Shrine to the Vine

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CATALONIA DREAMING

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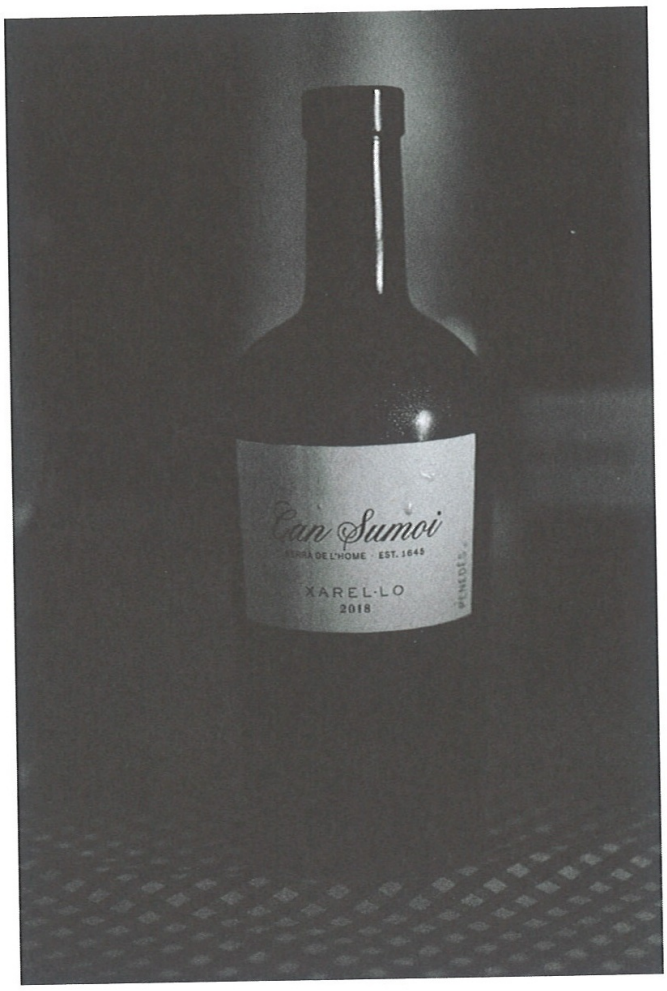
NATIVE GRAPES AND MAVERICK SPIRIT ARE BEHIND CATALONIA'S MOST INTERESTING NEW WINES

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 marketed, she swapped a career as an agricultural engineer for the life of a natural *vigneron* and started Els Jelipins 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, Codorníu (which, alongside La Sagrada Familia, 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 Macabeo, made using the traditional method of secondary fermentation in bottle – first attained international success during World War One, 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



Above: 2018 Can Sumoi Xarel·lo
Previous spread: Glòria Garriga, Els Jelipins, Penedès

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

Pepe Raventós, Clos del Serral vineyard

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 NV Grandes Marques. Juxtaposed against the intense, chalky minerality of, say, Pierre Péters 'Les Chétillons' 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 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, south-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 I'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 varietals, 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 as 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

the Sauvignon Blanc grape," 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 fruit for Raventós i Blanc, who keeps back 10% of his crop to make his own wine. In Toni's kitchen, we drink his wonderfully tangy Xarel·lo 'La Bufarrella' surrounded by empty bottles of Soldera Brunello di Montalcino and Château Rayas; maverick inspiration abounds.

Over in nearby Font-rubí, there isn't much that's orthodox about how Glòria Garriga taught herself to make wine or, indeed, approaches life in general. Like Pepe and Toni, she uses only organic fruit for the three cuvées she produces at Els Jelipins, but what makes her transition into natural wine so unique is that she has seen agriculture's worst abuses from the inside. "It's very interesting to learn how a multinational chemical company works from within," she says, eyes scanning her basic cellar for memories. "You're forced to forecast growth in sales, which is crazy, because you have a limited potential market. So you have to convince farmers that they need to use fertilisers, and once they start, they are forced to continue to get the yields they expect. Fertilisers are salt, which makes plants absorb a lot of water, which in turn makes a high production, but it also makes them more sensitive to pests and disease. Then they need to buy pesticides and fungicides to control that. It's like human health: if you eat shit food, you'll get ill and the pharmaceutical companies make more money."

Descended from Argentinian immigrants, Glòria has been coming to the finca that houses Els Jelipins' winery since she was a small child as it used to be her parents' place in the mountains. Having never owned vineyards, she has worked hard to build the trust of local growers so she can buy high-quality fruit, while insisting on her own pruning techniques to ensure low yields, and absolutely no fertilisers or pesticides. With fruit harvested from about 1.5ha of vines around the area, her production is tiny, and she has no plans to expand. "Maybe I'm not ambitious enough, but all I ever wanted to do was make enough money to live," she explains, before adding that her early vintages remained unsold until open-minded sommeliers as far afield as the US and Canada began listing her wines in 2012. Which is unsurprising, really, considering how different they are from the concentrated, oak-saturated style that dominated the Spanish market for decades.

Of the three cuvées Glòria produces, my picks are her Gravner-esque amber wine, vinified in amphora from Montonega and Sumoll, and a simple but hugely satisfying *rosado*, made exclusively from the latter. The red Sumoll grape is another interesting native that, due to its high acidity, aggressive tannins and capacity for ageing, has been dubbed the Catalan Nebbiolo, although Glòria's *rosado* tames any abrasiveness and ekes out delicate, Pinot-esque aromas. Like many artisanal wine projects started over recent years, it is attention to detail on small-batch productions and meticulous farming that elevate grapes others would consider too mundane to warrant proper consideration to new heights. "It's my dream that one day I'll go to New York or London and see a vertical tasting of Xarel·lo," Pepe tells me. Anything is possible when you believe.

Photographs by Benjamin McMahon

Pepe Raventós, Dan Keeling and Glòria Garriga, Els Jelipins, August 2019
Right: Toni Carbó