

Decanter

Jefford on Monday: Rebel harvest

Andrew Jefford | September 28, 2015

In this week's column, Andrew Jefford looks back at the harvest at Raventos i Blanc, and meeting 'Cava rebel' Pepe Raventos.



The Raventos i Blanc harvest. Credit: Andrew Jefford

My last harvesting experience was with Languedoc [Cinsault](#): big, blobby bunches that had contrived to grow themselves tightly around both tendrils and training wires. Within minutes, you had sticky hands and jammy secateurs. Gathering Xarel-lo grapes from the ancient vines of Raventos i Blanc's Clos del Serral a little earlier this year was much easier. The tightly packed, green-gold bunches, luminous in the early morning sunlight, hung sparsely from contorted, staggering plants, some of them as tall as I was. One clean snip followed another. The bucket seemed to fill itself.

We'd begun at 7, in the cool air of a late August morning. Everyone held hands, in a large circle, while Pepe Raventos addressed the moment, remembering a precious colleague lost since the last vintage. A couple of hours later, we ate breakfast rolls and drank the Raventos L'Hereu decanted into *porrones* (spouted drinking jars), passed around the group: you lift the glass vessel into the air and pour directly into your mouth. It delivers a large, instant mouthful, frothing and nose-tickling: very bacchic.



Xarel lo Raventos i Blanc grapes

The picking sortie gave me a chance to catch up with the Cava rebel, and gauge a little of his thinking. In November 2012, Pepe Raventos decided to pull Raventos i Blanc from the Cava DO; since then, the wines have been sold under the Conca del Riu Anoia (Anoia River Basin) descriptor, though technically they are no more than 'quality sparkling wine'.

He did it, he says, out of frustration at the tarnished international image of Cava. Since then, he and his wife Susana and their four children have lived for most of each year in New York, though this will be the last winter they do that: the house they have been slowly building on the estate is now almost finished; the children's English is fluent; the experience has enriched them all. 'The more time I've spent abroad,' he told me, 'the more I see that if we work honestly, with hard efforts from vineyards to bottling, and with transparency to the consumer, then we can realise the dream of offering something unique here. Something different. Not better or worse, just different. Like all the wines which wine lovers want to drink. If you like dry, mineral sparkling wines, then what we can make here, near the Anoia river, is the highest saline expression I have tasted in sparkling wines.'

Cava, he feels, can no longer communicate that message. 'It's a beautiful name, but it's ten times too late. The Cava world is three big players; it's a business. The core of the region should be the smaller producers. But instead of doing things right, they criticize the big producers all the time. It's a mess. Apart from a few companies, nobody does the homework. Nobody does top-quality winemaking. Nobody does indigenous grapes. Nobody does 18 months on lees. Nobody does vintages. Nobody does the minimum sulphur possible. Nobody spends a lot of money buying wines from all over the place to taste and to learn. You know how it is in the wine business. We say one thing; we do another. Until you put it all together, you won't get the kind of wines which get people excited when they taste them. I think this is fair, no? The times of the winemaker with a tie and a Range Rover, this is over. There are too many great wines out there.'

So far, no other producer has joined Raventos i Blanc in using the Conca del Riu Anoia name, perhaps because the quality charter which goes with it looks over-onerous (it stipulates 80 per cent estate grown fruit, only organic or biodynamic cultivation and only indigenous varieties), but more probably out of respect for their forbears. Some top-quality Cava producers I have spoken

to privately, though, feel as frustrated as Raventos does, and may not be far off making a similar decision.

As it happens, the new name may have to be relinquished: the Penedès DO is trying to create sub-regions, and 'Conca del Riu Anoia' would be one of those. Pepe Raventos is unfazed; there would, he says, be other options. The use of a different name as a label descriptor rather than a DO has, he claims, 'worked beautifully'. The Raventos i Blanc packaging has more classical elegance than any Cava rival, yet at the same time communicates the terroir and estate story on back labels as effectively as any sparkling wine or [Champagne](#) I know. Over half the sales are outside Spain.

It would be a shame, I feel, if Pepe Raventos' decision to quit the DO negated his local influence. He's one of the few winemakers I've met who could genuinely be called visionary; he's energetic and international in his outlook; and his people skills are remarkable, too (his first passion was social work, and he worked with the elderly before coming into the wine world). In addition to wine-making studies, he also trained as a sommelier, giving him horizontal as well as vertical wine culture.

And he's still learning. 'I don't believe in the perfect wine any more. After tasting for many years, I think that the perfect wine doesn't exist.' He's also abandoned the pure single-estate ideal. 'I'm no longer a 100% man. Using only your own vineyards is respectful but a little bit egocentric. It makes you think that you are better than the rest, and this puts you in a bad frame of mind. I learn more from my farmers than I learn from my own team.'

He intends to reserve the Raventos i Blanc name for sparkling wines only, and create a new company for his still wines – and they will be increasingly 'natural', meaning low- or zero-sulphur. 'Natural wines give me so much pleasure. For two reasons. One is that there is no makeup. It's raw, it's complex, it's rich, it reminds us of wines that we tasted long ago. The other is that as a winemaker it's a great challenge to produce wine without sulphur. You have to be very present and work very well to avoid oxidation. This is a challenge. If you can do that, you can do anything.' Anything? We'll see.

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