Sun, Limestone and Heritage: Exploring Catalunya and Levante

BY JOAQUÍN HIDALGO | NOVEMBER 25, 2025

Between Catalunya and Levante, what we'll call Mediterranean Spain, the ample sunlight gives rise to reds, whites and sparkling wines of surprising intensity and vibrancy. A melting pot of distinct visions for what a terroir-driven wine from the region should be, combined with a wide range of varieties, a dizzying array of styles and longstanding pride in local flavors makes the Mediterranean Spain an excellent place to seek out unforgettable wines amidst equally unique landscapes.

For this report, I traveled from Empordá on the French border to Murcia on the boundary with Castilla-La Mancha, visiting 54 producers and tasting over 650 wines that reflect how the sea and local climates shape this region.

The vineyards between the Manchegan village of Fuente-Álamo and neighboring Murcia present a contrast of green foliage and white, calcareous soils rich in gypsum crystals.

Corpinnat Redefines Sparkling Wine

It's hard to understand why Penedès can't agree on the right path forward for their sparkling wines. Cava, Clàssic Penedès and several other categories share the spotlight, but it is clear that Corpinnat is becoming the most reliable designation in terms of quality.

Established as a shared private brand in the European Union (rather than a Denominación de Origen, or DO), the group of producers that go by the name Corpinnat is led by the major sparkling wine houses of Penedès, including Gramona, Recaredo, Llopart and Torelló. This year, I tasted with most of the 16 wineries involved, and excellence is obviously chief among the group's priorities. In order to use the Corpinnat name, a producer must be organic and vinify the wine on site. There's a limit on purchased grapes from outside the winery (51.5% in 2025) and a minimum agreed price (which was €0.90 per kilo this year). Minimum aging is 18 months on lees. The use of varieties such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir is still permitted, but in declining quantities until they completely disappear in 2034, to be replaced by native varieties Xarel·lo, Macabeo and Parellada.

This report features some long-aged sparkling wines with delicate, nuanced profiles. While mild acidity is a hallmark of Penedès, it's the chalky textures and ethereal personalities that set well-aged Corpinnats apart.

The modern underground cellar where Llopart crafts long-aged Corpinnats in Penedès.

Sumoll Against Climate Change

In an increasingly hot world, Catalunya and similar Mediterranean regions have a great opportunity to expand its horizons to include varieties that offer new flavors and are resistant to the ever-more extreme conditions. I continue to encounter more and more fascinating experiments that combine contemporary research with an eye to the past, with producers reconsidering the potential red grapes such as Sumoll, Mandó and Arcos (of which only a very few hectares had survived), as well as white varieties like Forcada and Picapoll.

Sumoll is a red variety with somewhat rustic tannins—similar to Nebbiolo—but delicate red fruit flavors. Strikingly, it has an average pH of 3.1, even when fully ripe, presenting a distinctive palate for a red: lean and energetic. Although not many have found the right balance as of yet, Bodega Pardas, L'Enclòs de Peralba and Can Sumoi are paving the way with reds that are light in body but boast plenty of energy and structure. Yielding wines with refreshing energy and volume in the mouth, the white grape Forcada shows just as much potential in both the still and sparkling categories. The Torres family and the Abadal winery are leading the charge to recover this variety (and others) at a significant scale.

The Magic of Xarel·lo

The second-most widely planted grape in Catalunya after Macabeo, Xarel·lo makes up the core of both sparkling and still wines in the region, with 10,500 hectares under vine (about 7,000 of which are in the Penedés DO). Aromatic with good body, it presents aromas of green apple and pear against a backdrop of Mediterranean herbs and prominent fennel undertones.

When French varieties grew popular in the 1980s and 1990s, as part of a broader effort to introduce "improving grapes," wineries sought to replace Xarel·lo with Chardonnay, especially as a base for sparkling wines. This gave rise to a resistance movement that saw producers championing Xarel·lo and bottling it on its own from the mid-2000s onward. Xarel·lo received a significant boost from those producers who believed in its ability to yield quality still wines, sparkling wines and *Brisats*.

Today, the most interesting whites in the region are either pure Xarel·lo or blends based around it. The best aged whites I tasted for this report were also Xarel·lo, grown on calcareous soils. Readers should seek out the 2021 Can Sumoi Xarel·lo La Costa, the 2014 Pardas Pur Xarel·lo and the 2023 Finca Viladellops Tres Xarel·lo Selecció to get a feel for the variety's potential in still wine.

Xarel·lo's story is similar to that of other indigenous white varieties such as Malvasía de Sitges, Cariñena Blanca and Merseguera, which appear further south and lend character to Mediterranean wines. Pablo Calatayud at Celler del Roure said, "In the end, it turns out that the 'improving' grapes were the ones that were always here."

From left to right: Winemaker Modesto Arroyo and Josep Grau in Montsant; Pepe Mendoza at his Casa Agrícola winery in Alicante; Valentí Llagostera, co-founder of Mas Doix.

Brisat is the Old Orange

Catalunyan food expert Oriol Pérez de Tudela, who also makes wines in Tarragona, noted that Mediterranean whites were historically always *Brisats*, i.e., whites fermented with skins and stalks. Here, orange wines are far more than a trend—they are embedded within the region's winemaking heritage.

Mediterranean producers have picked up on this idea. I tasted a number of wines that were macerated with skins to some degree. Today's *Brisat*s reflect a wide range of quality. Because the intense local sunlight affects the phenolic development in the skins, it takes a careful hand in the winery to regulate that intensity. The best *Brisats* I tasted for this report were made with Malvasía de Sitges and Xarel·lo, such as the 2022 Torre del Veguer Brisat Pur, the 2024 Herència Altés Llunari and the 2022 Vinyes del Tiet Perez Escabeces Velles.

Garnatxa and Cariñena: Priorat's Dynamic Duo

Priorat is a magical place. The landscape is home to a charming mountain viticultural tradition of terraces and *costers* (i.e., sloping vineyards) on mostly slate soils, but more importantly, Priorat is a place where winegrowers really know their vines.

Where Priorat's resurgence was initially driven by those "improving varieties" in the 1990s, today it is very much about paying homage to the historical Garnatxa and Cariñena varieties. Both adapt notably well to the high temperatures in summer and intense sun exposure. In the austere soils of Priorat, both Garnatxa and Cariñena manage to preserve vibrant acidity and give wines a talc-like texture. This structure is the hallmark of the region.

From left to right: Dominik Huber of Terroir al Limit in Priorat; Sara Pérez of Mas Martinet & Venus in Priorat; José María Vicente Sánchez of Casa Castillo in Murcia.

What makes these two varieties a dynamic duo is their complementary aromatics. Where Garnatxa at its best is pure vitality—expressed as notes of rose, cherry and blood orange—Cariñena has more heft and delivers plummy aromas that enhance its Mediterranean herbal tones. Combined, these varieties present serious complexity that rewards measured aging, although

overuse of new wood and overexposure to oxygen in vinification and élevage can be detrimental.

Since the approval of the current classification system in 2017, Priorat has followed the Burgundian method of classifying its wines by village and area. It is interesting to note the contrast between the rounded richness of reds from Bellmunt and Gratallops and the silkier, nimbler versions from Poboleda and Scala Dei, the latter of which occasionally verge on ethereal. Priorat runs the whole gamut of possibilities. This report features wines that neatly fall into each category.

You can still find the ripe, potent, liqueur-like wines of previous eras, albeit to a much lesser degree—for instance, the 2023 Inici and the 2021 Perer Vi de Paratge—but there are also lighter reds such as the 2023 Terroir al Límit Les Manyes or the 2022 Nit De Nin Mas d'En Caçador. This raises an interesting question about the region: which style is the most representative of a modern Priorat? The terroir in Priorat supports this extreme stylistic diversity, showing the full range of what is possible with this type of fruit, concentration and texture. Priorat is a rich seam of delicious new discoveries.

This harvested vineyard in Baix Penedès shows damage from green leafhoppers—a serious issue this year. The Mediterranean Sea is visible in the background.

Mosquito Verde

I visited Catalunya, Valencia and Alicante in the middle of harvest time. In Penedès and Tarragona, as well as in the Líber and Alforins valleys, vineyards were suffering from *mosquitos verdes* (green leafhoppers) which feed on vines' sap. Some varieties were hit worse than others, but the damage was unmistakable on Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Garnacha Tintorera: the leaves

were brown, as though they'd been scorched, and some plants were stripped bare. If you touched a vine, a little green cloud of insects would lift off. The plague has exacerbated producers' troubles, coming on top of low grape prices (which I'll discuss below) and vines weakened by recent drought. The spread of organic methods has necessitated the search for organic pest control methods. It won't be easy, and some already believe that the *mosquitos verdes* are here to stay.

The 2021-2024 Drought

The drought was particularly intense on Catalan shores, and many of the producers I spoke to were contemplating installing irrigation where possible. Even the most reluctant are considering it, as the very survival of the vineyards is at stake. The available data on the drought shows a wet 2020 cycle followed by far below average rainfall in 2021, 2022 and 2023, then a recovery in the spring of 2024. Conditions were truly dire—since 1920, there has only been one other drought of comparable intensity, between 2006 and 2008, and that one was shorter.

Vineyards in places like Penedès and especially Priorat suffered an acute lack of water. In the 2021-2022 cycle, there were periods as long as 106 days without rainfall. Higher than normal temperatures only exacerbated the effect—from May 2022 to December 2023, every month saw unusually high temperatures. Temperatures reached as high as 50°C (122°F) in Priorat.

The stress of these years is evident in the wines. The 2021 reds are concentrated but balanced, thanks to the water the plants had retained from the 2020 cycle. Most of the 2022s, in contrast, show signs of uneven ripeness and rustic tannins alongside marked concentration. In 2023, the producers who made wines pruned heavily in winter, leaving only half the buds, and the wines achieved good balance, though they are still more concentrated than usual. Relief came in 2024, but the reds still bear the scars of the previous three years. Two thousand twenty-five will hopefully mark a return to normalcy, as this year saw average rainfall and dry days brought normal temperatures. Only toward the end of the growing season, especially in Catalunya, did higher temperatures convince some producers to bring the harvest forward. For this reason, the DOQ will permit whites with less than 12% alcohol for the first time in its history.

Morning mist rises over Familia Torres' Moneu vineyard after a night of rainfall.

Monastrell and Levante

Mourvèdre, Monastrell and Mataró are synonyms. Of all the reds in the Mediterranean, this is the variety that seems the most adaptable (aside from Garnacha, which is dominant in most of the rest of Spain). Monastrell isn't especially widespread on the coast of Catalunya, but it becomes more prevalent as you head south toward Valencia and Alicante. Monastrell reigns supreme in Levante, with about 23,000 hectares under vine.

The image that best describes the vineyards of Levante is that of an archipelago, in which the islands have little in common beyond Monastrell. This year, I went on a brief but intense tour of the area, visiting vineyards and wineries in Utiel-Requena and Moixent (Valencia), the Vilalopó and Líber valleys, and some corners of Murcia between Jumilla and Fuente-Álamo (Castilla-La Mancha).

Said archipelago is a conglomeration of very white limestone and ferrous red clay that each lend a distinctive character to Monastrell. The former tightens the palate, while the latter gives it some muscle. All the wines here are solar (the region gets over 300 days of sun), but this grape's magic lies in its ability to preserve its acidity even when very ripe. It also produces interesting notes of dark fruit and spice.

The best wines here are those that aren't overly compacted or concentrated. I very much enjoyed Carlos Cerrón's interpretation of the limestone vineyards of the area. "We look for fat grapes to produce looser, juicier palates that represent the distinctiveness of our parcels," Cerrón said. Casa Castillo and Bodegas Mustiguillo produce a similar style of Monastrell thanks to their own painstaking work in the vineyard.

Vineyards climb the hillsides on all sides of Poboleda, a village in Priorat, a common sight in many towns throughout the region.

The Low Price of Grapes

Up and down the Mediterranean coast during harvest time, the price of grapes was a constant topic of conversation. I noted sharp variations in different areas, from €0.20 per kilogram for basic grapes in Penedès to €3 per kilogram in vineyards in Priorat and Montsant. In Penedès, all conversations about grape prices came to the same conclusion: between the drought and low prices this year, many small, family and weekend producers will have dropped out by the beginning of next year's cycle. A storm appears to be brewing in a region with about 26,000 hectares of vine.

On the border between Castilla-La Mancha and Murcia, the situation was even worse. The cooperatives—to which almost everyone referred in the past tense, as though they were a failed model—sold grapes at such a low price that it required five decimal points, with varieties such as Airen costing €0.015025 per kilogram. Unless processes were highly automated and large-scale, the business just wasn't viable.

Other Sun-Kissed Areas for Intrepid Palates

This report also includes fortified wines from Jerez and Murcia, as well as some Mediterranean sweet wines. The world of fortified, sweet and *rancio* wines is just as diverse as the still wines. AT Roca still has vermouths and *rancios* that date back to 1900, which visitors can taste directly from bulbous glass vessels. Similar experiences are available in Costers del Priorat and at Bodegas Abadal, but from casks and barrels that date back to the Spanish Civil War. After lengthy oxidation in wood, these wines deliver biting acidity and linger

forever on the palate. Very few are available on the market, but more are available in the wineries, so when you visit, remember to inquire about tasting these rarities.

I tasted the majority of the wines for this report during my trip to Spain in September 2025, with follow-up tastings in my office in Buenos Aires.

PUNTUACIONS:

CAN SUMOI

Xarel·lo La Costa 2021: 96 points

The 2021 Xarel·lo La Costa comes from La Bisbal del Penedès in Baix Penedès. Aged for 10 months, it is intense and intriguing, with notes of dried grapefruit pee, apple, hop, chamomile and subtle nuttiness. Delicate and smooth, with elevated freshness and saline chalkliness, it delivers a long, flavorful Mediterranean-driven palate.

Led by Pepe Raventós, this minimal-intervention project focuses on organically farmed ancestral varieties from Penedès. The high-altitude vineyards, divided among several parcels in the Serra del Home in Montmell, are planted mainly with Xarel·lo, Montònega and Sumoll. The wines are pure, direct and precisely made. Raventós has achieved an increasingly distinctive expression with Sumoll, while his Xarel·lo stands out for its character and depth. Within the broader revival of native grapes and traditional styles, Can Sumoi is a producer to watch closely.

2022 Sumoll – 94 points

The 2022 Sumoll from Maslloreng, on the border of Penedès and Tarragona, was aged 18 months in chestnut barrels. The nose features chestnut, pure cherry and a earthy underbrush character. The palate is vibrant and juicy with fine, reactive tannins reminiscent of Nebbiolo. Less extracted than the previous vintage, it achieves greater poise and balance. With a few more refinements, Pepe Raventós seems poised to reveal the true heart of this high-acid, characterful variety.

Garnatxa Sumoll 2023: 93 points

The 2024 Garnatxa-Sumoll is a 50-50 blend from Montmell Mountains in Penedès, Catalunya. It was aged 20% in chestnut barrels for nine months and three months in bottle. The wine delivers an intense, expressive bouquet od cherry, elderberry and dried flower over a subtle woody background. Medium-bodied with well-handed tannins and juicy grip, it an agile red that provides a fresh look at Mediterranean styles.

2024 Xarel·lo – 92 points

The 2024 Xarel·lo from Montmell Mountains in Penedès, Catalunya sees 20% of the wine aged in concrete. Delicate on the nose, it offers notes of stewed apple and Mediterranean herbs. The palate is fresh and textured with a chalky edge and a lingering hint of soft herbs on the finish.

2024 La Rosa – 91 points

The 2024 La Rosa, a blend of 60% Sumoll and 40% Xarel3lo from Montmell Mountains in Penedès, Catalunya, presents delicate notes of rese and red fruit. On the palate, it is a more serious Rosé, combining elevated freshness and a smooth, supple texture with a touch of weight. It is balanced and refined.

2024 Montónega Ancestral – 91 points

The 2024 Montònega Ancestral is 100% Parellada from the Montmell Mountains in Penedès. It was aged four months under the ancestral method. With a modest varietal aromatic profile and a light citrus note, the palate is bright and delicate with rustic bubbles, lively and low alcohol.

2024 Muntanya– 91 points

The 2024 Muntanya, a 50-50 blend of Macabeu and Xarel·lo from Montmell Mountains in Penedès, Catalunya, was aged about 10 months on the lees. Expressive with subtle yeasty notes, it offers gentle pastry tones, lime and pear. Dry, moderately and fresh and chalky, it delivers an attractive malic edge and a textured finish.

2024 Garnatxa Blanca – 90 points

The 2024 Garnatxa Blanca from Montmell Mountains in Penedès, Catalunya, opens with restrained aromas of pear and Mediterranean herbs. The palate is moderately fresh and slightly creamy, reflecting the hot, dry vintage. A touch of bitterness and a hint of alcohol lend structure and length.

RAVENTÓS I BLANC

2018 Brut Nature Manuel Raventós Negra – 95 points

The 2018 Brut Nature Manuel Raventós Negra is 70% Xarel·lo and 30% Macabeu from Conca del Riu Anoia, Penedès. After nine months on lees in cement, it spent a minimum of 70 months on lees in bottle. With tertiary aromas of pastry, yeast and apple, it shows layered nuances. Chalky in texture, ethereal yet persistent on the palate, it finishes long with freshness and grip. A fine, elegant sparkling wine.

It would be impossible to tell the story of Cava without mentioning the Raventós i Blanc family. Heirs to nearly five centuries of grapegrowing and winemaking in Sant Sadurní d'Anoia—and once responsible for Codorníu, the creators of the original Cava—Josep Maria Raventós i Blanc and his son, Manuel Raventós i Negre, left Codorníu in the 1980s to establish a new winery on the family estate: Raventós i Blanc. Today, under the direction of Pepe Raventós, who oversees both winemaking and management, the estate works biodynamically in the Conca del Riu Anoia. Since 2012, their sparkling wines have been bottled outside the DO system, under names such as Texturas de Pedra and Mas del Serral. Ethereal and chalky at their core, these are refined, deeply expressive wines that deserve a place on any serious wine lover's radar.

2022 De La Finca – 94 points

The 2022 Brut Nature De La Finca combines 60% Xarel·lo, 30% Macabeu and 10% Parellada from Conca del Riu Anoia, grown on the estate's calcareous

soils. It was aged 30 months on the lees and opens with moderate aromas of lime and lemon pie. Dry, chalky and agile with delicate bubbles, it finishes linear and refreshing, underscored by it's calcareous character.

2021 Brut Nature Textures de Pedra – 93 points

The 2021 Brut Nature Textures de Pedra is composed of 60% Xarel·lo Vermell and 40% Sumoll from Conca del Riu Anoia, Penedès. It was aged 42 months on the lees and shows slightly mature aromas of cherry, herbs, a touch of rubber and modest complexity. Dry and chalky with a fresh, tense expression, fine bubbles and a hint of grip, it offers a precise blanc de noirs profile.

2000 Brut Nature Enoteca Manuel Raventós Negra – 93 points

The 2000 Brut Nature Enoteca Manuel Raventós Negra is composed of 40% Macabeu, 25% Xarel·lo, 27% Parellada and 8% Chardonnay from Conca del Riu Anoia. Aged at least 280 months on the lees, it is amber in hue and delivers evolved aromas of quince, honey and a sherry-like edge. Delicate and chalky, the wine is refined on the palate, finishing with oxidative notes and subtle complexity.

2023 Extra Brut de Nit: 92 points

The Extra Brut de Nit blends 49% Xarel·lo, 34% Macabeu, 9% Parellada and 7% Monstrell from Conca del Riu Anoia, Penedès. This very pale Rosé delivers subtle aromas of charamel, herbs and apple. It is fry, with an unusual touch of grip, bringing freshness and character to the palate. A distinctive sparkling wine well suited to food.

2023 Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs: 92 points

The 2023 Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs is composed of 50% Xarel·lo, 35% Macabeu, 10% Parellada and 5% Malvasia de Sitges from Conca del Riu Anoia. It was aged 18 months on the lees. The wine opens with simple aromas of white fruit, light pastry, wafer and a touch of lime. Dry at 4,5g/l, it offers a palate of tensions with a chalky note on the finish.

VINS PEPE RAVENTÓS

Mas del Serral Clos Petit: 96 points

The 2013 Mas del Serral Clos Petit is composed of 75% Xarel·lo and 25% Sumoll from Conca del Riu Anoia. From a great vintage for Penedès, it opens with slightly confited red fruit, cherry, apple, patry and toast. Dry, vibrant and tense, the palate is refined with fine bubbles, elevated acidity and a long finish. Singular and complex, it shows the nervy side of Penedès sparkling wines.

2014 Mas del Serral – 95 points

The 2014 Brut Nature Mas del Serral combines Xarel·lo and Bastard Negre in co-plantation from Conca del Riu Anoia. It was aged in egg on lees before spending 100 months in bottle. It opens with tertiary aromas of lemon biscuit, wafer, dried fruit, tuberose and acacia. The palate is slender, with fine bubbles, chalky grip and mousse texture, offering tensions and balance. A fine, classically aged sparkling wine.

2023 Xarel·Lo Vinya Del Noguer – 93 points

The 2023 Xarel·Lo Vinya Del Noguer comes from calcareous soils in Conca del Riu Anoia, Penedès and is made without added sulfites. It opens with notes of pear, Mediterranean herbs, fennel and compote. Dry, broad and saline, with firm acidity and good flavor, it is a refined natural white with delicate expression.