



Spain has long been known for its robust red wines, but in Galicia, in the country's northwest corner, the focus is on white wines, made from grapes indigenous to the area. Above: Viña Mein, a high quality producer in Ribeiro. Opposite: Emilio Rojo charts his own course with five grape varieties.

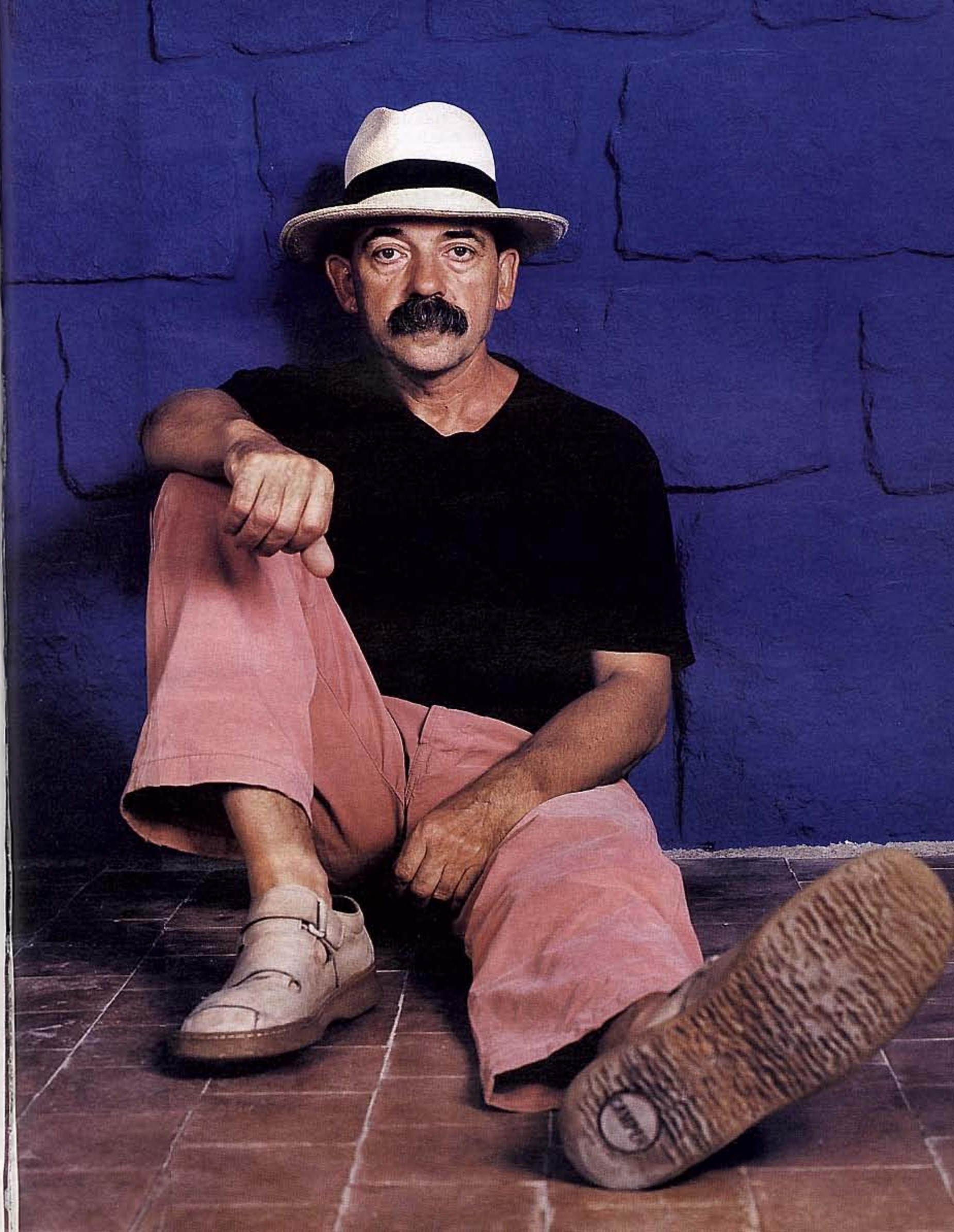
# SPAIN'S NEW WAVE OF WHITES

In Galicia, ancient varieties yield distinctive new wines

BY BRUCE SCHOENFELD PORTRAITS BY FRANÇOIS POINCET

Galicia is green and wet. Pushing inward from Spain's Atlantic coast, this westernmost region of Green Spain seems more like the Irish countryside, which was settled some 2,500 years ago by Iberian Celts who left from Galicia's rocky shores, than like the sun-ripened Spanish wine appellations of Ribera del Duero, Toro and Priorat. • Yet Galician wine is following the same path as the wines from those trendy appellations, which have emerged from obscurity to worldwide success. One by one, the winemaking areas of Galicia and of Bierzo, just across the border in Catilla y León, are replacing old ways with new, producing better wines and finding markets for them. But unlike the majority of Spain's best new bottlings, bold reds made from Tempranillo, Garnacha or Syrah, the emerging successes from Galicia are white wines, made from ancient varieties whose distinctive flavors fill the mouth. • The Rias Baixas appellation, which hugs the seacoast just north of Portugal, already has gained prominence for its

FERNANDO BRIONES/CEPHUS





The Albariño grape put Galicia's Rias Baixas appellation on the world wine map. The lesser-known areas also employ the grape but typically in blends.

refreshing Albariños. But Galicia's four other appellations, Ribeiro, Ribeira Sacra, Valdeorras and Monterrei, are works in progress. Using some Albariño, but mostly grapes such as Godello and Treixadura that have yet to capture attention outside the area, winemakers are fashioning tangy, high-acid wines stylistically similar to some New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs and Old World Rieslings, yet with flavor profiles all their own. Though often drunk with seafood, they can cut through the spice of a curry, or match the meaty flavors of roasted chicken or pork.

Five producers, spread over four appellations, stand out from the crowd. In Ribeiro, Javier Alen's Viña Mein and the iconoclastic Emilio Rojo work nearly within sight of each other, yet have carved out niches in very different corners of the wine business. At Adegas Moure of steep-sloped Ribeira Sacra, vineyard land is divided into dozens of parcels carved into hillsides. Bodegas Godeval all but saved the appellation of Valdeorras and the Godello grape, while Dominio de Tares in Bierzo is making white wine in an appellation gaining attention for its reds.

You won't find big bodegas or renowned producers represented on these labels. There has been no stream of outside talent, or outside money, to Galicia. Nearly everyone who makes wine here is from here. The learning curve has been steep, but today, Galicia's white wines are some of Spain's best. And because they developed from the inside out, they taste like nothing else.

Unlike many of the winemakers and grapegrowers rooted in the region, Javier Alen didn't inherit a winery. But he did inherit a culture. Galicia-born, he was raised in Madrid and trained there as a lawyer, but spent his summers back in Leiro, his ancestral home. Through the years, he drank bulk wine made from Palomino and other ignoble grapes that were prevalent in the region.

In 1988, Alen abandoned law and opened a travel bookstore in Madrid. At about the same time, half as a lark and half because of a midlife crisis, he and some friends bought a disused Leiro winery within sight of his grandparents' home. They renovated it and planted new vineyards with an idea of resurrecting the Treixadura

grape. Once known as "the great white lady," it had lapsed into oblivion. Gradually, Alen's partners at Viña Mein fell away. "The winery started as a hobby, but turned into a business," he says.

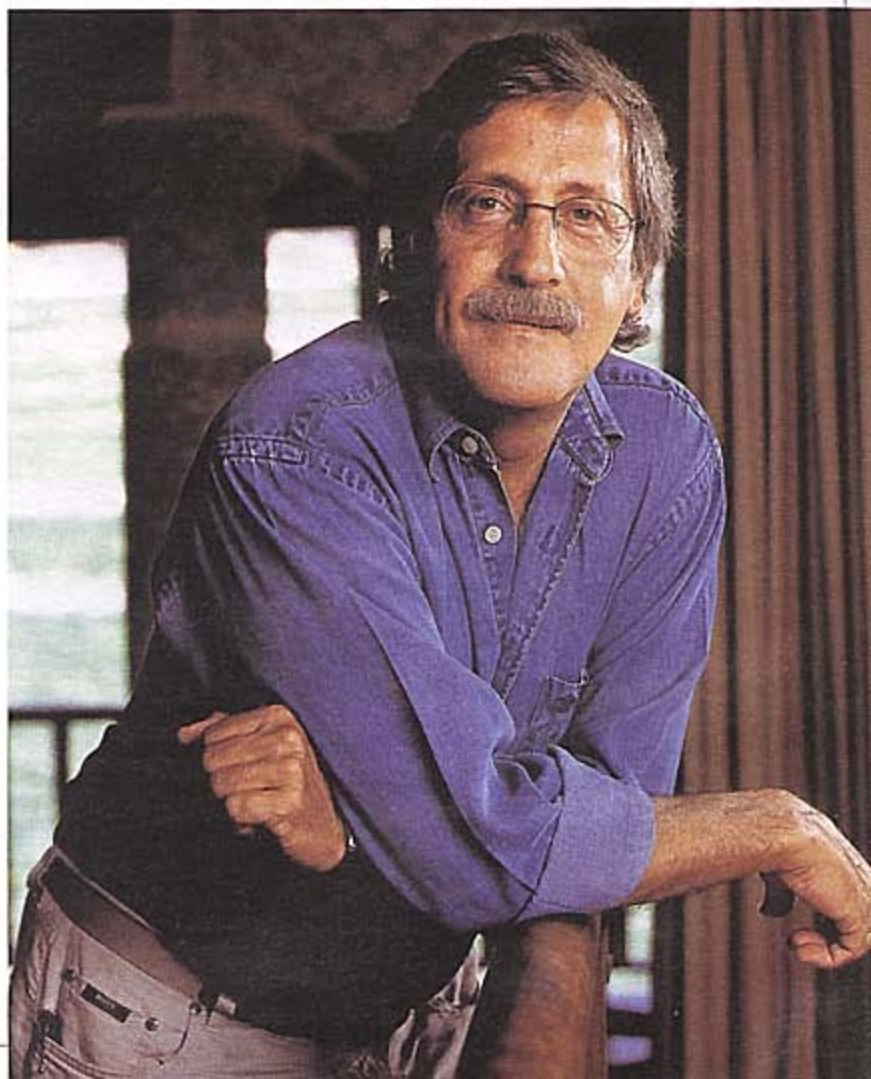
These days, he and consulting enologist Emilio Vidal, who also works at the local cooperative and consults for other wineries, turn out more than 8,000 cases annually of Viña Mein bottlings. Now 57, Alen spends weeks at a time in Leiro, where he stays in the home he inherited from his grandmother. He brings to his rows of grapevines the attention to detail he once brought to legal briefs.

Lately Alen has built two hotels in the area, creating the beginnings of a business empire. His wines have exotic flavors, but a smoothness that solicits mass appeal. In his mind, he's the Robert Mondavi of this corner of northwestern Spain, pulling the Ribeiro appellation into the modern era.

Yet just around the corner from Alen's house, the idiosyncratic Emilio Rojo works out of a glorified Quonset hut, deliberately turning his back on modernity. With his bristly mustache and black baseball cap, he is instantly recognizable in wine circles throughout Spain, appearing in magazine photos and attending symposiums. And yet, many Spanish consumers have never actually seen his wine.

Even in his most fecund years, his production is modest by any standard. "Welcome to my kiosk," he says, opening the door to the two-room, concrete shed that serves as his facility. "This is my labeling area," he says, motioning toward a piece of cardboard that has been laid atop a plastic crate. A telecommunications engineer until 1982, Rojo quit, spent a year in London, and then three more "relaxing and doing nothing" in Leiro. He took over the winery from his father in 1987 and changed its concept from

Viña Mein's owner Javier Alen is creating a business empire in Ribeiro: In the late 1980s, he acquired the winery, near his grandparents' home where he spent his summers, and has since built two hotels in the region.





bulk wines to tiny quantities of the highest quality. Now 51, he makes a living at it, barely. His wines sell for about \$35 a bottle in stores in the United States, startlingly expensive for a Spanish white—but even before expenses, his revenue is meager.

It comes as little surprise that no bottles remain for anyone to taste on site. Instead, Rojo offers visitors refreshment straight from a stainless steel tank. A field blend of five local grapes—Treixadura, Loureiro, Lado, Albariño and Torrontés—the wine will remain unfiltered, and a quarter of the 5,000-odd liters will be aged in new oak before the final blend is made. The result, year after year, is a complex and delicate wine that can be found on the wine lists of some of Spain's best restaurants, including Michelin three-stars El Bulli, Arzak and Can Fabes, and in the United States, which gets an allotment of 50 cases annually.

Despite his critical success, or perhaps because of it, Rojo has no interest in planting new vines, not even on the patch of empty land that sits above his terraced vineyard. "My goal is to make less wine, not more," he says. "I'd rather have a vineyard with five vines than 5,000." Believe it or not, he has exactly that: a row of five lonely vines on a tiny strip of soil that his wife's parents used to own. Its existence expresses his philosophy better than any mission statement or marketing brochure ever could. But Rojo's scale of production fits Galicia. These aren't appellations suited for large-scale winemaking.

**H** heading east from Ribeiro, past the city of Orense, the Miño River cuts a deepening gorge in the countryside, and the individual plots get even smaller. In Ribeira Sacra, which means "sacred riverside" in the regional language Gallego, the slope is so steep that in some places the harvested grapes have to be hauled away by boat. Nearly 3,000 acres of vineyards are scattered over five subzones of the crescent-shaped appellation (formally established in 1995), which hugs the Miño and Sil river valleys from Castelo in the north past Quiroga in the east.

"No Álvaro Palacios could come here and buy 10 acres of vineyards," says Xosé Manuel Moure, 48, of Adegas Moure, referring to one of Spain's top winemakers. "See that hillside? That's 7 acres, and it took me three years to get it." To do it, Moure says, he had to negotiate with 23 separate owners of vari-

ous parcels of land. "One lived in Argentina, one in Barcelona, one in Switzerland. I'm their neighbor, I was born here, I know them. Imagine what it would be like for an outsider!"

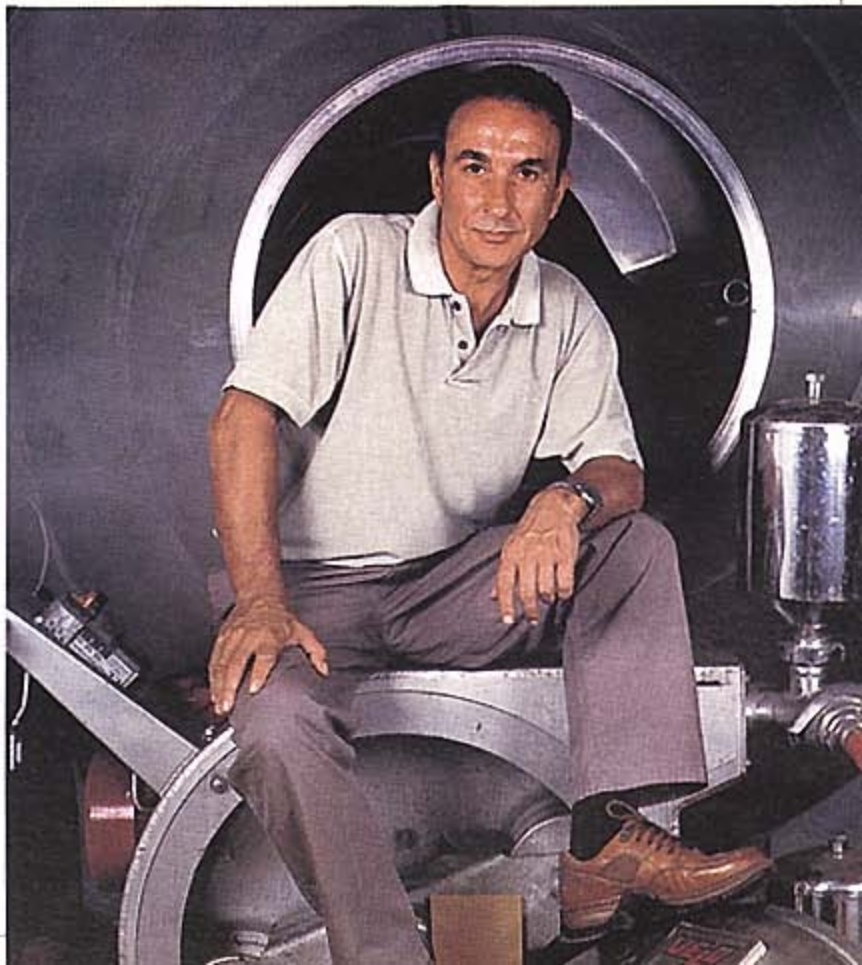
Moure's vineyards exist as more than 30 different levels of terraces cut into a picturesque hillside above a sharp bend in the Miño. In the midst of the vines, a swimming pool reflects the sky. It is both a manifestation of how hot this verdant area can get in the summer (as high as 100° F in some years), and a symbol, Moure says, of how well one can live here if he combines hard work with a plan.

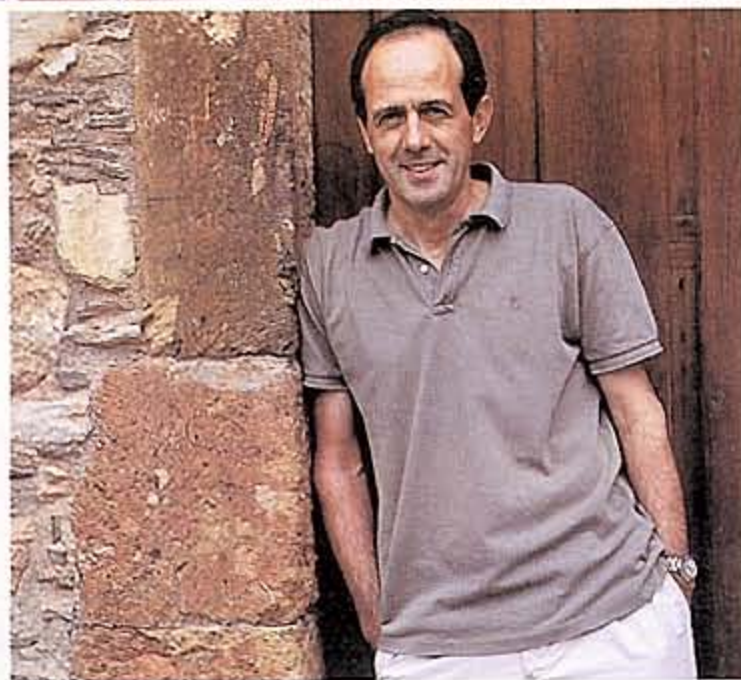
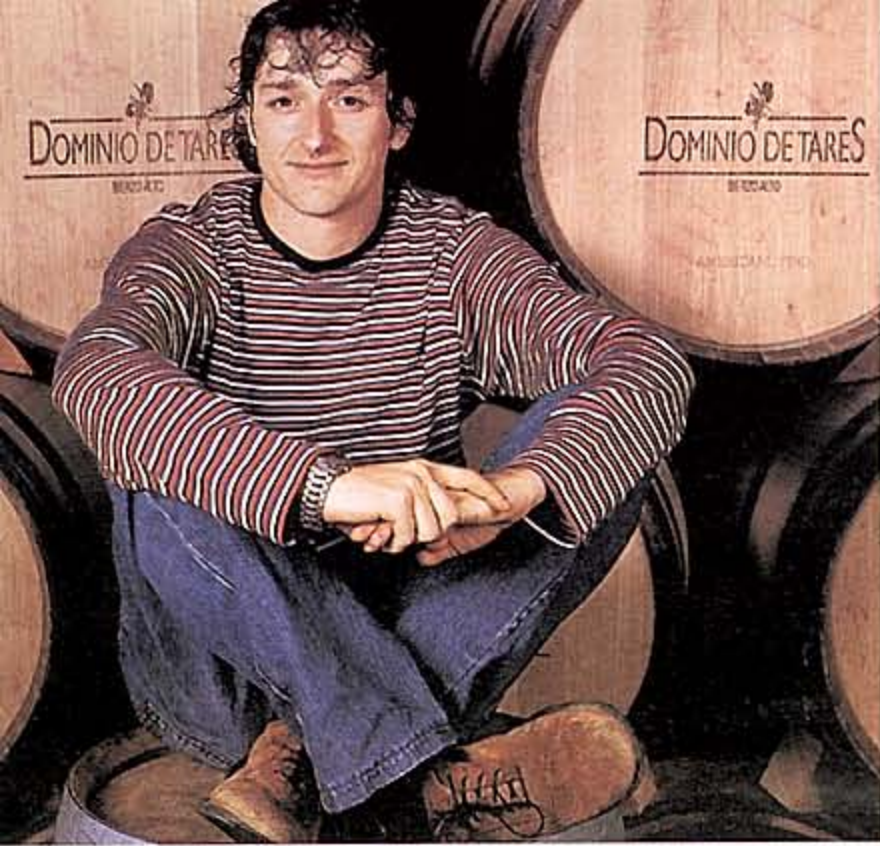
In 1982, Moure became the first winery owner outside Rias Baixas to plant Albariño. An area that had subsisted for years on field blends of the red grapes Mencía and Alicante Bouschet and the white Palomino was ready to come to life. In the two decades that followed, Adegas Moure grew into the largest winery in Ribeira Sacra, making 10,000 cases a year (mostly Mencía) under the Abadia da Cova label.

Moure, who studied enology in Madrid, makes the wine, with the ubiquitous Emilio Vidal as a consultant. Their Albariño bottling contains 15 percent Godello, while the Godello—smoother, rounder, with similarly bracing grapefruit notes yet less of an acidic tang—contains 15 percent Albariño. It is a felicitous pairing that makes both wines more interesting than single-variety wines would be.

Moure's Godello comes from purchased grapes grown in the sub-appellation of Quiroga, on Valdeorras' border. It is not idle boasting to say, as Moure does, that the finest Godello in the world is grown in Valdeorras and on Quiroga's nearby hills. Mostly, though, that's because this grape is nearly impossible to find anywhere else. And it might have been impossible in Valdeorras, too, had a government employee named Horacio Fernandez, now a robust 72, not decided to save the wine industry in his adopted region.

Xosé Manuel Moure owns the largest winery in Ribeira Sacra, Adegas Moure. He was the first producer outside Rias Baixas to plant Albariño, which he blends with Godello, another grape native to Galicia.





Above: José Luis Bartolome helped save the Godello grape from near-extinction in Valdeorras and today his Bodegas Godeval produces more than 16,500 cases of the varietal. Top: Dominio de Tares' Amancio Fernandez makes outstanding wines from the red Mencía grape in Bierzo, just outside Galicia, but also bottles a Godello. Opposite: Vineyards above the Miño River.

Born in León, Fernandez spent his 20s extracting palm oil in Equatorial Guinea. Then he wandered into a job as a government agronomist in the Galician town of O Barca. Because the grapes used to make bulk wine were just about the only cash crop besides chestnuts, the job made him a de facto viticulturist, though he'd never worked in a vineyard or taken a single course on the subject.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, difficult times in rural Spain, a substantial number of small landowners in the valleys that would eventually become the Valdeorras appellation abandoned farming and headed for the cities. By 1975, few remained to grow grapes. What had been vineyard land was soon covered in high grasses. Fernandez and a colleague, José Luis Bartolome, mobilized. "We started to look for solutions in terms of quality instead of quantity," he says. "We turned to autochthonous grapes to make differ-

ent wines than were being made in other places." That meant Godello, which was teetering on the edge of extinction.

Under the guise of a government experiment, Fernandez supervised the planting of about 40 acres. That led, a decade later, to Bodegas Godeval, which is now owned by six partners, including Fernandez and Bartolome, who make the wine together, producing more than 16,500 cases of Godello (along with a bit of distilled aguardiente and coffee liqueur). The wine, sold for about \$15 in the United States, tastes of pineapple, limeade and rose petals with a hint of rubber. It gets better and better, somehow, the longer it stays in the mouth.

**T**hirty miles northeast, across the border into Castilla y León, gnarled vines at least 80 years old dot the undulating countryside almost at random, like oil wells on the Oklahoman plain. This is Bierzo, where Álvaro Palacios actually did go to start a winery. Helped by names like his and that of Mariano Garcia, who makes covered Spanish wines such as Mauro and Aalto, Bierzo has evolved more swiftly than Galicia's appellations. "Thanks to them, the specialized press has come here," says Amancio Fernandez, a winemaker and partner at the 4-year-old winery Dominio de Tares.

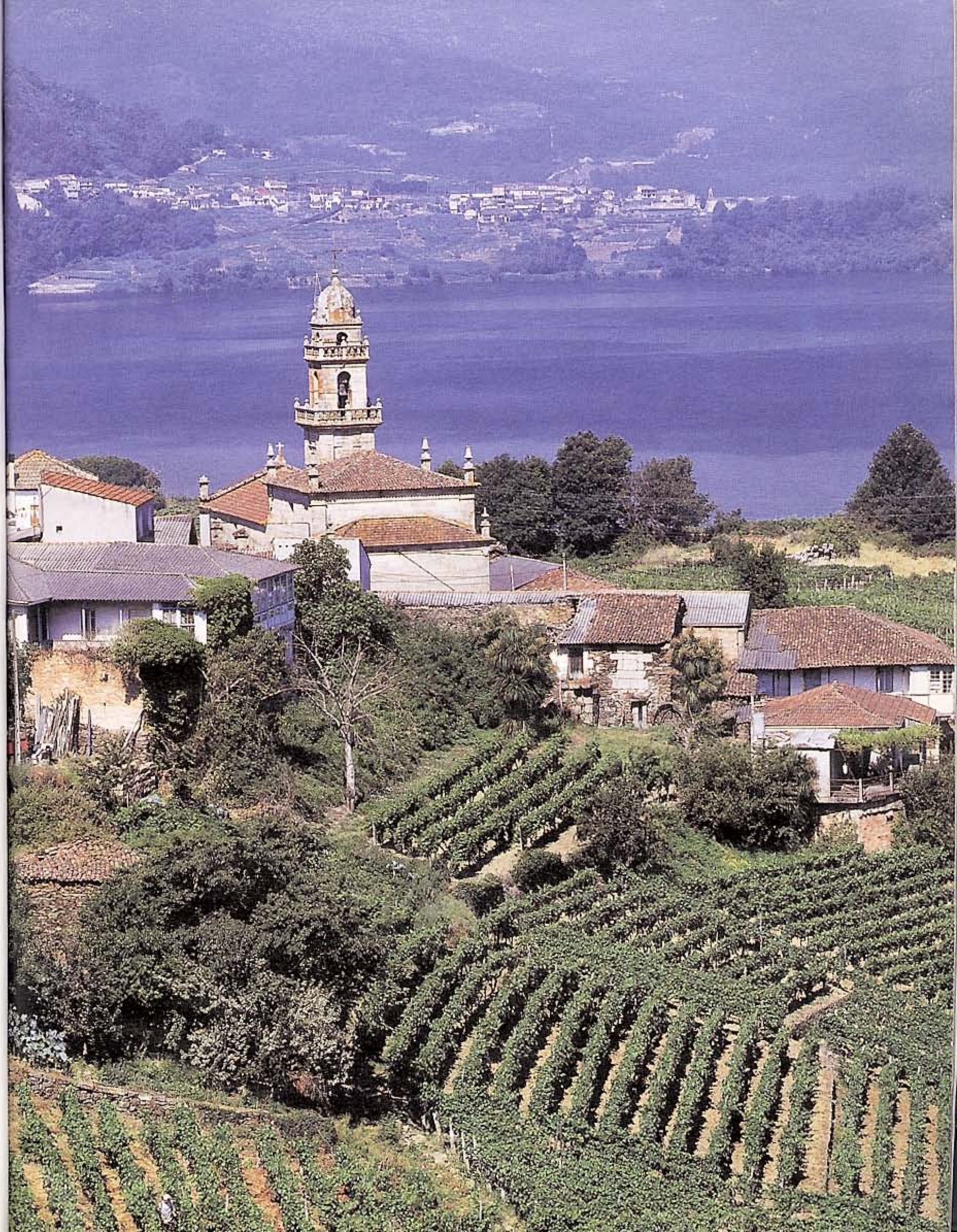
Not that they're coming for white wine. The main attraction in Bierzo is the Mencía grape, which has some Cabernet Franc-like characteristics, some Pinot Noir-like characteristics and some traits wholly its own. Fernandez was working at Bodegas Protos in Ribera del Duero when he and some friends had the idea to move to Bierzo and help resurrect Mencía. "Godello wasn't the motor, just something on the side," he says. "To us, it was a discovery."

Fernandez, 32, was born in Paris, but grew up from the age of 4 in Ponferrada, the largest town in Bierzo. You can't say he came of age drinking Godello, because nobody did. As in the appellations to the west, small growers looking to sell wine in bulk pulled out vines and replaced them with something the marketplace wanted, usually Palomino. Either that, or they gave up. The hillsides across the road from the modern industrial park that houses the salmon-colored Dominio de Tares winery were once covered with Godello vines; only a few remain.

With the success of Fernandez's Godello, made mostly from new plantings and fermented in barrel, more will come. "Our Godello makes a very complex wine," he says. "Not as fresh as in Valdeorras, but more potent, bigger in the mouth. Little by little, the world will find it." He grabs a bottle and sets out for a nearby restaurant, prepared to pour it with fish, with the heavier foods of this landlocked region, or with whatever else might come its way.

It isn't a coveted bottle, not yet. With the possible exception of Emilio Rojo, who makes so little wine that it is invariably hard to find, none of these wines have attained the cult status of Spain's latest generation of reds. Someday, perhaps, interest will grow for these fresh-tasting yet nuanced wines of Galicia and Bierzo. If that happens, these wines, like the top California Chardonnays and white Burgundies and the priciest of the Rias Baixas Albariños, will become wines for special occasions.

In a sense, that makes drinking them now even more exciting. "It is a wine in the shadows, a white grape in the land of reds," Fernandez says of his Godello. "But it will emerge." □



OPPOSITE: NICK BIRCH/CEPHAS