

JAVIER ZACCAGNINI: TANGENTIAL VARIATIONS

A talented linguist, trained engineer, and successful business administrator, Javier Zaccagnini's career has zigzagged from leading positions in the automobile industry to running the Consejo Regulador, and then starting the acclaimed Aalto winery with ex-Vega Sicilia winemaker, Mariano Garcia, in Ribera del Duero. Margaret Rand visits him at his new project, Sei Solo, and attempts to keep up with the tangents of a music-loving polymath who wants to find the elegance of a Bach partita in old-vine Tempranillo

It would be tempting to view Javier Zaccagnini's career as a series of tangents. First there was industrial engineering ("In my family you had to do something technical"), then a tangent to wine in the form of admin at a wine merchant, another tangent to the Ribera del Duero DO, and yet another to producing his own wine, Aalto, with Mariano Garcia, late of Vega-Sicilia. And that is where he might have ended up. But still more tangents are peeling off; first there are hints, in his conversation, itself full of tangents, that Aalto is less the be-all and end-all for him that it was. Sure enough, he has his own-own wine now, Sei Solo, made with his son Michael. Along the way, there was a venture in Rueda; that might be replaced with another white project somewhere in Galicia. He was considering New Zealand and registered a wine name there, though that's on hold. "I would end up with 17 wines, but I will stop with Sei Solo and a white. If the white doesn't work there, I will try somewhere else."

A series of tangents, or a series of staircases? It would be wonderfully neat to think of an Escher staircase, bringing him back to where his Sherry-producing great-grandparents were—far too neat. Their business went down with the Civil War, just as his French family's Cognac business went down with World War II. "So it was said. I think it was bad management in both cases," says Javier. Anyway, in their heyday the two families had intermarried, giving Javier a dual heritage and his first foreign language. "I learned French and Spanish at the same time."

What he didn't learn about was wine. His parents drank water—even guests weren't offered wine—and he finished his industrial engineering course without ever having tasted wine. But business lunches involved him being handed that most baffling of objects, the wine list. "Wine didn't exist for me." His

older brother, a psychologist, was having the same experience and came to the conclusion that they were both missing something in life. So, they signed up for a wine-appreciation course. "It was like trying golf because people like it." It consisted of four hours a day for two weeks at a university, and they were taught about pruning and grape varieties. "I really thought that the red grape made red wine, and the white grape made white wine. I was amazed to discover there were so many grapes."

Wine was still just a hobby, though, and he and his brother joined a wine club to be sent a case of wine a month. "We would sit together saying, 'Do you smell strawberries?'"

Toward a life in wine

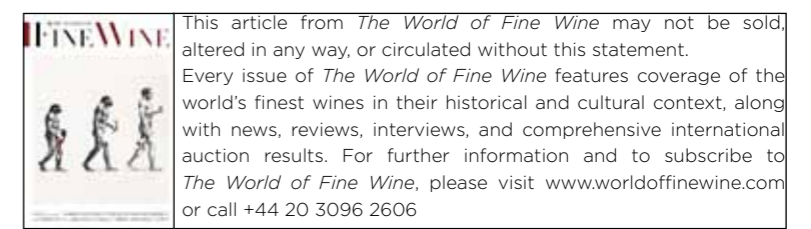
Wine gradually became a part of his life. "I have to tell you that I was extremely successful in my former career. At 33, I was general manager for two different companies at the same time, but I was going to have a heart attack, for sure. I came home at midnight every day, I worked on Saturdays, and I slept all day on Sundays. So, I decided to take a sabbatical year. I had enough money, and I would be at home with my wife and the children. At the end of the year I didn't want to go back." The two companies were both in the automotive industry—one in plastic injection, the other in seat belts. One was Spanish, one German: "I speak German as well."

What he wanted now was a job he enjoyed. So, he wrote to his wine club to offer "my MBA, my five languages" and started running a new project for them, and went home for lunch every day and was home again by seven. "It was heaven."

Five years on, in 1992, the Ribera del Duero Consejo Regulador wanted someone who could organize and could do PR in New York and Frankfurt. It meant commuting to Madrid, which meant a two-hour drive there and the same back, and "I



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was over the moon. Wine was my life. I was seeing it all being done, but not doing it." You can see how each of Javier's tangents carries the seeds of the next.

But let's have a tangent of our own here. Four hours a day in the car is a long time. He spent some of it trying to prove Fermat's Last Theorem. "I thought of a simple way to prove it, but it didn't work." So, that left music—which we haven't mentioned until now, but which is, if anything, more important than wine to Javier. "I thought, 'What if I only listened to Bach, only Bach? How long would I last before I wanted to listen to, say, Chopin?' So, I tried. Six months later, when I listened to Bach every day, I had to stop because I knew I wouldn't ever want to listen to anything else. So, I forced myself to go back to Beethoven, Schubert, and so on.

"Bach's second partita, the one called *Chaconne*, lasts 15 minutes, and it's the masterpiece of all time. Whenever, in 20 years' time or whatever, I make the wine I want to make, it will be called that: Ciaccona. Hopefully it will be in Ribera del Duero, but if I have to go [elsewhere], I will."

The birth of Aalto

But we're running ahead of ourselves now. We left Javier still organizing things at the Consejo, and his future business partner, Mariano Garcia, still winemaker at Vega-Sicilia, which he left in unhappy circumstances in 1998. "There were 25 new wineries a year in Ribera del Duero at this point. I wanted to be part of a winery, so I thought I would convince people to invest, look for an enologist and a general manager, and have a few shares." Then Mariano left Vega-Sicilia. "It was an opportunity—but a dream. He's the king of all Spanish enologists. But he doesn't speak English, so when he had visitors at Vega-Sicilia he'd ring me to ask, 'Can you come?'"

"We liked each other's personality. He'd always ask me, 'When are you starting your winery?' So, I called him, and we had lunch—you don't do anything with Mariano except over lunch—and I said, 'You don't need me, but I have administrative abilities, languages, and so on.' He thought about it and said, 'Let's have lunch again.' He liked my ideas, but he had his own—100 percent Tempranillo from specific villages. I said to him, 'Whatever you have in mind, we'll do it.' Mariano is a very free soul, and for 30 years he was at the bidding of Vega-Sicilia. I was offering him freedom. So, he agreed. I went out finding investors, and I don't want to show off, but it was no problem." The major shareholders are Enate and the Masaveu group.

"In 1999 I left the Consejo Regulador and rented an old winery, and not to be vain but we made a good wine that was successful and sold out, and after five to six years we wanted a new winery." Thus was Aalto born. The new winery cost €13 million, and "We paid it back in 2015."

The new winery is where Javier and I meet. Now he's turning it into a good place to work and visit, with a patio garden planted with acers, ferns, and weeping beech, a kitchen, and a dining room. "We deserve it. No, you never deserve it. We've been lucky." He apologizes for the mess, which isn't necessary. He also (and this also isn't necessary) tells me that he's a fan of mine, that I was one of his heroes when he first started buying wine magazines and studying wine. He's told me this on both occasions I've been to Aalto, and I confess I'm flattered to have been someone's hero, even at a distance, and I'm declaring it here so that if my head has been turned, you know why.

Multiple villages and old vines

Why 100 percent Tempranillo, when Vega-Sicilia is a blend? Because, says Javier, Cabernet Sauvignon ripens here perhaps once in five years, Merlot gets millerandage, and "Malbec is only at Vega-Sicilia for historical reasons. They never use it, and it's unbalanced, with 14% alcohol and 14 grams per liter acidity at the same time." Mariano's stipulation was old vines, from 40 years of age to much older.

With a single grape, the way to get complexity and balance is by taking advantage of Ribera del Duero's rich variety of terroirs. The altitude varies from 2,460 to 3,100ft (750 to 950m) within 50 miles (80km), and exposure, since the river runs east-west, is north- or south-facing. But what's more intriguing is the differences within Tempranillo. Forget the old chestnut about Ribera del Duero, Rioja, and so on all having different clones of Tempranillo; that idea was buried a long time ago. It's the enormous and ancient clonal variation within each region that is interesting—and of course it's lost as soon as growers start planting off-the-peg clones.

Mariano's plan was to buy or rent in as many villages as possible; they're up to nine now. (Old vineyards are also the basis of Mariano's other wines, like Mauro and new Garmón.) "It's difficult to buy old vineyards. But unfortunately, or fortunately for me, they will be sold because the children will sell them. They're not expensive, so we're buying little by little." About 20 percent of the total *uoha* (270 acres) are owned. They're farmed with no chemicals: "We're organic but not certified, and certainly not biodynamic."

The vines were planted up to 80 years ago, when people in the region lived from beets and cereals, and wine was for their own consumption. "They took 8 liters [2 US gallons] of rosé, at 9% alcohol, with them to work for the day," says Javier, "and they drank it all in a day. So they needed plenty for their own consumption." They would plant rootstocks, then graft on material from the same village, because to go to another village for cuttings would be frowned on.

As a result, there is Tempranillo with loose clusters, Tempranillo with compact clusters, large berries, small berries, different leaves—huge variation. Javier pours some samples for me, some of which will go into Aalto and some into Pagos Seleccionados, of which more later. Tempranillo from the village of Moradillo—2,950ft (900m) up, with a soil of pebbles over clay—is juicy, mineral, and concentrated, with a tight core. From Baños, very high up, the wine is dense, fresh, and aromatic, with grippy tannins. From Aguilera, big, vigorous vines with compact clusters planted on clay, the wine is sweet and fine, creamy and aromatic. From Fresnillo, from vines with small clusters planted on sandstone, the wine is floral, creamy, and showy. Most recently, there is a plot in Gumiel de Izan—"very different from La Horra and just as good." He's made his point. They're very, very varied.

Everything is picked separately, fermented separately, and aged separately for the first 12 months, after which a blend is put together in stages. The blending process "is like an inverted tree going down to one trunk, which is Aalto. We bottle one wine only. It has never happened except with press wine that we have disliked a lot and had to leave it out." Selection is rigorous; each cluster is looked at three times, and "if there's just one reddish berry, it goes out. People come to take the rejects away."

The reason Javier says he bottles only one wine where Aalto is concerned, while also bottling other wines as Pagos Seleccionados, is because the lots are separated in the vineyard during the year. "As we go through the year, we know which vineyards are excellent. Pagos Seleccionados is not a single-vineyard concept because it's not the same plots each year. We don't make it if we don't have it." Those lots that are judged to be right for Aalto each year arrive at the winery as Aalto and are treated accordingly; any judged in the vineyard to be more suited to Pagos Seleccionados are picked for that, and "Mariano gives them the Pagos Seleccionados treatment. Let me be a little vain—for me, they are talented grapes."

The Pagos Seleccionados (PS) villages, when it is made, tend to be La Horra (which I tasted but can't really comment upon because it had soaked up a lot of oak very quickly), Fresnillo, and Aguilera, but there may be others. The PS must have a faster fermentation, do their malo in new French oak, and are then racked into more new oak. The wine is powerful—sleek but massively muscular. Aalto, more sweet-fruited, spicy, pure, and of more manageable dimensions, has about 50 percent new oak, by contrast, and 80 percent of its oak is French, 20 percent US. "Power and structure are natural to Ribera del Duero," says Javier; "elegance is not. How do you achieve elegance and finesse?"

Sei Solo and the future

It is at this point that he introduces his own wine, Sei Solo. "I have a 27-year-old son who has studied enology and worked in Burgundy and New Zealand." They work together on Sei Solo, "which has more elegance, finesse even." It's aged in 600-liter old barrels, with no new oak. He doesn't overextract, he says, he doesn't ferment at very high temperatures, and he gives the skins to Aalto. The malo is done in a cool cellar at 54°F (12°C) and takes three to four months. "Aalto does the malo in a heated room, and it takes three weeks. There is no SO₂ until then. It's racked into 600-liter used white-wine barrels, which I buy, and I have a big Stockinger one now, of 1,200 liters." Sei Solo is poised, fine-grained, precise, and the second wine, Preludio, is aromatic, with wild herbs and leather. They're Ribera del Duero without the shouting, but with no loss of intensity.

Sei Solo started in 2007 and comes only from La Horra. "I bought superb old vines and rented them to Peter Sisseck for three years. Peter is a superb taster. When I was at the Consejo Regulador, I invented a tasting test for committee members, and only Peter scored a maximum ten." When Javier took the vines back, the fruit went into Aalto until he was satisfied; he started trying vinification with 50 percent stems and 100 percent stems, "but Peter said, 'Forget about stems. Experiment with the lees until you get good fruit definition.'" He adds, "I used to do things during the fermentation, but now I let the grapes go where they want to go." Making a Ribera del Duero with finesse he describes as "taking a bull and making it dance like an Andalusian horse."

"Mariano doesn't intervene in Sei Solo. If I asked him to, it would be a Mariano wine. I never ask him unless I have a problem." He doesn't have an enologist for Sei Solo; "just myself, based on what I've learned from Mariano," and some friends at the tasting stage. "When Mariano's son Eduardo was involved, people said Sei Solo was a Mariano wine, which I did not like. On Pagos Seleccionados and Aalto, Mariano has the first, second, and last words. That's why I started my own project, to do what I want, for good or bad. I know what I want; I know my vineyard."

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Why the name Sei Solo? It refers to six works for unaccompanied violin by JS Bach, and the label on the bottle is in Bach's handwriting. "The summit of writing for the violin is these six solos. All top violinists have recorded them." Yes, he loves Shostakovich, too, and Brahms, and Richard Strauss, and Tchaikovsky, "but Bach is my idol. I would listen to Bach for the rest of my life, and I wouldn't complain." Javier studied flamenco guitar from the age of ten, though he had to give it up at 26 because of lack of time. But his son Michael "studies things I would have liked to study—enology and piano... I think the poor guy has been trying to please me all his life, with piano, gastronomy, and wine." When Michael started piano lessons, Javier started, too, "and within three years Michael had overtaken me... My ideal would be to be a composer, then a conductor, then a soloist. But I am none of them, because I am a disaster at music. I would never make a living as a musician." So instead he spent €40,000 on reinforcing the cellar roof and will hold concerts there. "Music is a language, and we don't understand what it says. I say that Bach wrote 1,000 works and 900 are masterpieces and 100 are okay, and Mozart was the other way around. In [Bach's] *Matthew Passion*, there is nothing that is not a masterpiece, and it lasts three hours; there is not one second that is not a masterpiece. It's like heaven opening."

In wine, he wants to go further toward elegance, lower alcohol, and lightness, which might seem an awkward ambition when you're based in Ribera del Duero. "I have lots of ideas in my head, processes in my mind. Nobody's innovating in winemaking. Mariano is very innovative, and I am, too. I have lots of ideas. Most are a disaster, things that haven't been done before." What he'd like is a maximum of 13.5% alcohol without picking earlier, since ripe tannins are essential.

The white venture, using old pre-*phylloxera* vines in Rueda, was called Ossian and looked promising. "Excuse me for saying it, but it was voted best white in Spain. I had the company for eight years, and I don't speak badly of anyone, but..." Let's leave it there. "I want no criticism of anyone in the piece, please. If I'm not happy, I leave."

What will come next is not yet clear, but it will certainly involve Javier doing the things he likes doing: "I'm not humble, I do a lot of things very well. I speak six languages, I like to communicate, I enjoy designing labels, making decisions on everything that is not harvesting or winemaking. From day one, my wines have sold out. Mariano, not I, has prestige, and I have the easiest job in Spain, selling Mariano's wine." He will gradually detach himself from Aalto in order to do his own projects. And then no more tangents? We'll see. ■