



## ON THE CAVA TRAIL

Catalonia's gastronomic prowess is well-known to travelers, who flock to Barcelona for its tapas bars and temples of modernist cuisine. So why is nearby Penedès, the birthplace of Spain's sparkling wine, still a secret? A long weekend reveals a region ready for its moment.

BY TOM VANDERBILT

**C**AVA, SPAIN'S SIGNATURE sparkling wine, originated roughly 150 years ago in the quietly prosperous Catalan town of Sant Sadurn d'Anoia. If you visit today, you can see its impact everywhere. There's the sleek CIC Fassina Cava Interpretation Center, housed in a 19th-century distillery that once transformed the effervescent wine into brandy. Giant barrels and other wine-inspired objects sit in roundabouts and town squares; bottle-shaped bollards on the sidewalks protect pedestrians. On the outskirts of Sant Sadurn, large bodegas run by mainstream producers, including Freixenet and Recaredo, loom over the landscape. At harvest time, slow-moving tractors churn along the narrow roads,

▲ Racks of cava bottles inspired the architecture of Hotel Mastinell.

► Local producer Pepe Raventós assesses a glass of his winery's cava.

the shoulders of which bear stains from dripping juice.

Sant Sadurn lies at the heart of cava country, in Penedès, a sprawling region that runs from the sea to the mountains, about a 30-minute drive southwest of Barcelona. Millions of years ago, the valley was covered by what's now the Mediterranean. When the water retreated, it left behind untold numbers of fossilized sea creatures whose carbonized remains riddle the soil, helping give cava its characteristic tang. Like many travelers, I had enjoyed a cava or two in one of Barcelona's cozy *champanerías*, as well as at my own dinner table, without ever really associating it with any particular terroir. So when my family and I were invited by Pepe Raventós, scion of the most famous family in cava, to visit his winery, Raventós i Blanc, we decided to use it as a jumping-off point to explore this largely overlooked region.

On the weekend I rolled into Sant Sadurn with my wife and 10-year-old daughter, summer was giving way to autumn and the town was celebrating. Residents packed the streets for Festa de la Fil·loxera, a raucous annual gathering that commemorates the eradication of the yellow-hued louse, which in the late 19th century decimated the wine industry, not only here but across much of Europe. ►





◀ Tapas at *Cal Xim*, a restaurant in Sant Pau d'Ordal that's popular among locals.

▶ The village of Vilafranca del Penedès, a former stronghold of the Catalan-Aragon dynasty.

▶ Along with thousands of others, we watched townspeople parade in outlandish yellow louse costumes. Joan Amat, the town's former mayor, pointed out statues honoring seven local men who had helped defeat the pestilence. One of them depicted Josep Raventós Fatjó, Pepe's ancestor and the creator, in 1872, of cava itself.

Penedès is dominated by the jagged Montserrat mountains, the site of the Santa Maria monastery, Catalonia's most sacred retreat. The landscape is a mix of grapevines clinging to hillsides, wine-production facilities, and elegant early-20th-century Modernista buildings built by wine fortunes. In Vilafranca del Penedès, a 20-minute drive from Sant Sadurní, you'll find the Vinseum, housed in a 13th-century building that was once the seat of the Catalan-Aragon kingdom. It gives a fascinating spin through viticultural history, with a tasting at the end. (I tried a Cygnus Brut from 1+1=3, which had a mineral and citrus tang that offset the afternoon heat.) Outside town is the striking Hotel Mastinell, which was built to mimic a rack of cava bottles. Not far away, at Hotel Castell de Gimanelles, an old *masia*, or farmhouse, turned rustic inn, Jordi Urpí, the co-owner, eagerly showed me the stone bathroom of one guest room. Centuries ago, he explained, it was a cistern for storing wine.

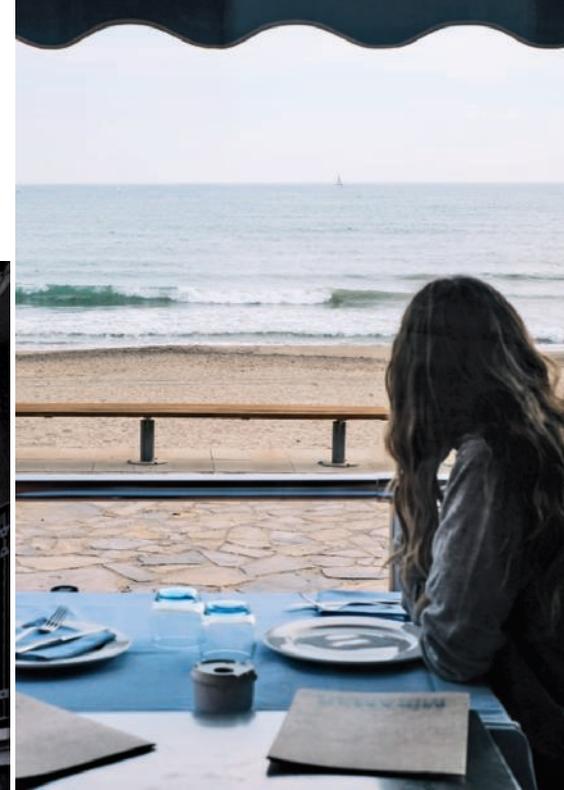
At Raventós i Blanc, Pepe pried the lid off a massive steel tank and gestured for me to scale its ladder for a look. Inside was a first fermentation, topped by *brumera marrona*, a brown foam that was fizzing and churning. The murky, unfiltered liquid below the froth would later be clarified, bottled, and stored in the caves below for secondary fermentation and aging. In two years, this would become one of the company's premium wines, Textures de Pedra. Nearby, Pepe had buried a few amphorae, allowing the



ambient heat of the earth to provide the proper temperature for fermentation. "It makes me wonder why we need a winery," he said.

Raventós i Blanc is not open to visitors, but Penedès is filled with all sorts of *agroturisme* opportunities. One could stay 10 minutes outside Sant Sadurní at Mas Palou, a simple but elegant *masia* complete with a pool and working vineyard, which sells grapes to Raventós. Maria Vallès Beneit, who grew up in the house and now helps run the inn, pointed out a curious bench in the yard around which a tree had grown. "The family hid jewelry in the ground there during the Spanish Civil War," she told us.

With some 200 cava producers in the region, visitors are spoiled for choice. Pepe's open-to-the-public favorites include Can Ràfols dels Caus and



◀ The seafood restaurant *Xiringuito Miramar* overlooks the Mediterranean Sea.

▶ *Xiringuito Miramar's* specialty is mussels.



Pardas. He also raves about Enric Soler and natural winemaker Toni Carbó. And just across the road from Raventós i Blanc sits Cavas Codorniu, an older winery owned by Pepe's relatives. The site is worth visiting for its design alone—namely, the soaring, vaulted winery building and fairy-tale structure designed by Josep Puig i Cadafalch, an often overshadowed contemporary of Antoni Gaudí. Visitors ride a tram through some 19 miles of arched caves, all lined with millions of bottles of wine.

My family also stopped by Sant Sadurní's Chocolates Simón Coll, which has been making confections since 1840—before even cava. In the factory, CEO Maria Coll told me that she had left Penedès for a time but returned to become the first woman to run her family's business.

One of the best places to drink cava is Cal Xim, a restaurant Pepe virtually demanded we visit. Located on a quiet square in Sant Pau d'Ordal, it's a favorite haunt of local vigneron. The meal was a full-on Catalan Sunday lunch: roast duck with raisins and pine nuts; *pa amb tomàquet*, the ubiquitous, and delicious, bread with tomato; and *escalivada*, a plate of vegetables, grilled over oak. Just across the square, we stopped for an espresso and a game of foosball at the café of the Centre Agrícola, a Wes Andersonesque cultural center.

A virtue of this disparate region is that you can be at the seaside for lunch but easily back in

the country for cocktail hour. One day we headed to the city of Vilanova i la Geltrú for a meal at Xiringuito Miramar, a busy seafood restaurant that Pepe ranks among his favorites. We then zipped down the coast to Sant Salvador to tour the former summer house of the renowned cellist and composer Pablo Casals. Just outside, my daughter decided to plunge into the ocean, still warm in September. We were back at the winery in time for what became a treasured ritual during our trip: enjoying a glass of cava and tapas by the pool as we watched the harvest workers finishing up in the vineyards below, the sacred peaks of Montserrat hovering hazily in the distance. Terroir, sweet terroir.

## Exploring Penedès

### GETTING THERE

Direct flights from major carriers land daily at Barcelona–El Prat Airport. From there, Sant Sadurní d'Anoia is an easy 45-minute drive.

### WHERE TO STAY

The light-filled **Hotel Mastinell** ([hotelmastinell.com](http://hotelmastinell.com); doubles from \$225), in Vilafranca del Penedès, nods to Modernista architect Antoni Gaudí. **Mas Palou** ([maspalou.com](http://maspalou.com); doubles from \$113), in El Pla del Penedès, and **Hotel Castell de Gimanelles** ([gimanelles.com](http://gimanelles.com); doubles from \$108), in Sant Jaume dels Domenys, typify charming Catalan *masias*.

### FOOD AND DRINK

Near Vilafranca, you can visit the vineyard **Can Ràfols dels Caus** ([canrafolsdelscaus.com](http://canrafolsdelscaus.com)). Close to Torrelavit, there's **Pardas** ([cellerpardas.com](http://cellerpardas.com)), and just outside Sant Sadurní, you'll find **Cavas Codorniu** ([codorniu.com](http://codorniu.com)). The latter is also home to heritage chocolatier **Simón Coll** ([simoncoll.com](http://simoncoll.com)). In Sant Pau d'Ordal, enjoy a regional feast at **Cal Xim** (34-938-993-092; entrées \$11–\$26), followed by coffee at the café of **Centre Agrícola** (34-938-900-815). For seafood, the must-visit spot is **Xiringuito Miramar** ([xiringuitomiramar.com](http://xiringuitomiramar.com); entrées \$12–\$40), in Vilanova i la Geltrú.

### TRAVEL ADVISOR

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