North East Spain

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

Navarra

In a nutshell: Well-priced reds and inexpensive rosés.

Main grapes: Tempranillo, Garnacha, Cabernet Sauvignon (reds); Viura, Moscatel (white).

Although there are significant historical differences, Navarra is effectively a north-eastern extension of Rioja, and is centred on the great bull-fighting town of Pamplona. Like Rioja, it benefited from Bordeaux's misfortunes in the late 19th century. As in Rioja, its vines tend to be grown by smallholders, many of whom sell their grapes to co-operatives (much more dominant in Navarra than in Rioja), while its wines are bottled by one of the larger merchants.

For many years Garnacha was by far the most planted grape variety in the vineyards interspersed with the fruit and vegetable farms for which Navarra is so famous. Once temperature-control systems were introduced into Navarra's wineries, Navarra was able to churn out vast quantities of the clean, fruity, dry *rosado* so beloved by the Spaniards, thanks to the light-coloured Grenache's suitability for pink wine production. Chivite's Gran Fuedo was Spain's pink answer to Marqués de Caceres' white rioja and is still the standard pink in many Spanish restaurants.

The Navarrans realised, however, that it was unwise to base their future on demand for simple pink wine and, considerably aided by a local government research programme, they made a careful evaluation of grape varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay and, especially, Tempranillo, which is now making some fine, concentrated wines, typically aged in American oak. Tempranillo has overtaken Garnacha as the most planted variety, with Cabernet Sauvignon coming in third.

The results are very respectable if only very rarely outstanding. Without a long tradition of ageing in American oak, Navarra’s bodegas have been able to invest in French oak for their French grapes and there is a host of affordable combinations of these and Spanish grape varieties, often oaked, on the market. Guelbenzu and Chivite make some of the finest examples of Navarra wine, including a sometimes stunning botrytized Muscat labelled Vendimia Tardía from Chivite who have also raised the bar in Navarra with their lavish investment in the Señorío de Arinzano vineyard and bodega in the north of the region.

This is more mixed farming country than Rioja, but as in Rioja there is a huge difference between the flatter more southerly vineyards and vineyards in the much more mountainous north where grapes may even occasionally be harvested as late as December.

Somontano

In a nutshell: Smart, crisp Chardonnay and international-style reds.

Main grapes: Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Moristel (red); Viura, Chardonnay (white).

This small and growing region right up in the southern foothills of the Pyrenees is potentially one of Spain's most exciting, even if much of its produce tends to be fashioned in the image of international classics (including red and white burgundy) rather than demonstrating more inherently Spanish qualities. The innovative producer Viñas del Vero nevertheless has a fine, juicily vinified Tempranillo and a surprisingly delicate Gewürztraminer. Enate, another company in private hands, also makes some fine reds and whites from imported grape varieties while the dynamic local co-op, Bodegas Pirineos, nurtures the region’s own grapes Moristel and Parraleta. This is another Spanish wine region worthy of international attention.

Some favourite producers: Blecua, Enate, Idrias, Laus, Castillo de Monesma, Pirineos, Secastilla, Viñas del Vero.

Catalunya

In a nutshell: Consistent, cosmopolitan wines.

Main grapes: Tempranillo, Garnacha, Cabernet Sauvgnon (red); Macabeo, Xarel-lo, Parellada, Chardonnay, Moscatel (white).

Penedès is the most important and most dynamic wine region in Catalunya (Catalonia in English, Cataluña in Castilian), the proudly self-conscious, hard-working region in the north east of Spain. Its most obvious product is sparkling Cava (see below) but the region also produces a wide range of still wines of many colours and styles.

Although Tempranillo is widely grown here, as throughout northern Spain, (and called Ull de Llebre in Catalan), Miguel Torres was responsible for developing French (and German) varieties and techniques in the 1970s and has for long been the region's dominant producer, turning out an increasingly confident array of bottlings of imported and local varieties, typically blended together, as well as taking a lead in following truly sustainable practices in vineyard and cellar. After years of experimenting with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Gewürztraminer and Riesling, and a substantial diversion into Chile, he finally produced his best wine, an intensely characterful red called Grans Muralles, from a blend of indigenous vine varieties. Jean León (now owned by Torres) also pioneered sophisticated Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, which have found a ready market in Spanish restaurants.

All over Penedès are pockets of vine-growing and (particularly) wine-making ambition. Producers who are more ambitious than most include Can Feixes, Cavas Hill, Molí Coloma, Mont Marçal, Puig & Roca and Ràfols dels Caus, Sot Lefriec, but it is hard to describe a specifically Penedès style, so determinedly cosmopolitan is this corner of Spain. The Catalunya DO was created at the turn of the 20th century to allow blending across the region, mainly for the benefit of the Torres empire.

Conca de Barberá is effectively a higher, western extension of Penedès in which winter temperatures are even lower. It grows many of the grapes for Cava and is home to the Chardonnay responsible for Miguel Torres' acclaimed rich, oak-aged Milmanda. Other interesting more locally informed wines are made here too, as in nearby **Terra Alta**.

In **Costers del Segre**, in the arid, harsh hinterland around the Catalan city of Lerida, the pioneer producer, Raimat, is an extensive property converted to wine production over several decades by the owner of Codorníu, has now been joined by quite a number of smaller but no less ambitious producers. Tempranillo and the usual gamut of international grape varieties are planted. Its oaked reds made from Bordeaux grape varieties can be extremely winning. There is considerable potential in this disparate zone, however, thanks to some characterful old vines, notably red Garnacha and white Macabeo sold under the Cérvoles label.

Since the 1990s the most famous Catalan wine region has been the dramarically revived **Priorat**. If potential were measured in financial and human investment, then Priorat (Priorato in Castilian) is Spain's most exciting wine region. On dramatically steep slate terraces like those of Banyuls just over the French border, low-yielding Garnacha and Carineña vines ooze tiny quantities of super-concentrated, tannic, occasionally over-alcoholic wine, sometimes well over 16 per cent. Until recently Priorato was a relatively unsophisticated product but a recent influx of capital and enthusiasm, spearheaded by René Barbier, originally of the eponymous Penedès winery and subsequently installed at Clos Mogador, resulted in several estates or ‘clos’ run by ambitious newcomers such as Alvaro Palacios. The best of these wines such as Palacios’ L’Ermita and Finca Dofí have already proved to be some of Spain’s most thrilling (and expensive) wine sensations. Most of these new producers are adding some Cabernet, Merlot and/or Syrah to provoke yet more layers of flavour in these inky wines. The invasion of this primitive, mountainous hinterland of Tarragona in southern Catalonia has continued in no uncertain manner with the likes of Miguel Torres literally re-sculpting the land into easy-to-work terraces. The key to Priorat’s extraordinarily mineral-laden flavour is the special soil here, a dark brown slate called llicorella whose stern substance really does seem to have infused the wine, providing one of the world’s most directly taste-able influences of terroir. New producers and labels seem to be emerging by the minute but those who earned their spurs relatively early in the short modern history of this region (which is named after the Carthusian priory whose monks made wine here as early as the twelfth century) include Cims de Porrera, Clos Erasmus, Clos de l’Obac, Mas Martinet, Rotllán Torra and Vall Llach.

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Montsant is a more recent DO awarded to the zone surrounding the hilly Priorat region and its wines are much more reasonably priced, even if little of Priorat’s characteristic llicorella soil type is to be found there. Between these inland vineyards and the coast is the **Tarragona** DO, traditionally associated with strong, sweet sacramental wine.

North of Barcelona there are now some interesting producers emerging on the coast in the **Empordà-Costa Brava** zone. Other DO regions include **Alella** (for white wine), **Campo de Borja** (source of some great value, juicy red), **Pla de Bages**, **Calatayud**, **Cariñena** and the promising **Terra Alta** to the west of Tarragona and Priorato. The potential of the often quite old Garnacha bushvines planted here is starting to be realised. They used to make basic pink wine but more and better reds are being made from them each year and they often sell at very attractive prices. **Calatayud**, **Campo de Borja** and **Cariñena** are distinct regions south east of Rioja whose potential to produce great value reds and rosés is increasingly being realised.

Cava

In a nutshell: Inexpensive sparkling wine.

Main grapes: Macabeo, Xarel-lo, Parellada (white)

Cava is not the name of a Spanish wine region but of a type of wine, Spain's much-loved answer to champagne, a dry(ish) white wine made sparkling by the traditional method. The great majority (95%) of it is made from grapes grown in Penedès, in one of a handful of giant bodegas based in and around the town of San Sadurní de Noya. Grapes used traditionally were extremely local: the rather neutral Macabeo (the Viura of Rioja), Parellada and the somewhat earthy-tasting Xarel-lo. The result of these varieties and the local relatively warm environment is that Cava, although usually technically very well made, with a steady stream of tiny bubbles, typically tends to seem aggressively frothy, and to taste oddly rustic, and sometimes rather soft and sweet, to those brought up on Chardonnay/Pinot fizz such as champagne. Nowadays Chardonnay and more recently Pinot Noir are grown increasingly and the result is Cava that has begun to taste much more familiar to international palates, even if less distinctively Catalan. Pinot Noir is a permitted ingredient in the increasingly popular pink Cava.

This may well simply be a question of conditioning and certainly one of the top bottlings from the likes of Codorníu, Freixenet, Gramona, Juvé y Camps, Marqués de Monistrol, Mestres, Nadal, Parxet and Moët & Chandon's particularly French-influenced Cavas should do what all the best sparkling wines do: refresh and stimulate. The Spaniards buy so much Cava that the larger Cava houses Codorníu and Freixenet have managed to finance their own sparkling wineries in Carneros in California. Although the Cava business was established on a commercial scale in Penedès as recently as the 1880s, by José Raventos, founder of the Codorníu dynasty, after a trip to France, it now produces about half as much traditional method sparkling wine a year as much as France's Champagne district.