

International Wine Review Blog

The Best Cavas of Catalonia

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Gramona's Cava Vineyards in Penedès

Cava is one of the most important wines of Catalonia (Cataluña) and thus is also a major part of our Report #42 *The Wines of Catalonia*, to be released May 2014. We've tasted more than 100 Cavas, almost all from the Catalan wine region called Penedès. We now have a deeper appreciation of Cava, both as the world's best value in sparkling wine and one of the world's finest sparkling wines. In this article we present our favorite Cavas.

Cava is often compared to Champagne, and that comparison is not always favorable. But we think it's also wrong. Although made using the *methode champenoise*, Cava is not Champagne and should be judged on its own. Indeed, Cava and Champagne hardly compete with each other in the marketplace. Most the Cavas we tasted sell for under \$15/bottle, while no Champagne can be found at that low a price. And while both Cava and Champagne make luxury cuvées of extremely high quality, the very best Cava is difficult to even find in the market place.

Cava and Champagne are alike in one respect—large firms dominate the industry. In Champagne, just 10% of the total number of Champagne Houses produce 60% of the wine. In Cava, a very few firms—Freixenet, Codorniu, García Carrions, and a couple of others—dominate production by specializing in inexpensive wines, much of which is exported. Also, in both Cava and Champagne there are a number of small “grower-producers” who make sparkling wine only from grapes they themselves have grown. Cava's grower-producers are receiving growing recognition for their emphasis on quality. They limit vineyard yields, sometimes ferment and age the base wines in barrel, and give their Cavas extended time on the lees in bottle, far more than the minimum required by the Cava DO (*Denominación de Origen*).



The Xarello (Viura) Grape

The grapes used to make Cava are indigenous to Catalonia—Xarello, Macabeu (Viura), and Parellada. Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are permitted but are usually just a small percent of the blend. Most Cava is in fact a blend of its three main grapes, which are uniquely suited to making quality sparkling wine in a Mediterranean climate. More on the grapes and Cava production methods can be found in the full report, *The Wines of Catalonia*.

There is a wide variety of Cavas on the market at all prices ranging from \$10 to over \$100. However, most are sold at under \$15 and are a bargain in view of their quality. Below we offer our recommendations of the best Cavas in three price ranges. Full tasting notes and ratings on these Cavas can be found in *The Wines of Catalonia*.

Best Luxury Cuvées

Most luxury cuvées of Cava are made by small grower-producers, but a number of the large Cava firms also make limited amounts of high end Cava made from the best grapes and aged on the lees for three years or more. They are usually labeled “Gran Reserva” which requires more time on the lees than other Cavas. These

wines age well, especially when made with a high percentage of the high acid Xarello grape. Our favorites are:

Gramona 2004 Celler Batlle Brut Gran Reserva

Gramona 2006 III Llustros Brut Nature Gran Reserva

Llopart 2005 Leopardi Brut Gran Reserva

Mont Marçal NV Extremarium Brut

Raventos i Blanc 2009 Del La Finca Gran Reserva

Raventos i Blanc 2011 de Nit Rosé

Best Mid-Priced Cavas

For most of our readers, the sweet spot is excellent Cava sold at a reasonable price. They are willing to pay a little more for quality. Fortunately, there is an abundance of Cava priced \$17-\$35 that we've rated 90 points or higher. Most of these Cavas are Reservas that have spent 18+ months on the lees. Our favorites are:

Albet I Noya NV Brut Reserva

Avinyó NV Rosat Reserva

Codorníu 2010 Reina Ma Cristina Blanc de Noirs Reserva

Gramona 2007 Imperial Gran Reserva Brut

Huguet 2007 Gran Reserva Brut Nature

Juvé y Camps 2008 Reserva de la Familia Gran Reserva Brut Nature

Maria Casanovas 2006 Brut Nature Pinot Noir

Heretat Mestres 2009 Coquet Brut Nature Gran Reserva

Cavas Naveran 2011 Dama

Cavas Naveran 2011 Perles Blanques

Raventos i Blanc 2011 L'Hereu

Viñedos Familiares NV La Vida al Camp Reserva Brut

Vins El Cep 2009 Marques de Gelida Brut Gran Reserva

Best Low-Priced Cavas

Perhaps the most surprising finding from our tastings is the large number of very good Cavas priced at \$16 or less. Most of these wines we rated 88 or 89 points, but there are also some exceptionally good Cavas rated even higher. These Cavas are produced in great volume but the quality is surprisingly high. These Cavas usually have a rich mousse, bright fruit flavors and good acidity. They are perfect as aperitifs.

Campos de Estrella Brut Nature

Cavas Casteller Brut

Covides NV Gran Gesta Brut Reserva

Juvé y Camps Cinta Púrpura Brut Reserva

Mercat Brut

Mont Marçal Brut

Poema NV Brut Rosé

Segura Viudas ARIA Estate Brut

U Mes u Fan Tres NV 1+1=3 Brut

Vins El Cep Kila

Cava offers excellent value at all price levels. For consumers wishing to experiment, we suggest looking for the Cavas mentioned here as well as many other bottlings reviewed in the full Report #42. The report provides complete tasting notes and ratings for more than 100 Cavas that readers will enjoy getting to know along with the many other exciting, new wines of Catalonia.

Mike Potashnik and Don Winkler

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