

Abstract of the thesis: "Commercial future of minor Spanish grape varieties" by Natalja Eggen

Motivation:

My motivation for choosing this subject is partly personal. Having studied the Spanish language, history and culture, I had an extra interest in Spanish when I began working in the wine business. I've worked for an agent in Spanish wines and travelled two or three times to Spanish wine regions. Since I began studying wine I also had a vivid interest in the many grape varieties that exist. In the wine world, and with wine consumers, there is quite a lot of knowledge of grape varieties, compared with knowledge about varieties of strawberries, pigs or olives for instance. In most of the cases the variety is stated on the label or at least it is easy to find out. One can taste the difference between the different grapes. To preserve this genetic variety and knowledge it is worthwhile to keep looking for interesting grape varieties. Efforts of grape growers and wine makers trying to make good wine from lesser known varieties need, in my opinion, more attention

Goals of this study

A grape needs human effort to survive, a vineyard left on its own will die out and there are few surviving wild grapes left in Europe. If a grape variety has commercial success its chances for survival in the future are much bigger. The goal of this study was to find out which factors are of importance for commercial success of these wines.

Methodology

Because there are so many varieties I decided to single out a few examples of these minor grape varieties, from different DO's, indeed from different parts of the country. I wanted to find out about their commercial success and contacted the grape growers/wine makers, a ampelographer, wine writers, people dealing with this issue on a daily basis. I also read the existing literature on this subject, wine magazines, tasting notes on internet fora etc. I also contacted the Spanish Wine board to try to find out about production/selling figures.

Content of the thesis

The three grape varieties that I studied were Prieto Picudo, Maturana Tinta, and Molinera del Bailén.

Prieto Picudo is the most successful of the three. It is a red grape, grown around the city of León in the north-west of Spain. Around 7000 ha are planted with it. Since several years the variety is successful and

many wine magazines have written about it. Prieto Picudo is well underway to some fame in the wine world. The factors that made it a success were then already available quantity, a good quality, relatively cheap vineyards, ambitious bodega's, good winemaking made it a success.

Maturana Tinta is a forgotten red grape, grown in famous Rioja. There are a few ha with it, and two bodega's who make a commercial wine from it. Two scientists from La Rioja university have fought for more than 20 years to put this variety (along with others) on the map. Its commercial future is uncertain: its legal status for use for Rioja Doca is not yet legal, there are few vineyards so it is a huge investment to plant more of it in expensive Rioja, its low yields, uncertainty of its use. The bodega that work with it are successful, but other bodega's don't need it to sell Rioja.

Red Molinera del Bailén grows around Jaén and is produced by the local cooperative Santa Gertrudis. It is kind of a local hero, but its quality is not very good, but there is enough production of it. My guess is that its position will stay the same as it is now. It is unlikely (because of its quality) that more producers will plant it and make wine of it, neither do I think that many people will buy it elsewhere in Spain or in other countries. But there is small chance that cooperative Santa Gertrudis will cease to exist either and so is Molinera del Bailén.

Conclusion

For a native minor variety to thrive several factors (some obvious) are important: presence in the vineyard, new plantings are risky and expensive and even more so with a unknown variety; good quality, if the resulting wine is not good, it will be difficult to make money with it. The problem is that little is known and that there has been no clonal selection with minor grape varieties. The potential quality is not certain. A third factor is the people behind it all: their motives can be different, commercial, quality, genetic variety, historic interest, cultural heritage. This does not matter as long as they care and, in some cases have patience.

A legal DO status also can help, but it has to have a history and quality to begin with in order to obtain this. In my opinion it is of lesser importance.