

# WINE ENTHUSIAST

## Why the Best Cava Isn't Called 'Cava' Anymore

BY JASON WILSON



Cava, **Spain's** best-known sparkling wine, is the country's answer to **Champagne**. Unfortunately, however, in most markets across the world, Cava competes in a race to the bottom. It's more often compared to cheap **Prosecco** than high-end Champers, and even within **Spain**, Cava is cheap—90% of it retails for under 10 euros. To say there is an ocean of middling Cava is an understatement.

Part of the problem is that Cava, as it's currently defined, is a wine without a true geographic identity. Though it's protected as a Denominación de Origen, Cava can be made in over 20 different regions across Spain, so long as they're made *méthode traditionnelle*. Two huge wineries, which represent more than 75% of the country's total production, basically control the Cava D.O.

In recent years, the smaller, artisan producers in Penedès—the area of Catalonia south of Barcelona that is Cava's spiritual home—finally lost their patience with this situation.

“We thought it was necessary to do something,” says Ton Mata, CEO of **Recaredo**. “People around the world were thinking Cava was only a massive, cheap wine. But we can compete with any sparkling wine in the world.”

“The sparkling wine in this region was always supposed to be fruity and fun,” says Ana López Lidon, **Gramona's** export manager. “But we know it can be a serious wine.”

In 2019, after years of living under Big Cava's thumb, producers like Recaredo, Gramona and others had had enough. Nine estates from Penedès **broke ties and left the D.O.** to bottle their wines under the brand name **Corpinnat** (roughly meaning “heart of Penedès” in Latin).

“We all quit on the same day,” says López Lidon. “The Cava drama!”



There are now 11 members of Corpinnat. For now, it's not an actual D.O. but a trade group, since Big Cava has the power to block an official denomination. You'll have to look for the word "Corpinnat" on the label, rather than "Cava."

But the name Corpinnat carries weight, because its rules are strict. Grapes must be organic and picked by hand. All wine must be made at a member organization's winery, with no juice bought from outside, which Big Cava's business model allows. If Corpinnat wineries buy grapes, they are obligated to pay a higher, premium price to growers. Aging rules are also stricter: All Corpinnat wines must spend at least 18 months on the **lees** (meaning all wines would qualify as Reserva) and wineries must make at least one wine aged 30 months or more and another aged upwards of 60 months on the lees.

"Thirty years ago, if we talked about terroir here, everyone would be laughing," says Mata. "[But] we have a wonderful story, and it's a true story. There's rigor."

The establishment of Corpinnat is not, however, the first rebellion in Cava. Before that, in 2012, Pepe Raventós of the famed **Raventós i Blanc** estate left the Cava D.O. to bottle under his own invented designation, Conca del Riu Anoia. The following year, a dozen other producers seceded from the D.O. to start a new denomination, called **Clàssic Penedès**. It's today an official D.O., now with 18 members. Clàssic Penedès also has strict rules, including that grapes must be **organically grown** and wines must spend 15 months on the lees, making them also all akin to Reserva).

"For me, there are two ways to make wines," says Agustí Torelló i Sibill, winemaker of **AT Roca**, which seceded to Clàssic Penedès. "You can make popular wines or you can make wines with soul."

So, just to recap: Spain's most famous **sparkling wine** went from having, by default, a simple four-letter name to now potentially being labeled as Corpinnat, Clàssic Penedès or even Conca del Riu Anoia. Even in the confusing world of wine, that opens the door to an awful lot of possible confusion. To be fair, the producers generally seem aware of how puzzling the various labels might be in the marketplace.

“Yes, I know it’s confusing now,” says Mata. “I’m not proud of that, but Cava was stuck. We had to do something. I hope in the future we can all join in one prestige project.”

“I believe Corpinnat and Clàssic Penedès can work together,” says Torelló. “We are [in] different places, but I think we will eventually arrive in the same place.”

How all the Cava drama eventually ends, no one really knows. “The Cava D.O. would definitely love to have Corpinnat back,” says López Lindon, a possibility that’s still not out of the question in coming years.



To be honest, there’s always been confusion surrounding the name Cava, itself a relatively recent term. Until the 1980s, most Catalan sparkling wine was called “Xampany.” (The X is pronounced as if saying shah). You can still find sparkling wine listed as Xampany in some of **Barcelona**’s old wine bars. When Spain joined the European Union in 1986, France objected to the term’s use for obvious reasons (sound it out). That’s when “Cava,” the Spanish word for cave or cellar, came into usage.

Traditionally, Cava is made from three white grapes: Macabeu (aka **Viura**), Parellada and **Xarello**. While the vast majority is a blend, some Corpinnat producers have begun exploring single varietals. There has been a particular focus on Xarello, the most uniquely Catalan variety. (Its unique Catalan spelling—Xarel-lo—is not a typo.) Pronounced shah-rell-lo, it has high **acidity**, low pH and a notably high level of the antioxidant resveratrol. There is almost no Xarello planted outside of Catalonia. Producers of high-end Spanish bubbles believe that Xarello bottlings could help boost the profile of terms like Corpinnat, Clàssic Penedès and Conca del Riu Anoia.

“Nobody knows how long a Xarello can age,” says Mata. “They used to think Xarello was too rustic and too strong. No one ever did more than 40% in a blend. Why didn’t we look at this grape and give it the importance it deserves?” Recaredo was the first to do it when they released their legendary 100% Xarello **1999 Turó d’en Mota** in 2008. Looking forward, Recaredo and other growers are working to select exceptional Xarello vines and using those cuttings when they plant new vineyards.

But even with all the drama and rebellion in the Catalan air, some very good producers have decided to stick with the Cava D.O. At [Mata i Coloma](#), winemaker Pere Mata—no relation to Recaredo's Ton Mata—sees no reason to leave.

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“Why? I love Cava,” says Mata i Coloma's Mata. “People say Freixenet and Codorníu are cheap and give a bad image to Cava. I don't think that's necessarily true. Because of these companies, everyone knows Cava. They allow me to go into the market and say, ‘Mine is better and it's a little more expensive.’”

The true battle, he continues, is with another sparkler. “Cava must fight with Prosecco,” he says. “That's the competition.”

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