful of producers working in the Sierra de Gredos is showing how distinctive the wines can be from an area that was ignored for so long.

Among them are Bernabeleva, which makes superb reds and whites of garnacha and albillo real; Daniel Ramos, whose wines are quite good, though they still seem to be grasping for an identity; and RuBor Viticultores, which makes natural wines that can be both fascinating and challenging.

But the bottles with the most finesse and nuance, and which have drawn the most interest, are from Comando G, whose wines are now among the most compelling in Spain.

The entry-level red, La Bruja de Rozas, is lovely and floral, with light, chalky

mineral flavors. Rozas 1er Cru is a step up, not as effusive or ample as La Bruja, and a little more chiseled.

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Most striking are a trio of wines made from old-vine garnacha grown in granite at high altitudes, all striking similar chords yet discernibly different. Las Umbrías, from a vineyard of sandy granite and clay, tastes like flowers, citrus and minerals. Tumba del Rey Moro — from a vineyard of almost pure granite with ancient vines interspersed with trees — is more like concentrated rose petals, yet distinctly salty. Rumbo al Norte is dry, chalky and almost austere.

“The texture of this vineyard is the texture of the wine,” Mr. García said, pointing to fine grains of quartz as we wandered among the boulders in Rumbo al Norte. Collectively, they are among the most striking grenache-based wines I have had.

The label, Comando G, comes from a Spanish 1980s cartoon based on “Science Ninja Team Gatchaman,” a Japanese anime series from the ‘70s. But just as important, the “G” could stand for Gredos, the region where they prospected for vineyards, and it could stand for garnacha.

Ten years ago, when Comando G was getting started, most of the garnacha wines in Spain were jammy, concentrated, oaky and alcoholic. The Comando G team looked for inspiration instead from France, where they found wines in a different style, like the legendary Châteauneuf-du-Papes of Château Rayas, made entirely of grenache and known for their subtle, intricate grace, and the exquisite Ceps Centenaires La Mémé cuvée from Domaine Gramenon, a producer in the Côtes du Rhône.

Mr. García and Mr. Landi took many trips to Burgundy, to the Rhône and the Loire, and eventually to Roussillon in the south and to Sicily and the Barolo region of Italy.

“In Spain, we didn’t have any references,” said Mr. García, who goes by Fer. “We learned about terroir and minerality in France and Italy, but not in Spain.”

The need to look elsewhere for inspiration was partly a legacy of the long Franco dictatorship, which effectively closed off Spanish winemakers from the rest of the

wine world, and from their own heritage. Emerging from the dictatorship in the 1980s and '90s, Mr. García said, and disconnected from their own Spanish wine traditions, they tried to duplicate internationally popular wine styles, aiming for dark colors, power and impact rather than freshness or expression of place.

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Only in recent years, Mr. García said, have many Spanish winemakers felt freer to explore their own tastes and muses.

“We’re not trying to copy the style of Burgundy, but to follow the philosophy,” Mr. Landi said. “Every village here is completely different. We want to express the style of each village.”

Mr. Landi grew up in the region. His family owned vineyards and was one of the first in the area to bottle its own wine. With the encouragement of the European Union, his family planted international varieties rather than the traditional grapes.

But Mr. Landi found that garnacha, grown at high altitude, was much more to his taste. He eventually left the family business and started his own label, Daniel Gómez Jiménez-Landi, making wines of a similar ilk to the Comando Gs, but from different sites.

In Madrid, Mr. Landi met Mr. Garcia, who was studying agricultural engineering and working at one of the city’s best wine shops. Together with a third partner, Marc Isart, who eventually dropped out, they started Comando G in 2008.

At first, it was a hobby. Mr. Landi had his family label while Mr. García worked for Telmo Rodriguez, one of Spain’s more dynamic wine entrepreneurs, who himself was one of the early explorers of the potential of the Sierra de Gredos region. Mr. García had also started another label, Bodega Marañones, which like Mr. Landi’s label also makes excellent wines from the region.

“Up until 2012 or '13, we both had day jobs and worked weekends and holidays on Comando G,” Mr. García said. “Now Comando G is the day job.”





To find the vineyards, Mr. García and Mr. Landi befriended farmers, often over beers at the bar.
Gianfranco Tripodo for The New York Times

In their search for old vineyards, they are looking for three qualities: granite soils, garnacha and altitude. The soils provide strength and freshness in the wines, Mr. Landi said.

Garnacha, which Mr. Landi calls the pinot noir of the south, gives the winemakers the ability to produce fresh, elegant wines. Altitudes of at least 2,500 feet — and

preferably 3,000 to 4,000 — allow a longer ripening cycle, and wines with less alcohol and more balance. **The New York Times** The men are especially interested in vineyards facing east and north, which receive less direct heat, especially important in the era of climate change.

The region encompasses three different valleys with three different climates, from Mediterranean in the southern Tiétar and Alberche valleys to continental in the northern Alto Alberche. The divergence is reflected in the landscape, where lavender and fig and olive trees in the southern part give way to oak, chestnuts and almonds in the north.

While there is great diversity in the land, the appellation system has not kept up. The official appellation, Viños de Madrid, encompasses three provinces with widely differing climate and geology. So Comando G prefers the unofficial Sierra de Gredos, the more specific region, with bottles identified by village as well, when appropriate.

They farm biodynamically, but each vineyard, Mr. García said, required slightly different techniques, derived often by observing how the older people worked the land.

All the garnachas are fermented with their stems, in the ancient fashion, the single-vineyard wines in big oak vats, the others in a mixture of oak and concrete. The aim, always, is to preserve freshness. “With grenache, you don’t need structure, you need acidity,” Mr. García said.

Comando G also makes a tiny amount of a lovely white wine from garnacha gris and garnacha blanc, El Tamboril, which smells like lemons, rocks and flowers.

In a sort of full circle, the Comando G partners are now consulting with the local cooperative, Granito del Cadalso, which — from a peak of almost entirely bulk wine production in the 1980s — had found itself in serious difficulty as people left agriculture for factory or construction work.

Since 2015, the aim has been to produce smaller quantities of better-quality wine in bottles, rather than bulk wine. The 2017 was fresh, fruity, direct and easy to

drink, a good value for about \$15. The Comando G wines range from about \$25 to \$100 or more for the single-vineyard wines.

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For Comando G, it has been a remarkable decade.

“Ten years is not so long in the wine business,” Mr. García said. “But 10 years ago there was practically nothing here.”

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