

H U D I N



Sparkling wines of Catalunya 2024

by Miquel Hudin | 27-11-2023

There is no hard date, but there definitely was a time in Spain when the concept of sparkling wine was “easier” as, from 1986 onwards, it was simply, “Cava”.

It was easier even if it was Cava from Rioja, which was the definition of “Spanish red” or Cava from Navarra which was the definition of “Spanish rosé” or Cava from Extremadura which still is the definition of being “Spanish middle of nowhere”. All of this, along with the 95% of Cava produced in Catalunya was somehow a Spanish Traditional Method wine we referred to as, “Cava”. Admittedly before Spain joining the EU, Cava was *xampany/champaña* but we don’t talk about that anymore.

Things started getting complicated just over a decade ago when various wineries started going their own way and the overall quality of DO Cava starting going in one very distinct direction: down. This quest to arrive to Prosecco prices without the Prosecco fun haven’t gone well and we see what we have today wherein when studying Cava for WSET, the representative wine of context is not a fine wine. While not quite the Great Schism of the Catholic church in the 14th century with three popes at one point, it definitely bears a resemblance.

Suffice to say, assembling these four sets of the tasting reports comprising more than 200 wines, with a minimum retail price of 15€, which are out today, was an ordeal as it meant contacting several entities to arrange tastings. There was also institutional unresponsiveness from Cava, which unfortunately seems to be part of recent changes that show a lack of agility to address the current reality and control their “message”.

As a point of review, let’s look at the main entities that form the sparkling wine scene in Catalunya, which are what I call, The Four C’s.

- DO Cava
This is the original and still only full denomination of origin for sparkling wines in Spain. They have a myriad of classifications schemes, permitted grapes varieties, and the ability to produce Cava across nine different provinces in Spain, thus no linking terroir so to speak. It also sees 87% of total production in the lower-end “Cava de Guarda” which only requires nine months of aging before release. There’s the longer-aged “Cava de Guarda Superior” wherein the far better wines lie, but that’s a very small proportion of Cava’s overall production and decreasing as top producers leave the DO.
- Corpinnat
In a huge upset, these producers left Cava in 2019 as they wanted to implement such things as: minimum 15 months of aging, only local/traditional grape varieties, only organic production, minimum grape prices, and a tightly-defined region for wine production. They still adhere to all of these today, number 13 producers in total, and continue to grow.
- Clàssic Penedès
This is a sub-classification under the larger DO Penedès formed in 2013 and embodies much of what Corpinnat espouses but with two key differences that the production area is larger and they allow a **lot** more grape varieties. They also have the same minimum 15 months of aging as Corpinnat however and require all grapes grown to be organically certified.
- Conca del Riu Anoia & Etc.
This is something of a larger grouping of which the star producer is Raventós i Blanc who were the first to give up on Cava’s downward spiral, leaving in 2012. There is no real cohesive aspect to these, although all the wines are produced in Catalunya. Raventós i Blanc still has plans to create a new DO around Conca del Riu Anoia and I’ve seen their studies, but as of yet, it hasn’t happened. Also in here would be Clos Lentiscus, Terra de Marca, Casajou, and a few others that weren’t part of the tasting.

So that’s obviously a lot more complicated than just remembering the name, Cava, which is why everything has become brand-focused as is the case in much of the drinks world. Do people buy Recaredo, Raventós i Blanc, or Juvé & Camps because of the various groupings they classify under? Not at all. People buy them because they make great wines and are trusted by the consumer.

A question of quality

But if a sparkling-wine loving alien landed in Catalunya today and said, “So, what’s my best bet as I know nothing of your terrestrial ‘brands’”, where should said alien head? As shown by the tasting reports, that’s without a doubt, Corpinnat, and I predict it will stay that way for some time to come.

While I stipulated a minimum retail price of 15€ when calling for samples which chopped out some of the less interesting wines, this only really benefited Cava as the wines under this DO that were tasted were in fact, their best wines and despite that, Corpinnat wines scored considerably higher.

It has to be stated that there are definitely excellent wines in all the C's, but for Cava, you primarily find them in the "Elaborador Integral" which was an interesting discovery.

The best Cava you'll never know

DO Cava is working in a black hole of their own making. Of the Big Three: Freixenet, Codorníu, and García Carrión (makers of Jaume Serra and other bottom-shelf Cava), the first two are now owned by massive international entities and it's clear that profit is all that matters to them. They're trying to keep just enough lipstick on the pig so as to convince you that it's really not a pig.

There have been several initiatives in the post-Corpinnat world of Cava that seem like the things the Corpinnat producers were originally wanting. Get a bit closer to this proverbial pig however and the lipstick washes off quickly as it's clear to see that how these changes were enacted did nothing to address core issues. Corpinnat producers saw the writing on the wall and that they could no longer affect change from within when the DO is controlled by three companies focused on profit above all else with 60-95% of the production—depending upon who you ask.

The Cava de Paratge (single vineyard classifications), despite arriving prior to Corpinnat, never worked as it was building a house from the roof first. Cava's massive land spread in theory made this system impossible as it would have required building up a classification pyramid to support the roof if done properly. Doing this would have taken ages given their (still-growing!) 38,000ha and it would have illuminated that many areas are subpar. Also, once some of the top wineries created Paratges (Recaredo, Gramona, Sabaté i Coca, etc.), the mega companies did so as well and it essentially sank the whole premise as the quality level wasn't maintained.

Also, while people outside of Spain complain about the Corpinnat name (again, does *sham-pain* sound nice when you think about it?), people **really** complained about this category when it was introduced as in either Castilian: Cava de Paraje or Catalan: Cava de Paratge, it's not easy for English speakers. It's been a long time since I've heard anyone take interest in it.

The subzones were another invention that was designed for failure. When forming the zones, the Comtats de Barcelona (Catalunya) was given four subzones out of eight in total across Spain. This may have worked were it not that one, Valls d'Anoia-Foix, ended up being the largest and where approximately 90% of all Cava is produced, thus making the subzones practically useless except to those producers outside of Catalunya who have long-promoted the main selling point of their Cava being that it is "not Catalan". And sadly, yes, that's still a thing.

It was however the introduction of the “Elaborador Integral” in April of 2022, that was perhaps the most baffling as while they created it and put out a couple of press releases initially, there has been nothing since. Why? As shown by the [Cava Tasting](#), the best wines still certified as Cava are in this group as an “Elaborador Integral” is an “estate wine producer” who doesn’t buy in grapes nor wines. Essentially, a core component of Corpinnat.

I follow all the events of the sparkling world in Spain closely and the first I heard about this was when I contacted Cava producers directly and they made mention of it. I can’t see these producers staying with Cava for much longer as the lack of promotion to this initiative will simply foster those who meet the requirements of Corpinnat to go there as soon as it makes sense for them. Some have already intimated this to me, but are held back due to Corpinnat’s strict variety requirements.

Instead of promoting the “Elaborador Integral” group to give at least some level of quality to the DO, Cava is instead focusing on doing tastings with the *paradores* in Spain, a [group of historic hotels](#) that it would have made sense to promote with in 1973, not 2023.

In fact, the marketing of Cava has been “curious” since they fired their in-house people to use two outside agencies that seem focused on trying to control their branding message (a futile act in the current age unless one has the nearly-a-century track record of Champagne already) and essentially act as a firewall for the people at the DO.

Taste in bubbles

Despite the failings of DO Cava to fix their core problems and the fact that people (at least in Spain) buy sparkling wine based more upon price (thus giving that 87% Cava de Guarda production a market) and then brand loyalty, what are the overall coherent trends as to what’s working?

Unsurprisingly, it’s all about “going native” as the best wines are by and far made with the local varieties.

In general I’m not a huge fan of rosé sparkling wines whether they be from Spain, Italy, or France, but if one is going to make sparkling rosé in Catalunya, it seems that Trepát is the variety to do it with as shown by Maria Rigol Ordi and Carles Andreu. It needs to be noted that Sumoll made a fine appearance in [this wine](#) by Mas Bertran. The light-bodied nature of both these varieties really lend themselves to the style very well.

The stalwart Xarel·lo never ceases to amaze and those such as Recaredo, Gramona, Juvé & Camps, are making the best wines in the region from it. But, it needs to be said that Parellada is coming into its own, as shown by [this wine](#) by Carles Andreu or [this one](#) by the crazy folks at Suriol. The third variety of the classic blend, Macabeu, doesn’t seem to have reached the same point of lift off neither in sparkling nor still form. Work will never cease.

Chardonnay seems like it will never die, but in turn, I've always found these to be the most lacking sparkling wines and I don't see how that's going to get better with a climate that continues to be less favorable to Chardonnay. The same should be said about Pinot Noir although some wineries are planting even more of it for some reason. But it's not just DO Cava with this weirdness as Clàssic Penedès permits Riesling and Gewürztraminer of all things.

But across the board, the aged sparkling wines were the standouts, which of course gave Corpinnat a leg up in putting the betting foot forward given their long, mandatory aging minimums that most producers far exceed.

There are however the occasional young sparkling wines such as Cava Palagó which was amazingly fresh but with plenty of depth in a youthful format.

All that's said

Ultimately when reviewing all these various segments of sparkling wine, I kept coming back to the fact that many people still badmouth the Corpinnat name or wonder when the Conca del Riu Anoia will become a reality, but the fact is, people keep talking about these wines due to their high quality.

It's a far different case for DO Cava where, despite all this controlling of the message (or most likely because of it), they need to pay whoever is willing at the moment to lend their name to selecting wines for a tasting, or supposedly consulting on some new aspect of the DO, or whatever else. The point is, people don't willingly talk about Cava wines at this point unless they're being paid for it or hope to be paid for it and that, says everything.

This tasting was a tremendous amount of work to pull together but ultimately, it was very much worth it to get a proper sense of where sparkling wine in Catalunya sits nearly five years ago Corpinnat left, 10 years after Clàssic Penedès was formed, and 11 years after much of this was set in motion with Raventós i Blanc leaving what they saw to be a sinking ship.

Will Cava change? It's seemingly impossible at this point, especially as they do the complete opposite of what would be needed to pull everyone in under their auspices again. It seems that for some such as Can Ràfols dels Caus or Terra de Marca, even just dropping the DO Cava moniker altogether without joining another group is a better option than staying.

There will indeed be more wineries joining Corpinnat in the near future as despite several unfortunate and untimely deaths lately, the momentum is with Corpinnat. The question just remains as to how many join and how soon.

It's undeniable that the air got sucked out of Cava's room years ago now and the shareholders of the Big Three wineries don't seem to care about plugging the holes as long as their bottom line is met. When that's no longer the case or no one will sell them grapes at unsustainable prices, I have no idea what they'll do, but clearly there's no thinking that far down the road as anyone can see there's a very steep cliff on the very near horizon.

Please review the Tasting Reports: [DO Cava](#), [Corpinnat](#), [Clàssic Penedès](#), [Conca del Riu Anoia & Etc.](#)

The association of Corpinnat assisted in collecting samples and providing tasting space at member, Can Feixes. DO Penedès also assisted in collecting samples and providing tasting space at their office for the Clàssic Penedès wines. The wineries in the Conca Etc. group all sent their wines directly to be tasted as did the DO Cava producers who were interested in participating given that the DO offered no assistance in any form whatsoever.

TOTAL WINES: 18

Sorting by: [Name](#) | [Year](#) | [Score](#) | [Description](#)

Year	Wine	Color	Rank	Score	
2019	Can Ràfols dels Caus - Clímax Brut Nature	🟡	●●○	91	☆
2019	Can Ràfols dels Caus - Clímax Rosé Brut Nature	🟡	●●○	90	☆
2015	Castell de Sant Antoni - Camí del Sot Brut	🟡	●●○	94	☆
2015	Castell de Sant Antoni - Gran Barrica Brut Nature	🟡	●●○	93	☆
2015	Castell de Sant Antoni - Gran Rosat Brut Nature	🟡	●○○	88	☆
2005	Castell de Sant Antoni - Torre de l'Homenatge Brut Nature	🟡	●●●	94+	☆
2016	Castell d'Encus - Taïka	🟡	●●○	92	☆
2018	Celler Analec - Gualach Reserva Superior	🟡	●●○	90	☆
NV	Celler Analec - Rosat Brut Nature	🟡	●○○	86	☆
2018	Celler Analec - Sort Abril Reserva	🟡	●●○	92	☆
NV	L'Olivera - Reserva	🟡	●○○	87	☆
2018	L'Olivera - Reserva Superior	🟡	●○○	89	☆
2012	Pepe Raventós - Mas del Serral	🟡	●●○	94	☆
2021	Raventós i Blanc - Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut	🟡	●●○	91	☆
2020	Raventós i Blanc - De la Finca Brut Nature	🟡	●●○	90+	☆
2021	Raventós i Blanc - De Nit Extra Brut	🟡	●●○	93	☆
2016	Raventós i Blanc - Manuel Raventós Brut Nature	🟡	●●●	97+	☆
2019	Raventós i Blanc - Textures de Pedra Brut Nature	🟡	●●○	94	☆