



# MARIANO GARCÍA

Mariano García is possibly Spain's most renowned winemaker and so much has been written about him that, as with all eminent figures, it is hard to distinguish the man from the myth.

WORDS CARLOS READ PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF MAUROS

There is however a certain irony in this as he has no airs, is approachable, softly spoken though determined and most specific, and his instinctive feel and deep knowledge of the land and vineyards together with his by no means elaborate way of making wine make him thoroughly endearing.

This is perhaps the result of his roots, for he is the son of an agricultural foreman at the (also mythical) Vega Sicilia (see **essential** December 2015) where he was born and brought up; and legend has it that his stellar career began one day, when he was just eighteen, as he happened to be passing the winemaker's office and was asked in as they needed another taster. With no formal knowledge of wine, he was however the only one to pick out two identical wines in a blind tasting of 20 and was straight away put to

work in the winery. Subsequently – with the blessings, encouragement and help of general manager Jesús Anadón and long distance then owner of the estate (Venezuelan), Hans Neumann, he undertook formal winemaking and viticultural studies first in Valladolid and then in Madrid, to end up piloting the oenological fortunes of the winery from 1968 until the spring of 1998.

This did not prevent him, however, from quietly branching out in 1978 – then in his mid 30s – into a separate, more personal project of his own. This would be the beginnings of Mauro, named after his father, and started with his purchasing some four hectares of old vineyards which were about to be grubbed up in Tudela de Duero.

Here, in total contrast with his role at Vega Sicilia where his job was in a certain sense to continue the historical mantle and gently pilot a super traditional series of

wines into the 20th century, he could let himself go with practices at the time considered either unnecessary or downright loopy, but now very much the norm in the production of quality wines: picking grapes by parcel, figuring out their specific qualities and characteristics, experimenting with the results of different macerations, seeking ways to express more primary fruit, achieving better balance by reduced ageing in oak and in different sorts of barrels from diverse origins, and working on lower yields in the interests of achieving more purity and concentration.

The official Ribera del Duero DO – which is some 115 kilometres long and just 36 deep – would follow a few years later, in 1982; but it is believed that when the bureaucrats were deciding and planning its limits, the mayors of neither western-most Tudela de

Duero nor neighbouring Sardon del Duero were particularly interested in being included and so they were not.

Meantime, many years later, in the late 1990s, Mariano – of whom his son Eduardo has said "For him the clock never stops ticking; he observes, learns, travels" – was ready for a further adventure. Amazed at the bandwagoning attention Ribera del Duero was receiving, he was convinced that in due course there would not just be a limit to the region's capacity, but some king of reckoning. It seemed to him that rural Toro – just an hour southwest and (still) known mainly for its clumsy, high strength reds, could be tamed. Here, it seemed to him, that the old virtually abandoned vines growing in their poor soils were simply waiting for someone to come along and make of them something different and dynamic.

After considerable research and experimentation, 1997 duly saw not only the release of Vega Sicilia's Pintia but of Mariano's own first wine San Román, for in 1996 he had bought for himself some 10 hectares of old vineyards there; and shortly afterwards he would construct Mauros, on the fringes of Pedrosa del Rey.

Both of these, in their different ways, would set the regional benchmark and it is probably fair to say that even all these years later there are no other top local cuvées that come close as, despite an abundance of new wineries, Toro has in general still not found its feet.

Shortly afterwards, however, came the bombshell, with the influential US *Wine Spectator* reporting: May 31, 1998 Vega Sicilia's Winemaker Fired by Owners. On April 6, Bodegas Vega Sicilia, Spain's foremost winery, abruptly fired Mariano García, its fabled winemaker for the past 30

years. Industry sources told the Madrid newspaper *El Mundo* that the decision was 'irrevocable' and based on García's alleged 'unloyal competition'.

Or not; for, as we have seen, Mariano had been rather busy for the last three decades, and if this piece has not dwelt on his achievements at Vega Sicilia – bought in 1982 by the Álvarez family – for whom Mariano not only tweaked its august, classic and ever so famous wines into a certain modernity, but in addition set up the formidable Alión estate in 1991 to offer a single upbeat Tinto Fino stylishly embellished with more than a touch of new French oak as befitted the times – it is because this has been more than written about elsewhere.

Never one to stand still, in 1999 Mariano teamed up with Javier Zaccagnini, then head of Ribera del Duero's Consejo Regulador (and incidentally its most effective ever) to create a

further winery in Ribera del Duero: Aalto. Here, yet again, quality and individuality remain the order of the day on the basis of old-vine or massale selection Tinto Fino, a wide range of terroirs spread over nine villages in the province of Burgos, and currently some 110 hectares. Some six wines are made and they are well worth hunting down especially if your pockets are deep.

Mauro has now swelled to some 80 hectares consisting primarily of three vineyards, the oldest of which consists of just three hectares of centenary Tinto Fino and is the source of the sublime *Terreus*, of which just a few thousand bottles are produced in exceptional vintages;

and Mauros now consists of some 90 hectares spread over a number of municipalities and from here next year will emerge the first ever vintage of super cuvée Cartago. Also out there somewhere is an exceptional barrel-fermented Godello, made in El Bierzo, production of which is just a few hundred bottles so blink and it's gone; for over the years, Mariano, in conjunction with his sons Eduardo (an accomplished winemaker in his own right) and Alberto (who runs the administration of the family's affairs), despite exporting their wines to over 70 countries, has become not just a myth but a household name trusted on his home soil and well beyond by serious wine lovers of all ages.

## MAUROS PRIMA 2014 (14.5%) – DO TORO

► Tinta de Toro/aka local Tempranillo with 15% Garnacha and 6% Touriga Nacional.

► Aged for 12 months in a combination of third use American and French oak.

► Intensely hued with alluring floral, purple and red plum characteristics, fresh curranty notes and overtones of fresh fig. Medium bodied, bright, jolly, with plenty of verve, substance and freshness.

## MAURO 2014 (14.5%) – VINO DE LA TIERRA DE CASTILLA Y LEÓN

► Tinto Fino/aka Tempranillo with 6% Syrah.

► Aged for 15 months in a combination of third use American and French oak.

► Purple in hue and in essence all about black fruit;

dense but restrained with nicely intermingled hints of toasty oak but with fresh, crunchy fruit and a nice mineral tang.

► Already most approachable, but will fill out with bottle age, so don't be afraid to cellar it for a while; this is an altogether text book year of major elegance.

## MAUROS SAN ROMÁN 2013 (14.5%) – DO TORO

► Old, pure Tinta de Toro grown on sparse soils with little organic material.

► Aged for 24 months in mainly newish French oak.

► Black in colour; big and mouth filling with a core of mainly red cherry fruit. Big, supple, succulent, harmonious and generously flavoured with (again) nice minerality. Already most approachable – ie. a pleasure to drink – but will cellar.

