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TINTO ON TENERIFE



A VISIT WITH DOLORES CABRERA OF LA ARAUCARIA

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*O knight, thou lackest a cup of canary.
When did I see thee so put down?*

SIR TOBY BELCH IN TWELFTH NIGHT, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

ON THE VERDANT SLOPES OF LA OROTAVA VALLEY, on the subtropical, Canary island of Tenerife, at the foot of the imposing Mount Teide, there is a tiny garden of Eden. A very high up garden of Eden that produces very special wine.

At nearly 4,000 meters above sea level, Mount Teide is the highest volcano in Spain. Of course, a stretch of the geopolitical imagination is required here: While the Canary Islands are politically and culturally part of Spain, they are located off the coast of West Africa. Their unique colonial history, along with their volcanic origins and remoteness from mainland Europe make the Canaries one of the world's most unusual viticultural regions. Tenerife is the largest and most populous island and, because it is nearly 2,000 kilometers from mainland Europe, the nineteenth century vine-destroying louse known as phylloxera never made its way here.

On this early spring day, I've come to visit Dolores Cabrera, whose wines captured my heart on a previous visit to the Canaries (I am half-Canarian, by the way). Back home in London, I searched for her wines but was unable to locate them—owing, I later understood, to both their limited production and the fact that she exports largely to the U.S.

Dolores has long been an organic farmer, but only recently began bottling her own wine under the label “La Araucaria.” Their rich, spicy character lingered in my mouth ever since that first taste, and I was curious to learn more.

The Spanish sparrows are chirping, the grass around the vines is strong and green, there are wildflowers everywhere. This soil is alive. “I want

you to know that for me the environment goes first,” says Dolores, pointing at the vineyards, where some of the vines already have a robust canopy. “We need a balance between farming, the plants, and animals, and we also need safe conditions for the people who work the land. We are ruining everything with so many pesticides and herbicides.”

In this subtropical seven-island archipelago comprising the Canary Islands, there are ten different wine D.O.s (*Denominación de Origen*, an appellation used across Spain to identify and protect the country's most remarkable terroirs) and half of them can be found on Tenerife. Because phylloxera never reached Canarian soil, nearly all Tenerife vines are *franc de pied*, meaning that they are grown on their own roots, ungrafted. The mineral-rich volcanic soils, together with the different elevations—some of the highest vineyards in Europe can be found here, above 1,500 meters—and varying microclimates on the island, enable winemakers to produce unconventional, highly expressive wines.

Master Sommelier Brian McClintic is one enthusiast of Canary Islands wines ever since a recent visit, and in particular, he loves the wines of Tenerife. I reached out to him over e-mail to pick his brain on why Tenerife captures oenophiles' hearts. “There are few places on earth with vines this old and soils this interesting,” he replied to me via email. “The reds are already very compelling with that distinctive pepper profile and energetic volcanic minerality. It's a common theme across grapes and across the island from Taganana to [La] Orotava to Teide.” He finds the whites remarkably “salty and crisp.”

History and geography dictate what crops are grown where, and the Canaries are no exception. Canary wines (mostly Malvasía) were highly regarded in England in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—Shakespeare mentions the wines favorably in *Twelfth Night* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Back then, exporting wine was the Canaries main money-spinner, and even if these days tourism has taken over, viticulture still accounts for almost half of the islands' agricultural land—the rest of it goes to fruits and vegetables like bananas and potatoes. Furthermore, the region's astonishing wine heritage means there are grape varieties on these islands rarely found elsewhere. Listán Negro, the predominant red grape variety in the archipelago, which the Spanish introduced in the sixteenth century, also makes up around 80 percent of Dolores' vineyards. On the other hand, the Listán Prieto variety, a perfect DNA match to California's Mission Grape—currently mainly found in the state's Central Valley—is more prevalent in the western isle of La Palma. This variety is also believed to have been introduced to South America by the Spanish *conquistadores*. In Chile, where it's known as País, it follows Cabernet Sauvignon as second in number of acres planted.

All sorts of rare varieties not found elsewhere exist on Tenerife in small amounts—including Listán Blanco, Malvasía, Vijariego, Baboso Negro, Tintilla, Moscatel, Marmajuelo, Verdello, and Negramoll. Unusual grape varieties aside, Tenerife is remarkable because of its strong, elderly vines—it's not uncommon to find healthy centenarian vines on the island's 8,000 hectares of vineyards.

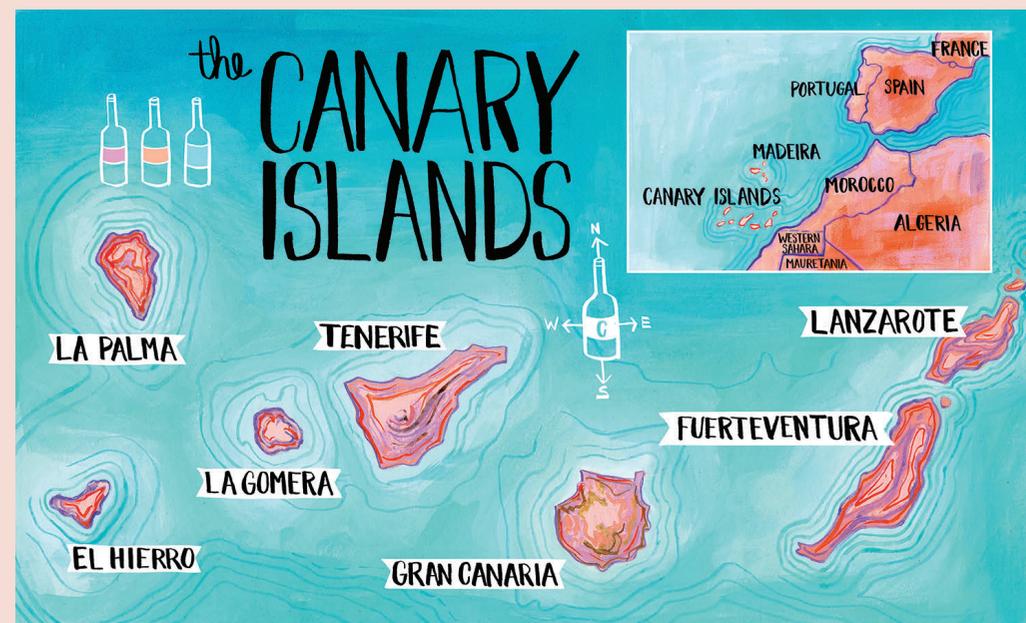
Dolores' vines are indeed over a hundred years old, and nearly all are planted in the traditional Canarian training system known as *cordón trenzado*. Literally “braided cord,” this fascinating system is unique to Tenerife, and specifically to this valley, La Orotava. Dolores describes it to me as “a multiple braided cord made from the

pruned vine-shoots,” with one that leads, and the rest of the branches braided together. It's a labor-intensive pruning method, which results in a higher cost of grapes. It is believed that this system might have been first introduced to produce Malvasía grapes when the grape was first brought over by settlers. One particularity of Malvasía is that it needs more buds left on the vine when pruning—the *cordón trenzado* system makes that task easier. Additionally, both to take advantage of the fertile soils and as a solution to the limited space on the island, the braided cord system enables farmers to move the vines' branches around during the resting season in order to grow other crops on the soil underneath, mainly potatoes.

Unlike many winegrowers on the island, Dolores was not born into this profession; rather, she built her career over two decades. She first attended Agronomy School in Tacoronte, one of the quintessential wine regions on Tenerife. Following this, she went on to work straight away at vineyards for different wineries, such as Bodegas Monje and El Penitente. In 2005, she began managing her own vineyards, but was still selling the grapes to other producers until the economic crisis of 2009 caused a shift in the global market. “I saw it as an opportunity to start making my own wine,” she says—and did so, starting in 2013.

From the start, when managing her own vineyards, Dolores insisted on organic farming, she tells me. “When you work in organic you need to work much more. You need to visit the parcels more often, check for plagues, for bugs. It's different when you use chemicals, you apply it and you don't need to go back to the vineyards until twenty days later.” But she isn't complaining as she explains this—rather, she is radiantly enthusiastic. I don't have the impression that she minds the constant work of organic viticulture. “Some farmers tell me that it's hard.”

She mentions a common annoyance for grape growers: birds who come to eat the sweet, ripe grapes. For Dolores, this is part of an ecosystem. “Yes, maybe the birds eat a hundred kilos of grapes,



sure, but then they also eat other bugs that are more damaging,” she says. “It's all about balance.” The vineyards Dolores rents and farms expand across seven hectares, all planted on the Mount Teide slopes, on volcanic soils with some clay, at an elevation between 300 and 600 meters.

In Tenerife, especially in the north, many families traditionally had their own small vineyards, making wine for their own consumption. In mine, family gatherings happen around my uncle's vineyard, where I have cherished childhood memories, including secretly playing hide-and-seek with my cousins. My uncle made wine as a hobby, and even now that he is retired from his job, he still goes to the vineyards every day, sometimes with his eldest son. Each year, the harvest was a special occasion for us, with the whole family getting together and everyone helping each other. However, Dolores explains to me, younger generations now aren't as interested in working the land—so, when their parents or grandparents are unable to work, the vineyards often go abandoned. That's when people like Dolores come in to keep viticulture alive. Sometimes, Dolores tells me, she spots a neglected vineyard and offers to look after it; other times vineyard owners

approach her to see if she is interested in renting. At her small winery in La Orotava, she currently produces up to 40,000 bottles each year. Her flagship wine, La Araucaria *tinto*, is made from Listán Negro grapes. Harvested by hand and destemmed, the spontaneous fermentation process starts in steel tanks. The wine is then aged in old Burgundy barrels for at least six months. It is bottled without filtration, and minimal added sulfites (between 5 and 30mg/liter.) Before export, the wine rests for another six months in the bottle.

Master Sommelier McClintic expressed his enthusiasm for Dolores' wines. “Each time I've tasted [her] wines, I've been impressed with her commitment to working naturally and pushing the envelope of transparency and purity,” he wrote to me. “Producers like Dolores and Envinate are breaking ground on Tenerife.”

After seeing the vineyard, I sit down with Dolores and her husband, Pedro—whose job involved working with winery machinery, and who is also, Dolores says, her right-hand man—to enjoy some delicious local goat's cheese and charcuterie, which go perfectly with the spicy, balsamic wine. I ask about the illustration of an araucaria tree

on the bottle. Dolores tells of the araucaria tree near the vineyards that they use as a landmark for people looking to find the place.

We are drinking the 2015 La Araucaria “Tinto.” I am finding balsamic notes, cherry aromas, and black peppercorn; the wine is medium-bodied and has a tangy, fresh finish. We then try her 2016 “Paraje la Peroma,” made as well with Listán Negro, but in this case unoaked and fermented by carbonic maceration; I find it more explosive in flavor, with mineral notes that must be from the volcanic soil, and notes of red fruits, licorice and a certain tobacco element. Dolores’ favorite is the La Araucaria “Tinto.” “It’s the wine that reminds me the most of the *vinos antiguos*—wines we used to have here on the islands long ago. It’s volcanic, more balsamic; it has aromas of local fruits.”

Currently most of the La Araucaria production is exported, mainly to the U.S. “It’s difficult being a woman in the world of wine,” says Dolores as the afternoon sun fades into evening and the birds calm their chatter. “I have been working for 23 years, getting good results and excellent quality. Yet it seems that you need to prove your worth more than a man—it looks like there is expectation to see when you are going to fail. But it doesn’t bother me anymore, the important thing here is the environment, not me,” she says.

With that, we sit back and sip more of this humble but passionate expression of the volcanic *terruño* of the La Orotava valley. 🍷

