

Raul Pérez – General Notes and Tasting Notes

Tasting Notes courtesy of Luis Gutiérrez, The Wine Advocate

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Raul Pérez thinks 2018 is the best year he has seen in his 25 years of making wines in Bierzo, calling it “The year of Balance”. Well, saying that a vintage is the best vintage ever (in a way here they always are) is not a solid sales argument in our ears, but 2018 in Bierzo is really a fantastic vintage with almost everything in its right place. Everything is relative of course too, and comparing with the super complicated 2016 and 2017 that both were warm and very dry (especially 2017) and also affected by frost, 2018 is like night and day. It's much more bright, there is more of a lighter dryness and more nerve in the wines, maybe a bit more texture too and probably not as direct as 2017, but great great potential and some of us, Rodrigo Mendez, me and some other quite good tasters have in common said that it may be Raul's best vintage to date.

Ultreia Saint Jacques 2018, 93+/100:

The truly impressive 2018 Ulteia Saint Jacques transcends its price category. They destemmed more grapes because they fermented it in the oak vats they bought from Vega Sicilia to use in the new winery, where it macerated for two months and then matured in used barrels for nine to 10 months. The secret is to use very good grapes from very good vineyards. The wine is clean, precise and fresh, and the oak is super-subtle, almost unnoticeable. The palate reflects a fluid wine of pleasure, a red of thirst. This is the wine where they have invested more, and 2018 has to be the finest vintage to date. They did 150,000 bottles of this in the outstanding 2018 vintage. It was bottled in October/November 2019.

Ultreia Godello 2018 (White); 92+/100:

2017 was the year of frost, and production was very small. So, we jumped to the entry-level white 2018 Ulteia Godello, which was produced with purchased grapes from different plots and new vineyards (including one in the zone of Ponferrada and also vineyards in Cacabelos and Valtuille), from a mix of soils, slate and clay. This sets the tone of the whites from the vintage: it has perfect ripeness, freshness and harmony and is very clean, with precision and clarity. It's subtly varietal and was fermented in used barriques and used oak foudres of different sizes. They never rack or do bâtonnage, and they never use sulfur until bottling. It's fuller and more volume, which is compensated by more acidity. The élevage lasts until the next harvest, when they need the oak containers, trying to keep them empty for the shortest amount of time possible. The wine is approachable and a bit gentler, for a wider audience. They produced 26,000 bottles. It was bottled in late August 2019.

Ultreia Valtuille 2018; 98/100:

The 2018 Ulteia Valtuille feels very young. Pérez explained that they used more new oak here because he thinks this is the most serious vintage of this wine ever and also his favorite. This is from a plot in Villegas on 100% sandy soils, and it's the twin plot to the Cepas Centenarias from Castro Ventosa, his family winery. As this was the first single-vineyard they produced, they called it simply Valtuille; but with the new classification, this should be called Villegas. This is serious and designed for the long run, subtle and elegant, with the profile of a grand cru, some baby fat and a touch of oak but with juicy tannins, gobsmacking balance and great length. Drink the 2018 La Vizcaína La Vitoriana while you wait for this. 2018 was a low-yielding year in this plot, and they got some 3,000 bottles from almost two hectares that have been organically farmed for some six years now. The first vintage was 2005, which was also bottled as Matador Raúl Pérez. This might change names in the future, as it might be confused with one of the new Vino de Villa.

Ultreia Rapolao 2018; 96+/100:

The austere and sleek 2018 Ulteia El Rapolao could be the red equivalent to the white La del Vivo. Vinified with a short maceration, it fermented in chestnut barrel, where the wine's allowed to deliver a veil of flor yeast, and it matured in two used 500-liter barrels and a 225-liter barrique. The plot that produces this Rapolao delivers a more fragile wine. This has 12.6% alcohol and is the longer and more austere of the Rapolao bottlings. It is cleaner and longer, young and juicy. This was the origin of the first Rapolao that they bottled separately in 2011 in the La Vizcaína range. There is magic here. 1,500 bottles produced. It was bottled in October 2019.

Ultreia Petra 2018; 95/100:

The 2018 Ulteia Petra comes from the Ponferrada zone, from a very small south-facing plot on slate soils at high altitude—some 820 meters above sea level—that was harvested around one month after the vines from Valtuille. He has around 900 vines here. This is a little exuberant, with fruit and flowers. The palate reveals abundant tannins, and the wine needs a longer time in oak to polish those tannins. It's a wine that also needs time in bottle. But the finish is

very tasty and long, more Burgundian from the vineyards, with more tannins that are going to require time in bottle. There was only one barrel, so they filled some 270 bottles of this in December 2019.

La Vizcaina La Poulosa, 92/100:

I tasted the 2017 and 2018 vintages of the La Vizcaina range, and the style of the years is radically different: 2017 is more Mediterranean (more Rhône-ish) with some sensations that make you think of slate, wines of more sun, and 2018 is truly continental, fragrant, more Burgundian. La Poulosa is always the rounder and riper of the four reds from La Vizcaina. The 2017 La Vizcaina La Poulosa is gentler, riper and a little more generous, and it's the one where the two vintages are less different. In this 2017, the sun of the year shows more—the palate is soft, ripe and tender, with moderate acidity. This is very approachable. Each plot now has barrels from a specific tonnelier, but they are moving toward larger barrels; in 2017, there was a significant percentage of 225-liter barrels that were replaced in 2018 and basically disappeared in 2019. 5,500 bottles produced. The 2017s were bottled in early May 2019, when the barrels were filled with the following vintage.

Las Gundiñas 2017; 93/100:

La Gundiñas is the wine that shows the most differences between 2017 and 2018. The 2017 La Vizcaina Las Gundiñas is dark and concentrated, a wine of sun, while the 2018 is delicate and feels like a mini Bonnes Mares! This is quite like a Cornas—meaty, juicy, a little reticent and powerful, with abundant tannins. This is one wine that behaves better in 2017 than in 2016. This is a plot that has ups and down; it might be more regular in the future, as they finally bought it in 2018. Some 5,500 bottles produced. It was bottled in May 2019.

Ultreia Cova de la Raposa 2018; 94/100:

Cool vintages in warm zones seem to work, and it shows in the 2018 Ultreia Cova de la Raposa, which was not produced in 2017 because of the frost. There is only a 500-liter oak barrel, and the wine feels quite fine for the warmer exposure. The sandy soils produce stress in this vineyard, but in a rainier year like 2018, they are an advantage. This feels harmonious, with black rather than red fruit and some dusty tannins, a little more rustic and on the Rhône side more than Burgundy. There are 600 bottles of this. It was bottled in December 2019.

Ultreia Paluezas 2018; 95/100:

The last wine of the Ultreia range I tasted was the 2018 Ultreia Paluezas, because it's different, coming from limestone soils. The nose feels a little riper, but the change is in the palate, where the texture is chalky, the tannins very fine, a little powdery and dusty. It's from a higher-altitude zone on the way to Las Médulas. It matured in a second use 500-liter barrel, which might have given it some creaminess, and the wine comes through as gourmand, round and very attractive and easy to taste and drink. 600 bottles were filled at the end of 2019.

Ultreia La Claudina 2018 (White); 95/100:

Raul Pérez thinks 2018 is the best year he has seen in his 25 years of making wines in Bierzo, calling it the year of Balance. The whites are superb, even the 2018 Ultreia La Claudina, where there's always a little more ripeness from the sandy soil. They have used only barrels, and in 2018 40% of the oak was new, but in the future there will be a 1,000-liter oak foudre for this. The élevage is longer—17 to 18 months—and the wine develops more. The barrels are never topped up, so it's a little more oxidative. And in this vintage, there is some creaminess (perhaps the high percentage of new oak), with a showier profile, peachy juiciness, more volume and a spicy twist a little à la Jura, but more Meursault than Puligny. It's more expressive, rounder and juicier, less radical than some of the earlier years, spicy and with notes of fennel. 1,400 bottles were filled in late August/early September.

La Vizcaina Las Gundiñas 2018; 95/100:

La Gundiñas is the wine that shows the most differences between 2017 and 2018, when the 2018 La Vizcaina Las Gundiñas feels like a mini-Bonnes Mares! This happened in 2013, and this 2018 is like a refined version. This vineyard was somewhat irregular in the past, but they bought it in 2018; now that they work the vineyard and have 100% control, it might be more regular. There have been ups and downs with this wine over the years, and this 2018 is clearly one of the ups. The other highlight was 2013. This wine is the palest of the 2018s. It's from a vineyard that perhaps has a bit more white Valenciana grapes. This is super elegant, a rara avis. Bravo! 5,500 bottles were filled in May 2020.

La Vizcaína La Poulosa 2018, 93/100:

La Poulosa is quite regular and ripe, with notes of prunes, and even though there is more freshness in 2018, the 2018 La Vizcaína La Poulosa shows closer to the 2017, keeping the profile of the vineyard, which is very strong. In fact, there is only half a degree difference in alcohol between this 2018 and the 2017. There is more fruit here, and it's juicy and approachable, with integrated oak (they started replacing the 225-liter oak barrels with 500-liter ones), more freshness and a livelier palate. The tannins are round, with no edges, despite the fact that all the La Vizcaína range ferments with 100% full clusters. Some 5,600 bottles produced. It was bottled in April 2020.

La Vizcaína La del Vivo 2018 (White); 95/100:

2018 is a great vintage: The cycle was long and Godello ripened properly, so they avoided the excess bitterness on the finish, as you can see in the 2018 La Vizcaína La del Vivo. It's made the same way as in previous years: they use 500-liter oak barrels and one amphora with skins and flor that is used for the final blend. Having such perfect ripeness, the wine is very tasty, and there's no fruit but a lot more austerity—they select the vineyards (around two hectares) for that straight and austere character (there is a little bit of Doña Blanca too, which adds to the austerity). It has a saline palate and some rugosity, complex, with no room for sweetness. I think this could live 10 years and develop great complexity. In 2019, they replaced some of the barrels with a 2,500-liter oak foudre. This is the most austere and serious white in its finest vintage. A white for purists and one that is going to develop very slowly. There are 4,000 bottles of this. It was bottled in September 2019.

El Pecado 2018, 97/100:

The 2018 El Pecado is always produced with grapes from the very small Capeliños vineyard that belongs to Guímaro, just over half a hectare of very old vines—they don't know exactly how old, but it must be about 100 years old. The vineyard is on a slope at some 350 to 400 meters above sea level and is planted with a Mencía field blend, as in the old times, they always included small percentages of other grapes. They destem a percentage of the grapes, which changes depending on the vintage, and the 2018 was approximately 60% destemmed and fermented in an open 3,000-liter oak vat with indigenous yeasts. It then matured in used 228-liter oak barrels. In 2018, it has a slightly lighter color and is a little more ethereal and elegant than other vintages, with less alcohol and terrific balance. This is perfumed and elegant, a little fuller than La Penitencia, with a very faint creamy touch, perhaps from being aged in the smaller barrels. It has to be one of the finest vintages of El Pecado. 1,000 bottles produced. It was bottled in February 2020. 97/100.

La Penitencia 2018, 98/100:

The wine produced with grapes from the Pombeiras vineyard owned by Guímaro on the banks of the Sil River is the 2018 La Penitencia. The vineyard is even smaller than the one used to produce El Pecado—less than half a hectare planted over 70 years ago with a field blend dominated by Mencía but also including small quantities of many other varieties, such as Caiño, Sousón, Brancellao, Merenzao, Negreda, Garnacha Tintorera, Mouratón and even other whites, all on schist soils of granitic origin. This has always been fermented with full clusters and foot treading in 1,500-liter oak vats and matured in 500-liter oak barrels. This has an explosive nose that is floral and exotic, with a wild herbal touch, juicy, a little rustic, very faithful to the origin. It has some citrus notes of freshness, and the palate is intense, high-pitched, electric, pungent and very long and mineral. It has moderate alcohol and very fine tannins, energy and light—it's simply superb. Some 800 bottles were filled in April 2018. 98/100.

Sketch 2018, 96:

The 2018 Sketch comes from the A Telleira vineyard from Forjas del Salnés and it used to be the same as A Telleira from Forjas, but that's not the case anymore. The wine is sold without appellation of origin, and for quite some time, it has been quite mysterious and sought after, as it's a wine they have used to experiment with underwater aging, in the sea, but those bottles have never been sold and are only drunk by themselves with friends, to see what happens and if the exchange increases the salinity of the wine (to which the answer is yes!). But the Sketch you buy in the shops has never been anywhere near seawater. Myths and legends abound... Anyway, it took them some time to master the fermentation and aging of Albariño in oak, as the obsession was to get the acidity to integrate and the palate to polish but without getting any oak aromas or flavors. The wine comes through as elegant and refined, with some peachy notes combined with the varietal, herbal and mineral notes. The palate is sleek, with extra freshness in this 2018, with a saline and faintly bitter finish. This is plain delicious. It fermented and matured in 750-liter oak barrels.

Special very limited production wines – some of them experimental projects and few were made only once so far:

Los Arrotos del Pendon 2015:

The vineyard is situated outside of the village Pajares del Otero which is León area, some 130 km east of Bierzo.

Appellation is Tierra de León.

Raúl has been working in this area for many years now, being the consultant winemaker for Bodegas Margon there.

And the wine is made in their winery.

Vineyard is 100+ years, and the variety is the local Prieto Picudo. The soil is calcareous and the altitude is around 900 meters. This is very austere area, warm in the summer and super cold in the winter. Very windy too, and the kind of trellis is very low goblet, the canes are basically stretched out on the ground.

Prieto Picudo is a variety with very high acidity, but also very tannic, full-bodied and dark. And the wines are normally that, very tannic and rustic.

Raúl has been doing experiments with the variety for I think more than 15 years now (consulting Margon) and somehow managed finally to make some drinkable wine here. Vinification is similar to what he does in Bierzo, with whole cluster fermentation in open oak vats, long maceration (for Arrotos should be 2 months in 2015), and with soft soft extraction. After pressing the wine went to used 300 liter barrels, and the ageing was 2 years. With flor in the barrels, no top-up, in order to soften the tannins (polimeración as he describes it, the ageing under flor breaks down the strong tannins). After the bottling he kept the wine in the bottle for another 2 years before the release this winter.

Ultreia Duoro 2015:

Joint project between Raul Perez and Dirk Niepoort. Two barrels produced every year by Raul in the cellars of Niepoort in Portugal.

Raúl Pérez Mata los Pardos 2013:

A tiny south facing plot in Valtuille with some 90-100 years old vines. Planted with mix of Mencia, Bastardo, Alicante, Palomino and Godello varieties on sandy and clay soil.

Vinified as the other wines with whole bunch in a small vat, with 3 months of maceration. One year of ageing in neutral barrels, and bottled in January 2015. 650 bottles made.

Raúl Pérez Petit Verdot 2015:

From Valtuille village, 35 years old plot that belongs to the Perez family domaine. Raul has been experimenting with through the years. Northeast orientation. Whole bunch fermentation, but shorter and more classic maceration time, 20 days before the pressing. One 500 liters barrel, aged for 12 months. 600 bottles made.

Raúl Pérez Pico Ferreira Paradela 2015:

Another centenarian small plot, situated southwest of Valtuille and outside of the appellation. Mencia, Alicante and Bastardo co-planted. Calcareous soil. Whole cluster fermentation in an open small vat and 2 months of maceration. Aged in a 300 liter barrel for a year. 350 bottles were filled in February 2017.

Raúl Pérez Anfora Godello 2016 (White):

Godello from a north facing plot in Valtuille. Fermented and aged in a clay amphora for 18 months. No oak used. 300 bottles made.

Raúl Pérez El Rapolao 2018: 95+/100:

From the Rapolao area, third wine of Raul from this historical plot in Valtuille. 90-100 years old vines, north facing slope, and these grapes come from the upper part of the field where the soil is more ferric, and with a significant higher proportion of Trosseau/Bastardo. Raul believes that around 30% of the plot is Trosseau.

Fermented in an open barrel with whole clusters, long maceration of course but very soft. One barrique, one year of ageing, bottled in January 2018. 240 bottles made.

Raúl Pérez San Asensio 2013:

Grapes from San Asensio in Rioja, Tempranillo... a barrel made every year 2012, 2013 and 2014, and blended before the bottling in January 2017. Challenge the idea of what Rioja is, in a cool and interesting wine. A rarity too. 240 bottles made.

Raúl Pérez Valduerna 2013:

Off-Bierzo in the León area. Another field-blend but here with Prieto Picudo, Palomino, Mencia, Alicante and Bastardo. 80 year old vines on calcareous and clay soil. One 500 liter barrel was produced, 620 bottles.

Rara Avis Prieto Picudo 2014; (2007 96/100):

Rara Avis (both Prieto Picudo and Albarin) are made in a very old cellar in the tiny village of Valdevimbre, south of León and some 120 km east of Valtuille Bierzo. Prieto Picudo vineyard on 850 meter of altitude with an estimated age of 100+ years (nobody know the exact year of plantation). Soil is sand with much element of gravel and some clay. It's a very dry area, looks a bit desert, and the traditional viticulture is called "arrastre" (dragging), meaning a very low goblet and the canes are basically touching the ground. Prieto Picudo is tannic like Tannat and also very acid, and needs a lot of time to come around, not an easy drinking wine when young. Raúl has managed to master it and makes some quite elegant and drinkable wines from the variety, but again, the wine needs time. 2 years in the barrel of ageing, followed by 3 years in the bottle before release... winemaking is similar as in Bierzo with very little intervention, but shorter maceration time. 1600 bottles were filled from the 2014 vintage.

Tasting notes of the 2007 vintage: Perhaps the most unique (and difficult to describe) of the Raul Perez wines is the 2007 Prieto Picudo sourced from 100-year-old vines and aged for 17 months in French oak. Opaque purple-colored, it has a mind-boggling, sexy bouquet of mineral, truffle, incense, kinky wild blackberry, and black raspberry, Firm on the palate, it is already complex, with silky-textured black fruits, succulent flavors, and a 60-second finish. There is no track record of how it might evolve but its impeccable balance suggests that 6-8 years (or longer) is well within reason. The extraordinary wines of Raul Perez must be tasted to be believed. Words simply cannot do them justice. The problem is that they are produced in minuscule quantities.