

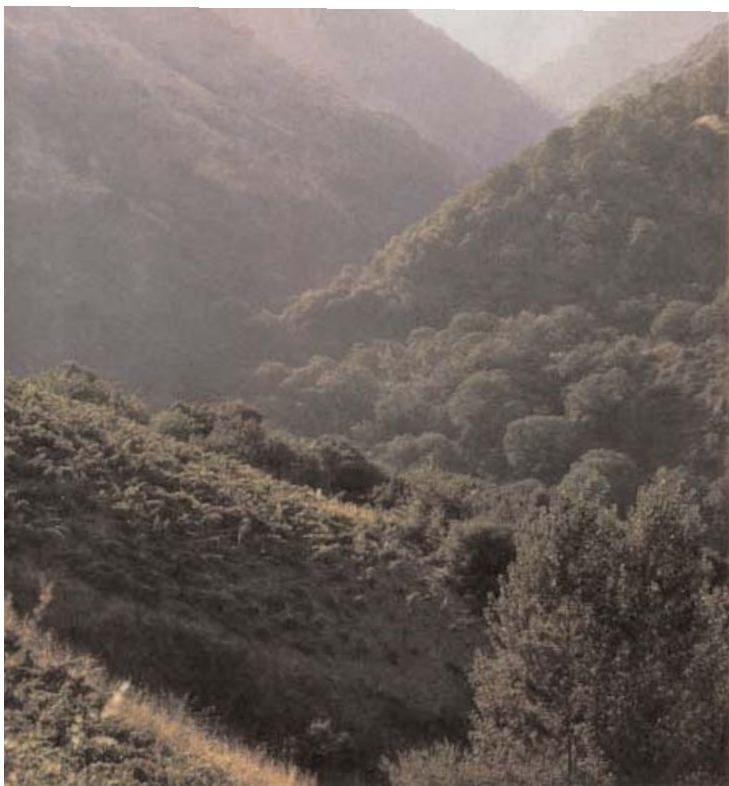
MAN WITH A PLAN

Through
grit and
talent,
Álvaro
Palacios
has become
the most
exciting
winemaker
in Spain

BY BRUCE
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Álvaro Palacios has helped bring worldwide attention to two formerly overlooked Spanish wine regions, Bierzo and Priorat.



Left: Hillside vineyards in Bierzo in northwest Spain, where Palacios has championed the region's obscure red grape, Mencía. Right: The hermitage in Gratallops, Priorat, that inspired the name of Palacios' renowned blend of Garnacha, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cariñena—L'Ermita.

With its dark wood and free-floating light fixtures, Álvaro Palacios' 3-year-old winery looks like a showpiece out of *Architectural Digest*. An oblique-angled palace set on a hillside, it fronts the gloomy, ocher-toned Spanish town of Gratallops with glass walls that come to a point like the prow of a ship. Deep inside the building, Palacios shows off a barrel room, ribbed like a whale's belly, to a group of fawning wine connoisseurs from Zurich who have chosen a visit as their annual pilgrimage. Then he pours them glasses of his 1997 L'Ermita, which earned 96 points from *Wine Spectator*—a "classic" rating.

The winery is one of the trappings of Palacios' success. International acclaim is another. Not yet 40, Palacios has helped revolutionize the Spanish wine industry by making richly elegant wines in the remote, rustic area of Priorat, an hour-and-a-half drive southwest of Barcelona.

His accomplishments have reverberated in other Spanish appellations, such as Ribera del Duero, Toro and Rioja, and gained him recognition as one of the world's most inspired and dedicated winemakers. As if to confirm the praise, Palacios has lately succeeded with new wines from a region even more obscure than Priorat: Bierzo, on the cusp of Galicia, in the country's northwest corner. The debut release of his *Descendientes de J. Palacios Bierzo Corullón*, the 1999, earned 93 points from *Wine Spectator*.

If such success seemed possible when he arrived in Gratallops a little more than a decade ago, only Palacios believed it. He saw a potential in Priorat's forbidding landscape that most others did not. First among the doubters was his father, José

Palacios Remondo, who ran the family's Rioja bodega, Palacios Remondo. "You have a sickness," he told his son. "The sickness of a sick kid."

Palacios Remondo couldn't understand why anyone would refuse a career path at an important winery in Spain's most prestigious wine region in order to grow grapes where grapes weren't meant to be grown. Priorat has scant rainfall, usually less than 15 inches a year. When the wind blows, as it usually does, the dust hangs in the air for days. Grape yields are impossibly low, meaning any wine of quality that emerged from the region would be probably too expensive to sell—at least by Rioja standards.

What's more, Palacios Remondo was preparing Álvaro, the seventh of his nine children, to eventually take over the Rioja bodega that his family had founded in 1947. But Álvaro had worked in Bordeaux at Château Pétrus, and the Rioja of the late 1980s didn't interest him.

"I wanted to make a wine like Pétrus in Spain," says Palacios, still fresh-faced at 38. "In those days, to be a wine producer in Rioja, you had to make hundreds of thousands of cases, or you were nobody. To make the kind of wine I wanted to make, in small quantities, I had to move to another area. Spain has a very deep and ancestral wine history, so I knew there were places. I just had to find them."

At the time, he was selling wine barrels to make a living, traveling to the far corners of Iberia. Everywhere he went, he inspected vineyards. His friend René Barbier, a former export manager at Bodegas Palacios Remondo, was making wine in Priorat, a forgotten region that once upon a time had a reputation

for strong, tannic wines. Palacios visited Barbier and was struck by how fresh the wines from his nascent vines tasted. Then he tasted similar wines at the local cooperative. He was sold.

"I'm going to make wine in Tarragona," Palacios told his father. It was 1989. Priorat wasn't even in any wine drinker's vocabulary then; it had to be referenced by the appellation next door. Palacios wouldn't be dissuaded, not even under the threat of disinheritance. "I'm not helping you with your new project at all, not one peseta," his father told him. "Go suffer, then, and don't give me bank problems."

In those days, Gratallops looked like a medieval town. Only recently has it upgraded to somewhere around the 19th century. There were no hotels and only one restaurant, serving the same limited menu every day of the year, a curtain of beads hanging in the doorway in a vain attempt to turn back the dust. The town's streets curved around dusty hills and opened onto dusty vistas.

Palacios didn't care. Wine was and is his life and hobby; entertainment could wait for his periodic visits to Rioja. He married, had a daughter, and kept right on working, day after night after day, part of a small cadre of wine revolutionaries living out their fantasies in a kind of viticultural commune.

Barbier was the ringleader, growing his grapes and making a wine called Clos Mogador. Carles Pastrana made Clos de l'Obac from the other side of the same facility. José Luis Pérez made Clos

Martinet, Daphne Glorian made Clos Erasmus. All the friends and neighbors have succeeded, but none like Palacios.

"He's a dynamic person who cares very much about work and wine," Barbier says. "He knows exactly what he wants to do, and always has. He saw a moment in which the Italian wines had started to move, and he knew Spain had similar potential to make great wines, memorable wines."

Palacios' top cuvée, L'Ermita, is unquestionably that. It is produced from vines growing on a hillside that leads to an old hermitage, a slope so precariously steep that Palacios has to farm the rows of vines with mules. L'Ermita debuted in 1994 as the most expensive bottling the region had ever seen, in the range of Vega Sicilia Unico, Spain's most renowned wine.

Today, Palacios makes from 4,000 to 6,000 bottles of L'Ermita annually and sells most of them to international collectors "almost bottle by bottle," as he puts it, for about \$220 each. The wine is a blend of old-vine Garnacha, about 10 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and usually a touch of Cariñena. "It has a deepness to it, like looking into a well," Palacios says.

Palacios makes a second single-vineyard wine, Finca Dofí, in slightly larger quantities, and prices it at about \$75. That blend adds a touch of Syrah and Merlot to the Garnacha and Cabernet. His third wine is a different project, a few hundred thousand bottles from grapes sourced from dozens of small growers and assem-

"[My father] never once told me, 'You are doing well.'... But he knew I was doing well, I know he did. I could see it in his eyes." —ÁLVARO PALACIOS, WINEMAKER



Left: José Palacios Remondo (left) and his wife, Carmen (née Muro), with Carmen's father, Antonio Muro, outside the first Palacios winery, established in 1947 in the Rioja town of Alfaro. Right: Álvaro and his sister Chelo, in 1985. Chelo is the director of Bodegas Palacios Remondo.



bled into a *négociant* blend called Les Terrasses, after the terraced vineyards of the area. Priced at about \$25, it regularly earns very good to outstanding scores from *Wine Spectator*.

Palacios' wines have not only fared well in the international marketplace, they pair beautifully with the evolved food of Spain's best restaurants. "Álvaro is on the vanguard, making great, great wine, and that type of modern wine works particularly well with modern cuisine," says Juan Mari Arzak (arguably Spain's most famous chef) of San Sebastian's *Restaurante Arzak*. "I actually prefer the modern wines like Álvaro's with any type of cuisine. They are exceptionally well-made, enjoyable wines."

All of this success came in time for his father to see. Palacios brought a bottle of 1996 L'Ermite home for Christmas and opened it at the family table. His father tasted the wine. By then, he had started to read the magazine articles that were being written about Álvaro. By then, he knew that he'd been wrong. Still, the father wouldn't—couldn't—celebrate his son's achievements.

"He was absolutely cold to me," Palacios says now. "He trusted my potential, I'm sure about that. But he wouldn't give me any support, or ever show his confidence. Even at the end, my father never once told me, 'You are doing well.'"

Palacios stops the car he is driving up a steep dirt road to let some machinery cross. His eyes appear misty, but it might simply be the dust swirling in the November wind. "I know why," he says. "I understand. He didn't want me to think that the work was done. But he knew I was doing well, I know he did. I could see it in his eyes."

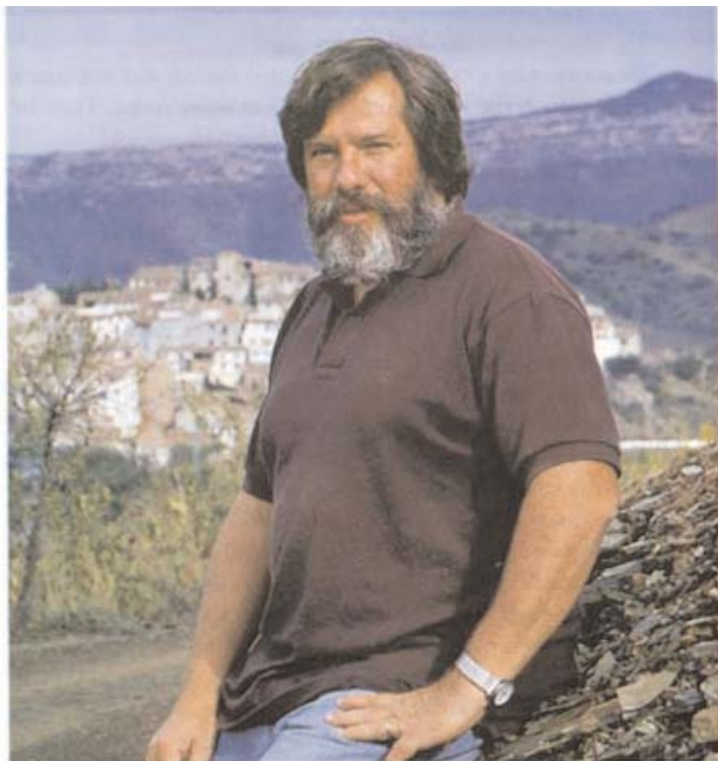
In March of 2000, José Palacios Remondo died of cancer. He was 78. By then, his second son, Antonio, was running the family winery.

Álvaro went home to Rioja for the funeral fully aware of the troubles facing the family business. In no small part because of his own contributions, the Spanish wine world had greatly changed since he first set out for Priorat. A decade of bluish-black, well-structured bottlings had altered the definition of a successful Spanish wine. The well-oaked, watery wines produced in large volume by the traditional Rioja bodegas were now being passed over by importers, reviewers and international consumers, in favor of these exciting wines made in the new fashion.

Since 1996, Palacios had been unofficially consulting with his father and his brothers. They'd ask for his suggestions, he says, and then all but ignore them. "I had to be careful, because it wasn't my winery; all I could do was suggest," Palacios says. "But in my brother's hands, I knew, the wine wasn't going anywhere."

After his father's death, Palacios called a family meeting. He announced that he would be willing to take over the business. He'd run the winery in accordance with his own philosophy, the same philosophy that had earned him the showplace winery on the hill in Priorat and all those enthusiastic reviews. He'd work with his sister and several of his brothers—but not Antonio, who would be given a piece of land and sent off to make his own wine his own way.

By then, Palacios had become one of the most famous winemakers in Spain. Now this world-renowned winemaker was offering his services. It was one brother making a power play against another, but the family couldn't afford to think like that. "There



René Barbier chose to grow vineyards in Priorat at a time when it was considered foolhardy. His success inspired Palacios to do the same.

was a company problem," Palacios says. "It was not a moment to talk about romantic things. It was time to say, 'We have to pull this company up.' The fact is, they needed me."

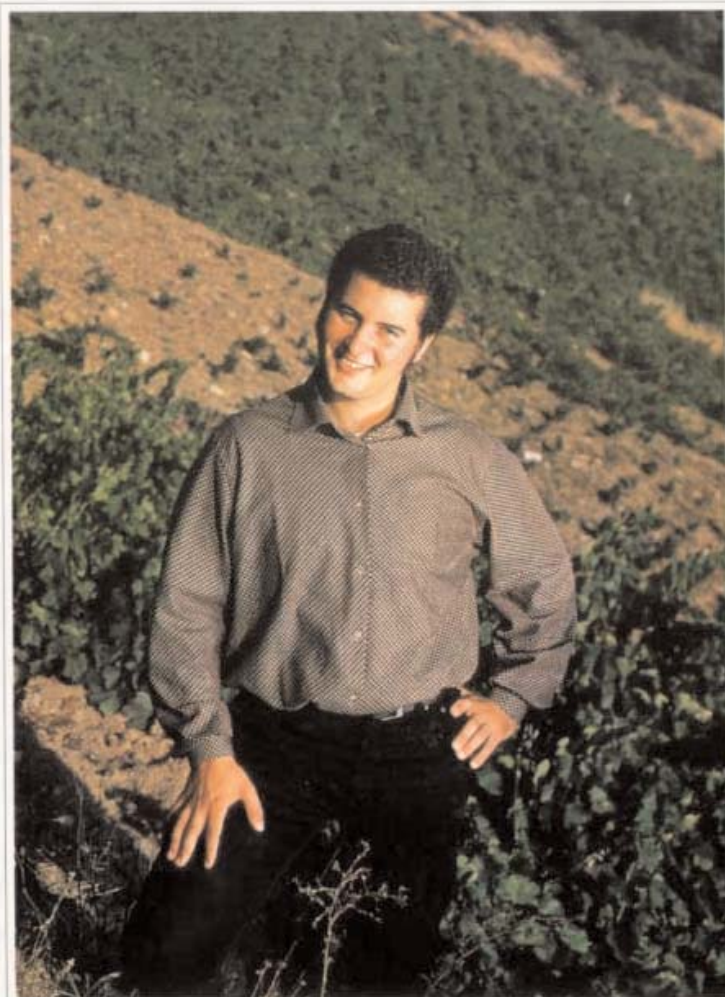
"Álvaro didn't want to force the situation, but Antonio was a person who looked at things the old way," says Barbier, who says he considers Palacios as close as a younger brother. "It was about the wine."

In the end, his mother and brothers agreed. Antonio, now 54, went off in his own direction—not exiled exactly, but certainly displaced. Álvaro began making the six-hour commute over the rough roads of Priorat, past Lleida and Zaragoza on the highway, all the way to Rioja.

With the 1998 vintage, he blended the *cuvées* earmarked for reserve-level Herencia Remondo wines back into the standard *crianza* bottling in an attempt to recoup the image of the brand. Going forward, he has made the decision not to produce wines labeled "reserva" or "gran reserva," designations that come freighted with specific rules made by the appellation's governing body. Instead, he is looking to establish an estate that produces a house wine, as in Bordeaux.

He stopped irrigating. He lowered grape yields 20 percent for 2000 and another 15 percent for 2001. He cut back drastically in production. The result is wines of greater opulence. "Yet they are wines, as my father always used to say, that invite you to drink them," Palacios says. "That's the goal with whatever I do. My father and I disagreed on a lot, but we always had the same way of tasting. I think what I have done is to put his style into the times of today."

At the same time, Palacios was becoming involved in Bierzo. This little-known region in eastern Galicia shared attributes with Priorat: steep hillsides and forgotten vineyards full of old-vine plantings, in this case mostly the obscure variety of Mencía. Palacios likens it to the Cabernet Franc of Chinon. In



Ricardo Pérez has begun his winemaking career in Bierzo under the guidance of his talented uncle, but this protégé will have to earn his wings the hard way.

truth, before Palacios arrived, no one knew what the grape could yield when taken seriously, with artful winemaking and modern techniques.

He had noted the region's potential during his days selling barrels, but his involvement was triggered by a family connection. For years, Palacios' nephew Ricardo Pérez yearned to be an enologist. At Palacios' urging, Pérez interned in Bordeaux, working in the vineyards of Château Margaux, among other places. "I knew he had talent, so I started helping to motivate him," Palacios says. "With my experience and his talent and passion, I knew we could do something great."

Pérez was driving back to Rioja from Galicia one day in 1998 when he decided to stop in Bierzo for a look. He came back excited. That was the impetus Palacios needed. They formed a company together and acquired three vineyard parcels near the town of Corullón, all with southern exposure, in time for the 1999 growing season. Pérez moved to Bierzo, just as Palacios had moved to Priorat a decade before.

Because of the success of his wines in Priorat, Palacios could have begun in Bierzo with a shiny new winery. Instead, he wants his nephew to understand what it means to begin at the beginning, with no money and no prospects, even if your partner and consulting enologist is a world-famous winemaker.

"With Ricardo, I'm trying to do the project with less money, to

make him suffer a little bit," he says, not realizing how much like his father he sounds. "I wanted him to have a note to pay. That's how I did it in the beginning. I carried buckets of ice to lower fermentation temperatures. I used butane-powered heaters to heat the tanks. It was hard, hard work."

Palacios stops talking for a moment and looks around at his surroundings. He's standing above Finca Dofí, looking down at the vines. The wind is blowing now, plastering his hair against one side of his squarish head. The naked vines are trembling in the breeze. He doesn't notice. He is thinking hard about the past and the future. For a moment, he looks like an old man.

"That's what I want for Ricardo, but it's hard," Palacios says. "Because his father doesn't understand. He says, 'Use my credit.' He brings furniture to the bodega. He wants to make it too easy for Ricardo, and it worries me." Palacios looks off into the distance, concerned, preoccupied, his father's son.

Standing there in the midst of Finca Dofí, Palacios casts a perfectionist's eye at his vines. "I'm frustrated that I can't get each bunch of grapes at the same height off the ground, the way they do it at Pétrus," he says. "That's how you get really consistent fruit."

These days, when his cell phone chirps, as it does several times an hour, it is likely to be his sister or one of his brothers calling from Rioja, or his nephew in Bierzo. Palacios is running a family empire now, spread over three sites, spanning the country from east to west. Still, his attention to detail hasn't waned.

Palacios knows his reputation as a winemaker is at stake. The same people who scoffed at his belief in Priorat, he says, now claim that his success is mostly due to the quality of the raw materials there. And it can't be denied that Glorian, Barbier and the others are also making terrific wine from the stressed vines that yield wonderfully flavorful grapes.

It makes sense to ask how much of the success of Palacios' wines is because of Palacios. "I want to show what the human factor means," he says. Already, the Bierzo wines have provided part of the answer. The 1998 Herencia Remondo, which Palacios merely blended, is on the market, but the true fruits of his labors in Rioja will come soon.

Palacios is tempted to keep going. He sees obscure regions languishing in the shadows, with wonderfully stressed old vines waiting for his caring touch. "I'm very optimistic," he says. "I'm impulsive, and maybe too passionate about wine." He says that three projects is enough for one winemaker, at least one who is committed to doing things right, but he doesn't sound convinced.

"I should stop and just work with what I have," he says. "That would be the smart thing."

Palacios smiles. His eyes scan the scene around him, the dusty hillsides of a forlorn area that produce some of the best wine in the world, but in his head he's racing toward the future, well aware that the next project, too, will probably be impossible to resist. He's dreaming about vines the width of a man's arm in Somontano, perhaps, or the parched landscape of Toro, or the steep hills of the Canary Islands. Perfection is out there, he knows it, but where he'll find it, even Palacios can't say for sure.

Bruce Schoenfeld is a frequent contributor to Wine Spectator.