

Our destination is Amandi, in Ribeira Sacra, one of the epicenters of the rebirth of Galician red wines. But for now wine seems secondary. What's making my head spin is what Pérez said before we climbed into his car: "Why are the tires so worn out? That's because I have to brake every time that I run into police radar. If they took my driver's license, it would be a big problem."

Now, as he takes the s-curves at top speed, as the landscape becomes more and more spectacular, mist slipping between the green and rocky peaks bringing a light air of fantasy to each scene, the dashboard lights up—something about a problem with the brake fluid.

Pérez seems unconcerned. "The cars last me a maximum of two years," he says without slowing down. "I put 200,000 miles on them and I leave them. This," he says, waving his hand at the windshield, "already has 50,000 miles, and I've only had it a few months."

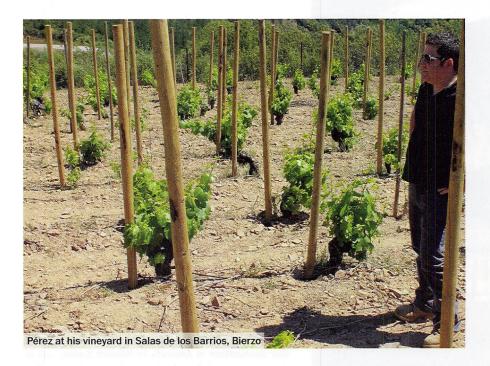
The first time that I met Pérez was some five or six years ago, in Bierzo, where he got his start. On that visit, we were opening bottles, talking and eating until close to sunrise, when, suddenly, Pérez stood up and announced he had a family meeting in Madrid (250 miles away) and that he had better start driving so he wouldn't be late. Pérez's energy is also in his wines, in the dozens of bottlings he makes in Spain and beyond.

He drives from Bierzo to Madrid to make wines; to Ribeira Sacra, Rías Baixas, Monterrei and, of course, León and from there to the Douro, in Portugal, where he drives because, in the end, it's not so far.

Raúl Pérez is 39 years old, his hair disheveled and black, and, although he's somewhat small, he is well built, someone you wouldn't want to get into a fight with at the end of an alley. However, his calmness, his easy smile and a certain timidity that comes out from time to time make it pretty improbable that Pérez would be that kind of guy.

His family has made wines in Bierzo since the 18th century. Their winery, Castro Ventosa, has some 170 acres of vineyards—a huge estate in the context of

Raúl Pérez at his winery in Salas de los Barrios



"The important thing is to be capable of making the wine that you have in your head."

-Raúl Pérez

Bierzo. Before 1989, the Pérez family produced only bulk wine, which was not a very appealing business to Raúl. In fact, while he continues taking curve after curve in the road to Amandi, he confesses to me that he didn't drink wine and that the family business was "only work, lots of work." He intended to study medicine, he says, but he showed up late to the medical school registration and ended up signing up for enology. "No idea how I got into winemaking," he states flatly.

During the late 1980s, the new Priorat did not yet exist, nor did the new Bierzo. But the first modern Ribera del Dueros had started to appear—wines with a certain "glamour" as Pérez describes it. People who drank Rioja and little else started to look elsewhere, and winemaking, for Pérez, began to seem more attractive. So he finished school, returned to Bierzo and started to work in the family business in 1993.

We turn off the highway, following the course of the Sil, a creek at the foot of the mountains. Reflected off its calm turquoise waters are vineyards rivaling the most precipitous in the Douro or the Mosel, vineyards filled with mencía, caiño, bastardo and who knows what else among the old vines.

In Amandi, it's a relief to get out of the car and stretch our legs. Raúl walks away, as if to take a break from the interview, but from the distance, he gestures to me, indi-

cating a piece of the vineyard in the middle of a hillside of black rock. It's the half-acre block he uses for El Pecado, one of his most famous wines, a delicate blend of red fruit and spices that tastes as if a Chambolle were debuting for the New York marathon. He makes El Pecado in collaboration with Pedro Rodríguez, another important player in Ribeira Sacra, who owns this vineyard as well as his own winery, Guimaro.

"The first time that I came here, I couldn't believe the landscape," Pérez says when I catch up with him. "I didn't know if the wine would be good or bad, I only knew that this place was calming for me, that the sound of the water gave me peace."

In 1993, Pérez's family winery was called Herederos de Rosaura López Fuentes, after his grandmother, who died at the age of 95 and who, he says with a smile that doesn't spread out across his lips, was a great taster and liked wine a lot. But his affection for her didn't stop Raúl from changing the name of the winery to Castro Ventosa, the name of a Roman settlement close to Villafranca.

But Raúl went beyond changing the name. He believed he had to build a modern winery, from scratch. He'd traveled to Bordeaux, where he says he learned that "wine has a prologue—not everything is technical. You have to know the history to have a reasoned argument to sell it."

That was in 1997. Two years later, Alvaro Palacios, already known for his work in Priorat, stopped in to say hello. "I think that that changed my life," says Pérez.

The arrival of Palacios in Bierzo-along with his no less talented and inquiring nephew Ricardo Pérez Palacios - marked the beginning of a revolution parallel to the one that had occurred in Priorat, when that same Palacios arrived in 1989. For Raúl Pérez, his influence was profound. "He showed me the wines of Burgundy. He showed me that you could drink old white wines like those from López de Heredia. He showed me that you didn't only have to vinify in stainless steel, but that you could also do it in oak barrels. He introduced me to other winemakers like Peter Sisseck of Pingus and Bertrand Sourdais of Dominio de Atauta. Alvaro opened up the world to me."

Pérez's world had already started to open a year earlier, when he met José Luis Mateos of Monterrei, whose family owns a bar in Verín complete with slot machines and tapas. He is also the owner of Quinta da Muradella.

Mateos, who studied communications and business in Madrid, started to make wine for his parents' bar in the early 1990s. "When I met José Luis," Pérez recalls, "he didn't know anything about wines, but he seemed like a nice guy."

Mateos introduced Pérez to a different style of mencía, the principal red grape of Bierzo. Monterrei is the southernmost region of Galicia (on the border with Portugal) and is also the warmest part, which in a certain way relates it to Bierzo, where the vineyards are generally warmer than in most of coastal Galicia.



Working with Mateos at Quinta da Muradella, Pérez has helped turn out wines with rabidly red fruit and a dagger of acidity—like A Trabe, from ancient mencía vineyards mixed with bastardo and who knows what else. The vines, in a town of semi-abandoned stone houses, look south toward the hills that border Portugal.

Through Mateos, Pérez began exploring beyond Monterrei to Ribeira Sacra as well as Rías Baixas, although his arrival at this last place was more the responsibility of his psychiatrist. Pérez had been pushing himself so hard in Bierzo—which was now being compared to Priorat for its *pizarra* soils—that he felt completely spent. His psychiatrist recommended that he rent a house close to the beach, to rest and forget about wine, at least for the summer. Pérez rented a house in Rías that looked out at the ocean.

A few days later, he was already thinking about buying some barrels and doing something in the garage of his rented house, with albariño—a wine that had the sensibility of the whites of López de Heredia, one that could handle the wood and was built for cellaring. He created Sketch, aged in bottles submerged in the Atlantic, and Muti, aged in neutral wood, a wine marked by the depth of its ripe fruit and the sharp cut of its acidity.

He purchased the fruit for these wines from Rodrigo Méndez, in Salnés, the town next door. And he soon made friends with Méndez, who asked him to help him with some wines, especially with caiño, the red his grandfather liked to drink. Pérez, using ancient vines, created Goliardo, filled with juicy red fruit and the spicy tingle of acidity.

Together, Pérez and Méndez, whom he

calls "Rodri," developed a new brand, Forjas del Salnés, focused on local varieties. "In the beginning Rodri surprised me," Pérez recalls, back in his car as we race toward Bierzo. "He had an openness to experiment. Now he impresses me by how he's grown and developed his knowledge." Meanwhile, the problem with the brake fluid persists, the little black sports car announces it to us, discreetly, from time to time on the dashboard.

After returning to Bierzo from his vacation at the seashore, Raúl decided to leave his family's business. "I felt that I went at a different speed and that was causing problems," he tells me. In 2004, he launched Bodegas y Viñedos Raúl Pérez in a garage, this one without water or light. He brought in some barrels for what would become the now mythical Mencía Ultreia 2005, a red that inaugurated Pérez's line of old-vine mencías from Bierzo.

He has since returned to Castro Ventosa while running his own winery in Salas de los Barrios, in Bierzo, in a building that dates to 1810 that used to be the town council. He has started to acquire vineyards as well. One of them, where he's taking me now, is several miles towards the mountains from his winery, a wild region, far from the big and now famous *pagos* of Corullón y Dragonte, just on the other extreme of the D.O. Raúl bought eight acres of vineyards there, having fallen in love with an acre of old vines, a mix of indigenous varieties, mencía among them.

But that patrimony of old vines and indigenous varieties was not the reason that he decided to invest. It had more to do with the place, with the mountains where only goats manage to graze, hills that extend into the horizon. "Don't ask me why, but I feel comfortable in the place. I like it here. It's like if I had already been in this place," he tells me, supporting himself on a post that's also supporting an old vine.

Pérez has built his consultancy in an intuitive way, in the same way that he chose vineyards in Salas de los Barrios: He's associated himself with people based only on the fact that he likes them. That's how he developed a project with Dirk Niepoort in Portugal's Douro Valley, who he met in Porto some years ago and perhaps is as restless (or enologically hyperkinetic) as Pérez. After spending some time in the Douro together, Niepoort now makes Ladredo, a wine from a small vineyard just in front of El Pecado in Ribeira Sacra. And Pérez now makes wine in the Douro, for his Ultreia line.

He approaches winemaking intuitively as well, running risks with wines like his Rara Avis. A white from alvarín, a local variety in León, he makes it in an oxidized style under a veil of flor. After 18 months in old wood, it ends up with deep mineral flavors, a sober answer to the wines of Jerez. "The most important thing in wine is to have your own opinion," Pérez tells me. "The important thing is to be capable of making the wine that you have in your head."

The ideas in Pérez's head have influenced close to 100 wines out in the market today, by my estimation—he doesn't seem to keep close track. What's exciting about his work is just that: What he thinks about exploring and all the flavors, grapes, regions and vineyards that have caught his attention. What's going on in his mind continues to confuse and amuse aficionados of Spanish wine.

