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Lledoner Roig - a Costa Brava speciality

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Catalan resident and author of the [Vinologue](#) book series, Miquel Hudin sends this account of a tasting devoted to a niche grape variety in the renascent Costa Brava wine region Empordà. It coincides with my growing awareness of the fine quality of many a southern French Grenache Gris. See, for example, my enthusiastic notes on these from [Ch Maris](#) and [Dom de l'Horizon](#). Funnily enough, our very own Spanish specialist Ferran Centelles makes tiny quantities of Projecte SIS Garnatxa Gris from Empordà grapes, though it does not seem to have been included in the tasting described below.

As is the case with many old European wine grapes, Grenache Gris has a number of synonyms, but one of the names you very rarely hear is Lledoner Roig, used by local winemakers in Empordà on the Costa Brava.

It's admittedly a grape variety that's generally on the decline. According to the former director of the viticulture laboratory in Roussillon Pierre Torrès, Roussillon grew 5,000 ha (12,355 acres) of this deep-pink mutation of Grenache Noir in 1958, mainly for the vins doux naturels then popular, presumably, but by 2012 the total had dwindled to 900 ha (2,224 acres). In Catalunya the decline has been even more marked and now there are all of 61 ha (151 acres) in total with 60 of those in Empordà. Of course, as noted by Anna Espelt of Celler Espelt, there are undoubtedly more unrecorded vines of Lledoner Roig out there than these numbers suggest as Lledoner Roig vines are often interspersed with old Carinyena (Carignan) vines. A major player in international wine this variety is not, but it has had more attention thrown its way recently due to the renewed interest in cultivating local indigenous grapes (see Wine Grapes, etc).

Under the auspices of DO Empordà, winemakers typically use the name Lledoner Roig to refer to the old bushvines. Ms Espelt said that new plantings, where found, are typically called Garnatxa Grisa as a way of distinguishing these newer clones that are French in origin. This nomenclature isn't always adhered to and the terms are often used interchangeably.

There are precious few vineyards comprised exclusively of Lledoner Roig. As the story often goes, when a Carignan vine died, peasants of yore would plant one of these Lledoner Roig vines in its place as it's a vigorous vine.

Historically these grapes were then used in the dessert wines of Empordà but several cellars, including Espelt and Cellers d'en Guilla, are now focusing on single-varietal dry wines from the grape. The dessert wines fortunately persist, however.

A tasting organised by local wine connoisseurs Jaume Pallàs and Ramon

for nearly a century in some of the oldest vineyards. The real question for the winemakers is to come to some form of consensus as to what they're looking for as a group – just as they need to demonstrate to those who come to the region thinking it's just sun and seafood that there is also a vibrant, adventurous winemaking scene to discover too.

I list the 10 wines I tasted in order of preference, starting with my favourite, which I gave 16.5/20. They were all made from 100% Lledoner Roig except for Cellers d'en Guilla's Vinya del Metge 2014, which contains 10% dark-skinned Grenache.

Celler La Vinyeta, Microví Torrats 2013 Empordà

Old vines of 90 years near the village of Espolla on sedimentary soils. Partial fermentation in stainless steel and then finished in French oak of 300 litres. Wondrously profound aromatically with pronounced mineral notes, light vanilla, and a lovely tinge of rose petals. Floats on the palate with lingering acidity. 14%

Vinyes d'Olivardots, V d'O 7.13 2013 Empordà

From a 91-year-old vineyard in Capmany that's a mix of pebbles, silt, and sand. Fermented in one new 500-litre barrel of French oak. Straw colour in the glass with pronounced minerality and grapefruit aromas as well as a touch of sweet caramel. Balanced, full, and of medium plus body that keeps the minerality as well as new oak notes in check. 14.5%

Espelt Viticultors, Lledoner Roig 2014 Empordà

From old vines in Rabós, fermented in 500-litre French oak barrels with ambient yeasts. Clear and bright in colour. Bold citric notes of grapefruit and lime peel. Larger bodied yet able to stay fresh and lively with minor toasted notes of the oak in the finish. 13.25%

Cellers d'en Guilla, Edith 2013 Empordà

Only two 300-litre oak barrels were made. Bright and alive in the glass with potent minerality, citric notes of lemon peel, and a hint of caramel. Round

across the palate with the citric elements more pronounced and a lingering, crisp finish. 14.5%

Cellers d'en Guilla, Vinya del Metge 2014 Empordà

The Lledoner Roig grapes are from a vineyard near the village of Mollet de Peralada. While definitely a rosé, it's extremely pale. Aromatically balanced with floral orange blossom notes and summer orchard fruit as well as a light touch of red fruits. Full-bodied, great structure with citric and light cream notes in the finish. 14.5%

Celler Cooperatiu d'Espolla, Vins de Postal - Finca El Beurac 2013 Empordà

Grapes from a 0.4 ha vineyard of 45 years that's mostly slate. Fermentation in used French oak barrels. Crisp, bright minerality with a rather large degree of toasted aromas and a surprising touch of dried fig. Even-handed, medium body that stays fresh and expressive throughout the finish. 13.7%

Cooperativa de Garriguella, Gerisena Rosat 2014 Empordà

Grapes from the edge of the Empordà by the Alberes foothills that are aged in stainless-steel tanks. A touch of yeastiness along with apricot peel, peach, and summer blossoms. Quite structured and full in the mouth but falls off quite quickly in the finish. 12.5%

Còsmic Vinyaters d'Agullana, Confiança 2014 Empordà

From 60-year-old organic vineyards in the northern village of Agullana on sandy granite soils. Full, natural vinification with ambient yeasts in 200-litre clay amphorae, no sulphites added. Cloudy in the glass with celery and radish notes alongside a dash of minerality. Medium acidity with the vegetal notes sticking through the finish. 12.5%

Vinyes dels Aspres, Oriol dels Aspres 2014 Empordà

From 38-year-old vines in the village of Cantallops that are Grenache Gris clones from Roussillon, aged in stainless steel. Light hint of brioche, granite minerality, stone fruit, and some minor lime hints. The flavours generally

mimic the aromas with a surprising burst of lactic notes in the finish. 14.5%

Celler Mas Llunes, 13.02 Singulars de Mas Llunes 2013 Empordà

An experimental wine of just 800 bottles made with a selection of grapes from a 70-year-old vineyard in the village of Fontanilles that sits on slate soils. A touch metallic with minor apricot and old cream notes in the nose. Doesn't hold much structure, has a short finish, and stays generally closed. 14%



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