

---

Monday 03/16/2009. Updated 22:21 h.

**BALEÓPOLIS** | Technology

## Malvasia, the old gold recovered

Elena Soto | Palm

Updated Monday 3/16/2009 8:41 PM

---

In the Decameron, Boccaccio describes an **imaginary territory**, a kind of country of Jauja where everything is possible called Bengodi, in which **the Malvasia flows abundantly**. In Tirant lo Blanc, famous novel of chivalry by Joanot de Martorell, the court doctor recommends the Empress repose and Malvasia. Whether as a symbol of abundance and luxury or as an elixir with healthy properties, this grape variety has numerous literary and documentary references. And it is that the European gastronomic history is closely linked to the malvasía, a wine that should never be missing from the table of the nobles and the Popes.

From Sitges, Sardinia, Istria, Canary Islands or Banyalbufar. The **cultivation of Malvasia extends throughout the Mediterranean basin**, reaching as far away as Madeira. It is believed to originate in Greece, at least its name, since the term Malvasia comes from the city of Monembasia, on the coast of the Aegean Sea, in southern Greece. Whatever its precise origin, the common ancestor of modern varieties had to travel through the Mediterranean to reach the Canary Islands and Madeira in the fifteenth century.

In Mallorca, **different municipalities of the Serra de Tramuntana** have been famous throughout history for the prestige of their Malvasía wines, and one of them has been Banyalbufar. After the conquest of the island by Jaume I, agriculture was the almost exclusive occupation of the inhabitants of this place who, **making the most of the difficult terrain of the area**, prepared the slopes with terraces to be able to plant vines. In the sixteenth century some 250,000 liters of malvasia wine were obtained, which was exported mainly to the court of Aragon. Later, in the 19th century, thanks to the Archduke Luis Salvador, the Malvasía received numerous prizes in the wine salons of half Europe.

But far from its times of splendor, the **variety has been seriously threatened until very recent dates**. The progressive abandonment of agriculture in the middle of the last century led the Malvasia to a limit and was on the verge of extinction. The few remaining strains were weakened, barely bear fruit, and early studies concluded that virtually all were affected by different types of viruses. Hipólito Medrano, professor of Plant Physiology at the UIB, recalls that in 1999 he was visited by several members of the Tramuntana Viva association and they explained the problem to him. And as in the University the research group of Biology of the Plants in Mediterranean Conditions had been dedicated since the beginning of the nineties to the work in vineyards, got down to work and began the study of recovery of this variety.

Between 1999 and 2005, the group carried out two **projects funded by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries** of the Government, until obtaining malvasia clones free of viruses and with good agronomic and oenological characteristics. "Plant viruses like those of humans," explains Medrano, "are incurable. There is no remedy, there are only palliatives. As in men there are mild, like the flu; and serious, like AIDS. And in the case of the malvasia, it seemed to us that the most effective way to clean the species with guarantees was through in vitro cultures from apical meristems, a minimum tissue of 0.1 mm near the yolk, which does not reach the sap and therefore neither the infection.

Biotechnology. The **process began with the collection of the most tender buds of malvasia**, which were peeled off with a scalpel until leaving only that point free of virus, the meristem, from which the plant can develop because it is a permanent cell multiplication zone. Subsequently, these minimum tissues were introduced into a test tube with the necessary nutrients to develop them. All this work of microsurgery was performed in the laboratory and in conditions of total asepsis.

The **plants that managed to survive were green** after two or three weeks and began to grow and take root; it was then when they were taken to an ex vitro culture medium, placing them in small pots under sterile conditions. If they surpassed this phase they were transplanted in larger containers in the open air. Later, they were subjected to a test to verify that, in fact, the specimens were healthy. And those that overcame this process were grafted onto patterns in several experimental farms.

In parallel, since 2003, in order to meet the **requirements established by the legislation regarding the certification of healthy plants**, samples were sent for three years to the National Center for the Detection of Grapevine Virus in Murcia, where they were tested, previous step to achieve the corresponding health certificate of the variety.

In 2006, **the Malvasía de Banyalbufar** became the first and, to date, the only Malvasia in Spain with a sanitary certificate. Medrano clarifies that this does not mean that there are no healthy malvasías in other places, but that they have not gone through this certification process. With the first 30 kg of grapes from the clonal selection a wine was produced that was excellent, since it maintained the original characteristics of the variety, although slightly more alcoholic. Currently, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries owns the malvasia clones that can be acquired by any winegrower.

variety. Despite the territorial differences, there is a common denominator in all malvasías, their aroma; a characteristic that is maintained in the wines made with them. In addition to the fragrance, there are the colors, from the greenish yellow wine of the youth to the different golden tones in the crianzas. Because of its richness in sugars, the variety is also very appreciated to make sweet and liqueur wines. Sicily, Lanzarote, Madeira or Mallorca, the Malvasía feel good the island air or, at least, the sea breeze, since the most famous wines of this variety almost always occur near the coast and in places with very steep slopes. The Serra de Tramuntana has in principle several peculiarities that can give originality to its wines: on the one hand there is its microclimate, between the mountain and the sea, that could be defined as sub-humid Mediterranean; and on the other its soil, composed mainly of limestones and marl.

Visit the Malvasía route visiting wineries such as Tomeu Isern, Son Vives, Can Picó or the Malvasía Cooperative and contemplate the vineyards on the coastline that goes from Estellencs to Port des Canonge, apart from its wine interest, it offers the possibility of enjoying one of the most beautiful landscapes of the Island.