

Cava, Spain's sparkling wine, is both affordable and delicious



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Cava has a conundrum.

Spain's preeminent sparkling wine built a reputation over decades for pleasant, inexpensive bubbly, the kind you'd keep a bottle of in your fridge to take the edge off a lousy day. The problem: When consumers want cheap fizz, they turn to Italy's prosecco instead of cava.

Need proof? The U.S. imported 134 million bottles of prosecco in 2022, an increase of 5.8 percent over the previous year, the Prosecco D.O.C. Consortium [announced](#) earlier this year. By contrast, Spain sent 21.6 million bottles of cava to the U.S. market, a decrease of 8.85 percent over 2021, according to the regulatory body of Denominación de Origen Cava, the official appellation.

So D.O. Cava's producers have embarked on a quality push. They want you to know that the word "Cava" on the label doesn't mean low price and low quality, and that many examples are world-class wines worthy of pairing with fine food. These cavas have always existed, of course; they've just been well-kept secrets.

"We need to court consumers who want sparkling wines with quality and personality, long-aging and a story," says Javier Pagés, president of the D.O. Cava regulatory board.

This is a belated response to a rebellion by several wineries that withdrew from the organization to get out from under the stereotype of cheap bubbly and market their product as wines of place. Cava is unusual as an appellation in that it refers more to a style of wine — sparkling made in the traditional method of second fermentation in the bottle — not tied to a specific region. While most cava is produced in Penedès, south and west of Barcelona, wines from several other regions across Spain can be labeled as cava.

Raventós i Blanc was the initial defector, in 2012, and now labels its wines with its own unofficial designation of Conca del Riu Anoia. Eighteen other wineries later withdrew to label their sparkling wines as Classic Penedès within the official D.O. Penedès appellation. A third group — now totaling 11 wineries, including highly regarded Gramona and Recaredo — joined under the banner Corpinnat. Classic Penedès and Corpinnat emphasize production of their own grapes rather than purchased grapes or base wine, organic farming and extended aging of at least 18 months. They also favor local grape varieties, while D.O. Cava allows chardonnay and pinot noir along with the classic cava blend of xarel-lo, macabeo and parellada.

D.O. Cava responded to these challenges with several changes to its labeling regulations, beginning in 2020. First, subzones were approved to give some geographic specifications to a wine's origin. Two categories were created to indicate quality: Cava de Guarda wines must be aged 9 months in the second fermentation, which creates the bubbles. Cava de Guarda Superior wines are aged longer, and as of 2025 will need to be made exclusively with organic grapes. Within this latter category, Reserva wines must be aged at least 18 months and Gran Reserva a minimum of 30 months. (Longer aging gives the wine added complexity and depth.) Single-vineyard wines aged at least 36 months and approved by a special tasting panel can be labeled Paraje Calificado, considered cava's highest-quality designation.

But wait — there's more! A new label sticker denotes a winery as "Elaborador Integral," meaning the winery controls the entire production process from vineyard to vino. Think of this as akin to the popular "grower champagnes," small producers who make distinctive wines from their own grapes rather than selling grapes to the larger champagne houses.

Currently, 15 wineries qualify for the Elaborador Integral sticker. At a recent tasting in Barcelona, I was especially impressed with wines from Alta Alella, Avinyó, Agusti Torelló Mata, Juvé y Camps, Parés Baltà, Torné & Bel and Vins Familia Ferrer.

Cava's producers would have us focus on the Guarda Superior categories as indicators of high-quality cava. If we can find them, that is. According to D.O. Cava's own statistics, Cava de Guarda — the basic level we have come to know over the decades — accounts for nearly 87 percent of all cava produced. So there isn't much of this quality tier to find.

We have a distinct advantage in our search: Importers have already done the selection for us. Look for cavas represented by your favorite importers — I trust you are reading the back labels and noting names. Some national importers with delicious cavas are Olé & Obrigado, Kobrand and Vintus. Washington, D.C.-area importers with good cava include Grapes of Spain, Free Run Wine Merchants and Well Crafted Wine & Beverage.

Will the new categories help cava gain consumers' respect, or will they prove to be too confusing? Will quality-minded wine lovers be intrigued, or have they concluded that the rebel wineries of Corpinnat and Classic Penedès are the best bubblies Spain has to offer? And will consumers be willing to pay more for the Guarda Superior tiers, or is cava locked in the market's mind as cheap, low-quality fizz?

Time will tell. But these wines are worth seeking out now, and the new labels should help us find them.



Cava, Spain's primary sparkling wine, is a reliable bubbly at an affordable price. To find standouts, look for organic viticulture, "reserva" (extra aging in bottle before release) or different grapes, such as the pinot noir rosé in this week's selections.