TOM STEVENSON

CHRISTIE'S

# World Encyclopedia of Champagne & sparkling wine

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# SPAIN

1340 Francesco Eximenis wrote of '*formigalejants*' or 'tingling' wines, yet another example of accidental z, albeit barely *pétillant* from the sound of it. But the deliberate production of sparkling wine did not cur in Spain until the second half of the 19th century.

DONKEYS GRAZING AT RAVENTÓS I BLANC

atoni Gali Comas made the first Spanish sparkling wine metime prior to 1851, when he entered it in a competition Madrid. He did not persevere and the next milestone Luis Justo i Villanueva, the laboratory director at the gricultural Institute of Sant Isidre in Catalonia. It was under llanueva that all the earliest commercial producers of anish sparkling wine learned the Champagne process. In 72, three former students, Domenec Soberano, Francesc and Agustí Vilaret, entered their sparkling wines in a celona competition. All used classic Champagne grapes own in Catalonia; Soberano and Gil were both awarded ld medals, while Vilaret, who used raspberry liqueur in *dosage* of his wine, received a bronze. Vilaret's firm, ers Mont-Ferrant, is the only one of these pioneering es to have survived.

Josep Raventós i Fatjó of Codorníu was the first to make ttle-fermented sparkling wine out of Parellada, Macabeo d Xarel-lo. But how these grapes came to form the basis the entire Cava industry is a mystery.

It was not until 1974 that exports were significant enough be officially recorded, but so rapid was the growth in the oduction of Spanish sparkling wines that by the 1980s y had become the second-largest bottle-fermented appellation in the world. Today it produces around 240 million bottles from the demarcated area of 31,765 hectares. The word 'Cava' simply means 'cellar' and, when it was devised in 1970, it could be used by any Spanish sparkling wine made by the traditional method. After Spain joined the Common Market in 1986, it became subject to the EC wine regime, which is based on integrity of origin. Because Cava had no delimited area of production, the appellation could not continue in its existing format.

Then, as now, most Cava came from Catalonia, and most of that from Sant Sadurní d'Anoia in the Penedès region, but there were also tiny quantities of Cava produced by a number of wineries spread across the country. This presented the Spanish authorities with a problem because they had been charged with establishing a geographical area of production for Cava. They were also still smarting from being double-crossed by the EC over the protection of their Sherry appellation and, ironically, this simplified the solution.

With a 3,000-year pedigree, Sherry is probably the oldest wine appellation in the world and the Spanish were promised it would enjoy the full protection of the EC if they joined. They were also told that so-called 'Sherry'

produced by other member states would be banned. However, they were misled by Britain and Ireland. These countries had lucrative industries where fortified wines made from imported grape concentrate were sold as British and Irish Sherry. They therefore used their combined veto to block the Community's attempt to prohibit these products.

Authentic Sherry was eventually protected in 1996, exactly ten years later, but at the time the Spanish were annoyed that EU bureaucrats cared more about the letter of the law than its spirit. Was it coincidence then that they did exactly the same? Cava fell short of the EU's ethos, which stated that all appellations must be geographically based. If a geographically based appellation was what the EU wanted, that was what the Spanish authorities would give them. Observing the letter of the law, they simply drew boundaries around the municipalities in which all the Cava producers were located. So, although 98% of Cava comes from Catalonia, its officially delimited area of production covers 159 municipalities in ten provinces (Barcelona, Tarragona, Lleida, Girona, La Rioja, Alava, Zaragoza, Navarra, Valencia and Badajoz) spread across one-third of Spain.

PRUNING AT LLOPART

## CAVA'S SPANISH ROOTS

Production is dominated by two firms, Codorníu and Freixenet. The latter has always been violently opposed to the invasion of Cava by foreign grape varieties, although it might be cynical to wonder whether this position has been influenced by the fact that Codorníu was the first and most successful proponent of Chardonnay (initially with Raimat, after which it was used in the primary Codorníu brand). However, Freixenet's argument is certainly valid – that foreign grape varieties could erode Cava's Spanish character. Strangely, after all that battling, Freixenet recently launched a premium range, Elyssia, in which Chardonnay and Pinot Noir play an important role. They gave in due to market demand, but also because, after purchasing the ex-Chandon estate, they had top-quality vines of Champagne clones. Like it or not, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are in Cava to stay, but the good thing is that they are not degrading the quality of the wines in the least: the contrary in fact, as Elyssia and Codorníu's many new exciting *cuvées* successfully prove.

Cava is one of the very few dry sparkling wine appellations of any repute outside France and Italy and, of course, Spain has its own indigenous grape varieties, while California, Australia, New Zealand *et al*, which have no sparkling wine appellations, do not. While it might seem obvious for New World producers to try the Champagne varieties first, Cava producers have a certain heritage to defend.

Even though quality has risen in the past ten years, the problem is that an unacceptable amount of Cava is boring. This is not to pick on the Spanish: elsewhere in this book it is stated that the majority of French sparkling wines are well below standard, and that is a heinous crime because the climate and soil in regions like Burgundy and the Loire are far better suited to sparkling wine production than anywhere in Spain. There are two main reasons that so many Cava wines are generally boring. It is not so much the climate or soil as the three so-called traditional varieties – Macabeo, Xarel-lo and Parellada – which do not reach the level of the classic traditional-method varietals Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. But probably an even more important reason is the industrial nature of Cava production, which trades character and ambition for faultlessness and cost efficiency.

According to Cava gospel, Macabeo, which is usually but not exclusively, the base of a Cava, provides the fruit; Xarel-lo the strength and body; and Parellada softness and aroma. In reality, Macabeo is not bad as a base wine; it does usually have good fruit and decent acidity. Xarel-lo's fine ageing potential and low pH are better valued today and Cavas destined for ageing have a higher proportion of Xarel-lo. It also has the strongest character of the traditional varieties but in knowledgeable hands, such as those of Gramona and Recaredo, it can be turned into a wine of great finesse. There are some good Cavas made predominantly with Parellada but on the whole it can't be considered as a good grape to use for fine-quality sparkling wines. The average Parellada makes such a neutral base wine that it is virtually tasteless and has so little acidity that it turns litmus paper blue. The best Parellada comes from the highest vineyards, where the grapes take longer to ripen, but almost all Parellada is grown on high ground, yet most of the fruit is unsuitable for high-quality sparkling wine. You would have to grow it on top of Montserrat to get sufficient acidity, and even then it is prone to rot, which is not exactly a bonus for the last Cava variety to be harvested. Furthermore, this rot can slip through the strictest physical examination at the winery reception area. Physically checking every bunch is a thing of the past, but even if it were not, Parellada is so tight-packed that huge bunches can appear beautiful and healthy, when in fact they are rotten inside.

So why is Cava made from these varieties? Ask any Cava firm and the reply will be because Cava has always been made from Macabeo, Xarel-lo and Parellada, just as Champagne has always been made from Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier. However, Champagne was once planted with numerous varieties and it took three centuries of trial and error to decide which of these were the most appropriate. For example, it was only in 1927 that it was decided to uproot Gamay, which grew throughout the region, particularly the Aube. If Champagne's three classic varieties are not exclusive to the region after 300 years, how can Cava producers be so sure that Macabeo, Xarel-lo and Parellada are even adequate, let alone the best varieties for sparkling wine in their area?

The first sparkling Spanish wines were produced here over 100 years ago, and for the first 75 years there were just two producers of any relevance. The first fizz was made from grapes that just happened to be growing in the vicinity and

OLD VINES GROWN BY RAVENTÓS I BLANC

obviously these were not planted specifically for sparkling wine. The first Cava regulations enshrined the tradition established by two firms) and over the last 35 years a large number of Cava firms have cropped up, and it seems as if they just fell into the habit of thinking that these varieties were indeed classic for Cava. This illustrates how premature it is for Cava's three so-called varieties to assume traditional, let alone classic, status.

As inadequate as Cava's holy trinity of grapes appears to be, some producers make decent fizz from them, and there is ample room to improve the quality of these wines without having to rely on other varieties. It would require the development of numerous new clones for each variety, which still has not happened, other than from a quantity point of view. The best producers often have to rely on massal selection from their old plots. A lot of work still needs to be done on site selection, how each variety should be trained according to its location, and the effects of yield control. There is no doubt that the vineyard is the most important area for future development.

Macabeo remains the most planted variety today with a 35% share. Xarel-lo and Parellada follow with 24% and 22%. Chardonnay plantations have risen to 9%, whereas Pinot Noir remains rather low at 3%. Trepat and Garnacha Tinta are on a par with Pinot Noir, but neither Subirat Parent nor Monastrell reach even 1%.

## CHARDONNAY

Although good-quality Chardonnay undoubtedly adds a desperately needed plumpness and finesse to a Cava made from traditional varieties, by no means all the Chardonnay used by the industry is good. In fact, the situation is similar to Alsace and Saumur, where the vast majority of Chardonnay planted produces very poor wines indeed. It is commonplace in Cava too to taste Chardonnay sparkling wines made from fruit that is far too ripe, giving the wines an unpleasant heaviness. One appeasement to the traditionalists would have been to restrict the cultivation of this variety to specified clones in certain proven areas, but unfortunately Chardonnay is already too popular and widely planted to do that. With Pinot Noir this could still be a valid option.

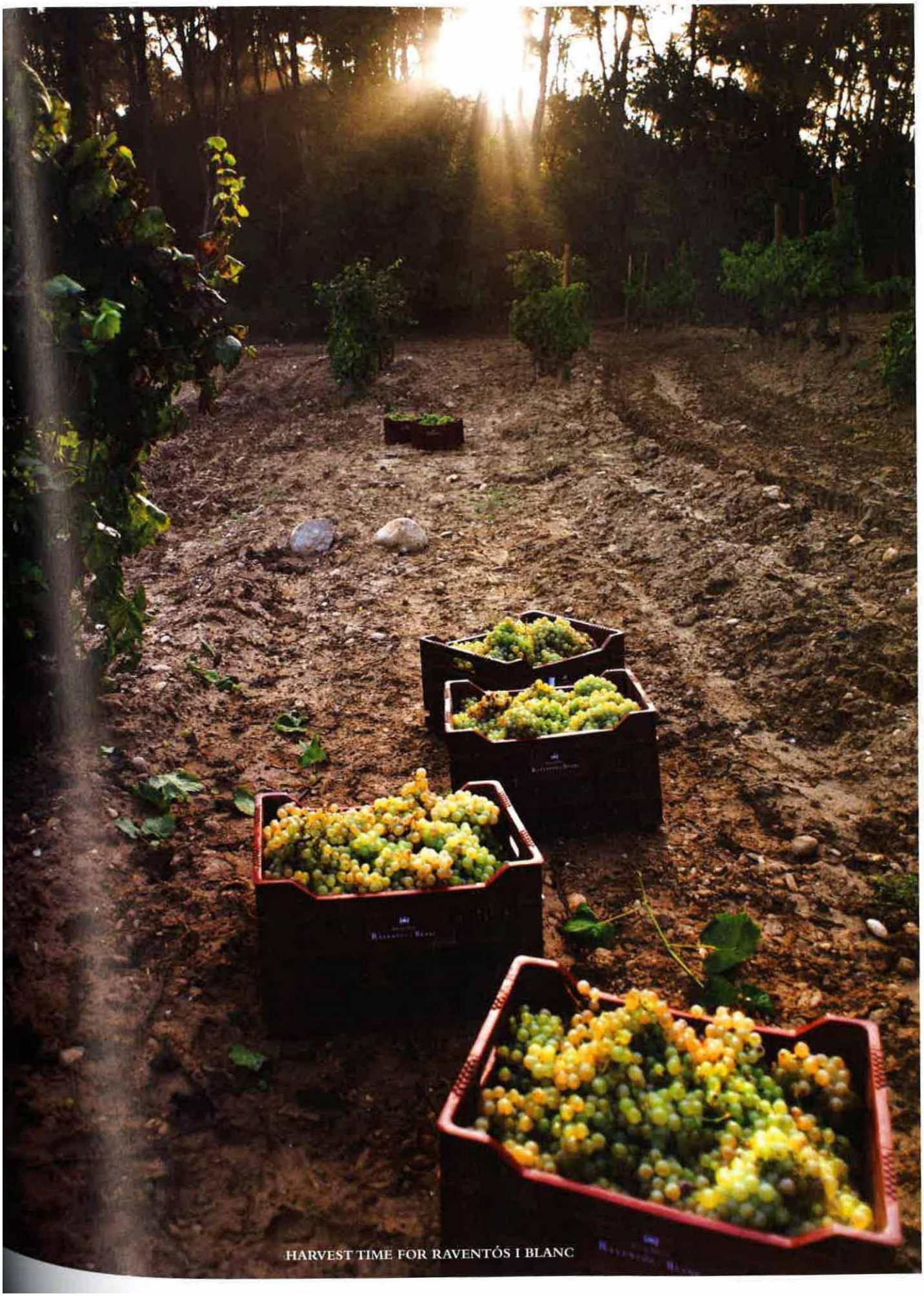
DURAN CAVA

## THE SEARCH FOR DIFFERENT GRAPE VARIETIES

As a major force in Cava and the leading traditionalist, Freixenet was woefully lax. It did nothing to prevent the introduction of Chardonnay, but, after it had been established, the management of this giant group merely bleated its dissatisfaction, doing nothing constructive to validate its position for a decade or more. At a Cava shippers' dinner in 1991, when the company's chairman, Manuel Duran, admitted that the jury was still out on whether the three traditional varieties are ideally suited for sparkling wine, he was challenged not simply to find an indigenous substitute for Chardonnay, but to try to experiment with red Spanish varieties.

Cava's traditionalists have, for some bizarre reason, always considered red grapes in a white Cava to be sacrilegious, yet Duran picked up the gauntlet. The first variety Freixenet experimented with was Monastrell, which is authorised for rosé Cava and is perfectly legal for white, although no one had tried it. Unfortunately Duran's white Monastrell was flabby, lacking in acidity and generally not a great triumph, but a more recent new red grape product has been far more successful. The first release of Freixenet Trepat from 1996 had excellent fruit backed by crisp acidity, giving it great length. As Trepat is a variety not allowed for white Cava, or *blanc de noirs*, Freixenet calls it a pale rosé.

Garnacha (Grenache) is another grape permitted for rosé Cava, and Trepat was at one time the only non-Cava Spanish variety that was officially under trial for Cava (again for rosé). Mont Marçal has used Tempranillo, while Can Ràfols dels Caus has even tried Merlot, both, of course, for pink Cava. Prior to Freixenet's Monastrell project, Codorníu was the only house to try red grapes in white Cava and succeeded beyond its wildest dreams, producing one of the most sumptuous Spanish sparkling wines ever. Pinot Noir is now a permanent fixture in Cava. It was permitted for rosé Cavas in 1998 and for white Cavas in



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Josep María Raventós i Blanc, the oldest son of Manuel Raventós, left his family firm, Codorníu, after decades of developing it due to long-term family and managerial problems. A major conflict occurred when the Codorníu board prohibited children of managers from joining the company. After the death of his father in 1977 working for the company was made impossible and Josep María was asked to leave his position in 1982. As the oldest son and heir of Manuel, he took the original 80-hectare Raventós property, Can Codorníu, which has belonged to the family since 1497. It was from this vineyard Josep Raventós i Fatjó made the very first Cava in 1872.

But all the drama was too much for his heart and he died on a trip to New Zealand very soon after, in 1986. It was his oldest son, Manuel Raventós Negra, who was left to establish the property in honour of his father.

The winery, which is constructed around the 500-year-old oak tree on the property, is one of the most beautiful in Spain. But perhaps it is one that in its grandeur implies an easy start, rather than a struggle, which the beginnings of the company evidently were. Now the power has shifted to Manuel's son Pepe Raventós, who has a dynamic spirit and a vision of raising this deep-rooted company to the highest level. He has shifted the focus from the winery to the vineyards and they work with their own estate fruit only. Raventós i Blanc is now organically certified and working towards biodynamic Demeter certification. As Raventos i Blanc feels that it does not fit with the bulk of Cava, it announced that it is leaving the appellation from the beginning of December 2012. The intention is to start using the Conca del Riu Anoia designation of origin, which is uncertified for the time being.

**WINEMAKER** Josep Raventós Vidal

**HOUSE STYLE & RANGE**

Reserva Brut, the entry-level wine, is very different to most Cavas due to its modern, light, soft and fresh nature. De Nit (meaning 'by night') is even more unusual, with just 5% Monastrell complementing the white grapes, giving a pink hue to this extremely pale-coloured, gently spicy, refined, fleshy and mineral wine. A really welcome style in the ocean of heavy and far too extracted rosé Cavas, even though this is not technically called a rosé. La Finca, coming from the estate's old vines, is a seriously ambitious sparkling wine. Manuel Raventós is stylish, with extended yeast ageing, showing a completely different style of wine from the entry-level *cuvées*. Its late-disgorged version is clearly an old wine, where the vintage and timing of disgorgement make all the difference.

**★ Reserva Brut**
Vintaged, traditional method: 50% Macabeo, 35% Xarel-lo, 15% Parellada

**★★ De Nit**
Vintaged, traditional method: 55% Macabeo, 30% Xarel-lo, 10% Parellada, 5% Monastrell

**★★ La Finca**
Vintaged, traditional method: 40% Xarel-lo, 30% Macabeo, 25% Parellada, 5% Chardonnay

**★★½ Manuel Raventós**
Vintaged, traditional method: 80% Xarel-lo, 20% Parellada

**★½ Enoteca Personal Manuel Raventós**
Vintaged, traditional method, late disgorged: 40% Parellada, 30% Macabeo, 25% Xarel-lo, 5% Chardonnay