



Opposite: Glòria Garriga,
Els Jèlipins, Penedès.

ROTTERS' ROAD TRIP

Penedès

Catalonia, Spain

WINE, IDENTITY, INDEPENDENCE: the sense of struggle is palpable in Penedès, Catalonia. Take Glòria Garriga, for example. Disillusioned by the effects of the vineyard treatments she once sold, she swapped a career as an agricultural engineer for the life of a natural *vigneron* and started Els Jèlipins in the hills of Font-rubí. It took almost a decade from her 2003 debut vintage for her wines to begin selling, but they're now listed in some of the world's best restaurants. "I don't have the words to explain how we suffered," she says of the early years when she also had a young daughter to support.

Or Pepe Raventós, the closest thing Catalonia has to vinous royalty, whose lineage stretches back 21 generations and whose ancestor invented Cava in 1872. Having seen how success had corrupted quality at the family's historic winery, Cordoníu (which, alongside La Sagrada Família, was once among Barcelona's most popular tourist attractions), Pepe's grandfather Josep Maria sold his shares and founded Raventós i Blanc in 1985, only to die from heart failure a year after the first harvest. Pepe and his father Manuel worked tirelessly to avoid bankruptcy, and are now at the vanguard of biodynamic wine in the region.

Forty-five-minutes' drive west of Barcelona, Penedès has long been the centre of Spanish sparkling wine production, yet, like the once-mighty Sherry, its image has been bastardised by oceans of poor-quality renditions. Cava – a blend of Xarel·lo, Parellada and Macabeu, made using the traditional method of secondary fermentation in bottle – first attained international success during the First World War, when much of Champagne was battlefields, and has since become dominated by industrial wineries to service demand. A century on, it is now a method-orientated DO that cares little for terroir expression or sustainable viticulture, something that led Pepe – whose grandfather also established the *Consejo Regulador del Cava* regulatory body – to leave and start the Conca del Riu Anoia appellation for his sparkling wines. Of course, other Cava producers see this as a betrayal, but if you believe in quality farming and

wines with a sense of place, what should you do? Champagne's largest annual production – Moët & Chandon's 30 million bottles – seems almost artisanal compared with the compromises that Cava's largest producer, Freixenet, must have to make to produce its mind-boggling 200 million.

Aside from the obvious tensions between industrial and traditional organic viticulture, Penedès sparkling wine's most significant struggle comes with such inevitable comparisons with Champagne. Whereas Swartland Chenin Blanc, for example, is rarely judged against Burgundian Chardonnay, Cava operates in the shadow of the greatest drinks marketing success story of all time. Talking with Pepe, a naturally charming advocate for his wines with a deeper, spiritual side – a mix of Dale Carnegie technique and Eckhart Tolle sincerity (the latter is one of his favourite authors) – it's obviously something that's kept him awake at night. I can see what he means when he says Cava is a more mineral wine than Champagne, which he regards as fruitier, but only in the context of Raventós i Blanc's biodynamic bubbles versus standard-issue non-vintage *Grandes Marques*. Juxtaposed against the intense, chalky minerality of, say, Pierre Péters 'Les Chétilons' or other leading Grower Champagnes, only Mas del Serral, from Pepe's top 1ha vineyard, gets close: it's a delicious, saline amalgamation of lemon cream, biscuit and umami to which other Cava producers can only aspire. But, again, why compare apples with oranges?

Pepe's story may be deeply rooted in Cava, but his project making low-intervention still wines – a passion he developed while frequenting natural wine bars such as Diner and Marlow & Sons when living in New York marketing Raventós i Blanc – aspires to elevate the humble into the world class. Back in

Below: Can Sumoi, El Pla de Manlleu, Penedès.



1999, when Raventós i Blanc had to fight to keep afloat, Pepe started producing a still wine called 'Perfum' to increase turnover, while dreaming of one day buying vineyards elsewhere in the region to keep the two styles separate. A keen cyclist, he finally realised this goal in 2016, when he rode past a tumbledown *finca* dating from 1645 in El Pla de Manlleu, west Penedès, and outbid another suitor who wanted to turn it into a chicken farm. Perched on a 600m hill – on a clear day, you can see as far as Mallorca – Can Sumoi has 20ha of old vines out of a 300ha forest estate, a landscape Pepe says he knew would produce outstanding wines the moment he saw it. Although it's only two vintages old, that's exactly how we'd describe the estate's 2018 Xarel·lo: citrusy, pure, precise and long, it leaves a sensation of salt crystals on the tongue and is the perfect foil for the local Palamós prawns.

Of Cava's three grape varieties, the austere, less fruit-driven Xarel·lo (pronounced Sha-rel-oh) is closer in profile to Chenin Blanc than Chardonnay, with excellent potential as a single varietal wine. Part of what makes Can Sumoi such an exciting prospect is not only the renaissance of a long-forgotten heritage – a trend throughout Spanish wine – but the ambition of elevating a grape not conventionally regarded capable of greatness. It's an idea Pepe picked up working for the late Loire Valley iconoclast Didier Dagueneau in 2004. "What inspired me was how he expressed the soil through Sauvignon Blanc," Pepe says. "I thought I must be able to do this with Xarel·lo. The thing I really took away was belief – he was a believer in what he was doing." Taking half the yields of similar producers in Pouilly-Fumé, but with twice as many workers in the vineyards, Dagueneau's meticulous farming practices took Sauvignon Blanc to heights many didn't think possible, an ethos adopted by other *vignerons* today. Pepe takes me to visit Toni Carbó, a local grower from whom he buys

Above: Pepe Raventós.

