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*Robert Parker*  
WINE ADVOCATE

**LUIS GUTIÉRREZ**

# THE NEW VIGNERONS

A NEW GENERATION OF SPANISH WINE GROWERS



Photography by **ESTANIS NÚÑEZ**

Foreword by **ROBERT PARKER**





# PEPE RAVENTÓS

Raventós i Blanc







In the world of *cava*, no name is more traditional than Raventós. *Cava* was invented by a Raventós back in 1872, the year Josep Raventós Fatjó made his first bottle of it, although it wasn't called *cava* at the time. In the beginning it was called *xampany*, using the Champagne method to trigger a second fermentation in a white wine made with the classical Penedès grapes from a specific estate. His great grandson, Josep Raventós i Blanc, was the first president of the appellation of origin for sparkling wines, which would then go on to be called the Consejo Regulador del Cava (Cava Regulating Council). Six generations later, the José Raventós we are going to talk about here is actually called José María Raventós Vidal, and he's working on the exact same estate, but he's always been known as Pepe since he was a child, and that stuck so... Pepe Raventós.

The estate was the cornerstone of Codorníu, the family business up until his grandfather's generation.

"The moment came when what was going on in the winery didn't fit in with what my grandfather wanted, but in a family business with lots of shareholders, it's very difficult to make decisions that might go against short term results. He left the business due to difference of opinion on the quality of the wine. So in 1982, he sold his part of the company where he had been managing director and winemaker for over forty years. As he was the firstborn, the heir, *l'hereu* in Catalan, he was entitled to his part of the inheritance, the historic estate with the 130-hectare vineyard where everything had started. He then decided to create his own winery and make *cavas* from the estate. Unfortunately, he died before he was able to see the project up and running, a project my father, Manuel Raventós Negra, continued." The project bears the surname of Pepe's grandfather — Raventós i Blanc, whose name was also Josep María.

## THE PHOENIX

"When my grandfather died, Raventós i Blanc lost its *alma mater*, and the first ten years were difficult," Pepe tells us. When they were expanding the business, they decided to acquire a winery in Bordeaux, Château d'Aiguilhe, in Côtes de Castillon, a minor appellation in the village of Saint-Émilion. "I was making the Bordeaux wines, as I wanted to improve my French, but mostly I worked with my uncle Higinio on social matters. Later on I would have the chance to work with important people in France, such as Didier Dagueneau (He died in a plane accident in 2008), one of the iconic white wine makers in the Loire, an area I love. He was a tough guy, eccentric and passionate at the same time, and he didn't pussyfoot around. I learnt a lot from him. I remember he gave me a tremendous telling off, the worst in my life, because I'd done something wrong. I was sharing a house with his son, Benjamin, who was also under the pressure of his perfectionist father who ruled with an iron rod."

Coming back to Raventós i Blanc, "the winery and the project were oversized, my grandfather came from a business dealing with much greater

volume, but because of his experience a lot of things were done looking to make work easier and increase quality. This means that today, we have fabulous facilities that are perfectly integrated into the countryside, despite their size. Mistakes were made too, there was a lack of understanding as far as marketing and sales were concerned, a vitally important point." The result was that, at the end of the 1990s, the company was on the verge of bankruptcy and drastic decisions had to be made.

"The Bordeaux winery was sold, as well as part of the estate vineyard, some properties and other assets to cover the debt and keep the company afloat. Those properties included the original Cordonú house my father had inherited, where my grandmother had lived up until that point. It was a superb construction built next to the old farmhouse by Josep Puig i Cadafalch, one of the most renowned Catalan modernist architects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 2000, I started working full time with my father in order to boost the winery. Years of investment and hard work have paid off, because in 2006 we finally broke even and the business was profitable again."





The hard work he refers to started with learning more about the trade, “so I went to Madrid to study a Masters in Viticulture and Enology at the Universidad Politécnica. I learnt a lot, I met lots of people and I had a great time. I love Madrid. I remember I used to go to shops like Cuenllas to sell them bottles of our wines.” Someone from the lab at the university said about him, “I learnt a lot from Pepe. Among other things, not to be shy, as well as the technique of direct sales...” Clearly, selling his wines was high up on Pepe’s agenda.

The aim of all this was to return to the initial spirit of the founders, to tradition, to the *masia*, the typical Catalan country house where people, animals and plants live in harmony. It’s easier said than done. “There are documents to prove that as early as 1497, there were working vineyards on our estate. I’m the 21<sup>st</sup> generation to do this, a heritage not many families in Europe can boast of, only Chave from Hermitage and the odd German family, but that’s it. We come from a long way back.” He thinks that the way to follow tradition is to seek quality and identity, not volume. “When my ancestors started making wine, they did it with the idea of achieving a world class product, not a high volume output with no geographical identity.”

In order to achieve this, Pepe believes you must have very demanding requirements. “If we want an identity, we have to define the origin and we need the wines to show it through traditional varieties, without blending vintages, so that the wine expresses a specific harvest. This is a wine made by you, you can’t buy it from anyone else, and even less so, buy finished bottles from someone else, *en punta*.” This term *en punta* is given to sparkling wine that is ready for the lees to be removed from the bottle. Normally those bottles are upside down

so that the lees collect near the cork and it’s easy to remove them cleanly; then the wine can be labeled and sold. They’re bought and sold and it doesn’t matter who has made them, they’re just a commodity.

“When you buy grapes, which should be no more than 20%, it should be from *payeses* (local farmers) who do it for a living, real winegrowers not amateurs, who we should help in the vineyard and pay a fair price. The minimum price for grapes is fundamental. You won’t get quality if you don’t pay for it.” The issue of grape prices is in Pepe’s blood. “If we want this to work, we’ve got to start by paying a reasonable price for the grapes. You can’t pay ridiculously low prices for grapes, because there’s no way you can get quality like that. We pay above average for our grapes, but we also have above average quality requirements. The ‘anything goes’ mentality just won’t do.”

“My grandfather was very highly regarded in the region because he paid a fair price for the grapes.” That’s no lie. While we were walking through the vineyards to examine a cut in the soil where you can see marine fossils dotted through the chalky soil, we bumped into a *payés*. This is the name for country farmers in Catalonia and this one in particular had marked features, tanned, weather-beaten skin, who was just clearing up after his day’s work. The ground in his vineyard looked as though it has just been raked, you could see he took pride in his work and enjoyed it. We stopped to chat to him and, like everyone in the area, he spoke about Pepe’s grandfather with admiration and respect. You could see that Pepe was moved by this man’s words as he listened to him talking about how his grandfather had looked after the people from the village, many of them farmers and grape growers.

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His grandfather had made sure that these people were able to live well, that their work was respected and that they got a fair price for their grapes.

I pick up a piece of limestone crammed with different seashells. It’s beautiful. It looks as though it’s been tailor-made. These are the limestone soils he was talking about, around 16 million years old, which is actually quite young for soils. “During that time, the Miocene era, all this was sea. The seabed was rich in calcium carbonate, which comes from all the skeletons of all the fish and marine creatures that had lived in the sea. Limestone is fundamental for achieving that mineral freshness we’re looking for in our wines.”

“But to get the wine to have that connection with the soil, I think that you have to use organic agriculture, or even a step further, biodynamic agriculture. And of course, yields have to be limited to a maximum of 10,000 kilos per hectare, harvested by hand and at precisely the right time. The vineyards can’t be less than ten years old although ideally they should be over 20. The wine needs a minimum aging of 18 months in contact with its lees in bottle, which is when the gas is produced, and once disgorged, it should have as little added sugar as possible, limited to five grams per liter, not the ten or 15 that commercial champagnes have.” Lastly, but most importantly, “they must all be vintage wines, this is the real commitment to letting nature be the star, not the winemaker himself.”

These are his self-imposed requirements, which are extremely demanding and far stricter than the current official specifications in the zone. “That’s why I left Cava.” What he refers to is that in November 2012, they announced their decision to leave the Cava appellation of origin, which had practically been created by his great grandfather. They weren’t the first, others had left before, but never anyone as relevant as them. They were descendants of the creators of the AOC, of the first person who applied the traditional Champagne method to create a sparkling wine with grapes from Penedès, and the ones in charge of the estate that

produced those first grapes. A landmark producer was abandoning ship.

Some said it was madness, commercial suicide and lots of other things. So we asked Pepe how that decision had affected sales of their sparkling wines, to which he replied, “I can’t say it has been a huge change. If you break sales geographically, leaving Cava has possibly affected the local market a little bit more, as some locals saw it as a kind of betrayal to our roots. But at the same time, we’ve found people who believed in us, many from the United States. Open-minded, unprejudiced people who have seen the product as it is, regardless of its label. It’s fundamental that people understand, so you need to explain.”

“In 2010 we decided to go and live in New York with our four children! Contact with the end consumer is essential. That was one of the reasons, among others, that we went to the States, to have first hand contact with the market, understand what people wanted, what they thought of our wines, what they were looking for... Perhaps if I hadn’t gone to New York, we wouldn’t have left the Cava AOC. You never know. But from there you can see things from a different perspective, a lot clearer, outside your context, exposed to the reality of the market.”





## THE CONCA DEL RIU ANOIA

Once out of the Cava appellation, the idea was easy – go back to their roots. “As I told you, 16 million years ago, this area just over half an hour away from Barcelona, was under the sea, and this left a sediment of marine fossils that created some unique soils.” There is even a coral reef site from the Miocene era in El Serral in Sant Sadurní d’Anoia. “Back then the rivers made their mark on the land and created the terrain we now know, rivers like the Anoia, that our village is named after, or the various tributaries, rivers and streams that

line the district, such as the Bitlles or Lavernó. So I thought that this could be called the Anoia River Basin and I started using the name *Conca del Riu Anoia* in Catalan to explain where and what we are. I recovered the name from the book, *La vida al camp* (life in the country), which was written by one of my ancestors named Jaume Raventós who lived at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”

“I’m trying to find those six or seven thousand hectares around here, and make a small quality appellation with the demanding principles we’ve

self-imposed on ourselves. Not a tiny area, a size similar to Châteauneuf-du-Pape in the Rhône, a zone which has an exceptional, different soil.” Not an easy task. There’s practically no one working with those standards in the area. I can think of only one other...

This talk of a return to the past, to life at the *masia*, aren’t empty words. He has built a house on the property, and in summer 2016, the children arrived after finishing their school year, and so did the moving van from New York. The



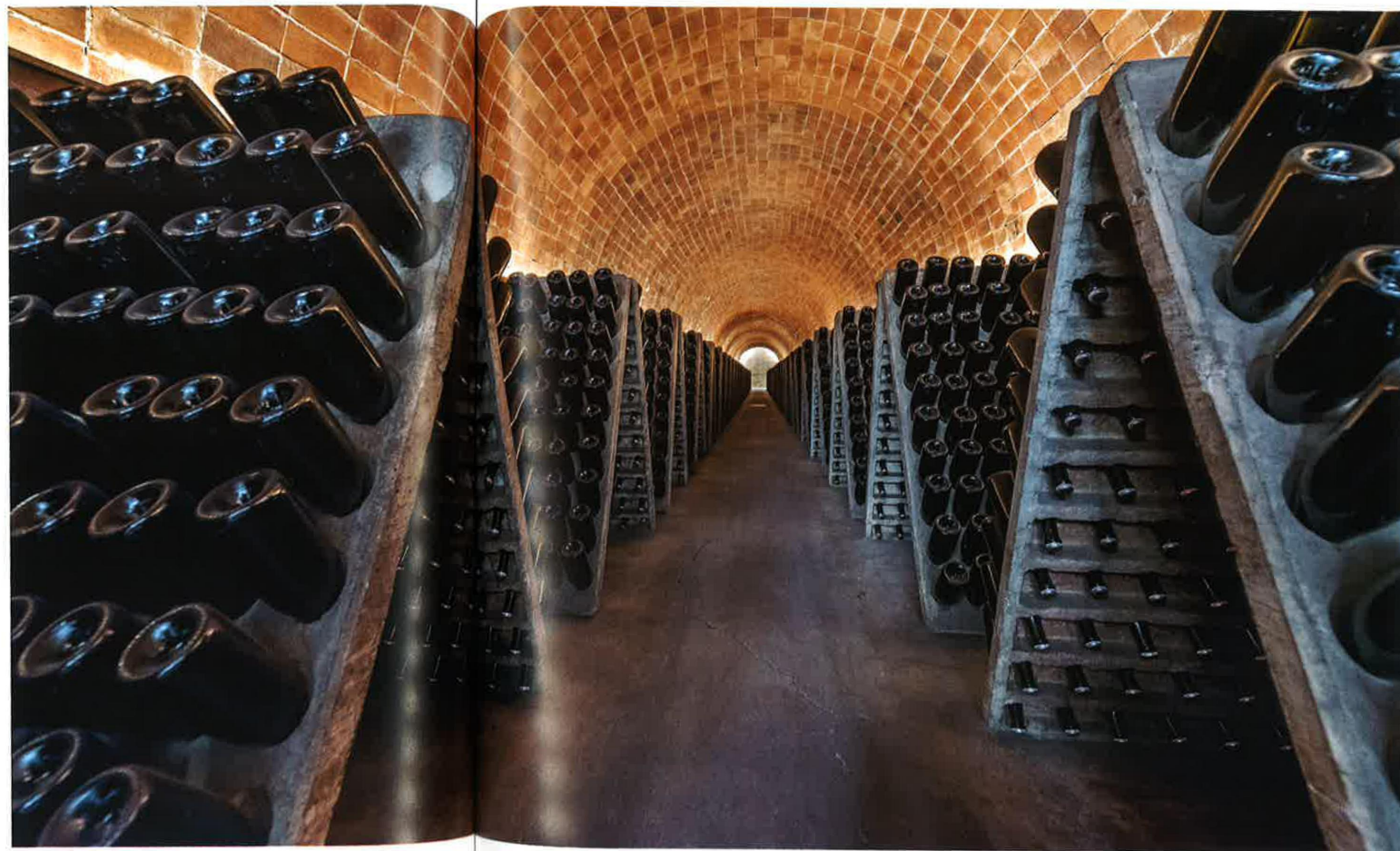
family moved into the estate. “I want to live in the countryside, close to our vines. I want to be here and be part of this. I’m totally committed.” He’s setting up a farm right now, “We’ve already got Bru, our horse, from the man who plows the vineyard, and the first chickens arrived a few days ago. Apparently it takes a while for them to start laying, maybe because of the stress of the journey. But, this very morning I saw they’d laid the first egg and I proudly took it to my wife. Tonight I’ll have the first omelet made with eggs laid by my chickens.”



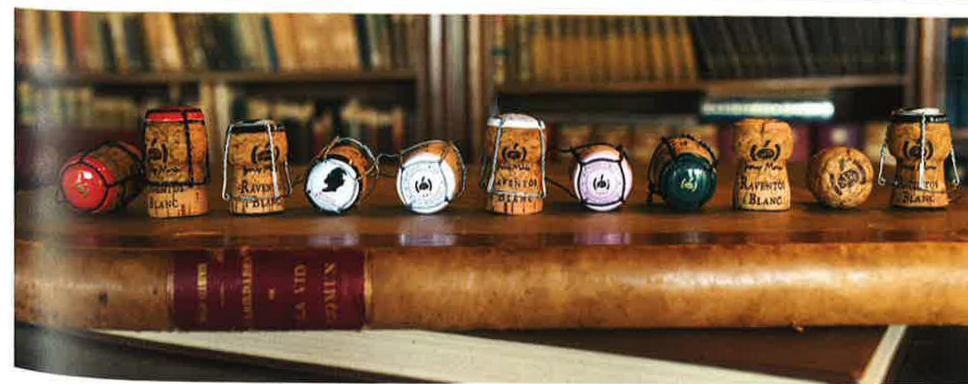
"We're working on all sides to recover the environment and that balance I'm telling you about. A high voltage power line used to go right through the middle of the estate, and we've just managed to bury it underground, not without difficulty. It was supposed to be carried out with the help of European funding of some type that never arrived. But I'm really pleased with the decision; we don't have to see that high voltage cable any more. I'd do it all over again." He's not only interested in the business and wine quality, but also in making what they do sustainable.

"I brought some donkeys in because a friend had told me about his experience in woodlands, which are really difficult to keep clean to avoid the risk of fire. He told me that, if you have free-roaming donkeys, they eat everything and keep the vegetation down because doing it manually is impossible. So I brought a pair here, and we started working with them." Everyone stops to take photos of the donkeys, also one of the typical Catalan emblems. "It's been a fantastic experience. We've got to set up electric fences everywhere to control where they go, because if they're left to roam free, they eat everything, even the vines and grapes! But they do keep the edges clean and produce manure, which comes back to the estate as compost and preparations. After the chickens are settled, I want to get pigs to recover the tradition of homemade pork products. Where my brother lives in the Pyrenees, they still do it, and it makes me really jealous. I want to go back to traditional country life, I think it's something really beautiful."

Things also go wrong, of course. His father and grandfather chose a centenary oak tree as the symbol for the company. An oak tree everything revolved around, such as the design and architecture of the winery, and it also appears on all their labels. In 2009, almost 500 years after planting it, it got sick and fell over after being damaged during a storm, leaving some of the roots exposed. It survived the storm but gradually lost strength until it finally died six years later. "It's a shame, but nature is like that." Pepe is rather



pragmatic about it. "We've got loads of ideas about what to do with the oak tree now. The one I like best is to create an underground sculpture. Have you ever heard of anyone burying an oak tree?" He talks so enthusiastically about this new project that looked like a tragedy at first glance.





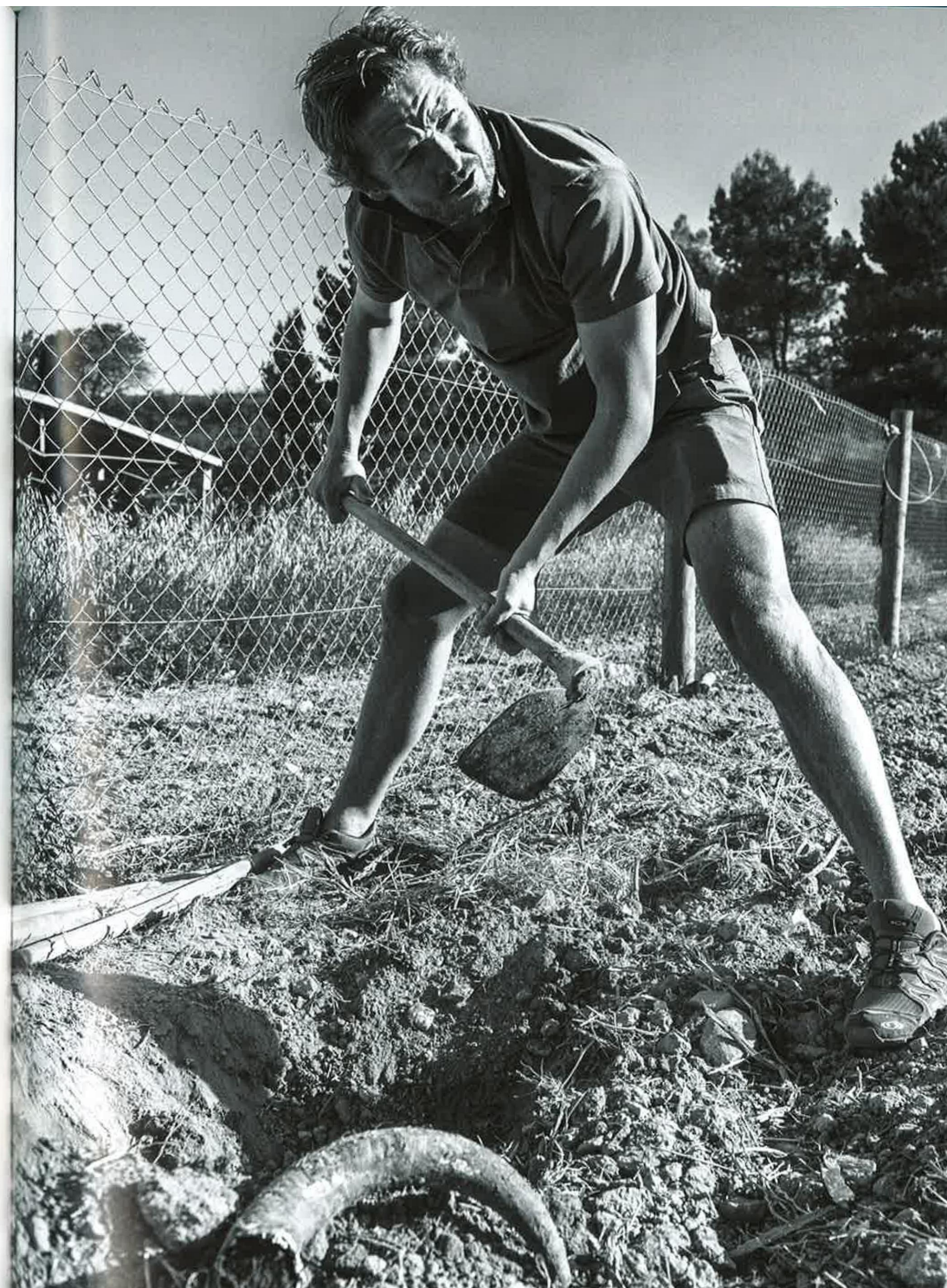


## WORKING WITH BIODYNAMICS

I've already mentioned that the viticulture method they use is organic, without pesticides, herbicides or synthetic products, but they go one step further, they use biodynamics. It's an agricultural philosophy that follows the cycles of the moon and the planets to organize work in the vineyard. "For me, biodynamics is mainly 'bio' the organic part, and the 'dynamic' side is less important, that of the preparations and the planets, which can sound more esoteric." I told him that I thought that the organic part seems increasingly important to me as the amount of insecticides, pesticides and other rubbish that we've inadvertently eaten and drunk might be the reason for many problems such as allergies, and the return to healthy eating, starting with healthy products, is fundamental. "Well, what worries you," Pepe says, "the Germans were worried about back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and for that reason, they organized a series of conferences where Rudolf Steiner established the basis for biodynamics."

Several conferences were held in Germany between June 6<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> 1924 where Steiner conveyed his ideas to farmers. The transcript is quite difficult to read, there's a book from the talks called *Agriculture*, but since then, there have been various interpretations, which is how the philosophy has reached the world of wine. The talks weren't directed specifically at grape growers, but at farmers and growers in general as, although in the text there are a few references to vineyards, the majority are general considerations on problems or illnesses related to fruit trees and animals. In fact, I understand that Steiner didn't even drink wine. One of the pillars of biodynamics is the application of natural preparations to bring the plants back to life and make the soils and plants healthier.

"These preparations are made using minerals such as silex, plants like horse tail, oak bark or nettles, or even manure. They have to be buried for some time inside cow horns, in lamb skulls or in







other special containers. There are others that have to be left to mature in a deer bladder and such like, which people may find quite shocking. They are then dissolved in homeopathic doses, mixing them well and dynamizing them by stirring them in a certain way for a specific amount of time. They are applied to the leaves of the vine or to the soil, depending on which one it is, wetting a branch and sprinkling the preparation on it."

"I really admire many Champagne growers and some of my favorites work biodynamically. But I think we should stop comparing ourselves to Champagne. Our soil is different from that



of Champagne, we have a unique soil here and Cava has tried to copy them instead of trying to be different, which I think is a mistake. This is not Champagne, we're different, but we haven't been able to discover and explain what makes us different. That saltiness in the sparkling wines is something not many look for, but I believe it is the key."

This is Pepe Raventós. I met him not long ago, but we clicked immediately, something that often happens, not only because of wine, but also because of music. It looks like being a rock fan is more common than it seemed at first, as though people

kept it quiet; but now you talk to anyone and it seems like everybody has been a rock fan! "I remember a song by Iron Maiden that I loved, *Phantom of the Opera*." I immediately looked for it on my phone and played it. He almost fell off his chair. While football and politics divide people, wine and rock bring us closer. Long live wine and rock 'n' roll!

Pepe Raventós – with a name like that he was bound to make wine, and sparkling wine at that. In the *Conca del Riu Anoia*.







## CATALUÑA'S RICH GASTRONOMY

Sant Sadurní d'Anoia, in the province of Barcelona, is not a port, but as the crow flies it's not even 20 km away from the Mediterranean. Apart from Lérida, which is inland, a land of snails and orchards, the rest of the Catalan provinces are all on the coast and seafood is a big feature of their cuisine. Kitchen gardens contribute a tasty combination of roasted vegetables called *escalivada*, a cold salad called *esqueixada* made with cod, *calçots* are typical in winter, those grilled spring onions with their *romescu* sauce made with dried peppers (*ñoras*) and almonds.

*Butifarra* is a delicious sausage you can eat anytime, and the favorite dessert is *crema catalana*, not dissimilar to *crème brûlée*. Catalan cuisine is rich and varied.

There are many emblematic dishes, one of which is a fisherman's stew called *suquet de peix*, allegedly from Tarragona originally, which combines tasty rockfish and some seafood with potatoes, tomatoes and onions. Prawns can be used although some consider cooking red prawns from the Costa Brava sacrilege...

In some places around the world they refer to all seafood as prawns or *shrimp*; in Spain we have a different name for each different type of prawn and seafood. White prawns and red prawns have little in common, and they usually add their place of origin to their name. Then there are king prawns (with their origin also attached as in *langostinos de Sanlúcar* or *langostinos de Vinaroz*), *carabineros*, *quisquillas*, *camarones*, etc. Because in a country with so much coastline, fish and seafood are an important part of our diet and cuisine.

Red prawns can be from Palamós, from l'Escala, even from Torredembarra in Tarragona. As one of Pepe's chef friends from Torredembarra told me, "the boats sail from different ports, but in the end they all go to the same place to catch prawns, so the different villages end up with a very similar catch." The people from Palamós wouldn't agree with that, of course. A friend from Llafranc says that the best ones come from Llafranc. It's like stew, your mother's is always the best. You'd need to do a comparative tasting, but they are all alike.

