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Comparison takes the fizz out of cava

By Andrew Jefford

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Ambitious sparkling wines the world over are invariably measured against champagne. This is understandable, but unfortunate. It is as if all red wines were expected to model themselves on burgundy, even those made from very different grape varieties in much warmer locations. Viewed through burgundy glasses, a meaty, heady Châteauneuf du Pape would be a failure. On its own terms, of course, it is splendid.

No sparkling wine suffers more from champagne's beautiful but inappropriate benchmark than Spain's cava. "We are always the poor brother of champagne," says the quietly spoken Ton Mata of Recaredo, one of the region's finest producers. "It is possible to produce great cava, but it has to be great in a very different way from champagne. Sometimes we get a little bit sad because nobody believes that cava can be great."

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Agustí Torelló, of the company of the same name, casts the problem in a different light. "It's easy to produce a good sparkling wine here. But it's very difficult to produce a cava with soul." The lack of recognition leads Agustí Torelló's sister Lali to call cava "the most undiscovered wine in the world". A month ago I would have treated these remarks with scepticism. Having tasted the finest wines of these two producers and others, I now realise that my frame of reference needs redrafting.

Tasting aside, perhaps the best way to explain these felicities is by pointing out how different they are from champagne's attributes. Champagne is made from barely ripe Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier in the coolest of vine-ripening climates. Acidity, therefore, is its main structural feature, balanced by the richness and texture of long-ageing on the yeast lees of secondary fermentation, and by the sugar in the wine used for topping up the bottles prior to dispatch. Great cava, by contrast, is made from the Catalan varieties Xarello, Macabeo and Parellada picked on the first cusp of ripeness in the much warmer climate of Penedès, just to the south of Barcelona. Both acidity and sugar are less important than for champagne; indeed many great cavas are entirely unsugared. Long lees ageing, however, is crucial. The end result is layered, textured and full, with an aromatic spectrum (thanks to those local varieties, grown on marine limestone in the Catalan climate) quite unlike that of any other sparkling wine.

Prominent notes include wild white flowers like hawthorne and elder, as well as fennel, rosemary, ground almonds, chicory, peach, apple and lime, together with a saline, mineral edge. The bubbles seem almost accidental, but have the effect of lifting aromas out of the glass like fluffy, fair-weather cumulus on a warm summer's day. Indeed, the profoundly Mediterranean character of cava makes its sensual personality seem intensely summery. Many of champagne's perfections, by contrast, are northern, wintry and interior: cream, toast, brioche, all laminating that icicle-like acidity.

Cava's origins, like those of Rioja, date back to France's 19th-century phylloxera epidemic. Bodegas in both regions were sited near railheads, and prospered by supplying crisis-stricken Champagne and Bordeaux respectively. In some respects, cava has made fewer concessions to the modern world than champagne. Recaredo, Torelló, Mestres and Gramona carry out all or much of their secondary fermentation under cork rather than metal beer-bottle caps, and are "disgorged" (having the lees removed) by hand, bottle by bottle. Gramona maintains the tradition, almost lost in Champagne, of using an intricately constructed final liqueur based on older wines and brandies to lend its blends a sumptuous, orchestral character.

From the mid-1980s, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir have been authorised for use in cava. Since they are much earlier ripening than the local varieties, it is hard to see them ever producing nuanced sparkling wine in this warm-to-hot location. In my opinion, the greatest cavas are all produced from later-ripening local varieties, and especially the structured, age-worthy Xarello and the fragrant, enchanting Macabeo, which in cava hands appears much more intriguing than it does as its synonym Viura in still white Rioja.

Will recognition come for fine cava? Soon, perhaps, though consumers must be ready to pay champagne prices for it. The current fashion for prosecco (in principle a simpler, younger wine) does at least mean that drinkers are now ready to seek out non-champagne sparkling wines for reasons other than price. All that the cava producers ask is that their finest wines are judged with an open palate.

Andrew Jefford's *Wine Course* (Ryland, Peters & Small) was judged 'Best Drink Book 2010' at the Le Cordon Bleu World Food Media Awards

Jancis Robinson is away

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Five great cavas

Agustí Torelló 2005 Krypta: impressive aromatic finesse, with mingled scents of white flowers, grains and honeycomb. The palate is long and floral, over a soft, fine-textured base. (Around £35; in the UK contact Georges Barbier, tel: +44 (0)20 8852 5801, and, in the US, Wine Symphony, tel: +1 212 897 4125, www.winesymphonyinc.com).

Gramona 2003 Ill Lustros: this is Gramona's core cuvée. Scents of soft summer fruits, bread, beeswax and hawthorne, matched to chewy, textured, deep flavours of great harmony. (Around £25; not yet imported to the UK, but Berry Bros and Rudd are likely to stock it soon; in the US, Eric Solomon stocks the similar 2001 vintage, tel: +1 704 358 1565, www.europeancellars.com).

Juvé y Camps 2006 Riserva de la Familia Gran Riserva Brut Nature: lots of wild flower notes, straw and lemon, and an intense, searching, fully dry palate combining those floral notes with balanced acidity and a long finish. (Around £17; contact Philglas & Swiggot, tel: +44 (0)20 7642 1576, www.philglas-swiggot.com; in US, Winebow, tel: +1 201 445 0620, www.winebow.com).

Raventos i Blanc 2002 Manuel Raventos: this aged, dry, single-vineyard blend of Xarello with Parellada suggests lime and dessert apple with hazelnuts. (Around £42; Hamilton Yorke, tel: 01258 820555; in the US contact Michael Skurnik Wines, tel: +1 516 677 9300, www.skurnikwines.com).

Recaredo 2006 Brut Nature: a blend of all three traditional varieties, with a tiny oak-aged component. Citrus, apple, pear and almond notes. (Around £26; not currently imported to the UK; in the US, Neal Rosenthal, tel: +1 800 910 1990, www.madrose.com).

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