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## Drinking the Story

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If someone said, "Can you tell me in a single sentence one of the truths of wine?" I would reply, "People don't drink the wine, they drink the story."

Let me give you an example. I'm a big fan of Spanish white wines. I admire their individuality, coming as they do from grape varieties seen nowhere else. I also like their reasonable prices and, in many cases, their lack of oak.

Not least, I love their remarkable stories. French wines tend to have wonderfully romantic, historical stories involving generals (Napoleon), writers (Rabelais) or a constellation of kings, queens and Rothschilds.

Spain, for its part, specializes in stories of resurrection and redemption, of wines and vines coming back from the near-dead and long-forgotten.

The best stories, of course, are tales of success. You can't beat virtue rewarded. One of my favorites is that of Angel Rodríguez of MartínSancho winery in the Rueda district northwest of Madrid. He pretty much single-handedly revived Rueda's indigenous grape Verdejo.

By the 1970s, Verdejo was nearly extinct, at least commercially, thanks first to phylloxera, then to the Depression, then to the Spanish Civil War, and finally to the misguided agricultural policies of dictator Francisco Franco, who ruled Spain from 1939 to 1975. Those policies subsidized the planting of "permanent" crops such as olive trees and encouraged growing grapes better suited to the bulk processing needs of state-sponsored cooperatives.

The delicious, thick-skinned white Verdejo grape was effectively abandoned as the vines were grubbed up to make way for the state-approved varieties. But Rodríguez ignored the revisionist thinking and preserved a 1-acre vineyard of ancient Verdejo vines still planted on their own roots (as opposed to a grafted rootstock used because of the vine-destroying phylloxera louse).

In 1976, he took cuttings from his old-vine repository and created a new 25-acre Verdejo vineyard. From Rodríguez's 1-acre "conservatory," a revived Rueda wine industry emerged in the 1980s and '90s, defined by—you guessed it—the Verdejo grape.

For his efforts, Angel Rodríguez was officially honored by Spain's King Juan Carlos. How's that for a happy ending?

Without knowing anything of this story, you can still savor the quality of a Martínsancho Verdejo, with its dense texture, lemon-yellow hue tinged with green, and crisp, fresh scents of citrus fruits, hay and mineral, devoid of even a whiff of oak. Yet when I told this story to my guests at a recent dinner while we were sipping the wine, there was no question that everyone "tasted" the wine differently afterward, appreciating its uniqueness that much more.

"Drinking the story" is more than merely being influenced by a well-told tale, although there is that to be sure. A compelling story also adds a dimension of understanding and appreciation. And that, in turn, makes you pay attention, if nothing else.

A high price tag can do the same, of course. But isn't that a kind of story too, especially if the wine was formerly cheap or overlooked? Think Gaja Barbaresco. Or Napa Cabernet after Prohibition and before Robert Mondavi.

Personally, I love improbable success stories, such as the one I recently learned in Australia's Margaret River region south of Perth. There, an American named Will Berliner, who never previously grew grapes or made wine, bought a piece of bare land.

He decided (unlike nearly everyone else in the zone) that the vines should be densely planted as in Burgundy and Bordeaux. He planted his tiny vineyard and entered the local wine competition, the Margaret River Wine Show, with his first-ever Cabernet Sauvignon, from the 2010 vintage.

What happened? The 2010 Cloudburst Cabernet Sauvignon swept the boards, winning trophies for the best Cabernet Sauvignon, the best single-vineyard red and the best red wine of show.

And then—you can see this coming, right?—the winery had the chutzpah to charge \$250 for subsequent vintages of the Cabernet Sauvignon and \$200 for the Chardonnay. Such stratospheric prices were not just unheard of, but more damning yet, were seen as distastefully "tall poppy"—an Aussie derision for anyone or anything too presumptuous or publicly ambitious.

How is the Cloudburst Cabernet? Oh, it's very good. But really, the story makes the wine much more interesting, don't you think?

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