



Cava, the Catalan answer to champagne

Three fine examples of sophisticated yet sensibly priced Spanish fizz

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Heretat El Padruell Cava, Spain NV (£8.50, Marks & Spencer)

Why have the British ditched cava for prosecco? According to figures released this summer, exports of the Spanish fizz to the UK dropped by 18% during 2016, while those of the spritztastic Italian continued to soar. For producers in cava's Catalan home of Penedès (a small amount is also made in other parts of Spain), this is a bitter pill to swallow: they would tell you that theirs is a much higher-quality product, getting its fizz from the labour-intensive practice of bottle-fermentation rather than the more industrial tank method of most prosecco. Despite this, prices can be more than a match for their Italian rival in wines such as M&S's white blend, an engagingly creamy mix of pear and crisp green apple.

Raventós i Blanc Blanc de Blancs Brut, Conca del Riu Anoia, Spain 2014 (£18.95, Noel Young Wines)

For some producers it's that very ability to churn out cheap alternatives to champagne (which is made in the same way) that is holding cava back. The best cava, they argue, is every bit as interesting as the best champagne, albeit in a different, very Mediterranean register. One leading winemaker in the region, Pepe Raventós, was so disenchanted with cava's bargain basement connotations that in 2013 he stopped putting the name cava on his labels at all,

preferring instead to use his local Conca del Riu Anoia. His wines are as good as ever, with the blanc de blancs, made from the traditional cava trio of macabeu, xarello and parellada, arrestingly pure, pretty and racy.

Gramona Cava La Cuvée Gran Reserva, Spain 2012 (£21, Berry Brothers and Rudd)

Last summer, cava's regulatory body announced a plan to give greater prominence to the very best vineyard sites in the region, and the names of the first 12 'grands crus' or Cava de Paraje Calificado were duly announced in July. The system includes vineyards belonging to the twin giants of cava production, Freixenet and Codorníu. But I hope it also helps along the reputation of - in this country at least - lesser-spotted talents with vineyards on the list such as Torelló, Recaredo and Gramona. The last one's gently honeyed, luminously stone-fruited La Cuvée offers ready-made proof of cava's many talents.

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