

the Cellar Door

Shop Local, Globally with Jones & Company Wine Merchants



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HONESTY IN THE FACE OF UNCERTAINTY: an interview with Esther Pinuaga

Interview by Jill Kwiatkoski,
Sommelier (CAPS)

Esther Pinuaga among the Pinuaga old bush vines in Corral de Almaguer (Photos by Pilar Sañudo)

In 1960, Valentín Pinuaga Salazar founded Bodegas Pinuaga near Toledo, Spain, just over one hour south of Madrid. The original winery was sold after Salazar's death in 1972, but the vineyards remained in the family, producing grapes for other private wineries. In 2003, Salazar's son, Valentín Pinuaga Portillo, and granddaughter, Esther, built a new winery and have developed Bodegas Pinuaga's wines to express the diversity of the soils in their home province. With great respect for their land and vineyards, they carry on the family's 60-year tradition of practicing organic wine growing and wine production with minimal intervention, making wines that honestly represent their terroir. Jill Kwiatkoski and Esther Pinuaga first met in person in March 2020, when Esther hosted a winemaker's dinner at Jones & Company.

Jill Kwiatkoski (JK) *Of course, we have to touch on this because of the moment we are in—but we won't dwell on it. How has COVID-19 affected your local business operations?*

Esther Pinuaga (ES) The big problem that we are really facing now is harvest, because our harvest is manual. We have to hire around 20 to 30 people for harvest and they work in the bush vines, which means they are always bending over. They carry a case that weighs around 16 kg, and they're usually working two by two. We work at night, so they wear this little light on their head, and then add face masks and safety glasses—it's going to be challenging. At the same time, we don't know what the authorities are going to say in terms of people working together because you have to keep a distance,

but there's no way you can keep a distance. We try to hire local workers who live in the village, and what we're going to try to do is, whoever is from the same family, we'll put them together because they're already in the same house.

JK How has it changed things for you in the wine market?

ES There's two sides of this business: we've seen big wineries that were selling to supermarket chains, then there are other wineries that wouldn't export at all, and they were just selling to local restaurants in Spain because they were doing good business. I'm so happy that we are actually exporting, and we are grateful that we have different customers elsewhere. It's giving us an opportunity to just survive.

We are very grateful because all of the customer base outside of Spain that we work with has been extremely supportive. That has really made me think that, sometimes in life, business is not only there just to make money—these people have supported us. I have learned over the years that the kind of importers and businesses like you that like to work

with smaller wineries like us—we are a small, 100% organic, family-run winery—have a bit more loyalty, and we are very grateful for that. Even though you are small, people like you have continued to buy—and for us, that's really important.

JK Since you're an organic producer, you also have had to contend with how the changing climate has affected your harvest. Looking back at the last decade, what changes have you seen in your vineyards?

EP Well, there are two things. One is longer drought periods, and two is a completely unstable climate. I think it's very difficult to predict what's going to happen because one vintage is extremely warm, then the next vintage is not as warm—there are a lot of peaks in the weather.

We're seeing a lot of strange, atmospheric events, where you get hail or frost in the middle of June. A couple of years ago, in 2017, there was a huge frost all over Europe.

Because it is very difficult to anticipate, we cannot predict, "Harvest will be this time." Everything is earlier, and I think

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Pinuaga wines available exclusively at Jones & Company Wine Merchants: *Coleccion* (\$21.99); *Rosé Rosado* (\$15.99); *Tinto Garnacha/Tempranillo* (\$14.99) [pictured above]; as well as *Bianco Sauvignon Blanc* (\$14.99); *200 Cepas Tempranillo* (\$31.99).

that's because of the heat and the lack of water. So things are marching in advance. This year, for instance, we've had a lot of rain, but in the South of Spain, they started harvesting the grapes in July, almost three weeks in advance compared to last year. The trellis-conducted vineyards do not adapt as well as the bush vines. Our bush vines are fantastic survivors. They go get the water from underneath aquifers, and I think that they adapt much better to the local climate.

JK What are some new projects you are looking forward to in 2021?

EP I would like to come up with a new white wine. We are looking at this 70-year-old vineyard from a really nice producer here locally. It's planted with Airén, a local Spanish grape variety. We want to make a smaller production of white over lees. We wanted to do that this year, but it's too complicated because of the situation, so we have to postpone it to 2021. Two other new projects that I want to accomplish at some point is a vermouth and my own olive oil.

JK One thing that our customers always comment on is your beautiful labels. What inspired them?

EP We wanted to attract new wine drinkers and the younger generations so I thought that it was a good idea to have fun labels. These labels were designed by a friend of

mine, Miguel, who is an architect and lives in Germany. He asked me for empty cases of wine and painted a super nice collage on them. We did a tasting and he did an exhibition called Paintings Over Cases of Wine. I asked Miguel if we could use his paintings for the labels, and he said, "Yes for sure!" So we designed these three wines—the Tinto, the Bianco, and the Rosé (see page 43)—to represent red, white, and rosé at a nice entry level that are fruity and refreshing.

JK Your labels can only tell so much of your story. What is the most important thing that you want wine lovers to know about Pínuaga wines?

EP I think that, for me, the most important thing is that they learn to appreciate that, because we're a small winery, the harvest and the vintage are present in the wine. So not every year is the same, and that's something that I think we like people to expect—that there's beauty in wine, that every vintage has its little things. Apart from that, we try to make wines as honest as possible. When I say an "honest wine," to me, it really represents what we are. It represents the soil, the type of grape variety, and the organic winemaking because we really don't use anything. We can call it natural if you want, but we really don't use any artificial yeast or any other products. We apply just minor, minor things to fine-tune the wines. We try to make the best out of what we have. P-3