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BY LETTIE TEAGUE

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EATING & DRINKING

ON WINE: LETTIE TEAGUE



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PROSECCO IS POPULAR. Champagne is admired and even Lambrusco has acquired a certain trendy allure. But Cava, the sparkling wine of Spain, is considered merely simple and fun. Why hasn't Cava earned a cult following, or at least a bit more respect?

One Cava producer doesn't even want to try to answer that question. Josep "Pepe" Raventós of Raventós i Blanc decided that, given Cava's less-than-glorious reputation, he wasn't going to call his wines "Cava" anymore but "Conca del Riu Anoia," or simply "Conca" for short. The name is derived from the place in the Penedès region where his wines—and those of many other Cava producers—are made. Though it's not an officially recognized region (the name translates to "Valley of the River Anoia" in Catalan), Mr. Raventós hopes that it will be one day. Right now he hopes to make "Conca" a brand.

Ironically, it was the 39-year-old Mr. Raventós's great-great-grandfather, Josep Raventós Fatjos of Codorníu winery, who "invented" Cava in 1872 at the Raventós i Blanc estate. The elder Mr. Raventós was the first man to apply the Champagne method to sparkling wine in Spain, using the native Xarel·lo grape. Part of the Raventós family (though not Pepe Raventós himself) still owns Codorníu, one of the two largest Cava producers in Spain; the other is Freixenet.

Mr. Raventós the younger doesn't see any irony in his semantic departure, but rather a kind of continuation of his forebear's idea. "I think that we share the same vision," he said, citing the fact that his ancestor used only Xarel·lo to create that first Cava.

The exclusive use of native Catalan varietals like Xarel·lo, Parellada and Macabeo is one of Mr. Raventós's criteria for producers who wish to use the Conca name for sparkling wines. (Many Cava producers also employ Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.) In addition, 80% of their fruit must be their own, not purchased; they must produce only vintage sparkling wines, no nonvintage; and they must age their wines for at least 18 months (current Cava law requires a minimum of just nine months of aging).

Would-be Conca producers must also observe both biodynamic and organic practices, said Mr. Raventós. It seemed like a pretty rigorous set of criteria to me. How many Cava producers could actually qualify? "Not



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Mr. Raventós with a laugh. "I think they're waiting to see if I shrink or survive." (According to Maria Eugènia Puig, the secretary-general of the Consejo Regulador del Cava, or the consortium of Cava producers, only three of the 253 Cava producers in the consortium no longer use the Cava name.)

It's clearly quite daring to exchange a famous name for four words that few people know. But Mr. Raventós, who moved his family to New York last year to better understand the American market, doesn't lack for confidence. He attributes the move to Manhattan as a big factor in his decision to stop using the Cava name, saying New York gave him a perspective that he might not have had if he'd remained in the small village of Sant Sadurn d'Anoia, where his friends and extended family live.

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the only place where the wines can be made: Cava can be produced in several other Spanish regions as well, including Extremadura and Rioja. This is something else that Mr. Raventós laments; he believes that Cava should be a wine of a particular place—like Champagne.

At least one Champagne producer has been eager to avoid too close an association with Cava. In 2010, Champagne Louis Roederer filed a lawsuit in Minnesota against Cava producer Jaume Serra, charging that the label of the latter's wine Cristalino looked a bit too much like that of Roederer's famous *tête du cuvée* Cristal. The label, which once was gold and bore just the name Cristalino, now is white and features the name Jaume Serra as well. "Defending the integrity of our brand—its name and artwork in particular—is very important to us,"

most Cava drinkers are buying such inexpensive varieties, according to Lorena Ascencios, wine buyer at Astor Wine & Spirits in New York. Astor sells a great deal of Cava, said Ms. Ascencios, though she said she was happy to note that Champagne is outselling Cava at her store this year to date.

Cavas priced at \$10 or less make up about 95% of Cava sales at Weimax Wines & Spirits in Burlingame, Calif., according to proprietor Gerald Weisl, who had an interesting Cava-related encounter recently: A group of students studying in a Wine & Spirits Education Trust program showed up at his store looking for Cava with "rubbery aromas" for a blind tasting.

Mr. Weisl explained that he didn't stock such Cava and considered "rubbery" a flaw. He later wrote to the Wine & Spirits Education Trust in Lon-

characteristic aroma of Cava, probably because "most Cava sold in the U.K. is cheap, whereas better-quality Cava is sold in the States." I'm not sure whether that's true, but a quick look through wine-searcher.com's U.K. listings revealed that the Cavas sold there are quite different from the fairly wide range of Cava sold in the U.S.

The 17 Cava that I purchased for my tasting ran the price gamut from cheap (\$7) to very high-end (\$40.) The wines, a mix of vintage and nonvintage (and a few rosés) included well-known names such as Freixenet and Gramona, as well as more obscure producers such as Parés Baltà and Montsarra.

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fore they even began tasting. (While theirs was a mostly positive impression, I did notice that the word "cheap" was mentioned many times.)

In fact, the cheapest Cava were the least popular wines of the tasting—with one exception (the Segura Viudas Brut, \$8). Most were dismissed as neutral and simple (Montsarra) or simply industrial (Freixenet). But the wines that cost \$14 to \$20 a bottle performed fairly well, with a number of favorites in that range, most notably the lively Avinyó Brut Reserva (\$19), the creamy 2009 Gramona Gran Cuvée Vintage Brut (\$14) and the soft and slightly fruity Castellroig Brut (\$14). The elegant and understated 2010 Raventós i Blanc L'Hereu (\$18) was also a favorite, though of course it's no longer called "Cava" at all.

On the upper end, the 2010 Navaran Perles Roses Cuvée Antonia (\$35) was a great favorite—a lively, juicy, utterly delicious rosé that happened to be beautifully packaged as well. But when I announced the price to my friends, not a single one said they would pay that sort of money "for a Cava!" as they exclaimed. And if it were Champagne and not Cava? Well, that would be different, they said. At least one ex-Cava producer is hoping they'll feel that way, too, if the label says "Conca" instead.

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Would-be Conca producers must also observe both biodynamic and organic practices, said Mr. Raventós. It seemed like a pretty rigorous set of criteria to me. How many Cava producers could actually qualify? "Not more than 10 would be eligible," Mr. Raventós replied. And have any of those 10 expressed an interest in adopting the name? Not as yet, said



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Located in the heart of the Penedès region, close to the city of Barcelona, Sant Sadurn d'Anoia is home to a good many Cava producers, including Codorníu and Freixenet. But it's not

the only place where the wines can be made: Cava can be produced in several other Spanish regions as well, including Extremadura and Rioja. This is something else that Mr. Raventós laments; he believes that Cava should be a wine of a particular place—like Champagne.

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Still, it's not likely that Cava drinkers are confusing a sub-\$10 wine with a \$200 luxury Champagne. And

most Cava drinkers are buying such inexpensive varieties, according to Lorena Ascencios, wine buyer at Astor Wine & Spirits in New York. Astor sells a great deal of Cava, said Ms. Ascencios, though she said she was happy to note that Champagne is outselling Cava at her store this year to date.

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Mr. Weisl explained that he didn't stock such Cava and considered "rubbery" a flaw. He later wrote to the Wine & Spirits Education Trust in London and asked why it instructed students to search for rubbery Cava. The response came back that WSET students were taught that that was a

characteristic aroma of Cava, probably because "most Cava sold in the U.K. is cheap, whereas better-quality Cava is sold in the States." I'm not sure whether that's true, but a quick look through wine-searcher.com's U.K. listings revealed that the Cava sold there are quite different from the fairly wide range of Cava sold in the U.S.

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See wine videos and more from Off Duty at youtube.com/wsj. Email Lettie at wine@wsj.com.



OENOFILE: CAVAS (AND A CONCA) WORTH BUYING



Segura Viudas Brut, \$8
Although it was the cheapest Cava of the tasting, the Segura Viudas was a real crowd favorite. Clean, light-bodied with a brisk acidity, it's great as an aperitif or for a large gathering.



Castellroig Brut, \$14
This small Penedès producer turns out a lovely Cava made entirely from native varieties (Xarel·lo, Macabeo, Parellada). It's a slightly lush, fruitier Cava that's made in a pleasant, easy-drinking style.



Avinyó Brut Reserva, \$19
This family-owned winery produces a range of Cava, beginning with this basic brut, also made from Xarel·lo, Macabeo and Parellada. Aged 18 to 22 months on the lees (more than twice the required time), it's a lively and very well-made wine marked by notes of citrus and spice.



2010 Raventós i Blanc L'Hereu Brut, \$18
Although this wine no longer bears the Cava name (Pepe Raventós uses the unrecognized regional name Conca del Riu Anoia instead), it's all that a truly good Cava should be. Aged on its lees for more than two years, it's an elegant, subtle wine with a bright acidity and notes of pear and stone fruit.



2010 Navaran Perles Roses Cuvée Antonia, \$35
This vintage Cava is produced by a small family estate and made entirely from Pinot Noir, aged on its lees for two years. It's a thoroughly delicious, utterly beguiling Cava that's also quite delicate and refined.