



Vicente Todolí in Todolí Citrus Fundació, 2022. Photo by Borja Llorens.



# Interview with Vicente Todolí

Imagine more than four hundred varieties of citrus trees brought together to form an open museum. The cool air under the canopy, the splatter of water in a dilapidated ditch, the smell of sea salt in the orange groves. You'd be walking into Vicente Todolí's citrus foundation, Todolí Citrus Fundació, the largest collection of planted citrus trees in the world located in Palmera, Spain. It is a strange paradise, summoning the ordered beauty and temporal roughness of landscape gardening. Yet it is fidelity to botanical knowledge, not aesthetics, what guides the arrangement of Vicente's citrus trees, the result of years of research. His mission is to share these resources with whomever needs it, from artists to chefs, perfumers, and doctors.

Vicente is swift to inform me about the origin of the word 'paradise' when I sat across from him in Todolicitrus Fundacio on a sunny December morning. Quick spoken, he exudes an inviting warmth evident when he gently corrects me with his encyclopaedic knowledge. "Pai-ri-daeza," he tells me, "is the name of Persian orchard gardens. The citrus orchard garden is the closest place to paradise on earth because it appeals to all the senses. Even sound, as you hear water and birds that nest in the treetops." His words take form as he speaks in our surrounding, for we sit next to ancient irrigation channels dug by the Almoravids during Al-Andalus – a visual clue to the direct lineage between his citrus fields and the orchard gardens of the First Persian Empire.

You will know Vicente from the indelible mark he has made in the art world as Director of contemporary art museums IVAM, Serralves, Tate Modern, and now Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan. In the last twenty years he has complemented this activity with the continuation of a dynastic tradition of citriculture and the preservation of his childhood landscape. Todolí Citrus Fundació is recognised as a charity for environmental defence after he bought twenty-four hectares of land adjacent to his family orchard to protect the area against rampant urbanisation. Now he has turned the commercial orange fields into an investigation hodgepodge visited by the likes of chefs Ferran Adrià and Quique Dacosta, and artist collectives Inland, Basurama and Cooking Sections.

**Q** The intention of the Todolí Citrus Fundació is to preserve a cultural landscape and disseminate knowledge related to citrus. What is the role of research in art and citriculture?

**A** Essential. Without research there is no solution. I am a born researcher and continue to investigate both art and the world of citrus. My two areas are these: art and citriculture.

**Q** What are the differences between researching art and researching citriculture?

**A** I research art because I am a museum director. I create collections and curate exhibitions. What I do is build discourse, but without words, with the artworks of others. I am like an editor. I choose the artist, I choose the works, I put them together so that they speak to each other and produce a vision of the work that did not exist

before. Because if an exhibition has already been done, why repeat it? It makes no sense. Hence the importance of research.

In the world of citruses there are different types of research. There is botany, commercial citriculture, and history. It's in this last area, history, that there is very little research. I have had citriculture specialists come here who know nothing of the history of citriculture – when and where citrus fruits originate from. I tell them: that is as if I dedicated myself to contemporary art and knew nothing about the history of art. It's not possible.

**Q** Where and when do citruses originate from, then?

**A** All citruses come from four varieties: Micrantha (C. Micrantha), Citron (C. Medica), Mandarin (C. Reticulata), and Pomelo (C. Maxima). Except for the Kumquat, which comes aside. For example, the famous Valencian Bitter Orange comes from Mandarin and Pomelo, not Grapefruit, which is much more recent.

All varieties emerged eight million years ago at the foot of the Himalayas. From there they spread to parallel species because they need particular climatic and humidity conditions to flourish.

**Q** How did you manage to locate all the four hundred varieties of citruses you preserve and bring them to Todolí Citrus Fundació?

**A** Again, through investigation. For example, going on research trips to Japan. Because Japan for me is the model. They do not let any variety disappear. Instead, they protect them. I just got back from there. I'm working with an artist who has a studio on an island, and they told me about the Aishancan variety, which I didn't know about. They told me, "It's still green now, but it will be available in April." I will go to Japan then and try it.

The idea is to bring Aishancan here to Palmera, but that could take years. There is a very expensive bureaucratic process to introduce foreign citrus varieties into the European Union. The first step is to import the fruit's germplasm. Many citruses do not reproduce by seed. Only those that are polyembryonic can be reproduced that way. Monoembryonic citrus varieties, of which there are many, come out nothing like their progenitors. For

this reason, they are put in a germplasm bank. The real reproducing factor is the plant material, the trees.

**Q** So, does part of your research include using trees that already existed on the land where the foundation was established as reproductive plant material?

**A** Yes. What I did with the orange trees that belonged to my family was to force grafts that were no longer active. First, I drew out the base by making cuts in the roots to find out what had been grafted on one hundred and fifty years ago. A bitter orange, different from any variety we knew of, sprouted out. In each tree there were three levels of grafts, which we also forced out to know what orange varieties had been cultivated on this land over the years. From there, unknown varieties also emerged.

**Q** When you say unknown, do you mean in the regional context of the Valencian Community?

**A** No, internationally. Having four hundred citrus varieties in our foundation gives us an understanding of what is grown across the world. Later, specialists came, tried them, and did not know about them. The varieties of bitter orange which we forced out were extinct. We've created a kind of Jurassic Park, you know? Which is only possible if you have old trees, because it allows you to resurrect grafts that were already neutralized.

This tells us that one hundred and fifty years ago there was a bitter orange on which farmers grafted in Palmera which was different from the one cultivated today. Why was it abandoned? Impossible to say. Often, citrus varieties are discarded for reasons as trivial as having an oval shape. Such a shape does not serve the marketplace because oval fruits are harder to pile together. Like the Peret, a pear-shaped Valencian variety that has practically disappeared and that for me is better than the Valencia Late. It is delicious, and beautiful.

**Q** And you take it upon yourself to preserve it for future generations. What is the logic for choosing which variety to cultivate at Todolí Citrus Fundació?

**A** I am interested in all varieties. It's like when Edmund Hillary was asked, "Why do you want to climb Everest?" and he replied: "Because it is there." If a variety exists, I am interested in it. That's it. Because if it exists, it does so for a reason.

Now, the varieties that do not interest me are the commercial ones that you can find in supermarkets. But, if one day there is a risk that they will no longer be widely distributed, then they will interest me. We have the varieties we do simply because they are rare. They contribute to expanding the resources to be able to investigate citrus.

**Q** Research at Todolí Citrus Fundació is not limited to your own. It also includes creating a space for others to investigate in. Is this the reason why you built the gastronomic laboratory Bartolí Lab amid citrus groves?

**A** Yes, at Bartolí Lab we have a gastronomy library with as many traditional recipes as we can get our hands on that contain citrus. Bartolí Lab also has a whole series of technical appliances so that chefs can come here to investigate, taste and cook, on top of a dehydrator and a machine to extract essential oils which can be used for perfumery. Todolí Citrus Fundació is a charity. We do not have commercial objectives. Our mission is to spread knowledge.

**Q** So, cooks come here and investigate with the knowledge that you have created around the field of citriculture?

**A** Exactly. Chefs and culinary students come here to carry out tests. Every year a group of English, French, Italian, and Spanish chefs come. They experiment and take notes.

We also have agents in London, the founders of Frieze Magazine and Fair. They love citrus and have a restaurant next to Somerset House called Toklas. In fact, we are going to do a presentation of Todolí Citrus Fundació there at the beginning of February. The name of the restaurant is based on Gertrude Stein's autobiography titled "The Aubiography of Alice B. Toklas", who was her partner and published a cookbook.

**Q** Speaking of art, where does the motivation of linking yourself to the land come from, especially after your career as artistic director of IVAM, the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Tate Modern and Pirelli HangarBicocca?

**A** Well, I am the fifth generation in my family of citrus specialists, which are different to citrus farmers. Citrus specialists, called 'planteristes' in the Valencian region, oversaw sprouting a stem from a seed and grafting it onto a tree. They then sold the new citrus varieties to farmers and advised them on pruning and re-grafting. In other words, I have lived this lifestyle since I was little. It was less a matter of linking myself to the land as it was

to continue a family tradition. For me, an orange grove has always been an oneiric landscape, one you enter to be with yourself and take a leap of fantasy. With a ditch and an orange grove, you travel to remote and dreamy places.

**Q** How do you apply your knowledge as an art curator to the arrangement of trees in your orchard?

**A** First, there is a botanical logic where the four main taxonomic groups of citrus are bundled together. Then come the hybridizations, which are not far away. At first, I didn't know that and made a lot of mistakes. I would realize a botanical error after planting and the following year we had to uproot and plant again. This happened for three years.

The rest is rhythm, like an exhibition. This is an open-air museum. Here it is not necessary to change the artworks. You can't either because they are planted! But it is not necessary because the trees grow, and each day they change according to light conditions. The collection varies according to how different citrus varieties mature at different times of the year. There is no need to update them. The trees refresh themselves. Later, when we take a tour, you will see that each area is different.

**Q** In this sense, it ceases to be a research orchard to become a decorative garden.

**A** It is planted like a garden, but it is not a garden, especially not a formal garden. The origin of gardens has a lot to do with citrus groves. Persian gardens were orchard gardens called 'pairi-daeza', from which the word paradise comes. The citrus orchard garden is the closest place to paradise on earth because it appeals to all the senses. Even sound, as you hear water and birds that nest in the treetops.

In addition, the citrus orchard-garden has a peculiarity. There is a time in the year, when it blooms, where three stages of tree life exist at the same time: the flower, the flowers that have turned into small fruit buds, and the ripe fruits that are still left from the previous year. This, for both the Persians and the Japanese, was sacred. The Japanese call it 'daidai', which means from generation to generation. For them it is a symbol of eternity.

**Q** What is the cultural role that the citrus garden occupies in the West, and did Valencia play any role in its development?

**A** Within gardening, the citrus garden occupies a special place in the West because it dates to Hercules. One of Hercules' labors was the theft of the golden apples of the Hesperides. Of course, golden apples refer to citruses. The humanists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries considered that citriculture was the queen of horticulture because it alludes to this labor of Hercules. This was a big reason why, in the sixteenth century, Orangeries – Limonaia in Italian – were created throughout Europe.

Valencia had a lot to do with that, because it was the Kings of the Crown of Aragon who distributed the lemon across European Kingdoms. First, Martin I of Aragon introduced the lemon to Naples and from there it spread to the rest of Italy. Then his grandson, Ferdinand I of Aragon, carried it to Amsterdam, Austria, and Prague in the mid-sixteenth century.

In the end, the place of *Todolicitrus Fundacio* in the European history of citruses becomes a homecoming. We return to where it all began, only that in Spain the preservation of citrus varieties was lost while the Italians kept it. To the point that we have a *Lumia* (a hybrid between citron and pomelo) at *Todolicitrus Fundacio* called *Lumia de Valencia* which no longer exists here. The doctor of the Borgias took it from Valencia to Italy. There it was preserved and here it wasn't.

**Q** Do you have a favorite citrus variety?

**A** For aesthetic and historical reasons, the *Citrus Medica*, which was also the favorite of the Medici and many other collectors. It is the rarest variety, the most spectacular, and the one that practically no longer exists. *Citrus Medica* was the first citrus to arrive in Europe. It was discovered by botanists who travelled with the troops of Alexander the Great in Media, Persia, in the middle of the fourth century BC. From there it spread throughout the Mediterranean, making it the mother of the lime and lemon. Also, it appears a lot in the art world. Luca Della Robbia made a beautiful ceramic of *Citrus Medica*.