

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## These Cavas Offer Champagne Quality at a Fraction of the Cost

Cheap Cava has flooded the market for so long, our expectations for the Spanish sparkling wine—and the amount we'll pay for it—tend to be low. Our columnist found 5 quality bottles that over-deliver for the price.



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Wouldn't you want to buy a bottle of Cava that a retailer described as "all the crisp, toasty, lively goodness you want—minus the scary price"?

I found that description so promising, I bought the wine—which tasted toasty but cheap. However, several other examples of this Spanish sparkling wine that I purchased for this column definitely merited praise. This was especially true of the pricier wines from smaller Cava estates.

That last fact is notable given that roughly half of Spain's Cava output each year is produced by just three megabrands. The oceans of mass-produced bubbly they turn out give the impression that all Cava is cheap. As a result, wine lovers often overlook or misunderstand the smaller-production Cava estates that produce higher-quality, complex wines at higher prices. As Cava importer André Tamers of North Carolina-based De Maison Selections noted, "Cava is a tough category for quality-driven producers."

## **The Champagne of Spain?**

Produced mostly in the Penedès region of Catalonia, in the northeast corner of Spain, Cava can be white or rosé, made from any combination of nine permitted grapes. Those might be Spanish natives like Macabeo, Xarel-lo and Garnacha, or French ones such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, two of the chief grapes of Champagne.

Cava producers actually touted their wine as the "Champagne of Spain"—until French Champagne producers put up a fuss and such references were outlawed. Like Champagne, Cava is produced on a fairly broad sweet-dry scale, from dulce (sweet) to semi seco (semisweet) to extra brut (very dry). Cava's production method also resembles Champagne's. The wine undergoes secondary fermentation in the bottle and ages for a specific minimum time.

According to the rules of the Cava DO (denominación de origen), even a basic Cava must be aged in the bottle a minimum of nine months; a Reserva Cava, 18 months; a Gran Reserva, 30. The wine's complexity presumably increases with time in the bottle. But time is money: A bottle that cannot be released for several years is a wine that cannot be sold. Yet the Juvé & Camps Gran Reserva Brut Cava I bought for \$43 was relatively cheap compared to a well-aged Champagne.

## **The Shopping News**

As in Champagne, Cava is made by a range of wineries, from large corporations to cooperatives and family-owned estates. Since wines from the first two categories dominate store shelves, it can be hard to find smaller-production Cavas; smaller estates made fewer than half of the 17 Cavas I purchased, priced \$9-\$43.

Most of my favorites were priced in the middle, \$18-25. My tasting notes on some of the cheapest Cavas included words like "bitter," "harsh" and "simple." The Segura Viudas Brut Cava (\$12) tasted like seltzer with a kick, but the Segura Viudas Brut Reserva Heredad Cava (\$31) was a big step up, toasty and rich.

Happily, not all the basic Cavas I bought proved disappointing. The Paul Cheneau Lady of Spain Cava Brut (\$13) looked unpromisingly cheap, encased in a garish gold wrapper complete with a cartoon lady. But I found it a pleasant, fruity drink—one I'd pour for a crowd.

The Dibon Cava Brut Seleccion (\$11) was even better: With bright acidity and complex toasty notes, it over-delivered for the price. The Tetas family created the Dibon label for the American market, said New York-based Victor Owen Schwartz of VOS Selections, who's been importing the wine for decades.

The top Cavas of my tasting truly deserved to be favorably compared with quality Champagne—at less than half its price. Two were from Raventós i Blanc, whose proprietor opted out of the Cava DO in 2012. I included the Raventós wines because they are still grouped with Cava in many wine stores and produced in the same region.

## **A Break With Tradition**

Raventós i Blanc proprietor Pepe Raventós is a descendant of the same Raventós family that founded megabrand Codorníu. This branch of the family chose to label its terroir-driven wines Conca del Riu Anoia instead of Cava. Pepe Raventós hopes that one day this will become a recognized DO for quality wines from other like-minded producers.

That hasn't happened yet, but Raventós and his wife and partner, Susana Portabella, hold out hope. "Over the years, we've had numerous conversations with other producers and made several attempts to negotiate a new DO with the Catalan government. While we pursued a shared vision, these efforts ultimately weren't enough to formalize the change," Portabella explained.

Both the 2022 Raventós i Blanc Blanc de Blancs Brut (\$18) and the 2022 Raventós i Blanc de Nit (\$20) were first-rate, beautifully balanced wines—the former a mineral delight with a decidedly saline note, the latter, a lush but polished pink bubbly. I've already purchased both again.

From Bodegas Sumarroca, a family-owned winery with vineyards all over Penedès, the 2021 Sumarroca Brut Reserva Rosé Cava (\$25) was a wonderfully crisp rosado with aromas of strawberry and bitter cherry. It's made entirely from Pinot Noir and aged a minimum of 18 months in bottle.

Tamers of De Maison Selections imports another Cava that impressed me: the elegant 2021 Avinyó Reserva Brut Cava (\$20). Generally aged over 20 months in bottle, it definitely over-delivered for the price. "Having their own vineyards and being a family operation keeps the value amazing," Tamers said.

Amazing is the word to describe the price-quality ratio of the best Cavas I tasted. While I will continue to love and buy Champagne, the bottles I've recommended in this column are the ones I'll be buying when I want to spend a lot less and still drink terrific sparkling wine.

## OENOFILE: Five Cavas of Outstanding Quality and Value



*2022 Raventós i Blanc de Nit,  
\$20*

This blend of four native varieties—both white (predominantly Xarel-lo) and a little red—was sourced from vineyards 25-50 years old. The fresh, delightful, very dry pink was inspired by Billecart-Salmon Rosé Champagne.



*20 2021 Segura Viudas  
Brut Reserva Heredad  
Cava, \$31*

This top cuvée from Segura Viudas is a rich, toasty blend of native grapes and a bit of Chardonnay. It's packaged in a heavy handblown bottle whose decorative emblem was inspired by the Segura family coat of arms.



*2021 Sumarroca Brut  
Reserva Rosé Cava, \$25*

This very dry and very stylish, rather delicate rosé Cava made entirely from Pinot Noir is produced by a family-owned winery with organically farmed vineyards throughout the Penedès region.



*2021 Avinyó Brut Reserva  
Cava, \$20*

A blend of native varieties (predominantly Macabeo), this crisp, beautifully balanced wine is generally aged over 20 months in bottle. From a leading artisanal Cava estate, it might even convince you that you are drinking Champagne.



*Dibon Cava Brut Seleccion,  
\$11*

This toasty, snappy “basic” Cava is a decided cut above its bargain-priced peers. Aged 15 months in bottle, it’s a fairly light-bodied, dry but fruity sparkler from the Tetas family, who named the wine after a family home, Masia Dibon.

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