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## Selling Cava in the City

By LETTIE TEAGUE

While just about every winemaker I've ever met talks about visiting New York—many can even name a favorite restaurant or two—I had never encountered one who actually wanted to make New York home. But then there's Pepe Raventós, manager, oenologist and wine grower at Raventós i Blanc. Not only does he live in the city, but like many New Yorkers he thinks big: His aim is to make more than just the greatest cava (the sparkling wine of Spain); he wants to produce "the best high-mineral-content sparkling wine in the world"—and yes, that includes Champagne. (Though Mr. Raventós likens his wines more to Chablis.)



Bryan Thomas for The Wall Street Journal

Pepe Raventós and Susana Portabella at Gotham Bar and Grill.

Mr. Raventós and I had lunch recently at Gotham Bar and Grill, accompanied by his wife Susanna Portabella. The restaurant is one of their favorite places in New York; the couple (both 38 years old) have accumulated a number of favorite destinations in their eight months in the city, including Veritas, Brooklyn Fare and Boulud Sud. So far they haven't found a favorite in their adopted neighborhood, the Upper East Side.

They chose the neighborhood largely for the sake of their four children, who are attending the local public schools. Unlike most ex-pats, the Raventós didn't want their children in private schools—they want them to experience the real New York. (Never mind that when they arrived none of the four, who range in age from 2 to 7 years old, spoke a word of English.)

They also couldn't afford private-school tuitions on top of all the other expenses of New York, Mr. Raventós admitted—a familiar lament in this city. (And when he mentioned that the furniture-rental company broke half the furniture during delivery, I was prepared to grant the Raventós full city citizenship on the spot.)

Why did Mr. Raventós see New York as the place where his message might best be heard? "New York is the most sophisticated wine market in the world," he said. What about London or Paris? "This is not a vacation, Lettie," Mr. Raventós replied. (In such a short time he'd figured it out: New Yorkers, above all, prize work.)

"New York is open-minded," he added. "Europe is close-minded. But New York loves Europe and the rest of America loves New York." I wasn't so sure about that last idea, I said. I've encountered plenty of anti-New York sentiment in the U.S. Mr. Raventós shook his head. He is in love with New York and that's that.

Just then, Gotham Bar and Grill's wine director, Eric Zillier, appeared, bearing the bottle of Raventós Reserva we'd ordered. I asked whether Mr. Zillier's customers know cava, or for that matter whether they appreciate the ambition behind the bottle he was carrying. Mr. Zillier shook his head.

"Not as many as they should. They just want a good sparkling wine," he said, adding that the reasonable price (\$45) made it a particularly easy sell.

But Mr. Raventós was undeterred. He wasn't selling cava—he was selling Raventós. The three of us toasted one another and tasted the wine. It was certainly an excellent cava: bone dry and yet creamy and rich, with a long, mineral finish. (It sells for about \$25 in stores.)

But back to his New York sales plan. What, exactly, is Mr. Raventós doing to further reputation of cava, or rather Raventós, during his time in the city?

"We have dinners and invite our importer, Spanish expatriates, chefs and sommeliers to our house," he explained. Sometimes he even accompanies his importer's team on sales calls. "I had the best day of my business recently," Mr. Raventós reported. "I visited 15 accounts in one day—we took the metro south, west, north, east. We went to Marea, Boulud Sud." It sounded exhausting to me, but he recounted it all with a look of delight.

I wondered how long they could they keep this up. Doesn't he want to get back to the winery, the peace of his vineyards? Isn't New York, for a Spanish winemaker, sometimes, well, a little too much? Mr. Raventós nodded. The noise does bother him—particularly "those window air-conditioning units." His wife agreed. "And we are right in the middle of the subway construction. It's kind of crazy," she added.

On the other hand, they love that they can walk their children to school. They couldn't do that at the winery—or in Barcelona, where they lived before. "That is the best moment. We can all talk for 15 minutes. We start to relax," said Mr. Raventós.

They can also walk around the city at night, as they often do before going out, "We don't like rush to the restaurant. We like to look around," his wife explained. (The couple has not adopted New York dining hours: They're more likely to be starting dinner at nine and even later on the weekends.)

Mr. Zillier appeared with a second wine, the 2006 Raventós i Blanc Gran Reserva that Mr. Raventós had brought along in a bag. This wine, made in small amounts from four different varietals, each vinified separately, is his particular pride and joy. It is every bit as rich and complex as Champagne and costs only \$45 (retail).

I complimented Mr. Raventós on the wine. He said it sells well in his home country. "Cava is well-known in Spain but everywhere else it is considered cheap," he said. "And the best place to change this view is New York."

Mr. Raventós, we're rooting for you.

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