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Can Spanish Sparkling Compete With Champagne?

Cava is the third-largest-production sparkling wine in the world. So why don't we know more about it?



PHOTO: PEP MONTSERRAT



By [Lettie Teague](#)

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18 COMMENTS

A NECTAR, a coffee, a kind of alcohol, a sparkling soda, a restaurant and “fake Champagne”: Those were a few of the answers I received from the wine drinkers to whom I posed the question “What is Cava?” Some didn’t even venture a guess, and only two correctly identified Cava as a sparkling wine that hails from Spain—though neither of them knew exactly where.

The third-largest-production sparkling wine in the world, after Prosecco and Champagne, Cava is surprisingly little known and even less well understood. Perhaps that’s because producers of Prosecco and Champagne have done a better job of marketing their wines and Cava just doesn’t have as famous a name.

Cava is a DO-classified wine, short for *denominación de origen*, which translates literally as “appellation of origin” and carries with it a raft of regulations regarding quality control. But while most Spanish DOs identify specific regions such as Rioja or Ribera del Duero, Cava is a wine type that isn’t tied to one region. While just about all Cava is produced in the Penedès region northwest of Barcelona (mostly centered around the town Sant Sadurní d’Anoia), Cava can be also produced in Rioja, Navarre, Valencia and other regions.

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Spanish producers first made this type of wine in the late 19th century, and stored it in a cave, or *cava*. The wines were inspired by French Champagne and made by the same method. Cava producers even used the name “Spanish Champagne” until Spain joined the EU in 1986 and they were forced to stop.

The grapes most commonly used to produce Cava are native Spanish varieties such as Xarel-lo, Macabeo and Parellada—names unknown to most wine drinkers—though some producers also add Champagne grapes like Chardonnay and Pinot Noir for elegance and depth.

When I conducted my highly informal, unscientific poll, I expected most people would know that Cava is a sparkling wine, and I figured at least half of them would know that it comes from Spain. That they did not came as a bit of a shock.

I first tasted Cava decades ago. The wine was Freixenet Cordon Negro, the cheap wine in the fashionable matte-black bottle. That wine is still cheap (\$9 at my local retailer) but far from fashionable today. Freixenet—one of the two largest Cava producers in Spain along with Codorníu, the company credited with creating Cava—dominated the Cava market in the U.S. for decades. That market is more diverse today, with more brands, including high-quality small producers like Gramona, Juvé y Camps and Fermí Bohigas. But their wines aren’t necessarily easy to find.

Ines Oro, the U.S.-based sales manager of Terra Nostra de Vinos, a consortium of Spanish wineries that includes Fermí Bohigas, believes that more of the people

I polled actually knew Cava. “They just don’t remember,” she said. I wasn’t sure if that counted as good news or bad, but she was optimistic. It’s just a matter of education, she said, including tastings at restaurants and stores. Cavas are doing particularly well in Boston, said Ms. Oro.

Eileen Elliott, director of operations and wine of Social Wines in South Boston, agreed and credited Bostonians’ Cava savvy to the number of good Spanish restaurants in the city. Ms. Elliott also noted Cava producers’ willingness to spend time in her town. She’d met quite a few of them, unlike producers of other sparkling wines. “We don’t see anyone from Champagne,” she said. As a result, her customers not only know that Cava is a dry “Champagne-style” wine but buy lots of it, too.

By contrast, Scott Levine, manager and wine buyer at Oak & Barrel wine shop in Manhattan, has to steer customers to the Spanish sparkling wine. “If they’re Prosecco drinkers looking for something drier, I’ll suggest Cava,” he said. And if they’re looking for an inexpensive Champagne, he will steer them to Gramona Imperial Cava instead. Made by the same method as Champagne and, at \$30, around the same price as a Champagne made by a cooperative, Gramona is a richer, more nuanced and complex wine than a similarly priced Champagne, he said.

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The 2011 Gramona Imperial Brut Gran Reserva was the priciest of the 15 Cavas I bought for my tasting; the \$9 Freixenet Cordon Negro, the cheapest. The gulf between the two was far greater than \$21. While the former might have been mistaken for Champagne, the latter would do little to dispel the impression that Cava is a cheap, simple wine.

“The secret to a great Cava is aging,” said Xavier Gramona, co-owner of Gramona. Gramona ages even their simplest Cava 4-5 years before release, a

costly practice, Mr. Gramona pointed out, as that means years of delayed revenue.

Mr. Gramona laments that Cava is associated with cheap wines. He hopes Javier Pagés, the new president of the DO Cava, will pay attention to his dissatisfaction and that of several other quality producers. Some, like Pepe Raventós of Raventós i Blanc, have already left the DO. Mr. Gramona doesn't want to leave; he wants to improve the quality of the wines and elevate their image.

After tasting 15 Cavas, I'd say the odds are long. Although Mr. Gramona's Cava was superb and we tasted several good wines, there were many disappointing ones, too—including a soapy tasting Freixenet Cordon Negro, a truly tinny Rondel Brut (in a tacky blue bottle) and a weirdly candied Babot Brut Nature.

The better bottles included the crisp Mas Vida Brut (\$11) and the Dibon Brut Reserve (\$10), pleasant if simple—good wines for a crowd. The Bohigas Brut Reserva, a decided step up, was lively and dry with a citrus note, and at \$12 a good buy. The Gran Campo Viejo Brut Rosé (\$14) was juicy and toothsome if a touch coarse. The Juvé y Camps Reserva de la Familia (\$17) was bright and well balanced, and the 2011 Gramona Imperial Brut Gran Reserva (\$30) was lush, layered and beautiful.

I asked Mr. Pagés, CEO of Codorníu Raventós as well as the new president of the DO Cava, if he would encourage those who left the DO to return. He responded (via email), “Unity will make us stronger.” His is an understandably optimistic position, but I can't help wondering if the DO Cava might be even stronger if the caliber of the wines were consistently higher overall.



PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

OENOFILE // 5 Bottles That Raise Cava's Cred

1. Dibon Brut Reserve Cava, \$10 This dry sparkling wine from the Penedès-based Bodegas Pinord is made from the three classic Cava grapes: Macabeo, Parellada and Xarel-lo. It may not be complex, but it's a pleasantly refreshing drink.
2. Mas Vida Brut Cava, \$11 Citrus notes and a clean finish made this Cava a crowd favorite among our tasting panel, and at \$11 a bottle, this wine is also an excellent buy. A perfect party sparkler, made from the classic Cava varieties.
3. Bohigas Brut Reserva Cava, \$12 This is a dry Cava full of character from all estate-grown, organic fruit, a blend of Macabeo, Parellada and Xarel-lo. Aged about two years on the lees, it has a rich, toasty note and represents remarkable quality for the price.
4. Juvé y Camps Reserva de la Familia 40th Anniversary Limited Edition Brut Nature Cava, \$17 This very dry, crisp wine commemorates 40 years of this bottling from the Juvé family, one of the most storied in Sant Sadurní d'Anoia, center of Cava in the Penedès.
5. 2011 Gramona Imperial Brut Gran Reserva Cava, \$30 The Gramona family produces what may well be called the Champagne of Cavas. This wine was aged almost six years before release, and the result is a full-bodied, complex, sumptuous wine with a soft finish.