

Catalan whites grow up

A growing number of Catalonia's most committed producers are working to bring the region's varied white wine styles into the spotlight. Miquel Hudin reveals the names to look out for

HISTORICALLY, TO TALK about white wines in Spain would be to focus more on the methods used to arrive at the wines. The fortified wines of Sherry, the aged whites of Rioja, or the sparkling cava wines, primarily from Catalonia's Penedès region, were and continue to be conversation starters. Wines without some splash of unique manipulation tended to take the form of fresh summer styles with food-pairing acidity and little more.

Happily, anyone who has followed the upward trajectory of Spanish wine in recent decades knows that the white wines worth talking about have greatly expanded, with both Albariño and Godello in Galicia and the Verdejo of Rueda being regulars on restaurant wine lists. Despite the success of these western and central wines, the whites of

Catalonia on the Mediterranean side of Spain haven't garnered as much fame. And this despite the fact that the region is spoiled for choice when it comes to native white grapes. What's more, diverse climates ranging from alpine to continental to coastal – and a liberal smattering of microclimates in between – present no end of unique growing conditions.

Much like other places in Spain, there has been a steady and active push towards quality which, after some three decades, has seen serious results. Additionally, a renewed focus in the 21st century on sales and marketing, higher-end craft wines, or simply a cooler vintage here and there, have created a groundswell of fine white wines waiting to be discovered in Catalonia.

Below: Xarel·lo vines at Recaredo's Turó d'en Mota vineyard, in the Bitlles Valley highlands of Alt Penedès

Grand Ole Penedès

The Penedès DO is a dominant force in Catalan wine. Single wineries within it are able to produce greater quantities of wine than entire other appellations such as DOQ Priorat or DO Montsant. Spanning some 24,000ha (hectares) and influenced by a wide range of climates from mountainous to coastal, 80% of what it produces is white.

Since its official inception in 1960, Penedès has produced reliable white wines and a

'We don't even know what the limits are in terms of Xarel·lo's ageability' **Ton Mata, Recaredo**

smattering of reds. This image would no doubt have endured for years to come were it not for the realisation that producers had to get more from their region, and for the last 10 years or so there has been a drive to deliver a more elegant style here. Some may argue this >



ambition remains unfulfilled, but bear in mind that many of the budget wines you think are from Penedès actually fall under Catalonia's kitchen-sink classification of DO Catalunya, which permits cross-blending from all regions.

There has also been a focus on the previously untapped star power of the Xarel·lo (pronounced sha-rel-lu) grape. Capable of producing excellent still and sparkling wines, most winemakers believe they are only just beginning to understand the full potential of this grape. Ton Mata of Celler Credo and Recaredo Cava once told me: 'We don't even know what the limits are in terms of its ageability.' And this is easily seen in the finesse of the aged sparkling Turó d'en Mota, which is 100% Xarel·lo.

Smaller producers in the region have tapped into this as well, and are starting to make excellent single-vineyard wines such as those from Enric Soler, who, producing a scant 7,500 bottles a year, is showing a different side to the region. His wine Nun comes from a single vineyard of Xarel·lo and shows the body, acidity, aroma and depth that can be achieved when care is taken to lower yields from the high level of 79.2hl/ha permitted under the regulations in Penedès.

Producer AT Roca adopts a similar philosophy with its single-vineyard Xarel·lo, which is partially aged in clay vessels. This recent yet ancient addition to the winemaking toolset in the region is helping to create more vibrant wines and to maximise expression of the excellent Penedès terroirs.



Above: Garnatxa Blanca grapes on the vine at Sant Josep Wines in the Terra Alta village of Bot

Southern accents

Heading further south in Spain usually means that things start heating up. Crossing the Ebro river, into a part of Catalonia that some Catalans often forget is still Catalonia, you arrive at DO Terra Alta, where production is amazingly half white and half red. In that portion of white, by far and away the dominant grape is not Xarel·lo, as in Penedès, but white Grenache (aka Garnatxa Blanca).

Where Terra Alta sits would seem to be the limits of where white Grenache can make proper wines, but this is due to what this 'high land' innately brings to them. They see a mix of both coastal and continental influences, getting the best of both. Plenty of sun during the day is tempered by night-time cooling breezes – unsurprising given that the altitude here starts at 400m and rises to 1,400m.

Some time ago, as more boutique estates came on the scene to challenge the dominance of old cooperatives, they decided to get behind white Grenache and thoroughly 'own' the grape via a '100% Garnatxa Blanca' campaign that started 10 years ago. A great number of varietal wines now emerge from the region and show that, unlike other, hotter areas, they can achieve a great deal of finesse from the grape, whether it's at 12% or 14.5% alcohol. Terra Alta is definitely a Catalonia region on the cusp of being discovered and treasured – the wines have distinctive regional expression and currently offer excellent value.

There are others in these southern reaches of Catalonia making fine white wines, such as in Priorat. In a region clearly known more for its full-bodied Grenache and Carignan reds, white wines represent only 5% of the total production here, but several producers have been crafting fine whites, albeit often from foreign varieties. Wines such as Aigua de Llum

'Terra Alta is definitely a Catalonia region on the cusp of being discovered'



Photograph: Teveon. Map: Maggie Nelson

Catalonia: six names to know

Altavins

Owner Joan Arrufí became the president of DO Terra Alta in 2015, and did so as a sea-change shifted the direction here from large cooperative cellars to the much smaller boutique producers, who have been focusing more on terroir than quantity. Arrufí's Altavins wines show this wonderfully, with a range of both whites and reds that lean heavily on the strength of both colours of Grenache in the region. The result is a selection of wines that can be deceptive in how approachable they are, yet ultimately layered and complex.



Above: Joan Arrufí, owner of Altavins and president of the Terra Alta DO

Bàrbara Forès

This Terra Alta cellar is named after owner Carme Ferrer's great-great-grandmother, who was influential in forging the family's path into wine back in the 19th century. Ferrer continues this tradition today with both white and red wines that do a wonderful job of expressing the region's terroirs.

Cellar Credo

This is the still wine cellar of highly notable cava producer Recaredo, and the wines it produces under this name are excellent for the same reason as the cavas: a focus on biodynamic viticulture

primarily from the Xarel·lo grape. His top wine, Nun, is a wonderfully vibrant and electric wine that highlights all the potential capabilities of the terroir of DO Penedès – if one is able to have a cellar that produces only 7,500 bottles a year.

Lafou

A winery in Terra Alta established in 2007 by the Roqueta family, who also has a cellar in DO Pla de Bages. It has been instrumental in working to revive the sector of smaller cellars in the region. Both its whites and reds wonderfully exhibit everything that's special and unique to this southern region.

Mas Candí

A DO Penedès cellar established in 2006 by Ramón Jané and Toni Carbó, who have been working to reclaim what Penedès was prior to the arrival of cava production, which is to say a region with considerably more grape varieties than today. They have an experimental vineyard dedicated to grapes such as Malvasia de Sitges, Mandó, Rogenc, Sumoll and Turbat. They work organically and vinify naturally, trying out different approaches while continuing to work with the classic Penedès grape Xarel·lo.

and attention to terroir and detail. The wines are almost all from the Penedès star grape Xarel·lo, and the family has a keen interest in showing the excellence of individual vineyards as opposed to producing large-scale blends.

Enric Soler

Previously a sommelier, in 2004 Soler inherited a vineyard from his grandfather and started working to reinvigorate the old vines as well as plant new ones, placing a focus on producing single-vineyard wines

from Vall Llach, made from high-altitude Viognier, or Font de la Figuera Blanc from Clos Figueras, also primarily Viognier, are elegant and enjoyable. White Grenache rears its head as the main component of two excellent blends: Massipa from Scala Dei and Lo Coster Blanc from Sangenis i Vaqué.

Frontier mentality

Costoners del Segre is the only DO in the province of Lleida. With seven separate and wildly varying sub-zones, the wines take on a multitude of different characters. In the lower parts around the Corb River, there are wonderfully fresh, crisp wines being made from Macabeu, Parellada – and even Chardonnay by L'Olivera estate, which inspires in its successful employment of people with severe disabilities.

As you wind your way further north to the town of Tremp, you will find winemaking at its most extreme in Spain – for now. A number of vineyards have been planted around the

town at elevations starting from 600m in an attempt to future-proof their wine production against climate change. While Penedès winemaking giant Torres was one of the earliest, the region was initially 'colonised' for winemaking by Raül Bobet's Castell d'Encus.

It's a most curious project for Catalonia, as Raül is using grapes not commonly associated with the territory, such as Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon and Pinot Noir. While various attempts at producing wines from these grapes have been made over the years, the quality was usually never there due to issues of acidity, or far too much sun for these grapes normally found in more northerly climes.

Raül is proving that elevation is the key to success, and that growers need to be prepared to 'make wine at the frontier', as he puts it. Given his 850m-1,000m of elevation, this is not an understatement; and this change of altitude resounds in wines with boundless acidity, so much so that he's actually >

replacing his Albariño vines with Riesling. It's a dynamic and fascinating project to behold, with excellent wines to show for it.

Tradition, renovation, innovation: these are the components of winemaking that have been pushing Catalan wines to greater levels in recent decades – and even more so in the case of the whites. As winemakers have forged a clear path forward in working with their red

grapes, they've now found time to come back to their whites and create singular wines from unique grapes and regions.

Little by little, they've been able to begin showing that white wine from this triangular area wedged between sea and mountains can be much more than just bubbles or a glass of some pale liquid that makes a nice photo alongside your paella. **D**

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Hudin's picks: best whites from Catalonia



Castell d'Encús, Taleia, Costers del Segre 2014 93
£26.25 **H2Vin, OW Loeb, Woodwinters**

A blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon that presents green apple fruit, grassiness, notes of light smoke and lime peel. It's direct, intense and complex with high acidity that fills the mouth, where the green apple notes take over with pleasing crispness and freshness.

Drink 2017-2021 **Alcohol** 12.5%

Can Ràfols dels Caus, La Calma, Penedès 2012 92

POA Indigo Wine

A rare 100% Chenin Blanc. Brilliant in the glass, with apricot, creamy white peach and gentle floral notes. Light and succulent in body, lovely balance and interplay of acidity and structure that don't overwhelm each other. Lingering floral finish. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 13.5%



Domènech Vidal, Cultivare, Penedès 2013 92

POA Perfect Cellar

Opens with creamy melon and light, delicate apple blossoms, notes of mature pear and many textured layers. Beautiful in the mouth with excellent integrated acidity and citrus notes that flow into a lingering, long finish. Really shows the best of Xarel·lo. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 11.5%

Castell d'Encús, Ekam, Costers del Segre 2015 91

£26.25 **H2Vin, OW Loeb, Woodwinters**

Aromas of white pear and almond blossoms, little flecks of Provence herbs, white pepper and a limestone minerality.

Linear palate with white peach notes and a lingering finish. While blended with Albariño now, will be 100% Riesling in the future. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 12%

Edetària, Finca la Terrenal, Terra Alta 2014 90

POA Burridges of Arlington Street

Garntaxa Blanca. Sweet vanilla and grapefruit citrus aromas along with notes of green pear, savoury mint and wild herbs. Balanced and expressive, the moderate acidity works very well, revealing lengthy citrus notes in the finish. **Drink** 2017-2021 **Alc** 14.5%



Martí Serdà, El Xitxarel·lo, Penedès 2015 90

POA Moreno Wine

Melon, white pear, fresh mint and light yellow blossom aromas. Crisp and lively in the mouth, with more pear notes as well as marked yet balanced acidity and a clean, savoury finish. Sports a brilliant label that plays on Catalan insults. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 12%

Mas Candí, La Pura, Penedès 2014 90

POA Indigo Wine

Xarel·lo. Grapefruit and green apple aromas with a good chalky mineral component and a touch of bitter melon. Very balanced in the mouth despite the rather peppery acidity. Overall very savoury and lively with a lengthy finish. **Drink** 2017-2022 **Alc** 13%

Albet i Noya, El Fanio, Penedès 2015 89

POA Vintage Roots

Xarel·lo. Aromas of lemon pith, bitter melon, honey, pear and herbal notes. Crisp, taut and succulent in the mouth with vibrant acidity and a medium-length finish. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 13%

Herència Altés, Far del Sud, Terra Alta 2015 89

POA Bancroft

With vibrant colour in the glass, this has a nose of subtle white peach, light almond blossom, gentle lemon pith and savoury stoniness. It's full on the palate but luscious and citric, with balanced acidity and a lingering, delightful finish. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 14.5%

Mas Comtal, Antistiana, Penedès 2015 89

POA L'Altre Vi, SpaNiche Wines

Old vine Xarel·lo, between 50 and 80 years old. Aromas of lemon peel, grapefruit and light orchard blossoms. Crisp, fresh and juicy in the mouth, showing good intensity and persistence on the finish. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 13%



Torres, Milmanda, Conca de Barberà 2012 89

£24.39-£33.99 **Christopher Keiller, Hailsham Cellars, Italian Continental Stores**

Chardonnay. Exotic fruit aromas of guava, pineapple, mango, some barrel notes and good intensity. Pineapple sits strong on the palate, along with woody straw notes and strong acidity, with a long finish. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 14%

Altavins, Il·lencavònia, Terra Alta 2015 88

£7.82 **Vinissimus**

Garnatxa Blanca. Light, mature peach and almond blossom along with tropical notes of pineapple and a good hit of stony minerality. Crisp and lively on the palate with green apple notes shining through, leading to a medium finish. **Drink** 2017-2018 **Alc** 13.5%

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