

FOOD & WINE

Can Spain Rival Champagne?

CAVA, THE SPARKLING WINE OF SPAIN, IS KNOWN FOR BEING PLEASANT AND INEXPENSIVE. BUT NOW ONE OF ITS STAR PRODUCERS IS AIMING TO BE AMONG THE BEST IN THE WORLD.

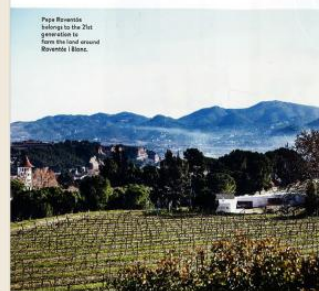
BY RAY ISLE PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUSTAV WIKING



“Cava is a great value,” says Pepe Raventós. “But our dream is to make the best possible sparkling wine.”

“La nueva denominación Conca que Pepe quiere crear es mucho más estricta: entre sus requisitos, las uvas deben ser cultivadas orgánica y biodinámicamente; y los vinos deben envejecer un mínimo de 18 meses (la DO Cava requiere 9 meses). “Son las reglas vinícolas más estrictas del mundo, incluyendo la Champagne”, dice Pepe, con evidente orgullo”.

Wine Battle • Cava



Pepe Raventós, looking for the best grapes to make the best possible sparkling wine.

Cava is a great value,” says Pepe Raventós. “But our dream is to make the best possible sparkling wine.”

What Manuel Raventós thought the day he first tasted of sparkling Cava was, “What is this? It’s amazing! And what we are doing is going to help this town.” It was Manuel’s son, Pepet, who had seen Pepe’s continued drive at the second estate of Cava that led him, in 2005, to stop labeling any of their wines as such. Now they are trying to create a new quality in the Cava world.

del Rio Arriba. In contrast, according to the Cava DO to try and maintain the sparkling wine of this region. They hope to prove that this part of Spain can make world-class sparkling wines on par with Champagne, making with Raventós. Here, they say, “Cava is a great value sparkling wine. But our dream is to help more people the best possible sparkling wine. Authentic wine, there is a particular place.”

Starting a new DO requires that Cava must meet a small part of achieving the goal, but 500- or 600- in France, or 200- in Italy, are significant. Besides to regulate the quality and geographical origin of a wine, they desire from the idea that products of a specific place have a distinctive character that’s worth protecting. But the Cava DO is because in Catalonia, as well as in the rest of Spain, the region

north of Barcelona that produces most Cava, but also parts of Valencia, Navarra, the Balearic Islands, and Aragón. It’s now like a grandmotherly connoisseur of Cava’s wine region. On top of that, its rules about the vineyard’s history to try to get 25 percent of its production are purely “historical, no matter what that has been made, bottled and aged by someone else. The goal of the DO is to produce quality and promote it, but the Cava DO seems perfectly designed to allow exactly the opposite.

THE CAVA DO requires that Cava must be made in the region of Penedès. Among its requirements, grapes must have to be grown organically or biodynamically, and vines aged at least 10 months. Cava requires that “the wine must be registered in the local, including Champagne,” he says, with evident pride.

THE RAVENTÓS’ SUCCESSORS came to the family name in 1970, when the family moved to the Cava DO. In 1970, a member of the Raventós family created Spain’s first sparkling wine, Cordon Negro, which the family co-owned and a branch of it still exists. It is one of the largest producers of affordable sparkling wine in the world.

Josep Maria Raventós i Blanc, Manuel’s father, was the man who the general director of Catalonia, as well as one of the most influential figures in the creation of the Cava DO. And yet, it was Josep’s

Cava’s Best

Some outstanding sparkling wine is being made in Spain with the Cava designation. Here are my favorite bottles.

MY FAVORITE BOTTLE OF CAVA
Cava (2011) A single, family-owned brand produces the grapes for this lovely, focused Cava.

2009 Girona Cava
Cava (2009) Girona Cava’s best price wine, like this rich, crisp, and lively one.

2007 Maresme Cava
Cava (2007) Maresme Cava’s best price wine, like this rich, crisp, and lively one.

2006 Rueda Cava
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Wine Battle • Cava



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THE TRAVEL ISSUE

FOOD & WINE

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59 BEST RECIPES

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VIETNAM, GREECE**



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STYLE IN
YOUR KITCHEN**
p. 92

**WHY WINE
VINTAGE
MATTERS:
THE 30-SECOND
INSTA-PRIMER**
p. 118

MAY 2015



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Pepe Raventós
farms his vineyards
biodynamically,
using donkeys to
help plow.



Can Spain Rival Champagne?

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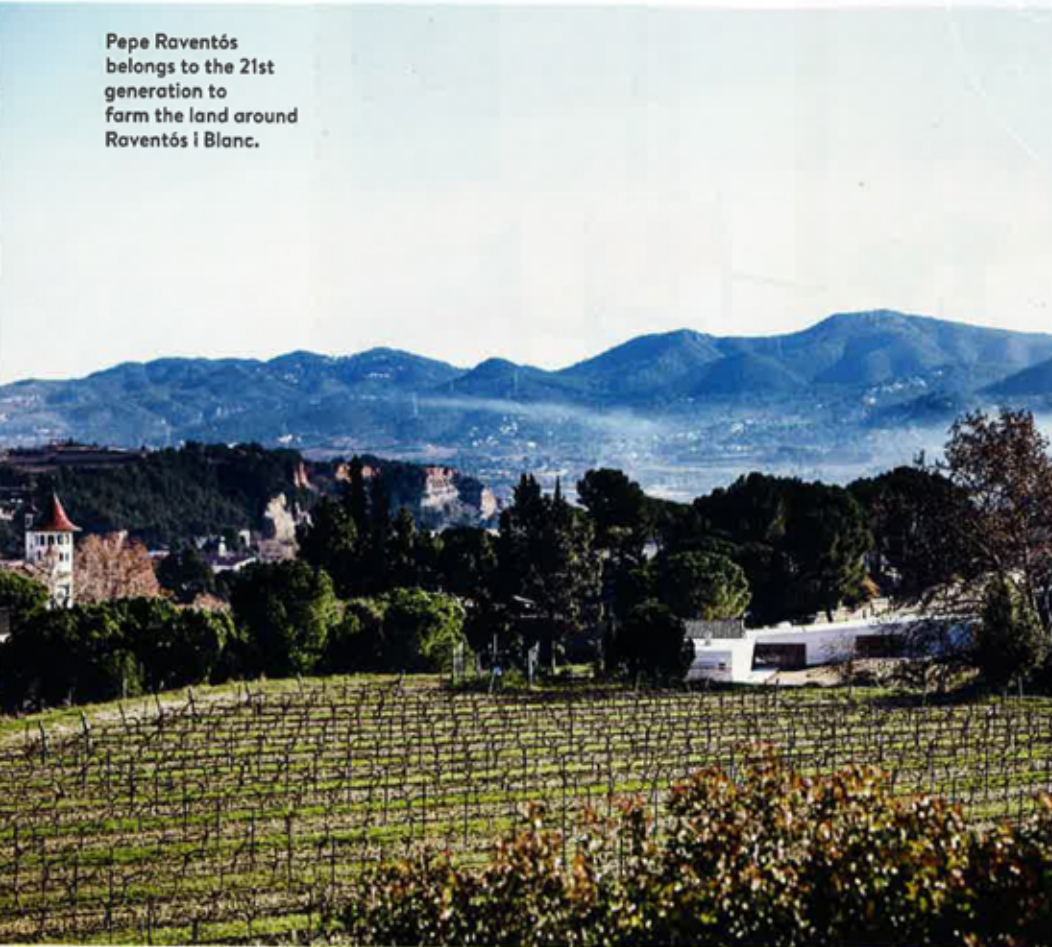
BY RAY ISLE PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUSTAV WIKING

OCCASIONALLY, YOUR DONKEY wanders off. It's one of those things—some days it rains, some days the donkey ends up at the *Café de la Plaça* in the middle of town. Perhaps in small Catalan towns like Sant Sadurní d'Anoia, donkeys sometimes feel a late-afternoon desire for good coffee; who can say? Regardless, when the donkey wanders off, you go get it.

It was when Manuel Raventós, the owner of the Spanish sparkling wine producer Raventós i Blanc, went to retrieve the donkey that he got what he refers to as a “dark look” from one of the old men at the bar. The old men are there every day. The *Café de la Plaça* is where they go to drink coffee and talk about the world. This day, though, the dark look seemed to be saying, “You are betraying Cava and betraying Sant Sadurní!”

Sant Sadurní d'Anoia is a sleepy little Catalan town, but it's also the heart of Cava production. Cava is the sparkling wine of Spain; the country produces some 220 million bottles of it each year. It's made from a trio of local grapes—Macabeo, Parellada and Xarel·lo—and like Champagne it follows a labor-intensive process that requires a second fermentation in the bottle to create its effervescence. Unlike Champagne, though, Cava is typically inexpensive. The most recognizable Cava available in the United States, Freixenet's black-bottled Cordon Negro, runs about \$10.

Pepe Raventós belongs to the 21st generation to farm the land around Raventós i Blanc.



“Cava is a great value,” says Pepe Raventós. “But our dream is to make the best possible sparkling wine.”

led them, in 2012, to stop labeling any of their wines as such. Now they are trying to create a new appellation (or DO) called Conca del Riu Anoia—in essence, seceding from the Cava DO to try and redefine the sparkling wines of this region. They hope to prove that this part of Spain can make world-class sparkling wines on par with Champagne—starting with Raventós i Blanc.

Pepe says: “Cava is a great-value Spanish sparkling wine. But our dream is to help nature produce the best possible expression of sparkling wine—authentic wine, from a particular place.”

Starting a new DO separate from Cava might seem like a small part of achieving this goal, but DOs—or AOCs in France, or DOCs in Italy—are significant. Intended to regulate the quality and geographical origin of a wine, they derive from the idea that products of a specific place have a distinctive character that's worth protecting. But the Cava DO is bizarre because its boundaries are so vast. It includes a large chunk of Spain: Penedès, the region

What Manuel Raventós thought the day he felt accused of betraying Cava was, “What is Cava anyway? It's meaningless! And what we are doing is going to help this town.” It was Manuel's and, particularly, his son Pepe's continued dismay at the overall quality of Cava that

south of Barcelona that produces most Cava, but also parts of Valencia, Navarra, the Basque Country, Rioja and Aragón. It's more like a gerrymandered congressional district than a wine region. On top of that, its rules allow (for example) a winery to buy up to 25 percent of its production *en punta*—basically, to purchase wine that has been made, bottled and aged by someone else. The goal of a DO is to protect quality and promote terroir, but the Cava DO seems perversely engineered to allow exactly the opposite.

The new Conca appellation Pepe wants to create would be more stringent: Among its requirements, grapes would have to be grown organically or biodynamically, and wines aged at least 18 months (Cava requires nine). “They're the strictest wine regulations in the world, including Champagne,” he says, with evident pride.

THE RAVENTÓS' SECESSIONIST move has stirred controversy in part because the family name is so inextricably tied with Cava. Back in 1872, a member of the Raventós family created Spain's first sparkling wine. Codorníu, which the family co-founded and a branch of it still owns, is one of the largest producers of affordable sparkling wine in the world.

Josep Maria Raventós i Blanc, Manuel's father, was for many years the general director of Codorníu, as well as one of the instrumental figures in the creation of the Cava DO itself. And yet, it was Josep's

Cava's Best

Some outstanding sparkling wine is being made in Spain with the Cava designation. Here are my favorite bottles.

NV Avinyó Reserva Brut Nature Cava (\$21) A single, family-owned vineyard provides the grapes for this steely, focused Cava.

2009 Gramona Gran Cuvée Cava (\$22) Even Gramona's least pricey wines, like this rich cuvée, age for 18 months minimum.

2007 Mestres Coquet Gran Reserva Cava (\$27) The Mestres family has been making Cavas like this honey-scented one since 1925.

2008 Recaredo Brut Nature Cava (\$35) Recaredo is one of the only Cava producers to use entirely estate-grown grapes. This bottling shows the bodega's style well: crisp, incredibly focused, intense.

2007 Agustí Torelló Mata Kripta (\$110) The football-shaped bottle may be bizarre, but the old-vine Cava inside it is one of the region's most subtle and nuanced.



Spicy seafood fideos. LEFT: Pepe Raventós and his father, Manuel.

"I hope I don't ruin our business," says Pepe Raventós. "I sometimes do feel like I'm the only one who believes."

dissatisfaction with the quality of most Cava that led him to leave Codorníu and found Raventós i Blanc in 1986. (Tragically, he died almost immediately afterward, leaving Manuel to fulfill his vision.)

The land surrounding the Raventós i Blanc winery, which forms the heart of the new appellation they hope to establish, has been in the Raventós family since the 1490s (possibly before; as Manuel told me, the Black Plague wiped out most of Catalonia right before that, so records are a little thin). Pepe Raventós belongs to the 21st generation to farm it. Leather-bound ledgers in the winery contain handwritten records of the family's wine business, back to the mid-1800s; when I sat down with Manuel one afternoon, we leafed through them. It was a bit of time travel: the entire history of Cava in neat black numbers, starting when it was known in Catalan as Xampán (eventually, the Champenois objected); years of good harvests and bad; boom sales during wartime (Manuel's grandfather realized early on that whenever the Germans started a war, one of the first things they did was overrun Champagne); visits from Spain's king.

As Pepe explains, the land itself is old, too. The Anoia River carved a depression in the Penedès Valley 12 million years ago; the calcareous ocean fossils in the *conca*, or basin, of the Anoia are what Pepe feels give their wines such distinctive minerality and character. "The oldest soils are exposed here," he says. "It's like the Colorado River, when it carved the Grand Canyon. It's an extraordinary place for wine."

That claim is borne out by the sparkling wines Raventós i Blanc makes. There are four. Unlike most Cava, all are vintage-dated. The 2012 L'Hereu (\$20), from organically farmed, 30-year-old vines, is pale gold in hue, delicate and aromatic; it has the apple-citrus notes typical of Cava, but with a finesse that recalls

Champagne. The 2012 De Nit (\$28), a rosé, is streamlined and elegant, with a floral-citrus aroma and a light yeasty note. The 2010 Gran Reserva de la Finca (\$40) comes exclusively from the best sections of the estate vineyards. Aged for 32 months before release, it's remarkably complex, with aromas and flavors of nuts and toast in addition to citrus fruit. Probably more important, it is distinctive; this is a wine that tastes as though it comes from somewhere. Finally, there is the extremely small-production 2007 Enoteca Personal Manuel Raventós (\$80), which is aged for seven years in the bottle. Full of savory umami flavors yet also surprising freshness, it satisfies the question of whether the Raventós wines have the capacity to age like top Champagne: They do.

There are unquestionably other similarly ambitious producers in the Cava region who make extremely impressive sparkling wines (Recaredo and Gramona are two good examples). But most, despite misgivings about the overall image of Cava, have not left the DO and still label their wines as Cavas. The Raventós' real triumph will come if and when enough of these producers join in their quest to create a *Conca del Riu Anoia* DO.

Some of the reluctance is cultural. As Xavier Gramona told me: "I can't go and have a coffee with everyone I have known for years and say, 'You don't know what you're doing, and we're leaving.' I think we can change things from within."

Financial considerations play a big role, too. Millions of people buy Cava; it's an incredibly recognizable, popular type of wine. Take "Cava" off your label and substitute "*Conca del Riu Anoia*" for it, and the reaction of most wine buyers is going to be something like, "Huh? What's that?" Economically, that translates to a huge risk.

However, Pepe is undaunted: "I hope I don't ruin our business, and that I live through all this. I sometimes do feel like I'm the only one who believes. But what I'm trying to do, it's not the highway; it's the little road. It's steep, and it takes time. And this place, where we are, has so much potential. I am convinced of that. We're going to make wines so good they will make you cry."