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Written by

Guest contributor

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Priorat and Montsant in 2015

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Miquel Hudin files this report. See also [Ferran's report on the rest of Spain](#) and tomorrow's compilation of tasting notes on Spain and Portugal.

These days everyone wants to put a positive spin on each year's vintage, wanting, rightly or wrongly, to stand out in a crowded digital landscape. But after last year's 'marmalade harvest' (see [Priorat shrinks in 2014](#)), people may be justified in wanting to go on at length about just how great 2015 has been.

The spring saw little hail but then came the summer with an extended heatwave that left the region suffocating throughout July. Of course hot Julys

are not atypical. The Catalan refrain - that deserves its own T-shirt some day - is *al juliol, ni dona ni cargol*, or 'in July there are neither ladies nor snails'.

It was initially a beneficial heat as it promoted wonderful veraison, but as it went on unabated, there were fears of another 2003. Viticulturists were getting up at 5 am to cut back the vine growth that had gone quickly from excellent to excessive. As August arrived, fears of an incredibly hot vintage were forgotten as cool evenings and light rains washed over the region, relieving vine stress and preserving acidity but with sufficient heat to continue maturity.

While there were a few who started harvesting their reds at the end of August, the harvest for both Priorat and Montsant began in earnest in mid September. A couple of wonderful days were followed by the threat of rain. Thankfully for the county of Priorat (encompassing both DOQ Priorat and DO Montsant), the rains passed right around them, demonstrating how this region is such a pocket of climactic uniqueness.

The harvest continued throughout October and the very last grapes came in just at the start of November in both appellations, which is one to two weeks earlier than usual. The grapes were extraordinarily healthy with next to no mildew nor rot. The grapes (pictured above with my dog) were in perfect shape for both regions, allowing for what many people are thinking will be another classic vintage.

DO Montsant

This year saw a changing of the guard in DO Montsant with a new president Pilar Just. Jaume Domènech decided to step down after being president since the appellation's creation in 2002. Pilar and her husband Xavier Peñas own the winery Sant Rafel in the village of Pradell de la Teixeta and she is very excited about the harvest for both her own winery as well as for the region at large.

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In the south, while we had a lot of heat at the start, the brief rains in August were a relief. We're seeing great concentration, especially from Carignan in the village of El Masroig.' While production for DO Montsant is mostly in the southern part of this doughnut-shaped appellation, Pilar also added that 'the north west, primarily in the village of La Figuera, will see 2015 as a much more concentrated year. The north east around Cornudella saw some initial hail but the end result was also quite strong.'

The Joan d'Anguera winery is in the village of Darmós and is so far south that it's actually in the neighbouring county of Ribera d'Ebre, which a small part of DO Montsant slips into. As they farm both organically and biodynamically, their susceptibility to nature's whims makes them something of a local canary in the coalmine in terms of evaluating the vintage.

Winemaker Josep Anguera said, 'as far as harvests go, this one was easy. Admittedly, given that we're done with our harvest before others start, it can make things a lot easier, but this year was simply a great harvest with excellent quality and good quantity.' While others throughout Europe were reporting much earlier harvests, Josep didn't find it that much different. 'It was at most three days earlier than typical. Some of our vineyards were the same as last year.'

Unsurprisingly, DO Montsant saw a larger total of grapes this year than last, resulting in 8.4 million kg compared with last year's 7.9 million. Pilar emphasised, 'It wasn't so much that in 2014 we had less grapes, but that we were forced to do more selection of the grapes that arrived at the cellars. In 2015 it was entirely the opposite with the grapes arriving in an excellent condition. While there were initially fears that acidity would be a touch low, this has proven not to be the case and the wines are balanced on all points.'

DOQ Priorat

The story of the older DOQ Priorat appellation was much the same as that of DO Montsant, with the cellars excited, optimistic, and nearly giddy with how well this harvest went. This is not just in comparison with 2014, but in

how similar it was to 2013 and other heralded vintages. The secretary of the DOQ Jaume Josa told me, 'It was a very favourable year. We saw an increase of total grapes to 6.3 million kg compared with 5.9 million kg in 2014. There was a little bit of hail at the extremities of the region, mainly in the villages of El Lloar and El Molar, but the vast majority of the grapes arrived in an excellent state.'

I asked DOQ president and winemaker Salus Álvarez about the effect of the heat, specifically in terms of how the heatwave of 2015 compared with the heat seen in the rather lacklustre 2011 vintage. He said, '2011 saw irregular spikes of heat that made for a difficult vintage with a great deal of stress to the vines. While 2015 was hot, it was consistent and the cooling in August arrived at the perfect moment.'

In terms of the official classification of the vintage, I asked if he thought this will be classified as 'Excellent'. Salus was quite emphatic that 'the classifications are primarily for the harvest but in those terms, it was a very good harvest and we'll observe the evolution. The real test will be for 2016 because the vine stress in the summer will carry in to next year. This is why you see that many of the vines still have their leaves now in December in an attempt to hydrate as much as possible before dormancy through the winter.'

When I caught up with co-owner of Vall Llach Albert Costa he was positively beaming about the harvest, 'This is easily the best vintage of the last five years with our production up 13% over 2014 and quality to match. It's more like 2012 for us with a great deal of dry air from the interior that kept everything free of rot and raisining, even the old vines. The aromatic profile of this vintage is already incredible. This was one of the first years where, as soon as we started vinification, I could already smell the wines ready to come out of these grapes.'

One of the other aspects that was surprising for not just Vall Llach but also other cellars in the village of Porrera such as Cims de Porrera was the speed with which malolactic fermentation was completed. Albert added, 'Marc at

Cims and I have been extremely surprised. There were some wines that finished malolactic *before* alcoholic fermentation was complete. This was a massive change from 2014 where malolactic sometimes took months to finish for those of us who work with natural fermentations like both of us do.'

Despite all the excitement about the 2015 harvest, it's important to note that while the harvest of 2014 was difficult, the resulting wines have been shaping up quite well. This returns to something a winemaker once told me: 'If you can make a wine in Priorat, it will be a good wine.' Of course it helps if you're starting off with grapes that are in as beautiful a state as those of 2015. Only time will allow us to see how the wines from this harvest emerge but chins are indeed up while eyes are already looking to 2016.



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