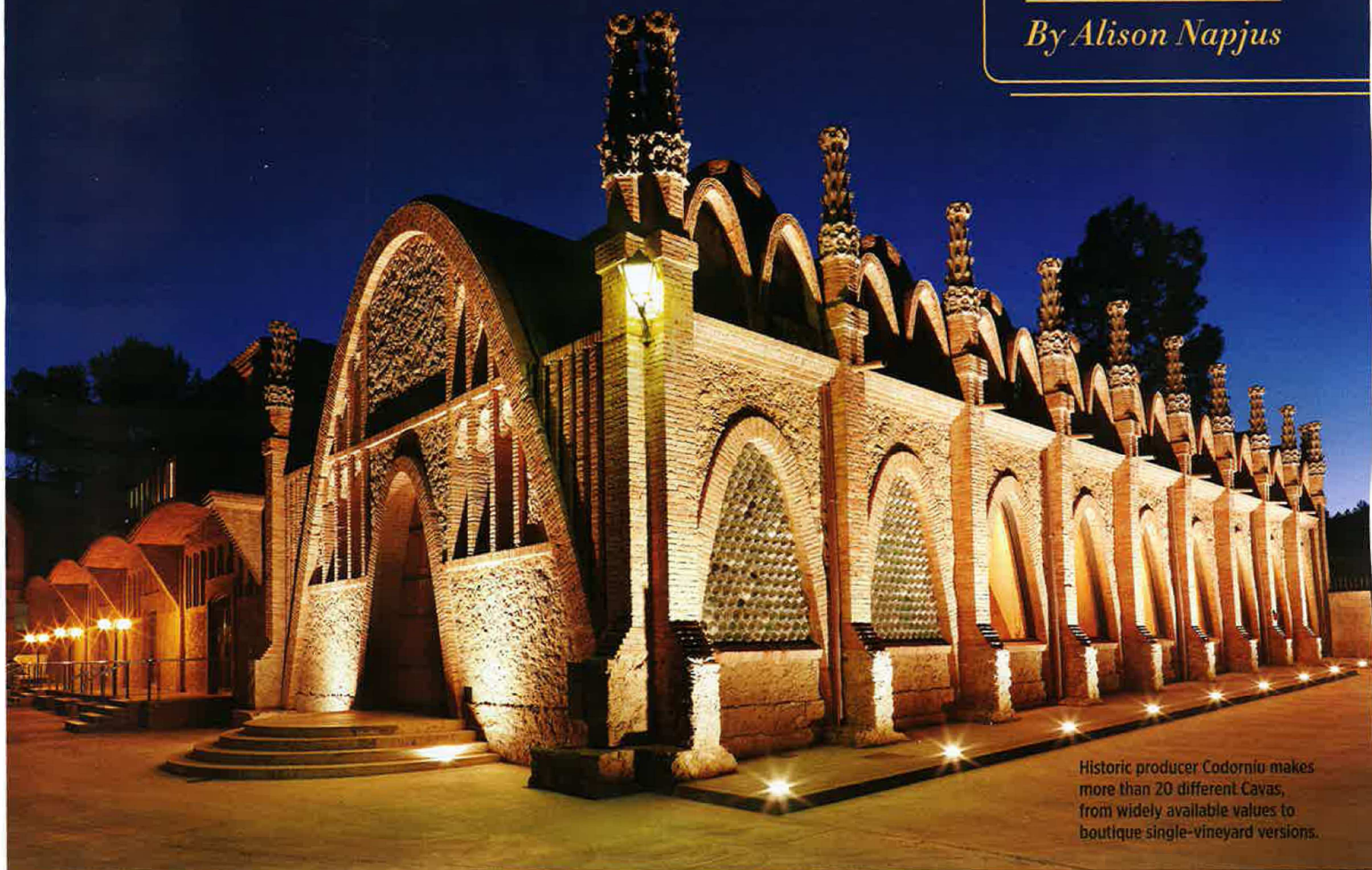


Spain's Sparkling Revival

*Cava producers
return to their roots
and improve quality
in their wines*

By Alison Napjus



Historic producer Codorniu makes more than 20 different Cavas, from widely available values to boutique single-vineyard versions.

Sparkling wines have been gaining a wider audience in recent years and, with sales significantly on the rise, producers everywhere are taking advantage of new opportunities to strengthen their identities and improve quality. Spain's sparkling Cava is a good example, moving beyond its reputation for affordability and exploring new approaches that show distinctive character and impressive complexity.

Currently, Cava and Champagne alike are riding on the hugely successful coattails of Italian Prosecco, with sparkling wine consumption in the U. S. seeing strong growth in all categories and price points, according to *Impact Databank*, a sister publication of

Wine Spectator. In 2016, Cava shipments to the U.S. rose almost 8 percent. Yet Prosecco's boom is also a challenge for Cava, presenting a face-off in the \$10 to \$15 price range for which Cava has been best known.

Some Spanish sparkling wine producers have even abandoned the Cava designation in an effort to distance themselves from the category's reputation for cheap-and-cheerful wines. Instead group leaders propose a new appellation, *Conca del Riu Anoia*, a tighter geographical delimitation within the sweeping Cava D.O., partnered with more rigorous production and aging standards.

A great number of wineries, though, have chosen to work within the current framework for Cava. One example is *Fermí Bohigas*, a family-owned estate in the heart of Cava. "The situation has been

very difficult,” says Maria Casanovas Giró, co-owner of Fermí Bohigas. “With two or three very big producers offering very low prices, it affects our overall image. But there are many small- to mid-sized producers who are doing very good work.”

Large and small alike, many producers in Cava are working both to refine existing strengths and to embrace innovation. Recently implemented wine law recognizes Grand Cru vineyards; bottlings with no dosage (labeled as Brut Nature) rise to the top; and cuvées with additional aging in the Reserva and Gran Reserva categories receive greater attention.

Cava is made according to the rigorous Champagne method, wherein the second fermentation, which creates the bubbles, takes place in the bottle. Traditional Cava is aged a minimum of nine months in bottle before release. Reservas have a 15-month minimum, while Gran Reservas require a minimum of 30 months. This extended aging promotes greater complexity and textural finesse. The Reserva category is the starting point that highlights the work of area producers to achieve these results, and global sales of Reserva bottlings in 2016 were up nearly 3 percent from 2015.

Within the Gran Reserva category, the Spanish government introduced in 2015 the Cava de Paraje Calificado designation, which translates literally as “Cava from a Qualified Place.” This category effectively recognizes Grand Cru Cava sites that express specific *terroir* and historically high quality. Nine producers, with 12 different sites, are currently approved to produce these wines, legally mandated to be sourced from the approved site’s lower-yielding and older vines and to be aged for at least 36 months.

Although it is the site that is identified and approved, some of these bottlings are labeled with a vineyard name while others use proprietary cuvée names that indicate grapes sourced from the approved site. At this time, bottlings do not specifically note the Cava de Paraje Calificado status, so it is up to the consumer to reference the vineyard or cuvée name on the label.

“It’s about learning where your *terroir* is, not just about making a Grand Cru wine,” says Arthur O’Connor, who recently retired as corporate winemaking director at Codorníu but still consults for the winery. Three Codorníu vineyards received the Cava de Paraje Calificado designation, more than any other winery. “When you blend, you lose track of your *terroir*.” Bottlings from Paraje Calificado vineyards are beginning to arrive

in the U.S. in small quantities, including some of the most highly rated Cavas of this report.

In the past year, I’ve reviewed 120 sparkling wines from Spain, with the vast majority labeled as Cava. Recaredo Mata Casanovas received top marks at 92 points for its 2005 Brut Nature Turó d’En Mota (\$184). This dry and harmonious Cava is a real beauty; it’s

“In our region, it makes sense to produce Brut Natures, because of the climate. We are in the Mediterranean—sparkling wine from a warm place, not a cold place.”—Ton Mata



Ton Mata of Recaredo Mata Casanovas

produced entirely from Xarel-lo planted in 1940 in the Paraje Calificado—designated Turó d'En Mota vineyard and is aged on cork for about 120 months prior to hand disgorgement.

Bottlings from other Paraje Calificado—designated vineyards also stood out. Recaredo's Brut de Brut Cava Finca Serral del Vell Gran Reserva 2007 (91, \$56) is refined and aromatic; Codorníu's Brut Chardonnay Cava Ars Collecta Finca La Pleta Gran Reserva 2007 (91, \$125) offers vivid fruit and satiny texture, and the Brut Xarel-lo Cava Ars Collecta Finca La Fideuera Gran Reserva 2007 (91, \$125) is mouthwatering and fruit-forward. At 90 points, try Gramona's elegant Brut Cava Celler Batlle Gran Reserva 2005 (\$90) or Juvé y Camps' expressive Brut Nature Cava La Capella Gran Reserva 2006 (\$80).

Spanish sparklers labeled as Brut Nature also shine. About a third of the Cavas reviewed for this report were Brut Natures. This labeling indicates that no additional sugar is used in the *liqueur d'expédition*, a mixture added to sparkling wine at the end of production to replace any volume lost during the disgorgement process and, customarily, when the mixture includes sugar, to balance the finished wine.

Sparkling wines with no or very low *dosage* have gained a lot of traction in almost all sparkling wine regions in the past five to 10 years. It's a trend that has resulted in varying degrees of success, as sparkling wine can sometimes taste lean and austere without the

helping *dosage*. But Cava seems to have found the sweet spot in this category, and roughly half of this report's outstanding (90 to 94 points) bottlings are Brut Natures. Look for any of Recaredo Mata Casanovas' Cavas, all bottled without *dosage*, as well as Josep Maria Raventós i Blanc's mineraly Brut Nature Vino Espumoso de Calidad de la Finca 2013 (90, \$33) and Canals & Munné's well-priced Brut Nature Cava Eunoia Montserrat Canals Torres Reserva 2014 (88, \$16).

"In our place, in our region, it makes sense to produce Brut Natures, because of the climate. We are in the Mediterranean—sparkling wine from a warm place, not a cold place," says Ton Mata of Recaredo Mata Casanovas, explaining why Brut Natures from northeastern Spain can more consistently achieve balance naturally, whereas sparklers from more northerly climates may struggle.

Cava remains a good source of value in sparkling wine. In traditional Cava at the introductory level, Segura Viudas continues to provide value with its Brut NV and Brut Rosé NV (both 86, \$10). Spanish winemaker Isaac Fernández Montaña gained fame from his work with wineries in Ribera del Duero, but succeeds with Cava as well; his Brut Biutiful NV, Brut Rosé Biutiful NV (both 86, \$14) and the Brut Nature Biutiful NV (86, \$15) are a solid lineup.

To explore the results of longer aging in the Reserva and Gran Reserva categories, try Juvé y Camps' fragrant Brut Xarel-lo Cava



The cellars of P. Llopart contributed two of this report's recommended sparklers: an outstanding Brut Rosé Reserva and a good-value Brut Reserva, both from the 2014 vintage.

Alison Napjus' Recommended Cavas

This report reflects Napjus' blind tastings of 120 wines. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/113017. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

RECAREDO MATA CASANOVAS Brut Nature Cava Turó d'En Mota 2005 Bright and creamy, with a soft, silky mousse and spice- and graphite-laced flavors of ripe wild cherry, pastry and lime blossom. This rich Cava is dry and harmonious, framed by sleek acidity.	92	\$184	HACIENDAS MARQUÉS DE LA CONCORDIA Brut Rosé Cava Reserva de la Familia 2012 A firm rosé, with a crisp, airy mousse and juicy flavors of white cherry, peach skin and slivered almond.	88	\$15
CODORNÍU Brut Chardonnay Cava Ars Collecta Finca La Pleta Gran Reserva 2007 A vivid, fruit-forward version, offering ripe and juicy black cherry, peach and blood orange flavors, laced with accents of fresh ginger and aromatic spice. Finely knit, with a satiny mousse.	91	\$125	GRAMONA Brut Cava La Cuvee Gran Reserva 2013 Floral and toast notes are an aromatic start to the flavors of white cherry and salted almond in this clean-cut Cava. Creamy.	88	\$20
CODORNÍU Brut Xarel-lo Cava Ars Collecta Finca La Fideuera Gran Reserva 2007 Graphite and apple blossom notes accent rich glazed apricot, pastry cream and spice flavors as they dance across the palate of this crowd-pleasing Cava, enlivened by bright acidity. Mouthwatering.	91	\$125	JUVÉ Y CAMPS Brut Rosé Pinot Noir Cava NV A firm backbone of acidity frames this well-balanced version. Light garnet in hue, this offers flavors of raspberry, orange zest and smoke.	88	\$17
JOSEP MARIA RAVENTÓS I BLANC Vino Espumoso de Calidad Manuel Raventós Negra 2008 Shows notes of toasted brioche, poached quince, candied ginger and lemon curd, as well as subtle graphite and spice accents. Well-meshed and lightly mouthwatering, with a clean-cut, lacy finish.	91	\$120	P. LLOPART Brut Cava Reserva 2014 Baked black currant and pastry notes ride the mousse of this bright Cava, with marzipan and lemon curd accents on the zesty finish.	88	\$18
RECAREDO MATA CASANOVAS Brut Nature Cava Relats Gran Reserva 2012 This refined and creamy Cava stands out for the expressive profile of steeped raspberry, exotic spice, orange peel and fleur de sel flavors. Finely meshed and vibrant, with a firm, lasting finish.	91	\$30	FERMÍ BOHIGAS Brut Cava Reserva NV A well-knit version, with floral and spice notes accenting the flavors of apple, dried apricot and slivered almond, riding the creamy mousse.	87	\$18
RECAREDO MATA CASANOVAS Brut Nature Rosat Cava Intens Gran Reserva 2012 Harmonious, fresh and light garnet in color, with a satinlike mousse and finely meshed flavors of kirsch, violet, ground anise and dried fig. A waft of sweet smoke lingers on the clean-cut, vinous finish.	91	\$40	CODORNÍU Brut Blanc de Blancs Cava Anna Reserva NV Ripe peach, grated ginger and biscuit notes are well-meshed with vibrant acidity and the lively mousse of this lithe and zesty Cava.	87	\$15
JUVÉ Y CAMPS Brut Cava Gran Reserva 2011 Finely meshed, layering sleek acidity and a delicate mousse with smoke and petrol notes and black cherry, biscuit and ground ginger flavors.	90	\$50	CODORNÍU Brut Rosé Cava Anna NV Lovely spice and floral notes meet ripe berry and cherry fruit in this lively, balanced Cava rosé. Mouthwatering and expressive.	87	\$15
P. LLOPART Brut Rosé Cava Reserva 2014 An elegant rosé Cava, with spice and graphite accents lacing flavors of white raspberry, apricot and toast. Creamy and mouthwatering.	90	\$27	MONT-MARÇAL Brut Cava Reserva 2014 This creamy Cava shows well-meshed flavors of plum, lemon pith and apple blossom, with mineral notes of petrol and chalk.	87	\$15
JOSEP MARIA RAVENTÓS I BLANC Brut Vino Espumoso de Calidad de Nit 2014 Delicate toast and smoke accents on the nose lead to white cherry, lemon pith and peach skin flavors in this elegant rosé sparkler.	90	\$28	SEGURA VIUDAS Brut Cava Aria NV This tangy Cava offers a lively bead and snappy flavors of Granny Smith apple, melon rind, petrol and Meyer lemon zest.	87	\$13
RECAREDO MATA CASANOVAS Brut Nature Cava Terrers Gran Reserva 2010 Harmonious, dry and lacy in texture, with a pleasing creaminess to the well-meshed flavors of white raspberry, biscuit and lemon parfait.	90	\$38	VILARNAU Brut Cava Reserva NV A light, smoky overtone wafts through flavors of apricot tart, lemon meringue and licorice in this tangy Cava, with a fine, creamy mousse.	87	\$15
ALBET I NOYA Brut Natural Penedès Reserva 2014 Clean and minerally, this layers citrusy acidity with the fine and creamy mousse and flavors of poached pear, candied ginger and fleur de sel.	89	\$24	ISAAC FERNANDEZ SELECCIÓN Brut Nature Cava Biutiful NV A dry and smoky version, firm but balanced, offering subtle notes of black cherry, biscuit and orange peel, set on a lively, lacy bead.	86	\$15
JOSEP MARIA RAVENTÓS I BLANC Brut Blanc de Blancs Vino Espumoso de Calidad 2014 Firm and finely meshed, this elegant blanc de blancs offers an appealing mix of pastry, glazed apricot and candied ginger notes.	89	\$25	ISAAC FERNANDEZ SELECCIÓN Brut Rosé Cava Biutiful NV Loaded with strawberries and cream, candied ginger and biscuit flavors on a zesty bead, this lively rosé Cava is fresh and balanced, offering a smoke-tinged finish.	86	\$14
EL CEP Brut Cava Kila 2015 A minerally version, with subtle flavors of melon, apple blossom, lemon curd and light toast riding the refined mousse. Firm finish.	88	\$15	HAMMEKEN CELLARS Brut Cava Gran Castillo Rocío NV Fresh and balanced, with a fine, lively bead that carries the flavors of Asian pear, ground ginger, smoked almond and pink grapefruit pith.	86	\$13
EL CEP Brut Cava Marques de Gelida Gran Reserva 2013 Offers a minerally undertow, with flavors of Honeycrisp apple and biscuit, showing hints of Meyer lemon zest, dried mint and graphite.	88	\$19	SEGURA VIUDAS Brut Cava NV There's a pleasing juiciness to the flavors of lemon sorbet, white peach and fresh ginger in this lively Cava.	86	\$10
			SEGURA VIUDAS Brut Rosé Cava NV This fresh rosé Cava is well-balanced, with notes of peach skin, spring blossom, slivered almond and fleur de sel riding the delicate bead.	86	\$10
			FREIXENET Brut Cava Cordon Negro NV Fresh and open-knit, offering easy-drinking flavors of fresh-cut apple, apricot and lemon peel, with a hint of smoke-tinged petrol.	85	\$13
			MARRUGAT Brut Cava Pinord La Dama Reserva Familiar NV Melon, lime zest and Thai basil notes are set on a lively, balanced frame in this clean-cut Cava.	85	\$9

for Colomer Martí, these achievements are not just part of Codorníu's history—they are also a path for its future: "The DNA of Codorníu is about pushing boundaries," he says. "First and foremost, we must always lead."

Josep Maria Raventós i Blanc

Named for its founder, Josep Maria Raventós i Blanc was established relatively recently, in 1986, but it's a winery with deep roots in the Cava region. As a direct descendent of the Codorníu family, Raventós i Blanc served as general director for Codorníu, expanding it in the 1960s and working tirelessly for the official creation of the Cava appellation in 1972. Ultimately, he left Codorníu to found his own winery with his son, Manuel Raventós i Blanc, due to dissatisfaction with the state and quality of Cava at the time.

Raventós i Blanc died after just the first vintage at his newly established winery, located on the family's Raventós estate, adjacent to the Codorníu winery. His son stepped in, and since 2001, Josep's grandson Pepe Raventós i Vidal has joined the winery as owner and winemaker with his father. Yet the winery of one of Cava's most notable families doesn't produce Cava—at least not anymore.



Pepe Raventós i Vidal of Josep Maria Raventós i Blanc

Perhaps channeling the spirit of his grandfather, Raventós i Vidal decided in 2012 to separate from the Cava appellation, one of a small group of wineries to do so. The most vocal advocate of the group, Raventós i Blanc is working for the creation of a new appellation called Conca del Riu Anoia, which proposes tight geographical delimitations and more stringent production regulations, including organic certification, minimum vine age and maximum yield limitations in the vineyards, and in the winery, the sole use of indigenous varieties in the blend and a minimum aging period of 18 months.

"I had a dream to create something small, but big—something that might be iconic," says Raventós i Vidal, whose clearly artistic persona is balanced by his drive and energy. The focus of that drive is largely the 225-acre Raventós estate, where he lives with his family, including his wife, Susana Portabella, who helps run the winery.

"When you realize nature is the protagonist, you can start to make wines that are closer to art. And you have to forget the egocentric winemaker position," muses Raventós i Vidal. He employs biodynamic viticulture

throughout the estate, and describes various parts and parcels of vines and their microclimates as he might the differences between his four children.

The winery produces five sparkling wines, with a reductive approach to winemaking to promote ageability and greater freshness and complexity. All the wines are vintage-dated, which Raventós i Vidal sees as another way to express the *terroir* of his vineyards. "What is beautiful in the wine is to taste what happened in that plot of vines in that particular vintage," he says.

Recaredo Mata Casanovas

In 1924, Josep Mata Capellades established Recaredo Mata Casanovas in the heart of the town of Sant Sadurní d'Anoia. Today, Mata Capellades' sons, Josep and Antoni Mata Casanovas, work with his grandson, Ton Mata, to run the winery, creating artisanal Cavas produced in much the same way as they were nearly a hundred years ago. The winery's range includes six Cavas, all of which are produced as Brut Natures.

"My grandfather began producing Natures, and finally, we decided on only Brut Natures," says Ton Mata. "It's a way for us to show the wine and the *terroir* in a very honest way—there's nothing to hide. It makes our wine a *terroir* wine."

The estate's 124 acres of vineyards are farmed biodynamically, spread out in parcels immediately to the south and east of Sant Sadurní d'Anoia, as well as in higher elevation sites located about half an hour northeast. The range of vineyard locations provides microclimates suited to the local varieties with which the family works, primarily Xarel·lo and Macabeu, along with small amounts of Monastrell, Parellada, Malvasia and Garnacha.

"We love Xarel·lo—it's one of the best grapes we have for our area—it's very well-adapted to this place. It has high acidity, high resveratrol content—natural antioxidants—and also a very long growth cycle," explains Mata. "So it's good for warm places, and it's also resistant to dry weather conditions. It's kind of a gift from the gods." Mata says that the resulting Xarel·lo wines have big structure and big acidity, and when blended or bottled solo for sparkling wine they are key to the freshness needed for long-aged Cava.

Long aging is a notable aspect of production at Recaredo. All the wines are aged on the lees beyond the region's 30-month minimum for Gran Reservas. This tops out for the single-vineyard Turó d'en Mota, which spends at least 10 years on the lees prior to disgorgement; as a result, 13 of the 19 harvests that produced a Turó d'en Mota bottling are still aging in the winery's caves.

But Mata is quick to point out that it's not just long aging that's important, it's long aging on natural cork: "When we're talking about very long aging, the advantage of real cork is that at the end, the quantity of oxygen that you find inside the bottle is less than a bottle aged with a crown cap." All of Recaredo's production is aged on natural cork, necessitating manual disgorgement, which a team of seven disgorgers completes without freezing the neck of the bottle. This is an added rarity to a practice seldom seen in the sparkling wine world, and one that additionally serves as quality control as the disgorgers smell each bottle.

Look to Recaredo for Cavas that invoke the original spirit of Cava, a sparkling wine to compete with the wine world's best while retaining a real sense of place and tradition. Speaking of their Turó d'en Mota, Mata says, "I say very humbly, that I think we have demonstrated that it's possible to produce real, wonderful *terroir* sparkling wine in our area. But it's not only us who can do it. In terms of quantity, it's not an important project. But in terms of emotional importance, it's something that we feel very strongly." □

Spanish Leaders

Four wineries that are raising the bar for the country's sparklers

By Alison Napjus

Fermí Bohigas

Fermí Bohigas' Can Macià estate has produced wine continuously since the 13th century under the direction of the family of Maria Casanovas Giró and her father, Jordi Casanovas Bohigas, current owners of the 500-acre property (86 acres of vines). In the 1930s Can Macià began making Cava, and today sparkling wine accounts for 85 percent of the winery's 55,000 case production.

"I think people today are very interested in things from the land, in authenticity," says Casanovas Giró, explaining that Fermí Bohigas maintains quality and a connection to the land by using only estate-grown fruit for its Cavas (most producers of this size purchase fruit or still wines for Cava production), as well as focusing on Cava's traditional grape varieties: Xarel-lo, Macabeo and Parel·lada. Xarel-lo makes up half of the blend for six of the seven Cavas in the Fermí Bohigas range.

The majority of the estate's Cavas are Reservas or Gran Reservas, often aged for three to six months beyond the legal minimum for the respective categories. Additionally, a Brut Rosat NV (87, \$18) from Trepapat (85 percent) with Pinot Noir is a fresh and fruity rosé with just 12 months of aging, while a new project, the Brut Nature Noa (2013: 89, \$27), blends the indigenous Xarel-lo with the French Pinot Noir and rounds out the line.

Casanovas Giró studied agronomic engineering and winemaking before joining her father, sister Ariadna, and mother, Victoria, at the family winery. Despite her winemaking background, Casanovas Giró admits that she spends more time on the business side these days, and a primary goal is to promote the overall image of Cava along with their own products.

"We have an opportunity in some of the countries that have not always known Cava," says Casanovas Giró. "We can show them that Cava is the same method as Champagne, but a different product. We can show them what happens when you change the land, the grapes, the climate—it's something original, and distinct."

Codorníu

Josep Raventós Fatjó, a Codorníu family member, is credited with the creation of what would become Cava in 1872. Returning from a trip to Champagne, he blended local grape varieties and used the traditional Champagne production method to make the forerunner of Spain's signature sparkler. By 1895, the winery had transitioned wholly to sparkling wine production under the direction of Josep's son, Manuel Raventós.

As a result, Codorníu is one of the most historically significant Cava producers, as well as one of its largest. The range includes more than 20 differ-



Fermí Bohigas' Jordi Casanovas Bohigas and his daughter Maria Casanovas Giró

ent Cava labels, from widely available values like the Brut Blanc de Blancs Anna NV (87, \$15) to boutique single-vineyard bottlings.

While the operation is big overall, head winemaker Bruno Colomer Martí keeps his attention on the details. "We're harvesting down to specific blocks, rows and parcels," says Colomer Martí, explaining his pursuit of grapes with ideal maturity, particularly ideal acid levels. "Acidity is the most difficult thing to find in our region—you have to have it from the beginning. At Codorníu, we start harvesting based on the grapes' acidity, instead of on the sugar ripeness [levels]."

On a broader scale, Codorníu relies on multiple vineyard sites to find the variety of quality fruit it seeks. Their vineyards for traditional Cava varieties Macabeo, Xarel-lo and Parel·lada are located in the Penedès area, directly inland from Barcelona, where a base of limestone is covered with sand at lower elevations and with clay as the vineyards rise. Pinot Noir is grown in slate-rich soils in the Conca de Barberà area, and Chardonnay in Costers del Segre's calcareous clay-based soil. Both of the latter, higher-elevation areas enjoy notable diurnal temperature differences, a key to success with these French varieties in Spain's Mediterranean climate.

Codorníu was the first winery in the area to work with Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, planting its first Chardonnay vineyard more than 100 years ago and successfully lobbying for the legal admittance of Chardonnay in the Cava blend in 1984. Other innovations followed, including the first rosé Cava in 2001 and the approval earlier this year of three Codorníu vineyards among the new Cavas de Paraje Calificado category (12 sites in total). But