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 RiberaSacra, 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 and frost are ever present dangers 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 32 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.

Each vintage, Rafa makes two cuvées from the sandy, granitic soils of the Val do Bibei: Louro, and As Sortes. When conditions are right, he will also make three single vineyard bottlings: Sorte Antiga, Sorte Souto, and Sorte O Soro. Louro is crafted from younger vines but carefully selected from plots that produce age-worthy wines. Fermented with indigenous yeast and aged on its lees in neutral 30HL French oak foudres, Louro showcases Rafa’s talent at balancing the minerality of the grape with the richness and texture of the elevage. Up to 10% of the blend in Louro will be Treixadura, a variety that can be found co-planted in Rafa’s sortes.
As Sortes takes the selection process one step further by employing grapes from vines between 35 and 92 years old from sortes situated in a natural amphitheater, 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 cuvées, Sorte Antiga, Sorte Souto and Sorte O Soro.

Sorte Antiga comes from Rafa’s oldest vineyard plot. These vines are nearing 100 years old and Rafa has noticed something peculiar about this site that warrants a separate bottling when the vintage conditions are right. Godello has small berries and thick skins which ripen late in the season and usually after the rest of the grape. Whether it is the age of the vines, the massale selection, or its specific terroir, the grapes from Antiga have a tendency to ripen completely and evenly. As a result this is a cuvée is fermented on its skins and only pressed after the primary fermentation is complete.

Sorte Souto comes from a tiny 0.58ha parcel of vines planted in a small hollow and surrounded by chestnut trees. It only sees a few hours of direct sunlight each summer so the grapes do not ripen until well into October if not the first few weeks of November. This late harvest wine is fermented separately from Rafa’s other cuvées because the indigenous yeasts from this site are inefficient and fermentation stops naturally around 11º resulting in a style of wine not dissimilar to a fruity Kabinett or rich Spätlese.

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 7 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.”