

Albarino is in the air

Perfect springtime wine from Spain makes a pilgrimage to the New World

Tim Teichgraeber, Special to The Chronicle

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(03-23) 04:00 PDT Santiago de Compostela, Spain -- For 1,000 years Catholic pilgrims have made long treks from all over Europe to the city of Santiago de Compostela near the Atlantic coast of northwestern Spain. The remains of Saint Iago -- the apostle Saint James -- are said to lie in the crypt under the magnificent cathedral there, and the church has recognized the pilgrimage to Santiago as one of only four great pilgrimages by which a penitent might be absolved of even the most egregious sins.

You would think that with so many travelers passing through Santiago over the years, the great local white wines would have caught on sooner. Fresh, zesty white wines made from Albarino grapes in the nearby Rias Baixas (REE-ass BY-shuss) region have long been a favorite match for seafood in Spain, but 15 years ago they were rarely tasted in the United States.

With Albarino imports topping \$5 million in 2005, up 159 percent since 2001 according to Spanish wine bureau data, the United States is now the No. 1 importer of Albarino wine. Spanish producers in Rias Baixas, a wine region in Galicia, have had to scramble to keep up with growing demand.

"You can't imagine how this region was 20 years ago," says Manuel Otero-Gudino of the Agro de Bazan winery in the Salnes Valley. "Most people had tiny vineyards and no temperature control in the winery. It was hard to even find a wine with a label." Today the region has many modern wineries, and increasing global demand for Albarino wines from Rias Baixas has generated a healthy assortment of international brands like Agro de Bazan's Gran Bazan label.

If you've never heard of Albarino, you're certainly not alone, but the grape is clearly gaining

traction with American consumers -- tapas restaurants and Gen Y sommeliers with indigenous grape fetishes aren't the only ones buying the stuff.

"People definitely ask for it," says Rusty Albert, co-owner of Wine Impression on San Francisco's California Street. Albert says he now carries five Albarinos from Rias Baixas, up from just one a few years ago. "We have a number of customers that are traveling all over, including to Spain and Portugal, and when they come back they're looking for those wines."

Albarino grapes make neat, distinctive wines that smell and taste like a remix of other, more popular grapes. It has some of the citrusy, grassy flavors of Sauvignon Blanc, flashes of the richer peach and pineapple flavors of Viognier, and the delicate, mineral character of Riesling. In Portugal, Albarino makes Vinho Verde, a refreshing, low-alcohol, sometimes fizzy wine. The Spanish versions tend to be riper, richer and more complex, but still tart and refreshing. Local wines usually complement local food, and Albarino is tailor-made for seafood, Galicia's other claim to fame.

Until recently, the only place Albarino grapes were grown was along the cool Atlantic coast of Northern Portugal and across the Mino River border in Rias Baixas, a region known as "Green Spain" because of its lush seaside forests.

Galicia looks like the Pacific Northwest, right down to the fishing boats in the harbors and mussel beds floating in the inlets. Red grapes like Garnacha and Tempranillo that grow well in the hot, hardscrabble country that makes up most of the rest of Spain don't ripen well in Galicia's Rias Baixas wine appellation (in Spanish parlance, a Denominacion de Origen or D.O.) but the cool seaside hills suit Albarino just fine. No one knows exactly where the grape originated, but Albarino's pilgrimage ended in Galicia.

Like Burgundy or Champagne, Rias Baixas has thousands of small family vineyards, many of them only 1 to 5 acres in size. Some small growers have pooled their resources to form the cooperative wineries Martin Codax and Condes de Albarei, the two largest wineries in the region, both producing more than 1 million bottles per year. Then there are a number of midsize privately owned wineries producing hundreds of thousands of bottles per year that may own some vineyards,

but also buy grapes from a number of other small growers. A handful of small- to medium-size wineries make estate-bottled wines from grapes grown in their own vineyards.

Albarino accounts for 94 percent of the grapes planted in the Rias Baixas wine region and its five subregions of Val do Salnes, Ribeira do Ulla, Soutomaior, O Rosal and Condado do Tea. In O Rosal and Condado do Tea, two of the warmer subregions, local grapes like Loureiro, Treixadura and Caino Blanco are blended with Albarino, but even there the wines are usually at least 70 percent Albarino.

Rain is always a possibility in Rias Baixas, and wet grapes are very susceptible to rot. Most Albarino growers grow the vines very high, up tall vertical posts to trellises that suspend the grape bunches above vineyard workers' heads, higher up from the potentially wet ground and allowing more drying breezes to flow through the vineyard after a shower. Sometimes growers with small plots will plant another crop, like potatoes, under the vine canopy.

Albarino wines from Rias Baixas are made in a very uniform way from winery to winery. After the grapes are crushed, the pulp and skins are chilled, so that they don't begin to ferment, and left to "cold soak" for a couple of days while the juice extracts aromatic phenols from the grape skins. "Cold maceration is like a religion in Rias Baixas," says Cristina Mantilla Gonzalez, winemaker for several top wineries including Valminor and Pazo San Mauro. Christina's husband, Emilio Rodriguez Canas, is no slouch as a winemaker himself, turning out top-quality Albarinos at Terras Gauda, an expansive, modern estate in the sunny O Rosal district of Rias Baixas. Between the two of them, the husband and wife make several of the region's best wines.

The juice is fermented in stainless steel tanks, where it stays until it is bottled just before shipment. Because Albarino tends to have very high acidity the winemaker will sometimes put part of the wine through a secondary malolactic fermentation to soften it, but not too much. That zesty edge is part of the grape's charm. An Albarino with a buttery finish is like a Porsche with under-inflated tires.

Albarino wines can have exotic fruit flavors, but oxidation and age can cause them to fade quickly. Most taste best in the first year after harvest. Fefinanes is one label whose wines seem to hold up,

but most lose more than they gain.

Behind the scenes, though, there's a lot of experimentation going on. Many winemakers are beginning to experiment with new yeasts and oak barrels.

"We still have a lot to investigate," says Marcos Barros Lopez of Coto de Xiabre winery, which produces the brands Maior de Mendoza and Fulget.

Commercial Albarino is rarely fermented or aged in oak barrels because the aromas and flavors of the wood can overshadow the variety's subtleties. But Valdamor winery, which exports most of its 500,000-bottle-per-year production, is one of several in Rias Baixas making a small amount of oak-aged wine.

Export Manager Carmen Paya Gonzalez insists the oak-aged Albarinos are motivated by local changes in taste rather than a belief that oaky Albarino will sell well in the United States or the United Kingdom. "As people started to like oakier wines in Rias Baixas, we decided to experiment with the same."

Lucia Carballeira, winemaker for Condes de Albarei looks quite the scientist in a white lab coat, toting a clipboard that helps her keep track of many lots of wine. "We try to retain a house style that customers expect," she says.

Rather than using oak barrels to make her reserve wine, Carballeira simply held back some choice batches of fruit from older vineyards and prime sites to make an outstanding small-production Albarino called Erxebre. Unfortunately none is exported to the United States.

At a time when some wine lovers are moaning about globalization and a perceived creeping homogenization of wine styles, Albarino's success proves that unique regional wines can compete against cookie-cutter Chardonnays.

What they all have in common is a consistency of winemaking style -- dry, fresh and unoaked -- throughout Rias Baixas. If you try one Albarino and like it, you'll probably like the next one you try,

because it won't be all that different. It's the same branding strategy that has worked for New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc.

Even Spanish winemakers experimenting with new styles of Albarino will tell you that they don't necessarily believe that oak or cellar-aged Albarinos are better wines than the straightforward, vivacious Albarinos that are selling so well in foreign markets. "In simplicity, sometimes you may reach higher goals than with wines that are more ambitious," explains Pilar Jimenez of Bodegas Pazo de Barrantes in the Salnes Valley.

With Albarino, sometimes less is more.

Old World grape thrives in New World

While wineries in Rias Baixas tinker with new techniques and styles, Albarino is making inroads in the New World. A handful of Albarino vineyards have popped up in an interesting assortment of places, from Oregon's Umpqua Valley to Carneros, Lodi and Santa Barbara County.

Michael Havens, founder and winemaker of Havens Wine Cellars in Carneros claims to be the first Albarino producer outside Europe, at his wife Kathryn's insistence. "We were drinking (Albarino) in Spain and Kathryn said, 'We need this wine in our life. We either have to import it or plant it.' "

A year later, Havens imported Albarino budwood, but the only way he could persuade grower Doug Hill to plant three acres was to commit to buying the whole crop. "He said, 'Albawhat?' "

Havens makes about 500 cases of Albarino, and it sells out quickly.

Louisa Sawyer Lindquist of Qupé Wine Cellars in Santa Barbara County makes several wines from Spanish grapes under her Verdad label, including a few hundred cases of Albarino. Lindquist has so far been sourcing her Albarino from a vineyard in Santa Ynez Valley, but is planning to double her production as soon when new plantings in Edna Valley mature.

After a few trips to Spain, Earl and Hilda Jones of Abacela Vineyards in Oregon's Umpqua Valley started planting Albarino in 2000 and now have 5 acres and expect to make about 800 cases of the

wine this year.

Earl Jones says he tempers the wine's acidity with some malolactic fermentation, "but I like acidity in a seafood wine. We have decided that we're going to stay with a crisp style. It's pretty classic Rias Baixas Albarino."

Lodi vintner Markus Bokisch also makes some Albarino, and the grape has made its way to Australia, where some 10 wineries are reportedly making Albarino.

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A taste of Albarino

The hallmarks of great Albarino are bright citrus flavors with more subtle grass, peach or tropical fruit notes and a zesty finish that sings with boiled crab, grilled prawns or New World ceviche. The few new American Albarinos emulate the same zippy, unoaked style of the Spanish original.

2005 Castel de Bouza Bouza do Rei Rias Baixas Albarino (\$11) A great value, zesty and focused with great Albarino character in its almond, white pepper, pineapple and lemon-lime flavors.

2005 Condes de Albarei Rias Baixas Albarino (\$15) A very well-made, well-distributed wine from one of the largest co-op wineries in Rias Baixas. It has good varietal character with straightforward grapefruit and grass aromas and richer peach tones in the mouth, finishing with bright lemon-lime and mineral flavors.

2005 La Val Rias Baixas Albarino (\$15) A crystalline, fresh white with grapefruit, candied pear, nectarine, rosemary and mineral flavors and a long, juicy finish. It doesn't have the midpalate richness of some of the best, but has plenty of juicy charm.

2005 Mar de Frades Rias Baixas Albarino (\$17) A full-bodied, relatively soft Albarino with plush peach, apricot, butter and melon flavors and a hint of salty sea spray character that you sometimes notice in wines that are made close to the sea.

2005 Pazo Pondal Condado do Tea Albarino (\$19) A lovely Albarino with delicate lavender, melon and citrus aromas, a rich mouthfeel and melon, cream, anise and lemon lime flavors, very expressive and nicely layered.

2005 Pazo Senorans Rias Baixas Albarino (\$19) This is one of the great wines of the region. It's a kaleidoscope of typical Albarino flavors, focused and taut, but rich in body, with candied pear, grapefruit, peach, lavender and green apple flavors that shimmer and shift through the citrusy finish.

2005 Santiago Ruiz O Rosal (\$20) A ripe, opulent blend of Albarino with smaller amounts of Treixadura and Loureiro grapes from the warm O Rosal subregion with rich grapefruit, melon, cream and herb along with mild grassy notes that give it fresh flair.

2005 Terras Gauda Abadia de San Campio Rias Baixas Albarino (\$14) An estate-grown 100 percent Albarino from one of the finest seaside estates in O Rosal, a dazzling white wine with perfectly balanced, crystal-clear green apple, lavender, grapefruit and green tea flavors that run especially deep.

2005 Valminor O Rosal Albarino (\$12) A big, ripe Albarino blended with other local grapes from the warm O Rosal region of Rias Baixas with hints of green grass and flowers on the nose and generous peach, passion fruit, coconut cream and pineapple flavors that finish focused and crisp.

2005 Vionta Rias Baixas Albarino (\$15) This Freixenet-owned brand is one of the easier Albarinos to find in the Bay Area and a good, typical example. It has fresh red grapefruit aromas and hints of apricot and peach flavors that seem comparatively ripe, but still finish crisp.

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