

The New York Times

FOOD

Cava Sparkles on Its Own Merits

JULY 2, 2015

Wine School

By ERIC ASIMOV



Photo ©Serge Bloch

Briskly uncork a bottle of cava, the sparkling wine of Spain, and you will hear the festive pop so dear to revelers around the globe. Ease it open ever so slowly, and instead you'll hear the soft, contented sigh that may signal an evening of sparkling romance.

Either way, they are the sounds automatically associated with Champagne. Yet cava is something altogether different, sparkling wine from a Catalonian viewpoint.

Just about anywhere in the world where wine is made, sparkling wine is made, too. Very little of it has to do with Champagne, beyond the obvious cue of the bubbles.

Yet consumers so often lump all sparkling wines into one large group with distinctions only by price: Champagne and cheaper Champagne alternatives. It makes as much sense as assuming all white wine is the same because it more or less shares the same color.

Despite the bubbles in common, you will taste no two wines more different than, for example, prosecco and sparkling Vouvray. They come from different places, are made of different grapes, employ different methods of production, express entirely different cultures and, in the end, smell, taste and feel different. You can draw the same distinctions about most sparkling wines. Not everything with wheels is a car.

Welcome back to Wine School, where the taxonomy of wines is not simply a matter of superficial categorization, but of taking careful note of real, discernible differences.

Here's how it works: Each month, I [pick a category of wine](#) and suggest a few representative examples. Over the course of the next few weeks, you acquire one or more of the bottles and drink them in a congenial environment with food, family and friends, paying close attention to your own experience. The next month, we convene here again and discuss the wines. I hope you will post your observations along the way at nytimes.com/food.

Careful observation is the key. While it's entirely possible, and often preferable, simply to enjoy wine without thinking too hard about it, an even greater pleasure comes from noticing its nuances and distinctions.

The ability to do this comes not from having a special powers of taste or smell, but from the habit of observation. As with cooks who no longer require the guidance of recipes as they become more comfortable and experienced in the kitchen, so it is with wine drinkers. The more varieties of wines you drink and scrutinize, the easier it becomes to articulate their characteristics and what appeals to your own taste.

Cava is a case in point. It is not only a victim of its association with other sparkling wines, it is also guilty of a checkered past. Cava is produced by the millions of bottles, and much of it is not very good, the product of an ethos that values quantity over quality.



Photo ©Serge Bloch

I spent some formative years drinking bad cava because it was a sparkling wine that I could afford, and it did not leave a good taste. It took quite a while — within the last decade, really — before I tried a cava that changed my mind. But eventually, between drinking cavas that changed my mind and [visiting cava country](#) in the Penedès region of Catalonia, I learned that cava could be wonderful if the grapes were farmed conscientiously and the wine made with utmost care.

Cava, in fact, shares the same production method as Champagne. After the grapes are made into a still wine, that wine is bottled and a secondary fermentation is induced in the sealed bottle. With no means of escape, carbon dioxide, a byproduct of that fermentation, provides the sparkle.

Where cava differs from other sparkling wines is both in the grapes and in the places they are grown. The primary grape of cava, xarello, is grown almost nowhere else in the world but Catalonia. It's subtle, and when grown with care expresses the characteristics of its terroir. Many grapes are permitted in cava, including the Champagne duo of pinot noir and chardonnay, but the best and most distinctive cavas are made of xarello along with two other grapes, macabeo and parellada.



Photo ©Serge Bloch

Cava can legally be made anywhere in Spain, but most of it, including the best versions, come from the Penedès. This lack of rigorous standards for cava has prompted some producers to remove themselves from the oversight of the cava authorities. These producers, including Raventós i Blanc, one of my suggested producers, effectively make cava, but they do not call their wines cava.

The three wines I suggested, the Raventós i Blanc de Nit 2012, the Gramona Gran Cuvée Brut 2009 and the Recaredo Gran Reserva Brut Nature 2008, are each entirely different, giving a taste of the range of possibilities available to cava producers. The Raventós, in fact, is a rosé, a combination of the three classic cava grapes with 5 percent monastrell, known in French-speaking circles as mourvèdre, which adds the color and some complexity.

It's a terrific wine: fresh, lively, dry and tangy with the hint of an underlying berry flavor. Several readers suggested that the color may have influenced their perception of a berry flavor. This is entirely possible. Colors have been shown to stimulate moods, so why not flavors? Still, it seemed real to me.

The Raventós is not only younger than the other cavas, but it was also fermented and aged briefly in steel tanks before returning to the bottle for its second fermentation.

The 2009 Gramona was made entirely differently. It has a significant portion of chardonnay in the blend, 30 percent. And the wine was aged in French oak barrels for a year, then received significant bottle aging. Both of these factors account for the wine's toasty flavors and rich texture. It is a more voluminous wine than the others: more spicy, less herbal, yet balanced and graceful.

The third cava, and the best in my opinion, was the Recaredo. It, too, had some barrel aging, but the toastiness was more subtle than in the Gramona, the flavors more steely, herbal and mineral. I loved the lacy texture of the Recaredo and its great finesse. Yet it was substantial as well, with flavors that remained long after I swallowed. Its bubbles, as one reader, Dan Barron of New York, pointed out, were the finest of the three.

I was happy to see that several readers found their reintroduction to cava a revelation. "I had pretty much abandoned cava as a sparkling alternative," David Stalder of Las Vegas wrote. "I won't shy away from it in the future."

Rick J P of Vancouver, British Columbia, got a firsthand lesson in the difference between good and generic cavas. The generic bottles, he found, were not bad, just one-dimensional. "The Raventós, on the other hand," he said, "was multilayered and exceptional."

It is important to remember that these are entry-level cavas from among the best producers. Each makes even better bottles that are still relatively inexpensive. One reader, JKM of Washington, stepped it up by buying Gramona's Imperial Gran Reserva 2007, made with a much smaller proportion of chardonnay and aged longer, which sells for about \$30 in New York. He loved it. "The wine was a different beast compared to those I've purchased from supermarket shelves," he wrote. "With Champagne commanding ever higher prices, being able to purchase a gem like this for half the price seems almost criminal. Not that I mind."

Ah, the comparison with Champagne. I suppose it's inevitable. Yet I do hope one day that selecting a cava will not be simply a matter of price, but of a desire for its winning characteristics. Then cava will have gotten its due.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/08/dining/wine-school-cava.html?smid=fb-share>