



RAVENTÓS i BLANC



Raventós i Blanc - The Wine Advocate #211 Reviews by Luis Gutiérrez (February 2014)

When Raventós i Blanc, a scion from Codorníu, left the boat in 2012, alarms really went off. They are not only one of the quality leaders in the category, they are also direct descendants of the creator of the first sparkling wine in Spain and the first president of the Cava appellation. They did not seek refuge in the Penedès appellation, but instead they want to promote the creation of a new, smaller appellation, Conca del Riu Anoia



Enoteca Personal Manuel Raventós 2001, 95 points

A special blend of 60% Xarello and 40% Parellada from their Clos del Serral and Creueta del Coll plots (and from 2007 onwards the cuvee is only Xarello) vineyards, which aged for seven years in bottle in contact with the lees. It has a bright golden color, much darker than the 2000, with abundant notes of roasted nuts, smoke, toasted bread, honey and caramel. It has lots of freshness, and underneath you still find fruit notes. The palate is compact, balanced, elegant and complex, with imperceptible bubbles that just add texture and give freshness with great persistence, very tasty and supple with a chicken-broth, umami taste. A great aged Cava. 7,958 bottles were produced, but most of them were disgorged and sold years ago and only a fraction remain and are offered now as Enoteca. Drink now-2019



Enoteca Personal Manuel Raventós 2000, 93 points

The 2000 Enoteca Personal Manuel Raventós is a blend of Macabeo, Xarello, Parellada and Chardonnay aged for ten years in bottle in contact with the lees. It has plenty of mineral and balsamic notes of petrol and camphor, with a subtle aroma and ultra-tiny bubbles that are perceived as a tingling texture on the palate, revealing great balance and length. Only 855 bottles were produced. Drink now-2018



Silencis 2013, 92 points

The 2013 Silencis is pure Xarello from a cold vintage harvested on September 25, which is the date when Xarello used to be harvested 30 years ago. They introduced some big changes in 2013, like not filtering or clarifying the wine, so it's very cloudy, and retains some of the gas, which gives a fresh sensation. Other than that, it feels very pure, lively and may I say? authentic. It's like night and day between 2012 and 2013. Apple notes, smoky, flinty, bread dough and a salty, mineral finish with superb acidity and freshness. Pure acid, fruit juice with an electric feeling in the palate. A superb Mediterranean Xarello that should develop well. Very good price for what it is. Drink now-2018



De la Finca 2010, 91 points

The 2010 Gran Reserva De la Finca Brut is a blend of Macabeo, Xarello and Parellada from the best plots within their own dry-farmed vineyards (De la Finca means 'from the estate'), grown on chalk-rich soils aged for 32 months in bottle. The wine is wrapped in paper with a label that is a leaflet that explains the wine and the zone. It has a nose of nuts, smoke and bread dough, quite elegant, and develops more complex aromas of brioche and honey with time in the glass. The palate has good harmony, with small bubbles, good acidity and a sharp, electric, refreshing finish, still a bit raw, but should develop well in the bottle. Drink 2015-2019



L'Hereu 2011, 90 points

Talking about the wines, let's start with the 2011 L'Hereu Brut, a blend of Macabeo, Xarello and Parellada from their own vineyards and some grapes sourced from growers located in the Anoia valley in Penedès, which aged for 18 months. All bottles have the disgorgement date on the back label, so they are not all the same in bottle with 8.5 grams of residual sugar. It is pale yellow-colored with fresh notes of apple and yeasts, some toasted bread with a sharp palate with high acidity, clean and refreshing, powerful yet elegant, with a citric finish. Drink now.



De Nit 2011, 90 points

The 2011 De Nit is a blend of Macabeo, Xarello, Parellada and Monastrell (only a small percentage, around 5%) partly from their own vineyards and partly from other suppliers aged for 33 months in bottle. The wine is very pale faded-pink colored with notes of dried roses, yeasts and fennel. The palate is very tasty, with pungent acidity and persistent bubbles, ending very dry. Drink now-2016



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Cava and Other Sparkling Wines: Quality or Quantity?



I tasted all the long-aging sparkling wines together after tasting them by winery.

I must confess that I was ashamed when I read the Cava chapter from *Christie's World Encyclopedia of Champagne and Sparkling Wine*, written by Tom Stevenson in 1998, during my research for this article. The picture he paints there is really shameful, but it is how he saw the world of Cava at the time. Much has improved since then, new names have come to the forefront (Recaredo, Loxarel, Llopart), debate about which grapes should be allowed was closed (now both Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are), and attention has shifted to the autochthonous Xarello as the main quality grape for this famous sparkling wine. What has not changed is the fact that Cava remains dominated by two big names. Codorníu and Freixenet produce and sell large volumes of Cava and, of course, compete to offer the lowest price possible. I think we all agree on giving customers good value for money, but when lower prices mean cutting corners and affecting the quality of the final product, it should raise a few eyebrows. When other producers consider that being associated with the name Cava is bad for them and they leave the appellation, it should make people really think about what's going on. Well, that is what started happening a few years ago, it has continued, and it seems like it's going to go on. Until when?

Leaving the boat

It was a slow process. Colet, formerly Colet Cava, left the appellation and started selling their sparkling wines with a Penedès back label in 1997. It gave them more freedom about which grapes they could use (they have Riesling, Gewurztraminer and other grapes that are included in some of their blends), among other things. Other names followed, Mas Comptal, Mas, Bertran, Loxarel. A slow but constant leak. But when Raventós i Blanc, a scion from Codorníu, left the boat in 2012, alarms really went off. They are not only one of the quality leaders in the category, they are also direct descendants of the creator of the first sparkling wine in Spain and the first president of the Cava appellation. They did not seek refuge in the Penedès appellation, but instead they want to promote the creation of a new, smaller appellation, Conca del Riu Anoia, on the banks of the Anoia river, but for now their bottled wines will be officially sold as VECPRD (*vino espumoso de calidad producido en región determinada*), the generic appellation for quality sparkling wines. Albet i Noya has been one of the latest to leave Cava and move their sparkling wines to Penedès. It was announced just before Christmas, the high season for sales of sparkling wines.

For some of the wineries it is unclear if a specific bottle is Cava or not, as they were produced when they were still in the appellation. I'm sorry if I made mistakes or created confusion, nothing was further from my intention, but sometimes the producers themselves don't know what to say: "if the bottle was disgorged before leaving the appellation, then it's Cava. If it was disgorged after that, even if we were part of the production during the harvest, I consider it outside Cava," explained Pepe Raventós when I queried him about some of the bottles that we had in front of us while tasting together. There is a word that appears in local articles that talks about the subject: 'stampede.' Will we see a stampede? Only time will tell.

In the meantime, the Penedès appellation seems to be taking the right approach when it comes to sparkling wines. All bottles have to carry the vintage year and disgorging date, aging in bottle in contact with the lees has to be at least 15 months, and all sparkling wines therefore fall under the category Reserva, and more important, all vineyards have to be worked organically. It seems like the ambition is that all Penedès vineyards show eventually be worked organically, and it seems like quite a goal to me, far easier said than done.

As a result I decided to group all sparkling wines in the same article under the name 'Cava and other sparkling wines' instead of including them in their own appellations of origin. On the other hand, for the article about other regions outside Priorat and the sparkling wines, there are wineries producing wines in different regions. But for now I decided to keep the regional structure rather than show all the wines produced by one winery together.



Cava or not, Cataluña is the main producer of sparkling wine in Spain

A bit of history

In the 1970s, Cava was heading in the wrong direction. They were on the verge of making the same mistake as with Laguiole knives and cheddar cheese: instead of protecting the origin, what was defined was the process or the characteristics of the given product. As long as you comply with the rules, the shape, the little bee, etc., you can produce Laguiole knives anywhere in the world! In fact, a good number of Laguiole knives are produced in Albacete, Spain, a place well

known for its cutlery, and in Asia, where production costs are low and quality can be, too! The case of cheddar cheese is a lot worse and I don't think I really need to talk about the quality and image of cheddar around the world. You'd be really surprised if I tell you that the handful of cheddar cheeses that are produced with raw milk, following the original method in the farms of the south of England rank among the finest cheeses on earth (remember the name Montgomery if you're after a truly world-class cheddar). But few of those remain, and unfortunately cheddar is today a synonym of a highly-processed, industrial, packaged and tasteless thing some call cheese. Knives and cheese apart, fortunately, when Spain joined the European Union in 1986, the rules had to change and Cava had to be turned into an origin appellation. The problem was that the appellation had to include all that were producing Cava up to that moment. That's how you end up with an appellation of origin with a core of vineyards around Sant Sadurní d'Anoia in Penedès and a scattered mosaic of pieces here and there, in Valencia, Zaragoza, Rioja or Badajoz, where Cava was being produced at the time, but where soil, climate and grapes are as different as they can be in places close to 1,000 kilometers away!

Today, the yearly production from the 32,000 hectares of vineyards covered by the appellation is around 175 million liters, which roughly translates into 230 million bottles. But you won't find focus on volume here. In fact, the selection of the wines to include here was important. I tasted relatively few wines and average scores might seem a bit high. I didn't taste many non-vintage wines, as they are impossible for consumers to identify and the idea behind not putting the vintage on your label is that you seek a homogeneous style, erasing the differences each vintage might bring, and it's therefore a waste of time reviewing those wines over and over again. Of course, there are some newcomers, wines that had never been reviewed before, or one-off special blends that are unique, but they are just a handful.

As a result of what I've explained, you will find mostly vintage sparkling wines from Cava, Penedès, Alella and Conca del Riu Anoia, and even some table wines produced using the ancestral method in this report. Will you find any Cavas from outside Catalunya? No, not really. Statistics say that around 90% of the land under vine within the Cava appellation is located in Catalunya, and around 98% of the bottles wearing the Cava name come from Catalunya. Other than just figures, can you name any Cava from outside Catalunya? I guess not. They do exist, some of them are really good, and they'll get reviewed in the future. For logistic reasons, as I tasted the appellations from Catalunya for three articles, I simply tasted a selection of Cava from there. I did taste the Cava Muga produced in Rioja, and it was included in the Rioja report. When I cover the different geographical areas, I might include any Cava of merit that I eventually encounter. Until then, this is it.

What's in a name?

Sometimes people get confused by foreign names. The spelling in Catalan language for Xarello grape is placing a dot between the double 'l'. Yes, a dot, but not a normal dot or a hyphen or a slash, this dot, '•', that I bet you cannot find on your computer keyboard unless you're a computer geek; I am one (or used to be?) and it took me a while! So it looks something like Xarel•lo. No, not Xarel-lo, nor Xarel.lo. It's Xarel•lo. Well, I've seen people talking about the grape Xarel-10 and all sorts of strange combinations. I've usually kept the Catalan spelling on most of the names, including Penedès, and I've often complained myself about the incorrect spelling of foreign names and words, but in the case of this white grape, I decided to go for the simple spelling Xarello, which would be the Spanish for it. In fact, I've used the Spanish spelling for all grape names, for the simple reason of not creating more confusion about them. Consistency? Well, for me that can be the exception that confirms the rule.



These technical corks for sparkling wines are 100% guaranteed against TCA. Can we have them for all wines, please?

Viticulture

One final word about the vineyards, which tend to be forgotten. People tend to think that viticulture and quality of the grapes, when it comes to 'special' wines, and read 'special' as sweet, fortified, sparkling, biologically-aged, etc., is not that important. Well, nothing is further from the truth. Viticulture and quality of grapes is essential for all wines. Full stop. What I want to get to is that not only do many people ignore viticulture, they don't even grow their grapes, they do not own any vineyards, they might not even ferment any grapes at all, they can buy the wine already fermented! Do you find a lot of the cheaper Cava to be very similar? Almost the same? Well, here goes a simple explanation: there are a couple of suppliers of base wines, huge industrial-style, bulk-wine producers, that provide the still wine that is bottled with yeasts and sugar to produce the second fermentation in bottle. Yes, you've guessed it! Many producers buy the same base wine from the same supplier, and their final products end up tasting very much the same, because, in essence, they ARE the same. And don't misunderstand me, there's nothing wrong with industrial or bulk-wine producers, it's just a different story. Because as it happens, the producers of the very best wines not only farm their vineyards, they pay extra attention to viticulture, they care about their vineyards, their soils, the health of their grapes to produce the best base wine they can as it sets the quality level for the final product. Sherry, Port, Champagne or Cava are not produced exclusively in the winery. They are produced with grapes, and as every small detail counts toward the quality of what you and I drink, grapes, viticulture and terroir COUNT.

I tasted the following sparkling wines between December 2013 and January 2014. The still wines for some of these producers can be found in the 'Cataluña and 10 of its Appellations' article in this issue.

—Luis Gutierrez