

## Raventòs Shakes off Cava's Image Problem



© Raventos i Blanc | Raventòs wants to create its own sparkling wine classification to focus more on terroir. One producer in Penedès is fighting passionately for his family's sparkling wine legacy.  
By James Lawrence | Posted Thursday, 03-Nov-2016

At the beginning of November 2012, leading sparkling wine producer Raventós I Blanc sent shockwaves through the Penedès region after it announced its decision to leave the Cava DO. Its proposal, to adopt a new and uncertified regional appellation designation named 'Conca Del Riu Anoia', was met with disbelief, shock and even anger, particularly as Raventós I Blanc is one of the founding fathers of the Cava traditional method sparkling.

"Historically, the Sant Sadurni Cava industry was always volume- and quality-orientated," said Pepe Raventós in 2012, justifying his decision to abandon his birthright. "But today, [Cava](#) has become a volume- oriented DO, encompassing low viticultural standards. Therefore we want to recover the Conca del Riu Anoia, the name of a small geographical area, to help us to better understand and convey our viticultural traditions, the strength of our land and the characteristics of our soils."

Nonetheless, Raventós had been part of Cava's history for decades, making the family's decision all too poignant for their neighbors, most of whom have chosen to remain within the confines of the Cava appellation framework. It was the current owner's grandfather, Josep Maria Raventós i Blanc, who invested the latter part of his life in creating the framework for a new sparkling DO, which was accepted by the Spanish government in 1972 after the creation of the Cava Consejo Regulador.

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Pepe, however, was not to be swayed. I remember asking him about their decision, and his bullish dismissal of the possibility that his family might have been about to commit commercial suicide. "Cava's cheap and affordable image simply doesn't fit in with what we want to produce and achieve at Raventós," he replied. "For this reason, we decided to start from the beginning and create a quality-orientated designation for our wines."

But now that the dust has settled four years on, has Raventós' bold move reaped the rewards that the family so desperately sought?

At first glance, stood in the expansive grounds of the Raventós estate, all's right with the world at Conca del Riu Anoia. Pepe, his usual playful and ebullient self, has just returned from a three year stint in New York, passionately educating the city's sommeliers and buyers about the virtues of Conca del Riu Anoia.

"I miss the US so much," he sighs. "Here I have to work really hard – would you mind taking over so I can go back to my life in New York?," he asks, only slightly rhetorically. Still, he is generally positive, noting that Raventós sales in the US have risen both in volume and value since 2015.

Joined by his 6-month old Labrador puppy, Bronx, we dart off in a battered old jeep to explore his beloved Conca del Riu Anoia sub-zone. Before we arrive, I ask Pepe if he regrets sticking up two fingers at the Cava DO? "I usually never regret action, just inaction," he replies. "But look, you can obviously take a mighty fall after making any decision, however, this was a very natural one for us. I simply knew we had to do it and I followed my instincts. Some of our importers were concerned in the beginning, but now they're all on board."

Since leaving the DO in 2012, Raventós has firmly shifted the emphasis from the winery to the vineyard, and now farms the estate using biodynamic and organic principles, cultivating 90 hectares (222 acres) of vineyards. They make on average 800,000 bottles per annum and continue to rip out international varieties such as Chardonnay, believing that only indigenous grapes can faithfully express the terroir. "Why should Chardonnay be grown here? It has no place in Penedès," he objects violently.

But if you want to get Pepe Raventós really excited, ask him a question about his beloved terroir. Particularly the so-called 'Vinya dels Fòssils,' located on the highest terraces of Conca del Riu Anoia, a small area that surrounds the Anoia River valley, between the Anoia and Foix Rivers in eastern [Penedès](#).

According to Raventós: "Marine fossils characterize the structure and composition of the soils of the Vinya dels Fòssils. It is the abundance of these fossils that gives our sparkling wine its characteristic saline notes."

He also waxes lyrical about the unique micro-climate, as any self-respecting 'terroirist' would: "Vinya dels Fòssils is located on north- and northeastern-facing slopes, lying between the Serral wood and the Raventós i Blanc lake, and is exposed to the coolest temperatures during the ripening period," he explains.

Indeed, there is a more than whiff of new-age philosophy floating around at Raventós i Blanc, an ethos that either makes one weak at the knees or encourages scoffs of derision, depending on your sensibilities. Raventós explains: "We have returned to the traditional method of vine-growing, which was already being used on the estate in 1497. We called this new philosophy of making sparkling wine, focusing on the vineyard, bio-synergy. Bio-synergy is based on the study of the interaction between the land, microclimate, vines, animals and the people who work in our farm."

However, currently Conca del Riu Anoia remains nothing more than an admirable working theory – there is no official legal recognition or appellation in place that recognizes Raventós' ambition. At least, not yet. "We are working with a geological department in one of Barcelona's universities to undertake a detailed soil analysis of Conca del Riu Anoia, to map out the exact boundaries and specifics of the proposed appellation," explains Raventós.

He continues: "The longer term plan is to petition the Catalan government to create a IGP designation surrounding Conca, although we'd need a minimum of two wineries involved for the IGP to be formally recognized, so we were thinking of asking Recaredo to perhaps join us in the future, although nothing has been said or discussed yet."



© Raventós i Blanc | Pepe Raventós (L) is passionate about the terroir at his family's estate.

According to Raventós, a key aspect of the proposed IGP is a severe tightening of the current rules of production. For example, producers adopting the Conca del Riu Anoia designation must pay growers a minimum of 1€/kg, the vineyards must be organically certified, at least ten years old and yields will be set at a maximum of 10,000 kg/ha. In addition, the minimum period on the lees is 18 months and only indigenous varieties can be used in the blend.

Raventós' enthusiasm, and indeed his ambition, is infectious, but his anger regarding the current state of Cava is even more palpable. "The current situation in Cava is unsustainable," he exclaims. "The industry is paying on average 30 cents per kilogram of grapes and selling Cava for under £10.00. This is not the legacy I want to leave to my children – it's not a legacy anyone should fucking preside over!"

But there is more vitriol to come. "Are we going to be pussies for the rest of our lives, or are we going to actually strive to make quality wines that offer a sense of uniqueness and place?" he shouts, his voice reverberating through the valley. "This region is capable of producing some of the greatest sparkling wines in the world, in the right hands, but instead most of these pussies churn out cheap and poor wines, to make a quick buck." He cites Gramona, Recaredo and Juve Y Camps as notable exceptions. I'm sure there are others.

A passionate member of Telmo Rodriguez's Club Matador and a key party to his Manifesto in Defence of Spanish terroir, Raventós is a fitting poster-child for Spain's terroirists, a growing firmament of winemakers who are calling for greater references to terroir within Spain's appellation frameworks.

Their battle is taking place across many of Spain's key regions, including Ribera del Duero, Priorat and most important of all, [Rioja](#). For as journalist and winemaker Victor de la Serna so eloquently noted: "Appellations in Spain (and France) are usually run by the biggest wineries, and these most often defend a low common denominator quality-wise and origin-wise."

But perhaps the most remarkable thing about Pepe Raventós is his genuine concern with Spain's future as a leading and respected source of quality wines, and not simply his own project.

"I would like to think that the Manifesto could make a positive difference to Spain's wine industry. The declaration aims to recognize the potential of Spanish wine and boost its heritage in order to defend and protect the country's unique, exceptional vineyards as opposed to strategies based on high production and low prices," says Raventós.

He continues: "There is a call upon the Regulatory Boards to be sensitive to the new wine reality that is emerging all over Spain and to approach a classification of the land in terms of quality. We are certain that establishing such distinctions is the first step towards excellence. Beyond emerging as an unstoppable trend, terroir wines are the best way to improve the quality of Spanish wines and achieve international recognition."

Meanwhile, the Cava Consejo is busy with a project of their own, the launch of a new superior category for premium Cava – "Cava del Paraje Calificado." But is the infant terroir of Penedès impressed with this move by the authorities to augment Cava's image?

"As I have said before, I don't think the new sub-classification will really make a difference to Cava's image," says Raventós. "In fact, I think it's a terrible idea – what fixes consumer perception is situated at the low end. It's like trying to offer a few blankets to the victims of great natural disaster and hoping everything will turn out ok."

A typically blunt response from a man as famous for his refreshing lack of bullshit and honesty, as for his defiance of the prevailing culture in Spain's sparkling wine homeland. Which, in an industry increasingly represented by reticent and uber-cautious PRs, is quite uplifting really.

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