

The Wine Advocate

By Luis Gutiérrez

After years of tension with the style of their Fondillón (and lately their sweet Moscatel too), Gutiérrez de la Vega has finally left the Alicante appellation. All the grapes are grown within the physical limits of the Alicante DO, but the wines are sold as varietal wines, whose vintage is certified by an independent body, not the Alicante appellation. His sweet red wines cannot be labeled as Fondillón either, as the name is used exclusively by the appellation. It's a shame an appellation lets one of its more important wineries go. As I visited their vineyards and cellars I had the chance to taste all the extremely limited cuvées which are bottled and sold in homeopathic doses. The best sweet wine producer in Spain?

Recóndita Armonía Solera 1978

The sweet/rancio wines from Gutiérrez de la Vega cannot be called Fondillón anymore, a special category belonging to the DO Alicante, since they have left the Alicante appellation. However, the wines are produced according to what they believe is the real tradition of Fondillón production in Alicante. The labeling and explanations are a bit confusing; these are really non-vintage wines bottled from a solera that was started in 1978, and in this case that is fed every year with the new wine to refill the barrels from where the handful of bottles are withdrawn. The grapes are picked very ripe, over 20 Baumé, then foot trodden and left to ferment slowly in an open oak barrel before aging a minimum of ten years in these barrels. Part of the wine is bottled as the vintage wine and the rest added to the 1,300-liter oak vat that contains the 1978 solera blend from which some 60 liters are bottled and used to refill the barrels that contain the 1978 solera. They tell me the production is ten bottles per year, making it probably the smallest cuvée in the world! This is quite similar to the Solera 1979, but here there is a more oxidative profile with more notes of nuts and dried plums, sweet carob (think of sweet tree bark) and slightly warm and dark notes and flavors of licorice and cola nuts. All components are well integrated, since the wine has aged for no less than 30 years in barrel. Super wine. **95**

Recóndita Armonía Solera 1979

I had the luxury to taste five different sweet Monastrell wines from Gutiérrez de la Vega, and my favorite was the Recóndita Armonía Solera 1979. He started a small solera in the year of the birth of each of his children: a 30-liter barrel for the 1978 and 1979 and the 1985 in a 150-liter barrel from another solera started in 1979. This one is darker than the 1987 solera and has more concentration with notes of dates, barbecued orange peel, curry, tobacco, tree bark and licorice. It shows great depth, complexity and elegance enlivened by a very fine thread of acidity that gives great balance to the full-bodied, powerful and concentrated palate. It finishes extremely long and deep. Whatever it says on the label, to me this is a sublime Fondillón. Regrettably this is truly an academic wine, as he only fills around ten bottles per year to keep the average age of the wine old. **97**

Recondita Armonia Solera 1987

The NV Recondita Armonia Fondillon Solera 1987 is the blend of the different years since he started producing Fondillon in 1987, so we could say this is the real McCoy, a solera started 26 years ago. The wine is stored in a 1,300-liter American oak barrel, to which new wine is added when it has aged for 10 years, and only a small quantity (400 half-liter bottles) is taken out and bottled every year. This is one of the few Fondillon wines produced in Alicante today. Dark mahogany color with an amber edge, the extremely complex nose is redolent of cashews, spices, curry, aromatic herbs, balsamic to the point that it reminded me of an old Barolo Chinato or similar vermouth, full of Mediterranean aromas with ginger, leather and coffee. It's a heady wine, velvety, warm, and intense, pungent and long, it stays in your mouth for minutes. A truly exceptional, unique wine that should last well. Drink 2013-2025. **96**

Casta Diva Reserva Real Solera 2002

This wine that last year looked like a solera wine, is confirmed this year. The NV Casta Diva Reserva Real 2002 is the bottling from November 2014 that you can see on the back label. The must had a partial fermentation in oak barrels as it was stopped with the addition of alcohol and then added to a solera started in 2002 with a wine that was served at the royal wedding of king Felipe of Spain. The wine has 210 grams of sugar and 13.6% alcohol. Old gold, amber-colored, the nose is really spicy and smoky with aromas of dried apricots and nougat as well as developing diesel notes. It is complex and ever changing with very good depth. In the mouth it tastes of honey, almonds and "turrón de Jijona" (the Christmas almond paste from the region) and finishes very long and persistent, with great length. This is truly outstanding, turning more balsamic once it's in the glass. While not cheap, this is still good value for the quality it delivers. **95**

Casta Diva Cosecha Miel 2013

The 2013 Casta Diva Cosecha Miel boasts 214 grams of sugar and 13.5% alcohol. It was produced with very ripe Moscatel grapes from old vines on chalk soils at 100 meters altitude very close to the sea. The wine is fermented in oak barrels and fortified when they consider it has reach the sugar level they are looking for, then aged for 12 months in these barrels. The nose is very intense, with notes of dried roses, orange peel, apricots and honey revealing a quite ripe character and also a little bit of alcohol. The palate is sweet, light and easy to drink with honeyed and balsamic flavors plus a very long and persistent finish. Textbook Mediterranean Moscatel. **93**