



## Spain: The Sparkling Wines from Cataluña - Where's the Spark?

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I mentioned in my article on the rest of the appellations of Cataluña (other than Priorat)—where Penedès is included and a great majority of sparkling wines are produced—that I feel young, energetic projects in the sparkling wine world are missing in the Penedès zone. It's something that strikes me as unusual, as one would expect that in such a traditional region for the category, there would be more people in the vein of Gramona, Loxarel, Mestres, Recaredo or Raventós i Blanc making original, exciting, sometimes unorthodox, terroir-driven sparklers. But even though I try and try and ask everybody, nothing much seems to be going on...

I mentioned this in relation to Penedès because Cava and Penedès in Cataluña share the same geographical limits, although others are produced in the other appellations, too. Indeed, many of the Cava producers who leave the appellation go to Penedès, which has an official category—for sparkling wines they call Classic Penedès. In fact, the Penedès zone is the most active in terms of still wines, but the sparkling wine scene seems to be quite dormant.



*The local Xarello grape is quickly turning into the most appreciated variety for Cava and sparkling wines from the Penedès zone, although the traditional blend with Macabeo and Parellada is still the most common.*

The Cava appellation has long suffered from a bad image because of too many mediocre wines sold at low prices. The rather non-eventful launch of the new official category Cava de Paraje Calificado, a sort of single-vineyard Cava, seems to me like starting the cake with the icing rather than with the cake itself, as the issues with the appellation are the cheaper, lower quality wines. The top wines have no issues; it's at the other end of the spectrum where things need to be improved and sorted out.

#### **How Leaders Work**

Quality leaders, not volume ones, that is! Well, these are focusing on vineyard work, when a huge percentage of the bottles sold comes from the same base wine purchased from a handful of volume producers, who buy grapes and churn out millions of liters of anonymous white wine. I've already mentioned it before. Do you wonder why so many Cavas taste the same? It's because they really are the same wine!



*Gramona, Raventós i Blanc and Recaredo, the three leading quality producers of sparkling wines in the Penedès region, work following biodynamic principles. Can it be a coincidence? Here Pepe Raventós is unearthing a sheep's skull containing preparation 505 of ground oak bark that has to be buried in a damp, humid place.*

The Penedès appellation is reinforcing organic work in the vineyards and single vintage wines, which is good, but the leading quality producers go further than that—and many are already working following biodynamic principles. Can it be coincidence when the best use biodynamics? I doubt it very much.



*To disgorge or not to disgorge? That is one of the questions.*

Of course, controlling yields and sugar levels, not blending vintages, etc., are common principles—not only here, but also in most other places. A couple of sparkling wine-specific issues are interesting. To disgorge or not to disgorge? That is one of the questions. So far I only know of Loxarel selling a Cava on the lees, with the idea that the wine will continue evolving in contact with the lees in bottle, pushing that time to the limit, in fact until you decide to pull the cork. It's an interesting idea that merits exploring, as shown by the exceptional 109 Gran Reserva by Loxarel from the village of Vilobí del Penedès, sold after no less than 109 months on the lees. But that's the only one I know of so far. The rest disgorge their bottles. The other question could be cork or crown stopper for the bottle aging? Here most of the quality producers seem to favor cork, but of course it creates more work and I think it's also more expensive.



*Many claim aging the sparkling wines under cork or crown cap bear different results. Here Recaredo favors cork.*



Unfortunately, the names in this quality group, the people who wonder about these questions, are so few that they only represent a drop in the whole volume produced in the region. There is a need for more quality-minded terroirists, but they seem to concentrate on still wines.

I wonder if people think there is no money to be made in sparkling wine other than selling large volumes at low prices with small margins and that's why they don't even try. But as Recaredo, Raventós i Blanc, Gramona or Loxarel are proving, there is a market for quality sparkling wines, and when the quality is there, people are willing to pay the price... What's going on then? Where's the spark?

#### **Not Only Turó d'en Mota**

I'm slowly visiting my favorite growers adding new names in each iteration of each region and this time I finally paid my long overdue visit to Recaredo, who to me are the absolute quality leaders in the Cava appellation. I visited not because I wanted to see their cellars, but because I was especially interested in seeing the Turó d'en Mota vineyard, which is the source for their best Cava and the best wine in the appellation.

The company laid its foundations in 1924, when Josep Mata Capellades himself built a wine cave underneath his house in the village of Sant Sadurní d'Anoia. His father's first name was Recaredo, and that's what he used as a brand name. The third generation, lead by Ton Mata, arrived at the business in 1990 and I think he's the one who has taken quality to a different, higher level.



*Ton Mata has taken the family company, Recaredo, to the helm of quality Cava.*

The flagship wine is a single vineyard Xarello named after a small slope, Turó d'en Mota, where the vines were planted in 1940. The north-facing vineyard is only 0.97 hectares on limestone-rich soils (14% active limestone), where the vines are head-pruned and each guided with the help of a stick. They have produced and sold this wine as a separate label since the 1999 harvest and are currently selling 2005, so it's still a newcomer. Not all vintages are produced and they are not necessarily released following a chronological order. For example, they have kept the 2004, which they consider a superb vintage in need of a longer time in bottle, so 2005 was released first.



*This old head-pruned Xarello vineyard is the source for Recaredo's top wine, Turó d'en Mota, a wine that carries the name of the vineyard.*

But let me make this clear. We talk about Turó d'en Mota because it's a unique, world-class wine, and we tend to talk more about this kind of wine more than others, but we end up drinking the others. The name Recaredo on ANY label is an absolute guarantee of a top quality wine and I order them whenever I see them on restaurant lists, as they never let me down. Maybe it has something to do with what I'm going to explain next...

**Recaredo's Creed: 100%!**

No, I'm not going to talk to you about the still wines from Recaredo that are produced under a separate company called Celler Credo (Creed), which appear in the still wines from Cataluña article. But the pun was intended; this is about what they do, what they believe in, and what their promise is to their customers.



*Turó d'en Mota is a world-class sparkling wine.*

Recaredo only produces Brut Nature (no sugar added), single vintage Cava, and every single bottle carries the vintage, the disgorgement date and the time the wine has been in bottle in contact with the lees. The production method follows these strict principles:

- 100% grapes from their own vineyards in the Alt Penedès
- 100% organic and biodynamic viticulture (certified since 2015)

- 100% manual harvest
- 100% aging in bottle with lees under natural cork
- 100% minimum aging of 30 months *sur lie*
- 100% hand turning (*remuage*) of the bottles
- 100% manual disgorgement without freezing the lees

Furthermore, they do not produce wines for any other winery and they have audited yields. For example, in 2015 the average yield from their vineyards was 4,900 kilos of grapes per hectare, when the maximum permitted yield from the appellation of origin Cava was 12,600 kilos per hectare. In fact, all of the above points have been certified yearly by Bureau Veritas... since 2003! How about that as a quality promise?

#### Food for Thought

I always like to end my articles with a morsel of food. Prawns are important in Spain. Very important. In fact, there are specific names to identify the different kinds: *camarón*, *quisquilla*, *gamba*, *langostino*, *cigala*, *carabinero*... Even within the ones we call *gamba*, the most common translation for prawn, there are different species that can be separated into two main categories, white or red. Many consider the red prawns from northern Cataluña, yours truly included, the best you can get. They are huge, deeply colored and flavored, and they are at their best as fresh as possible.



*Red prawns from the Costa Brava, Palamós to be precise...*

At the Palamós fish market, a small touristy village on the Costa Brava, you can get them as fresh as they come, directly from the boat. The larger-sized ones never make it to restaurants, because they are just too expensive. In the peak of the summer season, they can be as expensive as €120 per kilo, which works out at something like €10 per prawn! Restaurants would have to charge a fortune for them, so they usually buy smaller ones. If you want the largest, you buy them straight from the market and grill them at home. You have to experience them if you want to know what red prawns are about.

But these superb red prawns are food for enjoying, quite appropriate with these sparkling wines, by the way. The real food for thought is what Pepe Raventós told me: "We need differentiation and to exploit our differences with Champagne. We are different, we have a unique terroir, but we have made an effort to look as similar as possible to Champagne. To me that is a big mistake." Indeed, where's the spark in pretending to look like someone else?





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