

# Mercedes López de Heredia Winemaker

**Christina Pickard** talks to the fourth-generation winemaker at Rioja's traditional yet forward-thinking López de Heredia

Today's Rioja has become a divided land. With an ever-growing number of wineries making young, "modern", fruit-driven wines laden in new French oak, López de Heredia remains a bastion of the old ways, continuing to make wine in the same style and spirit as 135 years ago.

The ghosts of López de Heredia's generations of winemakers seem to permeate the layers of fungi draped throughout the tunnels of its historic cellars. However, in one of the wine world's greatest paradoxes, this ultra-traditional bodega is also one of the most forward thinking.

Deep in the atmospheric cellars, winemaker Mercedes López de Heredia, one of the two enthusiastic daughters to have taken over the day-to-day running of the winery, took the time to chat with me about the extraordinary bodega she's been fortunate enough to inherit.

## Tell me how López de Heredia began

My great-grandfather, Don Rafael, while working as an importer of goods, saw an opportunity to sell wine to the French while they were being

hit by phylloxera and started the Bodega in 1877. We were the first winery in Haro and are the third oldest in Rioja.

In 1890 phylloxera spread into Spain but by then the technique of grafting American rootstock onto vines was already well known. From 1901 to 1907 we had to uproot and graft all our vines which was quite a task, but we were already a strong enough brand to survive.

My great grandmother helped my great grandfather with the blending of the wines. She was diabetic but she loved to cook – she was huge!

## HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE USE OF OAK IN WINE?

It used to be a defect if the wine smelled or tasted too much like the barrel. Nowadays wood is sometimes used to cover other defects. You have to respect the nature of the wine and therefore the vines. If it smells like wood, you can't detect other components. The wine gains intensity but not purity – we want to respect the purity of the wine, not the barrel. My grandfather used to say: "Wood in a wine must be like perfume on a woman – it must enhance, not mask the natural beauty."

The best wine is one where all components are in perfect balance, and that takes time – it needs to develop in stages.

## What was it like growing up at López de Heredia?

Everybody has a very glamorous idea of the wine world but we used to go every Sunday to the vineyards with our father and we hated it. In Spain we say there is a

thin line between love and hate. I guess this applies to spending time in Viña Tondonia when it's cold or hot or windy without a break, but also learning about the great [grape] varieties. Still, it sounds better from the outside than when you have to suffer it. Behind a great wine there are many moments of hard work and little amusement. Only when you drink the wine do you realise that all the effort was worth it.

## What about your labyrinth of cellars, what was it like down there as a child?

I used to play hide and seek in the cellars with my eight cousins. One cousin was particularly mischievous and he used to switch the lights off. The darkness was so deep; it was incredibly scary. Even as an adult, if I forget to bring a torch down to the cellars with me and someone switches off the lights from the top, it takes around 20 minutes to find my way out – and 20 minutes down there is a long time.

## Have you felt pressure from other wineries in Rioja or from your export markets to make younger, more modern styles of wine?

Not at all. We receive more requests for not changing than for making new wines. And the market has demonstrated appreciation of our wines for 135 years.

## What vintages are you most proud of and which of those do you think are drinking well now?

A very special one is 1981 because it is at its best now and you can keep it for a long time. We decided to make a gran reserva even when it was not considered an excellent vintage in Rioja. We have always made our own decisions. To see that the result is good and that we weren't mistaken makes us feel more proud than when we have to make wine in a very good year.

However, the real philosophy of our family is based on the elegance of our reserva reds from Viña Tondonia, no matter which vintage. The rest of our wines are unique, rare and limited, but all our effort is shown in the reservas – they're what make us "winemakers" and they're the real López de Heredia. Only our most faithful customers know that.

## What are your ambitions for the future of López de Heredia? What direction would you like to take the winery in?

To continue as it is. Making great quality wine is never-ending hard work. But I have the opportunity of exercising every day. That's a luxury and a delight. ■