Any profile of Rafael Palacios inevitably leads with his family history and while being a scion of a famous winemaking family in Spain is an excellent way to get attention, it makes Rafa’s hard work and achievements seem fated or predetermined. If one were asked to rank the indispensable white wines from the old world, there would be very few on the list originating below 45° in latitude yet only after a decade in Valdeorras it is becoming apparent that Rafa can make wines from warmer climes have the potential to rival Hermitage Blanc, Corton-Charlemagne, the Mosel or the Wachau.

As quaffable and enjoyable as Godello can be from Valdeorras, it rarely reaches the level of richness, balance and complexity as it does in the hands of Rafael Palacios. Having left his family’s estate in Rioja in 2004, Rafa settled in the Val do Bibei, a rugged, weathered and off the beaten path sub-zone of Valdeorras. Bordering Ribera Sacra, the Val do Bibei is a tortured landscape of granitic, terraced slopes dotted with hard to reach and hard to farm vineyard plots. Whereas most of the rest of the DO is at lower elevation with limestone and schist soils, Rafa works exclusively with Godello planted on granitic soils at much higher elevations – so high that late Spring snow present an ever present danger to his already low yields. Locally these plots are known as sorte, a word in the local dialect that refers to the practice of drawing lots to determine inheritance. Rafa has assembled 24.5 hectares of vines divided among 26 sorte. Some plots he owns outright, others are on long-term lease. The oldest vines, some nearing a century, are head pruned while
the younger vines on more gentle slopes are trellised. The farming is minimalist since the sub-zone is blessed with free draining soils and warm, dry summers. All the vineyard work done by hand, including harvesting.

Rafa makes four cuvées from the sandy, granitic soils of the Val do Bibei: O Bolo, Louro, As Sortes and Sorte O Soro. The entry level wine O Bolo, which replaces Sabrego, is a tank fermented and aged version of younger vine Godello suited for early consumption capturing the vivacious qualities of the grape but retaining a surprising level of complexity.

The Louro is crafted from younger vines but is selected from plots that produce more age-worthy wines. Fermented with indigenous yeast and aged in used foudre, Louro showcases Rafa’s talent at balancing the minerality of the grape with the richness and texture of the elevage.

As Sortes takes the selection process one step further by employing grapes from vines between 35 and 92 years old, fermenting them with indigenous yeasts and aging them in 500 liter French oak barrels. For many years this was the benchmark wine of Valdeorras (and arguably Spain’s premiere white wine) until it was unseated by Rafa’s newest cuvée, Sorte O Soro.

Sorte O Soro is the culmination of Rafa’s pioneering work in the Val do Bibei. Originating from a single .47 hectare plot of 40 year-old vines and farmed biodynamically, Sorte O Soro is the Les Clos or the Clos Ste Hune of Valdeorras. A natural yeast fermentation is followed by aging for 8 months in new 500 L French oak barrels. Luis Gutierrez when tasting the 2011 Sorte O Soro called it, “one of the most exciting whites currently produced in the country.”