

## A Glass of Class?

In recent years, there has been a great deal of push back against the Denomination of Origin bodies in Spain which have been perceived as moving too slowly in terms of modifying outdated restrictions to meet the times. In early 2016, a manifesto that (quite reasonably) called upon the DOs to work in pursuit of terroir-driven wines was signed by 150 winemakers and journalists working in Spanish wine. This has been accompanied by some wineries deciding to leave their DO, the most high profile case being Artadi fully leaving DO Rioja last year.

What may have not reached English-speaking media as much was the creation of "Clàssic Penedès", essentially a sub-classification within DO Penedès for sparkling wines produced in the region. This is naturally quite confusing as this happens to be the same region that most sparkling wines for DO Cava are produced within thus making for a similar situation as what we saw in late 14th century Catholicism except that instead of two Popes, we have two sparkling wines in Catalonia.

Naturally, someone reading this is probably thinking, "Why bother? Names such as Champagne, Prosecco, and indeed, Cava are famous in terms of European sparkling wines. Why risk losing that brand?" I sat down with DO Penedès president, Josep Maria of his family's Albet i Noya winery as well as Sergi Colet of Colet and Agustí Torelló of AT Roca, to discuss this very question. The simple answer was that, much like in Rioja, they found that the Cava brand has been diluted and the common association of the name is more with cheap bubbly than any kind of craft wine. Anyone working in a restaurant today can most easily attest to this in that if you want affordable fizz, you turn to Cava or Prosecco as both have raced to capture the bottom end of the market while Champagne beams down from above in bemusement.

For those who aren't aware, approximately 95% of the sparkling wines produced under DO Cava are from three massive producers, two of them being Freixenet and Cordoníu. In terms of price, I was informed that 90% of Cava is less than 10€ retail in Spain. As Agustí put it, "There are two leagues of Cava: excellent and poor quality." And there are indeed excellent Cavas out there, especially in the higher end such as Recaredo, Juvé & Camps, Mestres, Gramona, and many others. But the vast, vast proportion of the overall production is simply blended wine that comes from any number of vineyards, villages, or even other parts of Spain including seven other Spanish regions outside of Catalonia.

Champagne and Cava have roughly the same production area but there are nearly 5,000 producers in Champagne whereas in Cava, there are only 287 which helps illustrate the industrial aspect of this type of sparkling wine even more starkly. As an ironic aside, despite their typical disdain for Spanish wine as "lacking finesse", the French drink over 5 million bottles of Spanish Cava whereas the Spaniards drink 3.5 million bottles of Champagne.

It's for this that the Clàssic Penedès producers decided to strike out on their own, a move that they admit is extremely risky. Currently there are 17 producers who have taken the steps to join this sparkling classification that officially came to be in 2013 with four of them previously making wines under DO Cava. Despite this first year of establishing the regulations, if a wine met the requirements before, they can release wines called, "Clàssic Penedès" that are a prior vintage to 2013.

So if one is looking at this sub-classification of Penedès and DO Cava, the question has to be asked, how do these two sparkling wines differ from one another? The simple answer is that while Cava is just the

name of a process regardless of geography, Clàssic Penedès (or just Clàssic for short) is the name of sparkling wines from a specific, singular region.

There are a lengthy list of regulations that define Clàssic and they are indeed quite stringent--considerably more so than Cava. The first most notable item is that any vineyard producing grapes for Clàssic must be certified organic. While some 55% of all producers in DO Penedès are certified as organic, this restriction makes them the first sparkling wine classification in the entire world to have wine produced from 100% organic grapes.

Clàssic producers cannot buy in their wine. If they bottle it, then it has to be wine made in their cellars. Fermentation, degorging, dosage, etc. all need to happen within their own registered premises. This is significant as around 80% of the wine produced by the big wineries in DO Cava is bought from other wineries who vinify it for them.

The minimum length of time prior to release, starting with initial fermentation, is 15 months, thus every wine is a "Reserva" in terms of the traditional Cava age naming scheme. This is quite different from Cava where the minimum is nine and there was a big controversy several years back as Freixenet wasn't even meeting the legal requirement and was fined over 2 million euros. The producers I talked to said that again this 15 months makes for a risky business as they can't turn around a vintage for sale the next year. But, they believe it to be crucial to fully age and allow the wines to develop.

Dosage levels fall in line with what have become the general guidelines for sparkling wines and as Catalan and French as more closely-related languages than Spanish and French, the domestic labels will be familiar to anyone who knows Champagne:

Brut Natural: -3g/l

Extra Brut: 0-6 g/l

Brut: 7-12 g/l

Extra Sec: 12-20 g/l

Sec: 17-35 g/l

Semisec: 33-50 g/l

Dolç: 50+ g/l

Dates play in to Clàssic a great deal as well in that there are no non-vintage years allowed. Every wine sold is a vintage wine. They also require that the date of disgorgement be printed on the label. The labels are another item to address as it may be difficult to tell who is Clàssic and who is Cava to the casual observer.

Initially they simply stated "Clàssic Penedès" on the front of the label. This is being augmented with a new back label that while stating DO Penedès, next to it will also state, "Clàssic Penedès". As time evolves, many winemakers may choose to state one of the new subzones of Penedès. Agustí showed me a bottle of one of his still wines where he states this and these subzones are where things start to get complicated as they apply to both the still wines as well as these sparkling wines

Penedès is a rather large region of some 54,000ha in total. Of this, 25,000ha is planted with vineyards. These are not all vineyards for Penedès wines, though, as a great majority of this goes in to DO Cava as well as DO Catalunya--something of a kitchen sink DO in Catalonia that covers the entire autonomous region and functions considerably more like a Vino de la Tierra region although it has DO status. Ultimately, there are 4,000ha that actually fall under the auspice of DO Penedès.

Historically, there were and continue to be three delineated subzones that form bands across the region when talking about Penedès: Penedès Superior (the more inland, higher elevation vineyards), Penedès Central (those in the mid valley), and then Penedès Marítim (the coastal areas.) For some time these have been considered woefully inadequate. First, they're confusing as there are also the Alt Penedès and Baix Penedès administrative counties (Upper and Lower Penedès, respectively) but the Penedès subzones don't correspond with them at all. Secondly, they're simply far too big. For instance, there are parts of the Marítim zone that run from sea level up to 500m. No one seems that energetic to talk about these subzones these days as they now have created a new set of seven that are much more accurate.

The new subzones are:

Conca del Riu Anoia (Anoia River Basin)

Valls de Bitlles Anoia (Valleys of the Bitlles & Anoia Rivers)

Conca del Riu Foix (Foix River Basin)

Serra d'Ancosa (The Ancosa Range)

Massís del Garraf i Costers d'Ordal (The Garraf Massif & Slopes of Ordal)

Marina del Garraf (Garraf Shore)

Costers del Montmell (Slopes of Montmell)

While this may seem like a lot to take in as it applies to both Clàssic as well as DO Penedès still wines, these new classifications have offered up a great deal more specificity when talking about points of origin in the region. The work on these classifications have been going on for over a decade and it's just now that both still and sparkling wines are coming on to the market. The first we'll see fully "activated" will be Garraf/Ordal as while they are pushing ahead with instituting all of them, there needs to be a winemaker in each subzone leading the way and acting as a representative. It just happens that Garraf/Ordal, as well as Conca del Riu Anoia where Albet i Noia has vineyards, have some of the most active wineries.

So, ultimately, Clàssic offers up what seem to be countless advantages in terms of a new sparkling wine brand: terroir specificity, organic production, bottling has to be done by the producer, longer aging, and a number of other benefits. Why would producers of Cava who meet the requirements not want to join Clàssic? Obviously, there is the justifiable concern that leaving such a well-known brand as Cava could potentially cost them in terms of sales, but in talking with producers with the Clàssic profile who remain within Cava, there were two main reasons that stood out.

The first was the name. When I asked the trio of Josep Maria, Sergi, and Agustí what was the thinking behind the name they told me, "They're 'classic wines from Penedès', essentially a return to the methods that our grandparents used before we went in a bad direction during the 1970s and 80s." One winemaker told me that while he agreed with the thinking, this name just made it sound a lot like the "crémant" wines of France and he found this to be a generic moniker that didn't carry the strength of "Cava". As an English speaker, I can see this as a justifiable concern as I automatically want to abbreviate the name to "clàssic" which I see as a lot more appealing than a possible shortening à la "pét nat" which in this case could easily become a very unfortunate, "clap".

The other concern that came up most often was the permissiveness of the allowed grapes. Officially, the following grapes are permitted in the wine and on the label: Macabeu, Xarel·lo, Parellada, Subirat Parent, Malvasia de Sitges, Chardonnay, Muscat d'Alexandria, Red Grenache, Carignan, Sumoll, and Pinot Noir. However, smaller proportions of Chenin Blanc, Gewüztraminer, and Riesling are also

permitted. The detractors find that these untraditional grapes shouldn't be allowed and they're taking away from the overall premise and reason to have Clàssic in the first place. The winemakers I talked to insisted that they have done a 10-year study on the grapes and found them to be fully suitable to Penedès which is indeed a mix of Continental and Mediterranean climates.

Ultimately, it seemed that those who wanted a reason to not leave Cava to join Clàssic could find one if they wanted to and just felt safer within the brand of Cava despite what it has come to signify. DO Penedès president, Josep Maria did confirm that there are others who are on the verge of producing under Clàssic and so the 16 that are in existence now may add to their ranks in the very near future.

DO Penedès kindly put together a tasting for me and whereas younger or more budget-minded sparkling wines from Spain are often little more than alcohol with fizz and a dose of acidity, here you could actually taste the soils, grapes, and the style of the winemaker. Also, despite the ability to add in these other grapes, all the wines with the exception of two were based on a blend of the Penedès stalwarts: Xarel·lo, Parellada, and Macabeu.

**Can Morral del Molí** 2013 Brut Nature 11.5%

Pale straw in color. Lime peel, smooth chalkiness, medium acidity in the nose, undertones of vanilla cream. Medium plus acidity and medium body, long finish, citric notes and creaminess follow through.

**Castell de Pujades** Aymar Brut Nature 2013 11.5%

Straw color, strong, stony mineral notes, biscuit, juicy peach. Medium plus acidity and body, full, strong mouthfeel, medium finish.

**Mas Bertran** Balma 2012 Brut Nature 12%

Pale straw in color, lemon pith, granitic minerality, rounded vanilla butter. Medium body and acidity but excellent balance and a lingering yet not potent finished. Very even-handed, integrated, and subtle overall despite not overpowering the palate.

**Mas Comtal** Joan Milà 2012 Brut Nature 12.5%

Lemon in color. Lemon pith, light almonds, minor vanilla and buttery cream. More green fruit notes in the body. Medium acidity and body, medium minus finish.

**Clos Lentiscus** Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature 2012 12.5%

A natural wine producer that uses the honey from their own beehives for the liqueur de tirage. Fully Malvasia based. Pale lemon in color. Honey, white blossoms, fresh lemon zest, melon, medium plus acidity, bright and lively.

**Albet i Noya** Brut 21 2012 12.5%

Pale straw in color. Notes of the lees, white blossoms, white pear. Light red apple notes in the body, medium plus body, medium acidity, medium finish. Holds a great deal of singular character.

**Loxarel** MM 2009 Brut Nature 12%

Another natural producers that doesn't use sulfites. Straw in color. Cider notes alongside young red apple, cured pear. Medium plus body with medium acidity, and short finish although good stick in the mouth and asks for food pairings.

**AT Roca** Rosat Reserva 2013 12%

Very light cherry blush in the glass. Very light red cherry, cured red apple, starwberry, chalkiness, and a tiny hint of wild sage. Touch sweet on the palate as is typical of Brut, medium in both body and acidity, medium finish. Nice option for fattier seafood.

**Colet Navazos 2012 Extra Brut 2012 12.5%**

Made in a partnership with Equipo Navazos of Sherry fame. Pale lemon with a hint of green. Chalky, lemon pith, hint of forest floor, and red fruits. Medium in body and acidity, very balanced across the palate, fluid, and intentional. Medium plus finish.

**Torre del Veguer 2014 Brut nature 12.5%**

With a based of Muscat. Lemon in color. Definite grapey Muscat notes in the nose but controlled and not syrupy with crisper, green fruit aspects coming out more. Medium body and medium plus acidity. Bright and lively on the palate. Short finish.