SPANISH INSURGENCE

A NEW VARIETAL, MENCIA, INCHES ITS WAY Onto the international Wine scene.

Name a Spanish grape in two seconds. Chances are, you said Tempranillo. It is the grape varietal grown in the country's most celebrated wine-producing regions La Rioja and Ribera del Duero. And it's also what Spain's finest and most iconic red wines – rioja and the Vega Sicilia – are made from.

But the wine cognoscenti have another grape varietal on their minds: the indigenous Mencia grape. Found only in north-west Spain – in the three seldom-heard-of zones of Valdeorras, Ribeira Sacra and Bierzo – it has been winning over the palates of those in the know, slowly but surely.

I stumbled upon this black grape several years ago on a trip to a port lodge in Portugal, which happened to coincide with the visit of a Spanish winemaker who brought along his own wine. The lodge's owner, curious about his guest's wine, invited all present for an impromptu tasting. No surprises here, I thought, expecting yet another Tempranillo-based wine. But I was wrong.

With its sleek character and mineral nuances, the wine, from the zone of Ribeira Sacra, immediately caught my attention. Called El Pecado, it tasted more akin to burgundy or barbaresco – with fetching flavours of cranberry and strawberry rather than usual black fruit and ripe cherry notes so familiar in Spanish wines.

This rare nectar was made from none other than the Mencia. Grown in obscure Ribeira Sacra in eastern Galicia, in cool climate and on soil of high slate content – a terroir unlike other parts of Spain – the wine is unusually elegant. Of course, it also benefited from the skills of the winemaker, who turned out to be the soft-spoken and congenial Raul Perez, Spain's star wine consultant.

This chance encounter triggered in me a desire to seek out wines made from this fascinating varietal, a grape that has captivated Spanish winemakers in the last two decades – and my search started me off on a journey of discovery.

It brought me on a re-education of Spain's vinicultural history. I had heard that Bierzo, a neighbouring Denominacion de Origen zone to Ribeira Sacra, was famous for its Mencia wines. What I never realised is that what is dubbed Spain's "newest" wine zone has, ironically, a wine history of over 2,000 years – starting from when the Romans cultivated grapevines on the soils of this ancient region of Castile-Leon.

"Previously known as Spain's 'lost' wine zone, Bierzo had been ignored by quality producers until recently," shared Misericordia Bello Pinedo, commercial director of Martinez Yebra Winery. And what brought the winemakers back to this forgotten land? The Mencia.

I was at Spain's national wine fair, the biennial Fenavin exposition held early this year, and I was on a mission – to taste the most interesting Mencia wines. Pinedo had just what I was looking for. "To appreciate the true taste of Mencia, try this," she said, handing a deep, cherry-red hued glass of Canes Tinto.

Made without wood ageing, it showcased the grape's qualities – pure red fruit, sweet

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tannins and a savoury finish. Also from Martinez Yebra is the Vina de Canes Tres Racimos, made from Mencia picked at ultralow yields of just three bunches per vine. The wine was brimming with intense flavours of forest fruits supported by good tannins.

Traditionally, Mencia vines are grown on fertile plains, which produce grapes that bring high yield but diluted wines. The wines produced are light, pale tipples meant for early consumption. This, however, is changing. Winemakers are now cultivating old vines on hillsides. The result: concentrated, complex wines that intrigue.

The 2006 Pittacum by Bodegas Pittacum – made using the harvests from 60- to 80-year-old vines growing on alluvial and chalky soils – showed depth of aromas and mouth-filling flavours of plums. The 2007 vintage had raspberry and chocolate with some toffee. Both wines boasted long delicious finishes. Also tasted was the Pittacum Aurea 2007. Produced at a single vineyard situated at an altitude of 650m, this wine was similar to the 2007 Pittacum, but differentiated by a suave edge.

This is evidently a responsive grape. Bierzo is a warmer region compared to Ribeira Sacra and wines are usually heartier. However, the hot days and cool nights experienced by the vines grown at high elevations imbue the wines with a certain delicacy. A prime example is the Casar de Burbia Hombros 2007, a wine made from grapes grown at 600m above sea level. It had plenty of character with an intense nose of plums, and flavours of coconut and tobacco. In contrast, Tebaida 2007, made from grapes grown at an even higher altitude of 700m, showed currant-like flavours allied with hints of cola and sour plums, and had a broad, elegant finish. How similar were they? As much as Hombros was as masculine in character, Tebaida was feminine – soft and rounded.

The Spanish are rightfully proud of their Mencia wines and keen to share their charms with the world. Back in Singapore, I was presented with a Petalos 2008 from Descendientes De J. Palacios at Santi restaurant at Marina Bay Sands. The wine, brimming with sour plums and tobacco, was also floral and hinted of minerals, making it elegant and handsome at the same time. Winemaker Alvaro Palacios revealed that Petalos was made from a blend of Mencia grapes from various villages – some with maritime climates and others with continental ones.

But it was not until I tasted Lalama from Ribeira Sacra vineyard Dominio do Bibei that I realised the magnitude of the Mencia grape. Tasted at the restaurant My Little Spanish Place, this wine was filled with the aromas of cherry and strawberry, with just a hint of cigar, earth and dried flowers; it had a beautiful structure, and it sang – a perfect illustration of how accommodating this particular grape can be when used in a blend with other varietals such as Garnacha, Brancellao and Mouraton.

This black beauty is on its way to earning its place as a noble grape. The next time you crave a glass of Spanish red, ask for a Mencia. We can almost guarantee that you, too, will fall under her spell.

Below: Bodegas Pittacum produces wine from 60- to 80-year-old vines.