

Txakoli: Basque Lightness

In a discussion about potential reports, I was a little surprised when I mentioned my plans for a trip to San Sebastián to Robert Parker, and he suggested maybe I could do a Txakoli tasting. Yes, Txakoli is a great wine to have with tapas, the one you have when you visit the Basque Country. Curiously enough, its popularity seems to be bigger in the United States than in the rest of Spain. But basically, there's nothing further removed from what is perceived as a parkerized wine than Txakoli. Go figure! It took me some time to do it - there were a few regions and countries that needed more urgent reporting - but I finally made it to San Sebastián again for a tasting of a good representation of these Atlantic wines.

Txakoli 101



Txakoli is a style of wine, more often than not white, that is low in alcohol, fresh, quite acidic and lean, with a little spritz that makes it very drinkable and appropriate to go with food. It cleanses your palate with its acidity and gets you ready for the next mouthful. In general the must is fermented in stainless steel tanks, malolactic fermentation is not carried out and the wine is bottled immediately. Txakoli can also be red - and even rosé - but the consumption of these tends to be very local or among hardcore fanatics. I've included a couple of them in the tasting as a reference.

Confusingly enough, the three provinces in the Basque Country in Spain have separate appellations of origin for Txakoli. The wine was traditionally made in other regions, Cantabria and

most notably Burgos, where the spelling would be the Castilian *Chacolí*. Although the reality is that *Chacolí* from Cantabria and Burgos does not exist as a commercial category, I admit to never having tasted one. I won't go into discussions about Basque or Spanish spelling of names or other politics, as it does not interest me. I'll try to spell things the way I believe people will find it more often on wine labels or texts.

As I mentioned, there are three separate appellations for Txakoli, one in each of the three provinces of the Basque Country, and their names are in Basque language, Arabako Txakolina in the Álava province (capital city Vitoria), Bizkaiako Txakolina in the province of Vizcaya (capital city: Bilbao), and Getariako Txakolina named and located around the village of Guetaria in the province of Guipúzcoa, whose capital city is San Sebastián (Donostia in Basque). To have an idea of the dimensions, here are the hectares of vineyards and the number of wineries in each appellation:

Arabako Txakolina: 100 hectares of Vineyards, 7 wineries

Bizkaiako Txakolina: 350 hectares of Vineyards, 50 wineries

Getariako Txakolina: 400 hectares of Vineyards, 26 wineries

So we're talking about relatively small appellations here, especially for Spain, where we don't have such a detailed appellation system as in France and the appellations are regional. Viticulture and wine production are quite small scale in these zones. Traditionally the wines have been fermented quickly and drunk even quicker, almost before fermentation was over, which is why the wines still have a spark. Even if most of it is just to be drunk young and nobody talks much about vintages, vertical tastings or laying bottles down, some of the better examples can age for a few years in bottle, taking on a character that might remind you of a German Riesling, with those diesel/mineral aromas.

The wine used to be produced with local grapes, the white Hondarrabi Zuri, the main grape for Txakoli, and the red Hondarrabi Beltza (not present in Álava) used for all three colors, white, rosé and red. The Basque Country is next to the southwest of France (in fact there is a Basque part of France in the southwest) and it shares some of its grapes, most notably the ones from Jurançon, Petit Manseng, Gros Manseng and Petit Courbu. In fact, many suspect they are all related, some Courbu Blanc is planted as Hondarrabi Zuri, a name which is used for some grapes that seem to be different, while the red Hondarrabi Beltza has some relationship with Cabernet Franc. Folle Blanche - (the main grape used to produce Cognac and Armagnac) and Riesling (and even some Chardonnay!) are also part of some blends.

I've avoided giving the Basque names for the French grapes from Jurançon to avoid confusion, but since they might be found on some labels, I've listed them below. Please note that Basque spelling varies from appellation to appellation and sometimes from village to village:

Petit Courbu: Ondarrabi Zerratia, Hondarrobi Zerratia, even Hondarrabi Zuri Zerratie or Xuri Zarratu

Gros Manseng: Izkiriót Haundia or Izkiriót Zuri

Petit Manseng: Izkiriót Ttipi or Izkiriót Zuri Tipia

And now that we are in dictionary mode, let's translate three words that are also found on labels: *zuri* means white, *betza* is black and *berezia* means special

Txakoli Then and Now

When wine was an everyday drink in Spain (we are now at a painful consumption of around 15 liters per head per year), everybody drank Txakoli in the bars of the Basque Country. It was a wine produced in an artisanal way on Basque farms (*caseríos*) mostly for home consumption, and it was not bottled, labeled or controlled. The appellations are something relatively recent. **Getariako Txakolina** was the first to be created in 1990, thanks to the importance of the bars and restaurants of San Sebastián. **Bizkaiko Txakolina** came a bit later, despite being the zone with more tradition, in 1994. Finally **Arabako Txakolina**, which does not have the same fame and history as the other two, was formalized in 2002. Unfortunately, and for many reasons we shall not discuss here, now most people throughout Spain ask for a *caña* (a small glass of beer) when in a bar. However, the creation of the appellations of origin has been a push for the planting of vineyards and creation of wineries which have seen a slow but steady growth.

In recent years, they started exporting small quantities, and lately Txakoli has become popular in certain circles in large cities in the US. While we're not talking about great wines for aging, these are fantastic with food, light, refreshing and gentle with your wallet. The wines, for those who have never had the chance to taste them, are quite light, mineral, spritzy and with high acidity, not that far removed from a Muscadet from the Loire. They are ideal therefore to have with seafood, light food and snacks...*tapas!*



*I did my research on site. The tapas bars of San Sebastián are difficult to resist. My favorite?
Hidalgo 56.*

Txomin Etxaniz is probably the most popular Txakoli producer from Guetaria, well known in export markets, as he was the pioneer in shipping his wines abroad. Itsas Mendi from Guernica is perhaps the leading producer in Vizcaya. But I was most impressed with the wines from Gorrondona, in the same appellation, one of the names I need to investigate further. One of the latest additions to the list of wineries is linked to a name that is quite popular in Spain. Karlos Arguiñano was a TV celebrity cook before they were even invented. I'm usually quite suspicious of wines "produced" by "famous people." More often than not, these people are not involved at all in the wine, they only add their image to the wine's marketing and worse than anything, the wines are mass-produced and uninteresting, destined for the celebrities' fans rather than for wine-savvy people. But this is not the case when it comes to K5. Arguiñano lives and works in Zarááuz, very close to Guetaria, and like any good Basque, he is in love with Txakoli and created the winery with a group of friends. I was very pleasantly surprised when I first tasted their wines, which are now one of the top examples of the region.

After tasting through some 50 wines side by side, I think I can draw some conclusions. The bulk of the tasting corresponded to wines from the last two vintages: **2012** was a warm and balanced vintage. In this climate, warm vintages tend to be better, as the problem here is achieving good maturity of grapes. **2013** was a wet, cold and late harvest which produced less wine because of hail storms that reduced the yields considerably. It has been a very complicated vintage throughout Spain, and in Getariako Txakolina, almost 80% of the production was lost to mildew and oidium. The styles of the wines from the three appellations are quite different. In Guetaria, the wines are lighter and tend to have more gas, although I suspect in some cases the gas was added to the wine. There are very few wineries in Álava, so the samples tasted are also very few. The wines seem to have a noble rusticity that might remind you of the Txakolis of the past. They felt quite "authentic," which gives them a special attraction if you're nostalgic. If you don't know what Txakoli was like in the past, this could be your appeal! Finally, the Txakolis from Vizcaya are more powerful and concentrated, some of them fairly serious and with potential to age. I'll try to taste some past vintages from Gorrondona next time, as they showed good aging potential. The complaint from some people locally is that they are more "wine" and less "Txakoli."

I sampled the following wines, all bottled, no tanks samples, in San Sebastián in May 2014.

—Luis Gutiérrez