

Harpers Rebellious Penedès

The concept of rebellion in wine typically conjures up images of a winemaker taking a chainsaw to old barrels or tossing a V at the regulatory body and growing whatever grape varieties he or she pleases. Hardly grand acts of sedition in the greater scheme of the world but for wine, they're earthshattering and even more so when discussing this within the scope of Catalonia, a region that has been actively trying to secede from Spain for the last 300 years. Catalans are nothing if not determined.

When it comes to Catalan wine, Penedès is the largest region. The winery Torres is responsible for a great deal of this by modernizing the winemaking sector in the early 20th century and pulling it out of the old, lower production and generally unpredictable approach to crafting wines.

While this worked wonders to grow winemaking to the point we see today, it also grew a reputation for Penedès at large to be a region that produced more economic, low-end, heavily blended, and less interesting wines than others in Catalonia. While the wines were dependable and a go-to for the budget conscious, they were hardly unique. There have however been those who rebelled against this typical premise of how one makes a "Penedès" wine.

Irene Alemany came back to Penedès in the late 1990s after many years of working abroad including France. It was her experience in Côte de Beaune that steeled her nerves to start up a new project, Alemany i Corrió using vines that her father had planted some four decades previously. One of several of their new approaches was fermentation with native, ambient yeasts as opposed to using selected yeasts that yield a much more controlled fermentation.

"Other enologists thought that I was crazy to attempt natural fermentation. There were even those who told me it would be impossible in the cellar without having used selected yeasts previously." She has of course been proven right in her thinking. Sot Lefriec, their top cuvée, holds a broad, elegant palate, and luscious herbal notes. But while Irene and her French husband Laurent Corrió were among the first to attempt this, others have emerged as well.

With a mere 7,500 bottles, Enric Soler easily has one of the smallest cellars in all of DO Penedès. Originally a sommelier, Enric has been working to invigorate his old family vines, plant new ones, and create unique, single-vineyard wines. One of them, Nun is insanelly electric and vibrant, an aromatic bombshell of dried white flowers, straw, and light buttery notes. As Enric puts it, "My wines **are** Penedès yet they resemble nothing of what most people know of the region." This is no wine to mindlessly quaff with a paella in the heat of summer and it shows the excellence that can be achieved.

Another micro-producer, Ton Rimbau, readily admits that "Absolutely everyone thinks I'm nuts." If there is one side of the winemaking galaxy that is the "conventional" method, Ton would be on the absolute other end of it and then down a black hole. While he produces his wines at Clos Lentiscus which is another craft producer primarily focused on sparkling wines, it's in the vineyard where Ton has an endless list of "unique" approaches. For instance, he puts a resin rod with copper and aluminium bits that's wired to a grounding rod in order to channel away mobile phone signals that would disturb the vines. But what people usually know are the unique ceramic bottles. As Ton puts it, "My wines are natural wines with no added sulphites. They're very delicate and the ceramic bottles don't allow any light to reach the wine, thus preserving them."

While Ton represents the extreme end in terms of winemaking, he is overall using the traditional grapes of the region. There are however others that are making use of older varieties that had long been disregarded as "too rustic" when compared to international varieties such as Chardonnay, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon. The recuperation of these ancient varieties is also playing in to the larger sea of change being brought on by those who have been bucking the status quo. One of them is Mas Candí, a winery started by Ramón Jané and Toni Carbó. After several years of experiments, in 2006 they started their project in order to reclaim these older varieties and go back to what Penedès used to produce in the past. They have small vineyards of grapes rarely heard of such as Mandó, Rogenc, Turbat, Malvasia de Sitges, and Sumoll. Ramón believes that, "Sumoll is Nebbiolo. It's tannic and strong initially but can age for years and has great acidity."

In addition to Mas Candí, there are other wineries working with older native grapes as well. Italian Massimo Marchiori of Partida Creus, in the Southern Penedès village of Bonastre, uses grapes that aren't approved within the DO such as Vinyater. This is an ancient white variety that he uses to make an elegant, full-bodied sparkling wine. In the same village is Sicus whose owner, Eduard Pié works not only with Penedès stalwart, Xarel·lo, but also the rare mutation, Xarel·lo Vermell, Sumoll, Malvasia de Sitges, and Garrut (aka Mourvèdre.)

No one in this group would be one that you'd pick out of the crowd and say, "Yes, that's obviously a troublemaker." Oddly enough that person would more likely seem to be the president of DO Penedès, Josep Maria Albet i Noya. On first glance he looks as if he were originally the Stones first choice to fill in on bass when Bill Wyman left the group. When asked about these various "new style" cellars, he happily states, "Mas Candí? Alemany i Corrió? Enric Soler? These are some of our greatest wines in Penedès these days." It's an interesting thing to hear from the head of what is seen as such a commercial, mass-producing wine region known for cheap wines.

"This image of cheap wines from Penedès isn't true now. It's become a very different region than what it was just a few years ago. It's all been part of a plan that we started around 2006-2008 to increase the quality of the wines that come from this appellation. Keep in mind that while there are 27,000ha of vineyards registered within Penedès, the great majority of that emerges as either DO Cava or DO Catalunya and it's in the second where you'll find these lower-priced wines."

Josep Maria continued on this topic stating, "Of the 140 cellars registered with the DO, 50 are now practicing organic viticulture. Every new cellar starting today, starts organic. This change to the region as a whole is coming, but like with everything in winemaking, it is simply a question of time."

So, these winemakers who started out as being the crazy newcomers are readily becoming part of the overall "New Penedès" landscape as it seems those who abandoned the modern ways were foreshadowing changes that were to come. This change, like everything in Catalonia is continuing. Much like the drive to leave Spain, it is and will take time but Catalans are an incredibly patient people, the winemakers even more so.