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Peter Sisseck

An Improbable Greatness

“Sisseck has stirred the imagination of a generation of winemakers ... a meticulous winemaker who has few peers within Spain or without.”

— Chris Fleming, *World of Fine Wine*

From Henri Jayet to Anselme Selosse, wine’s greatest visionaries have always built on the past—consolidating the teachings of earlier generations with ideas not previously imagined.

They advance the art of winemaking, raising the bar both locally and globally. And they are self-guided, relying on their own philosophical compass to find answers. They question dogma, while reading the signs of nature that others miss.

By the example of their work, they change the trajectory of wine history. They leave behind a world of healthier vineyards and purer, more expressive wines.

They are men and women of intellect, courage and vision.

Building His Legacy

It is too early to anoint Peter Sisseck as a member of this elite community; he has, after all, only been making wine professionally for about 20 years. But one day he’s sure to deserve it—given the influence he’s already had, and the extraordinary legacy of wines he has already made—at the relatively young age of 52.

He began, in 1995, by creating Pingus, the most iconic new wine Spain had seen in more than a century. And he parlayed that success into a stream of other trailblazing projects, each unique in conception.

Two of them, Flor de Pingus and Pingus “Amelia,” descend



Like all great winemakers, Peter Sisseck relies on his own philosophical compass to find answers.

directly from Pingus, though from different old-vine vineyards. The stature of each is worthy of the Pingus name. A fourth Ribera wine, PSI, offers astonishing value, while raising the living standard for scores of poor Ribera growers. Finally, in 2010, Peter returned to the scene of his wine birth, Bordeaux, to produce an excitingly classic St. Emilion, Ch. Rocheyron.

In the pages that follow, you will be able to read more about these wines—and purchase important examples. Included are vintages from the past as well as vintages never before offered.

Unlikely Beginnings

Born in Denmark, Peter went to Bordeaux in his early 20s—to study at the university and work with his uncle Peter Vinding-Diers, a winemaker whose work with dry Bordeaux whites in the 1970s and 1980s is the stuff of legend. *Continued on page 2*

He also worked with Zelma Long, whose Simi Chardonnays were so influential in the 1970s and 1980s. And then in 1993, he joined a new winery project in Spain's Ribera del Duero.

At the time Ribera del Duero only had two important wineries—Vega Sicilia and Pesquera—and thousands of poor farmers.

1995 Pingus may have been the single most influential wine ever made in Spain

But Peter was tasked with establishing one of the first new wineries of Ribera's modern era, Hacienda Monasterio.

While planting Monasterio's new vineyards, he became entranced by the noble old Tempranillo vineyards he saw around him. He scraped together enough pesetas to buy a few gnarled old vines, and in 1995, on a shoestring, made fewer than 400 cases of wine from them.

That wine, 1995 Pingus, may have been the single most influential wine ever made in Spain, helping to transform Spain's viticultural landscape over the next two decades.

Neptune's Cellar

If there is one word to describe 1995 Pingus, it's dramatic. It took the wine world by storm, with a **96-100** barrel rating from Parker, who called it "one of the greatest and most exciting young red wines I have ever tasted."

Tasting the wine itself delivered drama. So deep in old-vine concentration, we once wrote that this and other early Pinguses "evoked comparisons to the legendary late-1940's Pomerols. Pingus' black color, otherworldly richness and decadence, and massive concentration could only be compared to the likes of 1947 Pétus or 1948 Lafleur."

But there was more drama in store. In late 1997, the ship carrying the entire 75-case US allocation of 1995 Pingus sank in the North Atlantic. (There was seven times as much Ch. Lafite on the same vessel, but that didn't garner nearly the headlines.) By now, a wine that came out at \$30 a bottle was selling for several hundred. Today, a pristine bottle of 1995 Pingus can set you back nearly \$2000.

Pingus wasn't the only wine that Peter launched in 1995. It was also his first vintage for Flor de Pingus, a wine that has since



The barrels Peter uses at Ch. Rocheyron are only one-third new, to not compete with the nuance of this extraordinary *terroir*.

become iconic in its own right. However, few people have ever had the chance to taste 1995 Flor de Pingus, since virtually its entire 1000-case production is also resting on the ocean floor.

Enveloped in its mystique, Pingus has been mimicked by countless Spanish wines

A Maturing Genius

Most winemakers in Peter's position would have played it safe, cranking out 1995 Pingus taste-alikes for the rest of their careers. And, in fact, the success of that wine spawned a slew of Pingus copycats in both Ribera del Duero and Rioja. But none of them have come close to matching '95 Pingus' grace, since they generally rely on heavy extractions and excessive use of new wood to replicate the density Peter got from his old vines.

The makers of these wines miss what is truly magical in that first Pingus: balance. As it has aged, what initially appeared to be a brooding, powerful wine has morphed into a wine of consummate elegance, coming to resemble a great mature Right Bank Bordeaux, fulfilling our early expectations.

But despite the greatness of 1995 Pingus, Peter knew he could make even more profound wine. He became fascinated with the potential of biodynamic agriculture, which emphasizes equilibrium in the vineyard.

He also began to question whether extremely low yields pro-

Flor de Pingus is one of the world's great wine bargains

duce great—or just concentrated—wine. And increasingly he focused on vineyard expression. His early wines were aged entirely in new and very rare, Darnajou barrels (the same barrels used in aging Pétrus). The nuances of soil and grape find it hard competing with Darnajou's richness. And so over time he found himself using both less Darnajou—and less new wood generally.

The New Millennium

By the 2000s, Peter had evolved as a winemaker, and Pingus itself had acquired more finesse, while maintaining its richness.

Biodynamic agriculture had transformed his fruit, given it better acidity and tension—crucial qualities in Ribera's warm climate. The wines still had incredible palate impact. But they were more vibrant with the unique Pingus signature more clearly etched.

The 2000s also saw the coming of age of his second wine, Flor de Pingus. In the early years, Flor was made from purchased grapes, but now its vineyards were controlled by Peter and farmed biodynamically, just like the Pingus vineyards. At a price below \$100, it was increasingly viewed as one of the world's great wine bargains. (See back page.)

Amelia

Contributing to Flor de Pingus' extraordinary quality was a small plot of 500 Tempranillo vines planted in the 1890s. Peter called the vines "the most perfect clone of Tempranillo" he'd ever seen; and in fact, when he needed to replace vines in the original Pingus vineyards, he used *selection massale* cuttings from these.

Until the 2003 vintage, the wine from those 500 vines was blended into Flor de Pingus because, on their own, they produced, at best, a barrel of wine. That was too little to come close to meeting world demand. But perhaps it could work in a single market? So, beginning that year, Peter agreed to bottle the wine from this vineyard on its own, just for the U.S. The

wine's name is Amelia. (See page 6.)

PSI: The Soul of Ribera

Two years later, Peter embarked on his most ambitious venture since the first Pingus vintage: to involve poor local growers in a joint wine project—allowing them to capitalize on their old vineyards through better, chemical-free viticulture and Peter's brilliant winemaking. The project was named PSI, for the 13th letter of the Greek alphabet.

Peter had three equally important goals. The first was to try to put a halt to the destruction of Ribera del Duero's old vineyards, which were being uprooted by the dozens. Second, he wanted to give the growers the tools with which to produce better grapes.

And third, he wanted to make a wine that—through minimalist winemaking—would capture the soul of Ribera's old vineyards.

By using long, gentle macerations and virtually no new wood, PSI has more transparency than 99% of the wines now being made in Ribera. From its first vintage, 2007, PSI has been as subtle, delicate, and compelling as anything seen in modern Spain. It is also remarkably affordable. (See Page 5.)

Rocheyron

Finally, in 2010, Peter returned to the place of his wine education and the birth of his passion: Bordeaux. With longtime friend Silvio Denz, he found an extraordinary vineyard on St. Émilion's famed plateau. The vines were planted 35 to 65 years ago in limestone-rich clay soil. Here, Peter would pursue his vision of making the kind of classic Bordeaux that is becoming increasingly rare.

He quickly converted the five hectares of Merlot and two hectares of Cabernet Franc to organic viticulture. This is some-

Old-School St. Émilion, the likes of which we seldom see

thing that, even today, is surprisingly rare in Bordeaux. And he adopted a winemaking regime very similar to what he now does in Spain: long, gentle macerations and only about 1/3 new barrels.

The result is Old School St. Émilion, the likes of which we too seldom see these days. It is a wine of remarkable minerality. (See page 7.)

For only the second time in our history, we devote an issue of our newsletter to one grower. It is honor to do so.

Pingus: In Search of Greatness

Pingus is one of the few new Spanish wines of the past twenty years to have joined the ranks of the world's most coveted wines. And it could easily be the most individual.

The child of three ancient vineyards in the Ribera del Duero town of La Horra, Pingus was first made by Peter Sisseck in 1995. One can only imagine the reactions in Bordeaux when he showed up at the next year's *en primeur* tastings with samples.

Few wine writers or merchants at that time gave Spanish wine a second thought. Yet, by the end of the week, Pingus was the greatest story of that season's futures campaign.

Robert Parker announced the wine on the back cover of his *Wine Advocate*, bestowing an unheard of **96-100** point score. The world took notice, and Pingus was on its way.

Core Values

From its first vintage, Peter's vision has been to capture the essence of old-vine Tinto Fino. He spent years restoring the old vines to health and making them biodynamic.

The winemaking is equally meticulous. Pingus is fermented in large wooden vats and, once in cask, is mostly left alone. Since the early 2000s, Peter has steadily reduced the amount of new wood to enhance expressiveness. Extractions have always been gentle—a fact that comes through in Pingus' distinctively velvet texture.

Peter's work has been widely imitated, and countless Spanish wines have mimicked Pingus' style. But none has ever captured its magic. That is how it must be: Pingus is an expression not just of a noble *terroir* but of a great winemaker's soul.

Pingus' Past and Future: A Reassessment

After Vega Sicilia—which celebrates its 150th anniversary this year—Pingus is today Spain's most famous wine. But, because of its tiny production and high price, very few wine lovers have actually ever tasted a bottle of Pingus.

And so Pingus is enveloped in its mystique. Questions abound—the natural result of so many collectors, and even writers, never having tasted it. Is it a modern wine or is it firmly embedded in classicism?

In his 2012 comparison of Pingus with Vega Sicilia, Neal Martin concludes the latter, adding, "One might legitimately ask whether it bears great semblance to (Vega Sicilia's) Unico?"

Two years ago, a complete Pingus vertical in LA made the same point. Early vintages like 1995 and 1996—once thought to be so massive—have aged into wines of classic beauty.

The best way to judge a wine's quality is through the prism of time, and there is today enough history to see Pingus for the great—and, yes, classic—wine it is.

2010 Pingus

96 *The Wine Advocate*

\$865

Luis Gutierrez (*Wine Advocate*): "... Red and black fruits, a hint of smoke ... a very polished texture that is more northern Rhône than Bordeaux, with some minerality. A streak of acidity makes it more precise ... has the balance and stuffing to age gracefully and slowly."

2011 Pingus

94-96 *The Wine Advocate*

\$850

Neal Martin (*Wine Advocate*): "... a gorgeous, pure black cherry, cassis and blueberry scented bouquet ... The palate is full-bodied with a decadent entry. The tannins are ripe and rounded, imparting great tension and focus. There is both dimension and grace to this formidable Pingus"

More Legendary Pinguses

1995 Pingus RP 96-100 \$1595.00

The mythic first Pingus; Peter's Holy Grail wine.

2003 Pingus RP 96-100 \$850.00

"A candidate for perfection." Robert Parker

2006 Pingus WA 98 \$1750.00 magnum

Tasted 3 times since 2012: a fabulous Pingus.

2009 Pingus WA 97 \$845.00

One of the greatest Pinguses ever.

Three-vintage Pingus Retrospective
2 bottles each of 2009, 2010 & 2011
\$4,500 six-pack

If purchased separately, the six bottles would cost \$5120.

Bottled Soul

Ψ : PSI peers into the heart of Ribera del Duero

In 1995, Peter Sisseck had the foresight to acquire some of the Ribera del Duero's greatest old vineyards when it was still possible to do so. And he used these vineyards to create Pingus. The acclaim he's earned has made him a global celebrity and an idol of winemakers throughout Spain.

In 2006, Peter decided to pay back the region that had been so good to him. He conceived a new wine, PSI, to allow local growers to share in Ribera's economic success, while helping to protect its old vineyards from destruction.

Old Vines & Transparent Winemaking

For the project's name, he chose the Greek letter "PSI," and enlisted former Alonso del Yerro winemaker Pablo Rubio as his general manager.

The wine itself is made from mostly old-vine Tinto Fino farmed organically by local growers—and it is made in a way rarely seen in Ribera these days: classic in inspiration, with soft extractions and little new wood.

Since the first vintage in 2007, PSI has realized its goal of capturing the soul of Ribera del Duero in a way that few wines have. And the price is compellingly low.

Leveling the Playing Field

The main problem Peter is attacking is that Ribera del Duero's small growers have benefitted little from the region's economic good fortune. At the mercy of big producers, they are paid not for quality, but by the ton, for their fruit.

And so they are trapped in a cycle of relying on chemicals to keep their vines "healthy." Today, Ribera del Duero is one of those regions whose soils have—in the words of Claude Bourignon—less microbial life than the Sahara Desert.

Preserving Ribera's Patrimony

PSI is also helping to preserve the very old Tinto Fino vines that set Ribera del Duero apart from everywhere else. Like California's Historic Vineyard Society, Peter's goal is to keep priceless old vineyards from being uprooted.

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The magic of all of Peter's Ribera wines lies in the way he expresses the very old Tempranillo—aka Tinto Fino—vines.

He explained it this way to Luis Gutierrez in 2011: "There are a lot fewer old vines in Ribera today than when I arrived here in 1990 ... the grape growers, being paid by the kilo, have no incentive to keep the old vines, because the yield is lower. So they rip them up and plant new ones that are going to produce more grapes, but not of the same quality. That's how in these 20 years we have lost some 2,000 hectares of old vines."

Consequently, Peter pays the growers a substantial premium to avoid chemicals, reduce yields and produce much better fruit.

Buying a case or two of PSI each year not only assures you of a fantastic, ageworthy wine at a great price, but that you are doing your part to assure the vineyards and growers of Ribera del Duero of a better future.

2011 PSI

BOTTLE **\$37.50** MAGNUM **\$85.00**
SPECIAL 12-BOTTLE CASE **\$399.00**

Josh Reynolds: "Glass-staining ruby. Dark berry, bitter chocolate and potpourri on the perfumed nose. Spicy, penetrating black and blue fruit flavors show impressive clarity and lift, with a zesty mineral nuance adding bite. Smooth and seamless on the subtly tannic finish, which leaves juicy blueberry and violet pastille notes behind."

The Mythic Pingus “Amelia”

We can count on one hand the number of countries who get allocated more than a dozen cases of Pingus. But we only need one finger to count the number of countries who see Pingus’ sibling, Amelia.

That makes American Pingus lovers the luckiest in the world, as they can also tap into the 23 cases of Amelia that Peter makes each year exclusively for us.

Here’s the story behind Amelia. While tasting barrels on a 2004 visit to his cellar, Peter showed me a special barrel. The wine came from a plot of 500 Tempranillo vines planted in the 1890s. He called these vines the “most perfect clone of Tempranillo” he’d ever seen.

In fact, when Peter needs to replace vines in the vineyards that produce Pingus, he gets his *Massale* cuttings here. But because the vineyard is physically separate, the juice has never gone into Pingus. Instead, it went into Flor de Pingus.

That struck me as tragic, so I asked he’d if he’d be willing to bottle it separately for the U.S. I was prepared to beg, but I



didn’t have to. Peter loved the idea, and so Amelia (named for my daughter) was born.

Aged in a used barrel and carrying only about 13% alcohol, Amelia is a masterpiece of finesse. Tasting complete verticals twice in 2012, I was struck at its resem-

blance to a great Right Bank Bordeaux. I can’t wait to see these wines in their full maturity.

Amelia has been produced each vintage since, except for 2004. It is shipped to us in six-bottle wood cases. Not a single bottle is sent elsewhere.

As you’d expect from such extraordinary vines, Amelia has been a consistently breathtaking wine from the start and with the stunning 2010 and 2011, it continues to be so.

— *Mannie Berk*

2006 Pingus Amelia \$275

Jay Miller, *Wine Advocate*: “96 rating ... an enticing perfume of cigar box, lavender, truffle,... Layered, complex, rich ...”

Josh Reynolds: “95 rating ... powerful, mineral-driven aromas ... strikingly pure ... broad, palate-staining fruit ... The mineral element clings impressively on the long, sappy, sweet finish.”

2007 Pingus Amelia \$275

Jay Miller, *Wine Advocate*: “97 rating ... a compelling bouquet of sandalwood, mineral, Asian spices, truffle, black currant, and blackberry ... has superb volume, intensity, complexity, and density. Savory, suave”

2008 Pingus Amelia \$250

Josh Reynolds “93 rating ... A wild, highly aromatic bouquet of black raspberry, cherry-cola, incense and rose oil, with a sexy note of Moroccan spices. Lush and creamy in texture, offering expansive dark berry flavors ... sweet, focused and very long”

2009 Pingus Amelia \$295

Jay Miller, *Wine Advocate*: “96-99 rating ... ups the ante with its creamy texture, refined personality, and 60-second finish. It, too, will enjoy a lengthy lifespan of 30-40 years if not longer.”

2010 Pingus Amelia 250.00

Josh Reynolds: “94 rating ... exotically perfumed ... Lush and expansive, with hefty boysenberry and bitter cherry flavors underscored by racy acidity ... an uncommonly long finish”

2011 Pingus Amelia 250.00

Josh Reynolds: “93 rating ... Intense cherry and dark berry preserve flavors ... smoky minerals ... a suave Asian spice quality ... Impressively elegant wine that smoothly weds power and finesse.”

Also available in very limited quantities:

2003 Pingus Amelia \$395 — The first vintage
2005 Pingus Amelia \$425 — 97 *Wine Advocate*

Château Rocheyron

Inaugural U.S. Offer

Peter ultimately found his voice in Ribera del Duero, working with ancient Tinto Fino vines.

But the greatness of his Spanish work stems in part from the time he spent in Bordeaux in his twenties—working with his uncle Peter Vinding-Diers and studying at the University of Bordeaux. It was then that he acquired the Bordeaux-inspired methods—including his fine touch with French oak—that are the signature of his wines today.

Returning to His Roots

So, in 2009, when the Saint-Émilion estate of Château Rocheyron became available, its *terroir* and old vines proved irresistible to Peter. The estate is located on the fabled limestone plateau alongside such legends as Ausone, Pavie and L'Angélus. And though small—only 7.5 hectares are planted—its *terroir* is exceptional: just a half-meter of topsoil on a bed of solid limestone.

The average age of the vines is nearly a half-century, but what really got Peter's attention was a tiny plot of 80-year old Cabernet Franc vines. Sisseck loves Cabernet Franc and with his experience with Pingus' ancient Tinto Fino, he knew that Rocheyron's vines were capable of producing extraordinary fruit.

And so Peter acquired it in partnership with his longtime friend, Silvio Denz, who also owns Ch. Faugère, Péby Faugères and Lafaurie-Peyraguey. No expenses have been spared in maximizing the estate's potential.

As Peter told *Wine Spectator's* James Molesworth, "The nice

part is that we already have other businesses going, so with Rocheyron, we can really just do what we want."

A Bordeaux Ideal

The farming is organic—some day it will be biodynamic—and the selection of lots for the *grand vin* is ruthless. Above all,

Rocheyron's
old vines &
unique *terroir*
were the allure.

Peter can make a classic style of Bordeaux that he remembers from the past—and one increasingly rare today.

Rocheyron is fermented in cement tanks at moderate temperatures. New wood is kept to about one-third to favor expressiveness without overwhelming the fruit.

In his first vintage, Peter took full advantage of a 2010's great, small crop to fashion a classic St.-Émilion. Its brown spice and cigar box richness is perfectly balanced by firm structure and limestone-born minerality.

With its noble *terroir* and Peter's touch, Rocheyron should take its place among Saint-Émilion's top châteaux. But between the estate's small size and very low yields, only 800 cases were made of the inaugural 2010 and 2011.

Here's your chance to get in on the ground floor of Peter's latest masterwork.

2010 Château Rocheyron

BOTTLE **\$149.95**
6-BOTTLE CASE **\$795.00**

James Molesworth: "Well-packed, offering layers of boysenberry, fig and blackberry *pâte de fruit*, inlaid with anise, roasted apple and singed spice notes. Dense and grippy, showing detail and energy through the lengthy finish, with a backdrop of minerality that should blossom in the cellar."

2011 Château Rocheyron

BOTTLE **\$149.95**
6-BOTTLE CASE **\$795.00**

James Molesworth: "This has muscular layers of fig, boysenberry compote, blackberry confiture and tobacco notes coursing underneath. The tannins are refined, with a lingering elegance to offset the heft. This should age well."

Ch. Rocheyron Explorer 6-Pack \$750 (3 bts 2010 / 3 bts 2011)

Large Formats 2011 Rocheyron are also available: MAGNUM **\$325.00** DOUBLE MAGNUM **\$650.00** IMPERIAL **\$1,300.00**



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Flor de Pingus

“Offers superb value relative to its ritzy Pingus sibling.” *Josh Reynolds*

Because of Pingus' tiny production—and correspondingly high price—few get the chance to experience Pingus' magic firsthand.

But over the past decade, Peter's iconic second wine—Flor de Pingus has edged closer and closer to Pingus in character and complexity. Drinking Flor de Pingus today will bring you tantalizingly close to a true Pingus experience, at a fraction of the price.

Mirroring the Grand Vin

The key, as with any great wine, is the vineyard sources: several parcels of old vines in the same La Horra zone of Ribera del Duero as Pingus. Peter controls the vineyards' viticulture—ensuring low yields and fabulous old-vine concentration. They are even farmed biodynamically like Pingus itself.

In the cellar, Sisseck treats Flor de Pingus much as he does Pingus; following fermentation in large wooden vats, it is essentially left alone in barrel to develop its uniquely brilliant expression of Tempranillo and *terroir*. But each year we see greater depth and finesse due to Peter's subtle refinements.

The Great 2009 & 2010

Every year, Flor de Pingus is one of Ribera del Duero's premier wines, tracking Pingus in quality and acclaim. In 2009 and 2010, it's simply a masterpiece, as reflected in the *Wine Advocate* and *International Wine Cellar* reviews below.

The next great vintage of Flor de Pingus is the 2011. But in anticipation of this special newsletter, we held back a few cases of both bottles and magnums of 2010 Flor de Pingus—a wine that saw massive demand when offered last fall.

And from our library, we've even pulled out a few cases

we'd protected of the wondrous 2009 Flor de Pingus.

This wine was widely celebrated in 2012, in the wake of its 95-98 rating from Jay Miller in *The Wine Advocate*. We can offer both bottles and magnums. But please note that the magnums in both vintages are extremely limited.

2009 Flor de Pingus

BOTTLE \$95.00
MAGNUM \$245.00

Jay Miller in *The Wine Advocate*: “95-98 rating ... opaque purple in color with a primary perfume of pain grille, mineral, spice box, incense, and blackberry. Locked and loaded with remarkable concentration and depth, this mouth-coating lengthy offering manages to incorporate some elegance into its powerful physique. It will drink well for 30-40 years.”

2010 Flor de Pingus

BOTTLE \$84.95
MAGNUM \$195.00

Josh Reynolds: “94 rating. Ripe cherry, cassis, potpourri and cracked pepper on the intensely perfumed nose, with subtle licorice and woodsmoke qualities adding complexity. Deep, sweet and expansive, offering explosive dark berry compote, floral pastille and anise flavors. A spicy quality gains strength on the finish, which leaves smoke and mineral notes behind. This bottling has been going from strength to strength in recent years and offers superb value relative to its ritzy Pingus sibling.”