



CATALONIAN VI RANCI: THE FINESSE OF RANCID WINE

The centuries-old Catalan tradition of leaving wines in barrel to oxidize—or “rancify”—to produce *vi ranci* was in danger of disappearing by the mid-1990s. But, as **Miquel Hudin** explains, a project to find and preserve existing old barrels in the houses of Priorat, the introduction of protected origin status, and a 100-point score from an influential critic have all helped raise the status of these rare, rustic, but captivating and historic wines

Gazing on the crumbling slate and rugged landscape of Priorat, it seems almost impossible that the dreaded pest should ever have found a foothold here. But phylloxera reached the village of Porrera in 1893 and spread rapidly from there. While replanting on American rootstock was the solution, new vines only started to take hold over the following decades, which also brought the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). Priorat never really recovered, and despite the creation of the official denomination of origin in 1954, it was by and large a region making basic bulk wine from Grenache and Carignan.

This was still the state of Josep Vaqué's village of Porrera in 1964, when Priorat's decline seemed inevitable. The family's future was soon to be in the hands of his 18-year-old daughter Conxita, but it looked bleak. Despite everything, he decided that he needed more barrels—specifically, *caratulls* (the local name for rundlets), which hold only 30–60 liters (8–16 US gallons). So, he went over the hill to the town of Reus and the barrel shop of Francisco Sierra, to buy French oak barrels. He had no interest in the Spanish ones of the time, because the staves weren't dried adequately and gave an astringency to the wines aged in them. He brought many of these small barrels back to the family home.

Built in 1777, the Vaqué residence wasn't some small, rustic affair; it was, and still is, one of the grandest classic houses in Porrera. It was known as *Ca les Viudes*, “House of the Widows,” since a number of them had lived out their remaining days there in the 19th century. Josep carried his new barrels up three flights of stairs, installing them in the *golfes*, or attic. This wasn't to season them further but rather to make a special kind of oxidized wine known historically throughout Catalonia as *vi ranci*.

Deliberately left to sit so that the wine inside them oxidizes (or “rancifies,” as Catalans would say), the barrels nevertheless need to be topped up periodically, to compensate for the evaporation, a task that Josep dutifully performed. At first he used Grenache bought from the winemaking cooperative in the village. But once Pere Sangenis married Josep's daughter Conxita in 1972, they took over the winemaking, since Pere brought vines whose fruit was to be vinified in the Vaqué family cellar. And a dozen years later, in 1984, they decided to start

filling the barrels still sitting in the attic with their own wine. They always made sure to use their best grapes for the *vi ranci*, recognizing that it would be a case of garbage in, garbage out if they risked using anything less than their top wine. Pere continued to top up the barrels dutifully every one or two years, as required. And there they sat, enzymes from the ancient mothers (a collection of solid materials and natural compounds that collect in the barrel) working on the new wine that was added each year, a small portion being extracted to savor at the end of special family meals or on holidays.

Pere and Conxita had four daughters. As the second two, Maria and Núria, grew up, they witnessed the changes in Priorat sparked by the iconic 1989 vintage as released by René Barbier, Josep Lluís Pérez, Álvaro Palacios, Daphne Glorian, and Carles Pastrana. Maria and Núria saw that, thanks to the quality revolution sweeping through the region, working in the cellar might after all have a happier future, so they decided to follow their parents' path. At the same time, however, those who had arrived from outside could see that while there was, at long last, a vision for the future, the past was being forgotten by many. Old barrels of *vi ranci* were slowly being left unfilled, not in *Ca les Viudes* but in many other houses that had maintained them meticulously for decades, if not centuries.

The roots are replanted

In the mid-1990s, René Barbier therefore embarked on a quest with a friend and Priorat native, Jaume Balaguer, to save all the barrels they could and create a new cellar in the DO devoted to wines in this special style—*Arrels del Priorat*, “Roots of Priorat.” After much searching, René and Jaume found interesting old barrels in seven houses: *Cal Batlet*, *Cal Boter*, and *Cal Piró* in *Gratallops*, *Cal Pagès* in *Bellmunt*, *Cal Ferrando* in *Poboleda*, *Cal Sabaté* in *La Vilella Baixa*, and *Ca les Viudes* in *Porrera*. This last, the Vaqué home, was one of the most important, because although Josep Vaqué had bought many of the barrels in 1964, he was using the *solera* method, as for Sherry, and the original mother wine was around 100 years old. Once they had gathered all the barrels in their small cellar outside *Gratallops*, René and Jaume dutifully topped them up every two years



but otherwise left them well alone, patience being the most powerful tool and most rewarding virtue for this type of wine.

Meanwhile, Maria and Núria Sengenís completed their enology studies and started to work for their family cellar. The Catalan authorities raised the status of the Priorat appellation to *denominació d'origen qualificada* (DOQ) in 2000, which the Spanish authorities finally recognized in 2009. But just at this critical stage, the entire financial world was in crisis, leaving Priorat in a state of great upheaval, since producers, dependent on exporting 85 percent of their wines, were left scrambling for new markets as the old ones withered away.

All through this, the *vi ranci* barrels sat, unaware of the seas of change washing over the outside world. Jaume and René would pull out a small amount of wine each year to bottle what there was—just 60 half-liter bottles in the case of Ca les Viudes—then add more new Grenache to the timeless base.

The course of *vi ranci* would probably have remained unaltered had it not been for the February 2014 issue of *The Wine Advocate*, where the only wine from Catalonia to receive 100 points that year from its Spanish reviewer, Luis Gutiérrez, was the Ca les Viudes *vi ranci*: “I felt I should include them in the report as they are truly exceptional, unique wines,” he wrote. “I hope my comments bring attention to these exceptional wines.” It was an important moment, since it suddenly thrust this ancient and, at times, very rustic wine on to the world stage, piquing the interest of many who had never, and never would have, heard of it. Any yet the manner in which it is produced will never allow it to be enjoyed by as many as might like to taste it.

New histories

“I think I was 13 years old at most when my father and I visited the Sala dels Àngels at Scala Dei in 1984,” explains Sara Pérez, owner and winemaker of Mas Martinet. “We tasted some of the *vins rancis* in those ancient barrels, and I thought, ‘Yuck, this is disgusting! It’s so acidic and strong!’ Naturally, I’ve since changed my mind. In 1997, I was working at Castell de Perelada [in DO Empordà], and they had tucked away a barrel of *vi ranci dolç*. I found this sweet version of the wine incredible. It reminded me of all the aspects I’d tasted a decade and a half earlier, but it was so round and luscious. And I thought, ‘Yes, this wine I enjoy, and this wine I want to make.’ So I did.”

Sara found the barrel that would form the base of her mothers in the nearby village of Torroja. To this she added additional barrels from other villages around the county, and she now has a series of five large barrels through which she transfers the wine about every two years. Always using only her own Grenache (the grape variety generally favored for *vi ranci* due to its innate oxidative characteristics) from rows of vines next to the winery, she hopes at long last to release a bottled version of the wine at the end of this year. “A *vi ranci* always needs time before it’s ready, and I think that, just maybe, mine is at that point.” To describe Sara’s wine as “aromatic” doesn’t remotely do it justice, for when it sits in a glass near you, it effuses a blend of orange peel, chocolate, and floral potpourri. It lingers forever in the mouth, with vibrant acidity, despite the underlying sweetness, and a nutty touch on the finish.

Happily, Sara’s is not the only new *vi ranci* with a pending release date. Back in the same village as Ca les Viudes (Porrera), Vall Llach is preparing to release its own. In fact, it has several, ranging from barrels started in 1927, the 1930s, and the 1970s, to

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a new creation that started in barrels in 2003 and has remained there through to 2016. Initially, co-owner and winemaker Albert Costa was aging the barrels in the attic space of their barrel cellar in the stately old village house, Cal Baldrich. But as he explained, “Normally, if you start with 100 liters, after five years you’ll have 60 liters. But it was going far too fast and threatened to destabilize the wines, so we moved them down to one of our old underground cellars.”

Climbing down a ladder into that cellar, and casting about with a light on the end of a long extension cord, Albert comes to the old barrels. “Initially, these old barrels were filled with Grenache, but we’ve since been filling everything with Carignan from some of our best vineyards in the village.” The two oldest barrels were in the family of the other co-owner, Lluís Llach, and ten years ago he wanted to do what he could to revive a tradition he had known his entire life, while gaining fame through his singing career. Tasting from the barrels, it’s remarkable how dramatically the 1927 and 1930s barrels differ from one another. The 1927 has more toffee and floral aromas, abounding in acidity that gives a seemingly endless, savory mouthwatering finish. The 1930s, on the other hand, is drier and more potent, with lower acidity and bitter-almond notes on the finish. The much newer *vins rancis* are still in their infancy, the 2003 just starting to show the classic oxidized profile, and the younger wines still on their way there.

Quietly waiting, but not alone

There are more of these wines to be found in Priorat. Mas Plantadeta and De Muller have made *vins rancis* for some time, and they are well regarded for their elegance and refinement. One of the early stars in the *vi ranci* revival, in addition to Arrels del Priorat, was the fantastic Corum from the now-defunct Terra de Verema winery, but no one seems to know where the barrel ended up once they went in to bankruptcy. There is also a *vi ranci* from Cal Pla in Porrera, derived from old family barrels and first released earlier this year.

Beyond Priorat there are small amounts of *vi ranci* in neighboring DO Montsant, though most remains a strictly domestic affair. In DO Terra Alta, farther south, at the bottom of



Catalonia bordering Aragón, there are four producers: Sant Josep, Edèteria, Vins del Tros, and the cooperative of Gandesa, which makes a sweet/*ranci* hybrid that is very different from the wine of Sara Pérez. It's also interesting to note that because white Grenache is so prevalent in that area, they use this for their base wine rather than the red Grenache.

The tradition also persists just across the northern border of Catalonia in Roussillon, where producers including Danjou Banessy, La Rectorie, La Préceptorie, La Tour Vieille, Patrice Ey, and others have banded together and have even created the IGP Rancio Sec to protect their unique take on the wine. As in the other areas, they use the grape varieties most typical of their region—Grenache (red, white, or gray) or Macabeu.

The future is nearly now

It is encouraging and exciting that suddenly, after so many years, a small but nevertheless generous number of these wines are coming on to the market. One might speculate that the 100-point score from Luis Gutiérrez raised the profile of *vi ranci* to the degree that producers suddenly thought it was a profitable time to release their wines. But any such theory is debunked by Jaume Balaguer: "Making *vi ranci* is not a business. Given how much wine you lose during the aging process, how much time you have to wait, and then how few bottles you can draw out each year, it's simply not profitable." René Barbier adds, "These are our jewels, and we enjoy making them simply because we enjoy drinking them," beaming after another sip.

"It is required that *vi ranci* be aged a minimum of five years before we will certify it," says DOQ Priorat secretary Jaume Josa, "but even then, it's going to need more time." DOQ president Salus Àlvarez explains that "there is an enzymatic process that begins after seven or eight years, and it's only then that there's a breakdown of the main acids, primarily volatile, to form the round, elegant taste we associate with *vi ranci*."

In the Arrels cellar, René Barbier points to a large (225-liter) barrel in the corner. "You see that? I pulled that barrel aside in 1991, just as we were starting Clos Mogador, and it's still not ready! Close, but not yet, and I've been filling it religiously for 25 years now!" Indeed, when tasting it, it's easy to see that the wine is nearing the classic profile but just short of it, with some slight primary fruit notes in their final death roll on the palate, which can most likely be attributed to Cabernet Sauvignon being part of the base many years ago.

But it's in this same wine that we can find the answer to the question, "Why now?" It's simply one aspect of the evolution of Priorat, which is a young wine region in terms of its modern winemaking. It wasn't until the pioneers led by René arrived and saw what Scala Dei was doing in the 1970s that they could see the region's potential in all its facets. While they initially gained fame for their red wines, on the side some started their *vi ranci* projects. So, given the years, if not decades, that the wines demand, it's fully understandable that some are coming on to the market only now, when at last we find the perfect collusion of history, passion, and time required for the wines to show well.

Other producers could start releasing the wines. Anyone who visits the Scala Dei winery by the monastery should ask if they can visit the "Sala dels Àngels" to which Sara Pérez refers, where they have many old barrels that they have yet to bottle but continue to fill. And almost every old house in Priorat still has some old barrel tucked away that could potentially be certified.

Most people have it at the end of a meal with nuts or a strong cheese. And while it is an unfortified wine, it can be used as a fitting finale to round out a meal, savored in small sips and lingered over as a meditation wine. A place has emerged for this wine in the modern wine lover's life, making it contemporary, as well as timeless

Asked whether there will be further growth, Salus Àlvarez responds with a bit of a smirk, "Well, there is an official limit of 'only' 99,000 liters of production per cellar per year." His amusement stems from the fact that a typical Priorat producer may reach only 30,000 bottles in total each year. As Jaume Josa explains, "It's a question of certifying the barrels—we maintain a barrel registry—and honestly there are just very few of them. Even though we've allowed *vi ranci* to be classified as such under the DOQ regulations since the beginning of the appellation, given that we limit the amount of extraction each year as well, a large degree of growth would be physically impossible."

So, what does one do with a rancid wine?

A rich history full of twists and turns, and an heroically long aging process, make for a great story. But where does *vi ranci* fit in to our drinking patterns? Given its oxidized character, the easiest comparison is with Oloroso Sherry, though the fact that the base wine is usually from a red grape variety (as distinct from the white Palomino of Sherry) and the aging process is generally even longer, it has a considerably lighter profile than Oloroso, which can be quite potent.

Many producers call it "the wine of hospitality," because it is offered to guests who visit their home. Most people have it at the end of a meal paired with nuts or a strong cheese such as recuit (a Catalan soft cheese), for which it makes an excellent companion. And while it is an unfortified wine, it can often be used in place of Cognac as a fitting finale to round out a meal, savored in small sips and lingered over as a meditation wine.

A place has indeed emerged for this wine in the modern wine lover's life, making it contemporary, as well as timeless, given that we are generally tending toward more savory or even bitter flavors in our food and drink. The only question is how many wine lovers will be able to find a bottle, because while it is still widely viewed as a "peasant drink" in Catalonia itself, residents are more than happy to quaff down most of what is released. But if you can find one of the few bottles to slip out of the region, luxuriate in the wealth of history you'll find inside and savor it to the last drop. ■