

YEAR'S BEST SUMMER SPARKLERS

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CATALÀN REFRESH

*New Wines from Ancient Vines*



# NEW CATALONIA

*Contemporary Wines from Ancient Catalàn Vines*

by PATRICIO TAPIA

THE GRAN MURALLES VINEYARD  
IN CONCA DE BARBERA, WHERE  
TORRES GROWS FRUIT FOR ITS  
BLEND OF LOCAL VARIETIES.





most unique vineyard landscapes in Spain.

Artigas first came across the vines at La Prats while he was studying oenology, and getting to know the vineyards near his village, Vilassar. He remembers coming across a small 2.5-acre vineyard that looked abandoned, but when he went to check out the vines, the owner chased him away, throwing stones. That was his first meeting with Josep Carbonell.

"He was a very special person, like a man from other times," Artigas recalls. "A kind of eccentric millionaire, who kept bags of money in his house, but who lived a very austere life, without comforts, as in the Middle Ages." Artigas is now safely standing in the middle of a small parcel of vines crowded between factories and houses and facing the sea, just a few yards away.

While Carbonell was throwing stones at him, he was also shouting complaints, that the vineyard was useless, that the grapes were as big as ping-pong balls. But Artigas was charmed by those old vines. He kept returning to check on them and finally convinced Carbonell that he could help work the vines. "The truth is that I loved the vineyard, but I also saw that Josep was very old and had trouble moving. I felt sorry for him," Artigas admits.

Carbonell and Artigas ended up becoming friends and, after Carbonell died, Artigas continued to work the vines. Dating to 1913, half of them are pansa blanca, Alella's most widely planted variety, with other grapes such as summol and beier mixed in. "And there are at least 25 others that I have not been able to identify," Artigas says.

Although he initially vinified the white varieties and the reds separately, he changed his strategy in 2013 and started to make only one wine from the parcel, harvesting all the grapes together in a single day, on September 11 of each year. "The old people of the town told me that this was how it was done, all at once. And I chose September 11 because here it is a holiday and so I have the time. By September 11, the pansa blanca is already ripe, but about ten percent of the grapes in the vineyard are still green when they arrive at the winery and another twenty percent arrive as raisins. I like the mix."

The wine he makes from La Prats is not easy to classify in contemporary terms: Halfway between a rosé and a red, it has herbal and fruity aromas, together with a slightly rustic texture and charming fruit flavors. "I use neither selected yeasts nor sulfur, and vinify with as little intervention as possible," he tells me while we taste the wine in the midst of the vines at La Prats. "What I think I get here is what Carbonell got; that's what this particular vineyard has to offer me," he says, adding, "This is how I want to live. All this is what makes me happy."

An equally singular landscape enchanted Pepe Raventós, technical director of Raventós i Blanc, the first time he saw it. He was out for a long bike ride in the mountains of southern Penedès and he found an abandoned vineyard, about 50 acres of old-vine parellada, xarello and summol, a red grape. It was surrounded by close to 1,000 acres of old-growth forest and, at the top, a *masia*, an old Catalàn farmhouse built out of stone.

Raventós was fascinated by the place, and found records of the estate dating back to the 17th century, when it was known as Can Sumoi. Isolated and wild, the property rises 2,000 feet above the Mediterranean, which it faces directly to the east. By the time Raventós bought the estate in 2017, no one had tended the vineyards in decades and the forest was advancing on the vines.



(TOP LEFT) XARELLO VINES AT CAN SUMOI; (TOP RIGHT) PEPE RAVENTOS GROWS LOCAL VARIETIES AT CAN SUMOI, BLENDING HIS ESTATE-GROWN FRUIT WITH GRAPES FROM NEIGHBORING VINEYARDS. (RIGHT) CAN SUMOI RISES 2,000 FEET ABOVE AND LIES DIRECTLY EAST OF THE MEDITERRANEAN.



The place is a completely different environment than at Raventós i Blanc, where Raventós and his team produce close to 500,000 bottles of sparkling wine with each harvest. He traces his path to Can Sumoi back to 2012, when he and his father, Manuel Raventós, decided to leave the Cava denomination and bottle their wines as Conca del Riu Anoia. They hoped to focus their wines on their origin—in this case, their 149 acres of vineyards surrounding the family's winery in Sant Sadurní d'Anoia.

For several years, Pepe and his young family loved in New York while he commuted back and forth to Sant Sadurní. And it was in New York that he and his wife, Susana Portabella, grew interested in natural wines, produced without added sulfur. "When I try natural wines, I feel they have a lot more energy," he says.

By 2016, after he'd moved the family back home, he set up a small winery in his garage and began to experiment, vinifying small lots of wine while minimizing his own intervention. That's when he came across Can Sumoi.

Now using the estate's 50 acres of old vines, as well as grapes from neighboring growers, Raventós is bottling a line of seven wines, all focused on local varieties.



Among them, Can Sumoi La Rosa plays the spicy red-fruit flavors of sumoll off the acid nerve of xarello and parellada, while the Xarel-lo cuvée is full of mineral and spicy tones and has a fine line of acidity. Both wines are produced without cultured yeasts or sulfur additions. "We're trying to recover a kind of knowledge, to listen to older growers and to appreciate their way of seeing wine," Raventós says.

At the end of the 19th century, his great-grandfather, Manuel Raventós Domenech, was one of the Cava producers responsible for establishing the blend of xarello, macabeo and parellada, a pragmatic decision post-phylloxera that abandoned the diversity in the Catalàn vineyards. Later, in the 1960s, Miguel Torres's father, Miguel Agustín Torres, helped introduce cabernet sauvignon in Spain and, with it, a wave of French varieties that began to replace the native vines throughout Iberia.

It's not only their descendants who are bringing a different, purely Catalàn perspective to the local vines. It's a vinous form of Catalàn independence, with ever more growers exploring their inheritance, a vast genetic resource in once abandoned vineyards, to build a new Catalonia. ■

