PEPE RAVENTÓS: FOREVER SPARKLING WINE

MAR 24, 2020

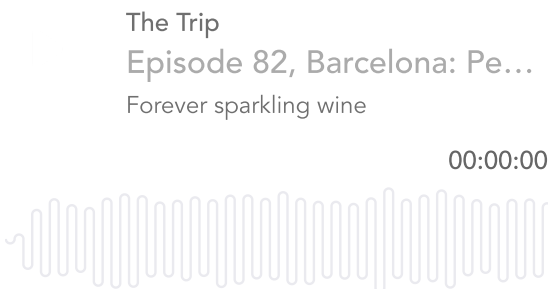
As heard on: ***The Trip Podcast****, Host:* ***Nathan Thornburgh****, Guest:* ***Pepe Raventos****, Illustration by:* ***Daisy Dee***

This week on The Trip podcast: Pepe Raventós and 500 years of Catalan winemaking.

It's early winter, it's a baby lamb on a hill in one of the oldest wine estates in the world. It's a little green glade under a canopy of trees, a horse paddock, a nearby river, a full view of the sawtoothed mountain range they call Montserrat, where the eternal soul of the Catalan people lives in collapsing grottos under limestone cliffs. This week's guest, Pepe Raventós, is the 21st generation of his family to work this estate. And this here is the perfect place, the perfect vista, from which to contemplate the calm and everlasting nature of things.

Especially now, from self-quarantine in New York City, when the news cycle seizes in the chest like a heart attack, when the only thing we know is that we have no idea what is happening, when we can squint and almost see the end of everything: your life, your family, your city, your world. That is exactly when, and now this is turning into the darkest sparkling wine sales pitch ever, *now* is when you need a bottle of Raventós i Blanc De Nit 2017. You need it because if you're like me, you don't plan on dying sober. You need it because every breathe of that wine has the centuries bubbling gently through it. You can hear them calming you, reminding you that they've been there since 1497, noting mildly all the plagues and pestilences and famines and fighting that the Raventós family survived, that all our bloodlines survived, to get us to this place, this moment, this hilltop, this baby lamb in a coastal winter breeze.

Here is an edited and condensed transcript from my conversation with Pepe. Listen to the episode for free on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts.



RELATED READS

23 THINGS TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO TO BARCELONA
Your complete survival guide to the Catalan capital.

BREWED FREE IN CATALONIA
In Catalonia, booming local microbrews ar another way for people to express their independence.

Thornburgh: What do you want people to think of when they think of Conca sparkling wine? What does it have to conjure in their minds?

does it have to conjure in their minds?

Raventós: I think the first message here is to encourage everybody who travels to Barcelona to go 35 minutes west and enjoy the beauty of the northern Penates, the Montserrat mountain range, the valleys, and walk the potential of Conca. That is the way to understand wine regions. Away from architecture, which I love, but this is not about architecture, it's about winemaking. Away from design, away from tourists, walking the little dirt roads that connect the villages in Penates and really feeling the potential of the area.

Thornburgh: Without a Frank Gehry hotel right plopped in the middle of it.

Raventós: Exactly. Nothing against this—but we have made all the mistakes. We went bankrupt in the mid-90s because we focused too much on architecture, and then we thought wine was about packaging and labels. We won all the design awards in prestigious mid-1990s Barcelona. We've made all the mistakes, and we will continue to make them. Wine is about feeling a place, and you start feeling it by walking it and understanding it. This is what I'd like people to think about Conca. If you like fruity, drink champagne, but if you like mineral wines, give Conca a try.

When you're sipping that liquid, your mind and your spirit travels to the place of origin

Thornburgh: That's an American palate thing? That's something that they like out of their wines, more so than the fruity or sweeter things?

Raventós: Let's not forget that America is the paradise for Pinot Grigio.

Thornburgh: Let's not forgive too quickly.

Raventós: I agree that as the palate matures, the more we enjoy minerality, the more we enjoy tension, the more we enjoy austerity. When we pay our dollars, we want impact back. I think the more wine you drink, the more you appreciate the balance, the harmony, the austerity. And more than anything, when you're sipping that liquid, your mind and your spirit travels to the place of origin.

Thornburgh: You should be able to uncork this bottle in New York, or wherever on earth you are, and then somehow be looking over the Montserrat mountains?

Raventós: This is exactly the idea, and this is what I think the most successful wine regions in the world

have been able to do—create this essence. Maybe not create, but interpret this authenticity—that when

you're drinking that beautiful Nebbiolo, you go to the slopes of Serralunga D'Alba or La Morra and even see the landscape. The chestnuts and the cold and the truffles and the food.

Thornburgh: During your economic crisis in the '90s, you had to go into exile. You moved around different cities?

Raventós: Yes. My father had to sell the family house and then move to Barcelona, where I grew up, and then had to sell some vineyards to get back on track. We had difficult times, made a lot of mistakes. Since then my life has been focused towards the dream of recovering this beautiful tradition of more than 500 years of cultivating this farm. After the crisis, we started to build. We refurbished this house, we refurbished the guest house, and we brought the life back to the farm. Now we live together with two draught horses, and we have a herd of sheep and goats that are grazing here semi-freely. I know this great American farmer called Joe Saladin. I love this quote. He says, "Farming is all about fencing."

Thornburgh: So you've been building fences here.

Raventós: Building fences for the sheep, and then we're trying to bring back all the breeds of different animals that belong to a Mediterranean farm. For example, the pigs are a local breed from northern Catalonia, we have chickens who lay beautiful eggs, and we work with experts in ornithology, designing nests for all the birds that used to live here before the age of confusion and pesticides and chemistry.

I believe that to express origin, you really need to bring a lot of life into your farm.

Thornburgh: What does this have to do with making wine?

Raventós: I believe that to express origin, you really need to bring a lot of life into your farm. The principle is very simple: the more diversity on your farm, the more richness there is, the more resistant and strong your vines will be, the fewer treatment they will need, and the more authentic the wine will be. I left the idea of making perfect wine a long time ago. I think my duty is to make the most authentic possible wine.

Thornburgh: What was it like to come back and build this house, and come and move in with your family? Did you throw an incredible party, did you say a little prayer to your ancestors? That's quite a return.

Raventós: I think it's more spiritual. Sorry to get a little serious, but this is more about finding peace in the place where you have to be. We spend our lives searching for something, and maybe it's time to think about spending more time practicing it.

Thornburgh: Right across the street from you, that was part of the old lands that had been sold off and is now disconnected from your family. It was bought by American hedge fund. It's an insane juxtaposition: here you are with your family and your dogs and your name and your heritage, and really trying to live on these slopes in this particular way, and then right across the street, you've got the Wolves of Wall Street. I don't know who they are. Maybe they're amazing people, but that's what's happening to a lot of the wine world, as well as a lot of agriculture in general—it's becoming more commodified. Do you feel the satisfaction of being a counterweight against our times, or are you just trying to keep your head down?

Raventós: I think there's room for everybody, and for me, I am not an example at all. I think the question nowadays is, "Do I live simply enough?" When I ask yourself this question I realize that I don't at all. There's room for everybody. I think we're living in a very interesting moment, where I see that the younger generations are questioning the rules of success that drove our generation, and our parents' generation, questioning this idea of success.

Thornburgh: Wine's funny, because there is a lot of bullshit in wine. You can pick your different bullshit.

Raventós: That's a quote I use a lot.

Thornburgh: What is the bullshit in wine? When you say that, what are you referring to?

Raventós: One of the reasons bullshit comes into wine is that it's so impossible to be objective when you're tasting it. There's so much room for marketing, and that becomes the bullshit. "This wine is great because it's made like this, like that." First of all, too often what is said is not what's really made, and this is very difficult to track.

Thornburgh: In terms of saying "This is organic," or "This is heritage"?

Raventós: For example, in my region, so much wine has the name of my region but comes from other regions because the players can buy it cheaper. This is the biggest drama that we have. For example, with Cava, there is no control over where the wines are coming from. Putting Penates on the label and

bringing the wine from La Mancha, which is the cheapest region in Spain, or people naming it Bordeaux when the wine comes from Chile.

Thornburgh: And they're just bottling it here.

Raventós: Because Bordeaux sells more than Chile. That's a big bullshit aspect, but also at a smaller level there are super-prestigious wines that cost $200 because they say they use a certain type of recipe or a certain type of wood, and that's impossible to track. There's a lot of bullshit. Another aspect of the bullshit would be the architecture: build big, beautiful wineries. But we're not selling architecture. I love architecture. But we're talking about wine, not architecture. The same with names and packaging. Haven't you seen these ridiculous labels now? It's all about the Yellowtail effect, for example. We need to step back and look at nature, origins, farming, and de-complicate it.

Thornburgh: That's the front-facing, the commercial-facing, but then you also have on the wine making side, you have fevers that grip wine makers. We were talking about Demeter. Something about the cycles of the moon and the lunar phases—adding some sort of shamanistic qualities to the process of wine making.

Raventós: This also helps to complicate the whole thing, no? Like when it's time to use more wood or less wood, and so on, of course, there have to be trends, but they complicate the expression of sites and the work, and the connection with the earth, which at the end of the day is what is beautiful about wine. Demeter brings fantastic things to the table, like a connection with the farm, and then also it brings more esoteric aspects to the table, which in my opinion make people more confused. Here in the village, when the moon is descendant, you go to the hairdresser and there is a big line—because everybody knows that the hair grows slower in that lunar phase, so it's the best time to get your hair cut.

Thornburgh: This is an actual thing that happens?

Raventós: This is a thing that happens in villages all over Europe. As you know, when the moon is descendant it makes descendant pressures that, for example, create the tides.

Thornburgh: Yes, the tides I can believe in.

Raventós: It's the same with the plants. When the moon is ascendant, plant fluids concentrate more towards the roots of plants, and that's when you want to do the pruning—so you don't damage the plant. This is something that, while it may seem to you esoteric, makes common sense to me.

Thornburgh: That's actually true.

Raventós: What is more esoteric is, for example, when we go into the preparations, where we have to mix cow manure we buried inside cow horns into our soils during the winter season, and then we

underground them in the spring. Then we do what we call dynamization: we mix it with water, and we dynamize this water by creating circulation in two different directions, creating a vortex. Then we spray the cow-manure dynamized water into the soil, enhancing the connection between root and mineral. But I can understand that with that, we're starting to confuse a lot of people.

Thornburgh: That's real eye of newt, bubbling cauldron, witch's coven stuff. You're putting cow manure into a cow horn, burying it under the ground at a certain time, bringing it back up. You don't need to do that to make great wine?

Raventós: I think you don't need to do that to make great wine. I think biodynamics can be criticized for being too esoteric, while there is a very important centerpiece, in my opinion, that biodynamics does, which is to control the application of copper and sulfur and chemistry and taking it to the next level. There are other parts of the Demeter certification that are harder to believe, inspired by Rudolf Steiner philosophy—a man who not only didn't like to drink wine but never cultivated a grape in his life. Bullshit can come to all parts of the wine-making cycle.

Thornburgh: It all comes back to marketing?

Raventós: I would like to say that the best marketing is no marketing. Tis is a quote from my friend Andy Bates, from Chicago. I think that in wine, the future is the past.

Thornburgh: The future is the past. Strip all that other bullshit away?

Raventós: Don't spend money on technology, don't spend money on pharmaceuticals for your grapes. Just try to understand the place and all the people working in the vineyards next door. Work together, learn from them, and just get a little bit of the history of the place. That's the future of wine, that's what's going to be of interest—something real, something authentic, something naked, and made with care and passion. The more detail that you can apply to it, the better the wine will be.

You can listen to the episode for free on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts.