

THE PURE PLEASURE OF ORGANIC WINE

Aj Linn travels to the high Alpujarras to meet a viticultural visionary who produces one of the best organic wines in Spain.

Four hours drive from Marbella in the breathtaking mountain countryside of the Alpujarras lies Cádiar, home of wine maker extraordinary, Manuel Valenzuela. For 20 years he has been tilling his small vineyard on the craggy mountainside, trying to produce wine as it was made in this area centuries ago - organically. At last he has succeeded, and the world is beating a path to his door.

When Manuel was a company employee in Barcelona, he had always dreamed of returning to his native Alpujarras to work with the soil and gave up the chance of heading up the company to realise his dream, buying an old vineyard with a *bodega* - literally blind because a thick mist that day prevented him from seeing what he was getting for his money.

Chemical Cocktail

Wine producers all over the world are never slow to say how many years their products have been matured, or what grapes they used to make them, but ask them what chemicals they add and their attitude changes. Claude Bourguignon, the French microbiologist, told the wine makers of Burgundy 20 years ago that their vineyards were as dead as the Sahara Desert. Decades of spreading pesticides to kill off insects, weeds and diseases and the addition of millions of tons of artificial nitrate fertilisers had left the soil without a worm or even an ant. The subterranean water supply was seriously polluted.

Regrettably this is the pattern throughout the wine-growing world. Ten of the main chemicals used are prejudicial to the health. The preservative sulphur dioxide can cause allergic reactions, pesticides carbyl, mancozeb, benomyl and ditiobenil are carcinogens, metam sodium and oxyfluorfen can cause birth defects, dimethoate causes reproductive problems and methyl bromide, nerve disorders. One tonne of chemicals is used to produce 8,000 bottles of Burgundy, and the production of mass-market wine accounts for nearly half the pesticides used on agricultural land.

Most people know someone who has



A grape adventure

try a bottle of organic wine, rather like eating a naturally reared tomato or potato, you will notice the difference.

Happily for the wine drinker, there is now no necessity to take in harmful chemicals with the daily tittle as most countries now produce organic wine - unsurprisingly the US is in the lead by a long way. Spain is not far behind. In 1997 there were 3,120 hectares dedicated to producing organic wine (*vino ecológico* or *vino biológico*, as it is known here) and a year later, the spread of organic vineyards

had almost doubled. There are now at least 25 *bodegas* making organic wine and the number is increasing. Even those producers who have not gone organic have finally realised that killing off the soil and poisoning underground water supplies is counter-productive. They now use ultralight 4x4 tractors which do not compact the soil between the vines and new chemical sprays which avoid over-dosification.

Killer Almonds

When Manuel Valenzuela started, he admits he knew nothing about wine making and even less about organic wine making. Without the guidance of Manuel Carrillo and the backing of the Junta de Andalucía, he may have been battling against the elements even today, but he followed the advice offered and planted new vines, at the same time rooting out the almond trees on his land. "Almonds were planted fairly recently on a huge scale", says Manuel, "and practically all the local vineyards were destroyed in the process. But this has resulted in the desertisation of the hillsides, since almond trees encourage soil erosion, whereas vines hold the soil."

In 1986, Manuel visited France and returned with a clearer idea of the sort of wine he wanted to produce. Using such grape varieties as cabernet, garnacha, tempranillo and a selection of local varieties, he began to concentrate on perfecting wines which were pesticide and artificial fertiliser-free.



Organic message in a bottle

had to stop drinking wine because it causes an allergic reaction. The good news is that it is not the wine at fault, just the added chemicals so organic wine is safe to drink and actually does taste better. Californian producers market it on that basis and if you

His production is minuscule. No more than 5,000 bottles of the now famous *Barranco Oscuro Tinto '98* reached the market, although within the next three or four years this quantity should double with future vintages. Manuel is building a new winery with a capacity of 300 barrels, to be inaugurated next month. "In my lifetime I will probably put down about 120 barrels", he says. "That's enough for me".

Other wines have been made with varying degrees of success. The *Barranco Oscuro Brut* is the only organic cava in Spain, made from the *vigiriega* grape and the hand-written label stands out on store shelves, where it sells for 1,250 pesetas - if you can find it. There is also a white wine but this, although quite pleasant, has been relegated to the back of the cellar.

A Cottage Industry

Ask Manuel how he markets his wine and you will get a blank look. If you insist, he will admit that buyers just turn up on his doorstep with pockets full of cash. The Germans are particularly keen on his wine, and several dealers regularly descend on Manuel's *finca* and take back all they can load into their vehicles. A recent buyer complained that the labels did not mention that the wines were organically-produced, so Manuel fetched a roll of the official labels issued by the Junta de Andalucía and told the buyer to stick them on himself because he did not have the time.

In spite of the fact that his *Barranco Oscuro* has been well reviewed in the Spanish press, Manuel feels that he may vary the composition slightly for future vintages. Using *tempranillo* and a little *garnacha*, there is no doubt that the present mix is effective, but Manuel believes he can make it even better. It sells at 1,650 pesetas, *ex-bodega* and has been described by *El País* newspaper as the '*glorioso Barranco Oscuro*'. There is a more *corriente* red wine, made with *tempranillo* only, which sells at 850 pesetas.

As we loaded up the car with as much *Barranco Oscuro* as Manuel deemed prudent to let us have, we promised to return. Indeed, this would seem to be the only way of ensuring a supply of his wine, since although I am sure it is available in wine stores somewhere, Manuel was not much help on this topic.

If you visit Cádiar, consider staying overnight at the *Álquería de Morayma*. This is a small country hotel classified officially as a *centro agroturístico*, 85 kms from Granada and Almería. Double rooms start at a reasonable 7,000 pesetas and the excellent restaurant serves local Alpujarran fare with wine from local vineyards.

For further information, contact your local specialist wine store, Hipercor or Manuel Valenzuela at Barranco Oscuro, 18440 Cádiar (Granada), Tel: 95 834 3066. The best-known Spanish producer is Albet i Noya, in Catalonia, Tel: 93 899 4056. There are also several producers in La Rioja. The Asociación de Vida Sana, Tel: 93 265 2505, also has helpful information on organic wines.