

PREMIUM SPANISH FIZZ

The Spanish sparkling wine scene has become increasingly fragmented, but overall quality has risen. **Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW** shares 18 of Spain's best, from the Cava DO and beyond



Until the turn of the century, understanding Spanish sparkling wine was easy. Spain produced a single category, Cava, which was mostly, but not only, from Catalonia. Cava used to be cheap and cheerful, cheaper than Champagne and better quality than Charmat-method wines.

Then, confusion set in. First, a number of relatively small producers aimed for the highest quality – and achieved it. Some excelled in understanding old vineyards, others mastered ageing, a few became great at both. In one decade, several very good wines received market acclaim, and icon Cava was born – but only in the

market, not yet on the label. All wines, no matter their quality, were just Cava.

Some producers were angry at the situation and left the DO. They created a new sub-appellation, Clàssic Penedès. In addition, Raventós i Blanc – owned by descendants of the 'inventor' of Cava – decided to work in SuperTuscan style, outside the appellation system.

The first defections moved the appellation to recognise that fine Cava is a reality, and that its potential for quality is extremely high. Cava segmented itself from the top down by creating the Cava de Paraje Calificado (single-vineyard Cava) category, which was successful in highlighting the best wines. However, it arrived too

late to prevent the exodus of another group of great producers, who formed the Corpinnat association.

In parallel, another appellation also decided to adopt high-quality sparkling wines. In 2017, Rioja's governing body created a new category for sparkling Rioja – a fitting change, given that the first recorded Spanish sparkling wine was made in Rioja, according to little-known documents from 1848. What's more, several wineries in Rioja are already producing sparkling wines under the Cava DO.

Nonetheless, the Cava appellation continued its endeavours. Many of the DO's remaining producers reacted by impressively increasing the quality of their wines, and nowadays Cava is one of the most thoroughly defined classifications in Spain.

Diversity and quality

On the one hand, sparkling Spanish wine today is a nightmare for students of wine, with so many appellations that cannot be distinguished by tasting. There is Cava from Rioja, as well as sparkling Rioja, not to

mention wines from Penedès that are called Cava, Penedès or Corpinnat...

On the other hand, it is a gift for the wine lover. The quantity and average quality of sparkling wines is better than ever before. The diversity, due both to terroir and to human ingenuity, is also increasing.

Most of the best wines here have two things in common. First: the vineyard is key. The most refined examples are single-vineyard wines, many of them cultivated using biodynamic or organic methods. Second: ageing. Top wines need long ageing. In particular, bottle ageing in the cellar under cork (rather than metal caps, as is most common) results in amazing smoothness and complexity.

I hope that one day all the great producers of Penedès get together once again under the name of Cava, or whatever title they choose. Recognising and protecting quality on a wider scale would be helpful for all. For the time being, we'll live with the current landscape of Spanish sparkling – the wines are worthier than the words.

Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW is a widely published wine journalist, educator and judge. He is a member of the Gran Orden de Caballeros del Vino and on the governing board of the Spanish Tasters' Union



Raventós i Blanc, Mas del Serral Brut Nature, Catalonia 2009 99

£190/magnum (ib) cru

The most refined Spanish sparkling wine I've ever tasted. Despite ageing 17 months in vat and 100 months in bottle, it shows pristine fruit, intriguing stone aromas, zesty freshness. Delicate texture; layered flavours linger on the palate. From an old-vine single vineyard with Xarel-lo and Bastard Negre (a local biotype of Graciano). A top biodynamic terroir wine and masterwork. **Drink** 2021-2039 **Alcohol** 12.5%



Llopart, Original 1887 Brut Nature, Corpinnat 2009 97

£36.80 (2011) Bibenbum Wine, Exel

So close to perfection. An organic blend of Xarel-lo, Macabeo and Montònega (a local biotype of Parellada) that's far more than the sum of its parts. Delicious, with a refined old-wine texture, but fresh fruit and elegant lees ageing expression. Slow, open finish. It's all about balance, and worlds apart from Champagne: pure Penedès. The best Llopart wine I've tasted. **Drink** 2021-2029 **Alc** 11.8%



Can Sala, Anyades Històriques Gran Reserva Brut Nature 2005 96

£39.95 The Robin's Nest Lewes

This Cava de Paraje Calificado is even subtler and deeper than previous releases – indeed, the wine is disgorged on request. It is fermented and aged in oak, then left on its lees in bottle for more than 12 years. It gathers oxidative vinosity and reductive development, in a way that only the purest must can sustain. A most 'Champagne-ish' Cava, and inexpensive. **Drink** 2021-2035 **Alc** 12.5%



Vins El Cep, Claror Gran Reserva Brut Nature 2014 94

£40 Amathus Drinks

This relatively unknown single-vineyard, biodynamic Cava de Paraje Calificado deserves much attention. It has a rare complexity on the nose, with excellent definition and a charming extra element of slight development. Harmonious, with a soft texture and a vibrant finish. Very Catalan, very Cava, but also in a class of its own. **Drink** 2021-2027 **Alc** 12%



Colet Navazos, Clàssic Penedès Reserva Extra Brut 2017 93

£40 Indigo Wine

A delicious blend of the flagship Penedès style with a Sherry touch. Pure Xarel-lo, organic, but the liqueur d'expédition for the second fermentation is a drop of palo cortado, selected by premium Sherry specialist Equipo Navazos. The result is fascinating: the wine attains an even drier character with a hint of noble development, yet keeps its Cava identity. **Drink** 2021-2024 **Alc** 12.5%



Loxarel, Cent Nou 109 Clàssic Penedès Brut Nature, Catalonia 2006 93

£90 The Northern Wine & Beer Co

An original wine that gives insight to the virtues of traditional-method ageing – though it technically can't be classified as such, since it wasn't disgorged. Released after 109 months' ageing on its lees, it's not the prettiest, but it's delicious. Complex, fresh, with intense biscuit and brioche aromas to complement Xarel-lo's citrus, grassy notes. **Drink** 2021-2036 **Alc** 12%



Gramona, Celler Batlle Biblioteca de Añadas Brut, Corpinnat 2005 96

POA Available via UK agent Enotria&Coe

The masters of ageing in Catalonia go a step further with this wine, ageing it for more than 10 years on the lees, disgorging, then ageing for five more years. It proves that top sparkling Catalan wine is well worth cellaring: complex brioche notes mingling with truffle and bitter almond hints. Distinctive and very harmonious. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2021-2035 **Alc** 12.5%



Júlia Bernet, María Bernet Brut Nature, Corpinnat 2009 94

£80 Iberian Drinks

Aged on its lees for six months before the second fermentation. Discreet, understated aromas with great integration of ageing and fruit expressions. Velvety texture, complex and poised style on the palate, with a multilayered, open finish. Pure, very dry style. One of the nicest surprises of this tasting. **Drink** 2021-2029 **Alc** 12.5%



Recaredo, Subtil Brut Nature, Corpinnat 2015 94

N/A UK www.recaredo.com

An entry point to understand the top terroirist in Penedès. The wine's name suits it, as it's all about subtlety, with a suave but persistent expression, delicate texture and understated refinement on the long finish. Everything about it is pure terroir: made entirely from a selected local clone of Xarel-lo; biodynamic; even the sugar for the second fermentation comes from local Xarel-lo must. **Drink** 2021-2025 **Alc** 10.5%



Sumarroca, Núria Claverol Homenatge Gran Reserva Brut, Cava 2014 93

£45 Alliance Wine, HarperWells, The Grape to Glass

The luxury cuvée by Sumarroca, in a very well crafted style, from a selected Xarel-lo plot, and with very discreet dosage. Elegant, rounded, very attractive. Indeed, charm and elegance are this wine's best attributes. But the background is quite serious, with delicate creaminess and a remarkably persistent finish. Luxury, that is. **Drink** 2021-2024 **Alc** 12.5%



Agustí Torelló Mata, Barrica Gran Reserva Brut Nature, Cava 2015 92

N/A UK www.agustitorellomata.com

I tend to dismiss Cava fermented in barrel, but this wine proves me wrong. It has a complex array of aromas and flavours, fills the mouth while keeping finesse, and is very persistent. Bubbles are there just to enhance the vinosity. Excellent style, more for the table than for parties, with a touch of what I would simply call beauty. **Drink** 2021-2025 **Alc** 12%



Alta Alella, Mirgin Exeo Gran Reserva Brut Nature 2015 92

£65 Georges Barbier

Single-vineyard organic Cava de Paraje Calificado from an area close to Barcelona, where the sauló (decomposed granite) soil gives a distinctive character to this blend of 40% Chardonnay and local Pansà Blanca (Xarel-lo). Austere, serious, with aromatic precision, a round mouthfeel and expressive finish. Deservedly at the top of Cava's hierarchy. **Drink** 2021-2025 **Alc** 12% ➤



Maria Rigol Ordi, Gran Reserva Brut Nature, Cava 2014 92

£29 Tannico

Great example of the benefits of long ageing for top Cava. Intense biscuit and brioche aromas, dried fruit and leaves, with a liquor hint that provides elegance. Round, archetypal old Cava texture, creamy, somehow opulent, rich.

A small producer with an attractive offering.

Drink 2021-2024 **Alc** 11.5%



Mestres, Visol Gran Reserva Brut Nature, Cava 2013 92

£26.49 (2012) Gauntleys

Mestres' speciality is long-aged Cavas, ageing the base wine in oak, then bottle-ageing under cork closures, giving a more complex profile.

The resulting wines show development and are very austere and tense, extremely dry, with a particular expression. The oak influence is evident but well integrated, and the ripe fruit gives dry fruit aromas. Bubbles for attentive enjoyment. **Drink** 2021-2028 **Alc** 12.1%



Miquel Pons, Montargull Crianza con Corcho Gran Reserva Brut Nature, Cava 2014 92

£45 Pix Pintxos Bars

A small producer, with an original style of Cava. Some oxidative development provides complexity and vivacious lees aromas. The wine was aged for 60 months under a cork closure. I suspect it will be particularly appreciated by sommeliers and wine lovers looking for alternative expressions. Slow and intense finish. **Drink** 2021-2024 **Alc** 11%



Vivanco, Cuvée Inédita Reserva Extra Brut, Rioja 2017 92

POA Bibenbum Wine

A world apart from Cava, being produced in the Rioja region. An Atlantic, cool-climate style, crisp acidity and intense stone fruit. Mouthfilling, with an elegant hint of bitterness and steely dryness yet restraint on the finish. The first time I've ever tasted a sparkling wine made with Maturana Blanca (45%) and Tempranillo Blanco (30%), along with 15% Viura and 10% Chardonnay. Very promising.

Drink 2021-2027 **Alc** 12%



Roger Goulart, Gran Reserva Brut, Cava 2012 91

£19 Fountainhall Wines, Islington Wine, Luvians, Roberts & Speight, Vino Wines, Whole Foods Market

One of the rare successes of 'foreign' wineries in fine Cava territory, Rioja-based CVNE improves year after year the quality of its top cuvées. This gran reserva is a reference for top classic, aged Cava, integrating fine brioche and yeasty notes with touches of tropical and citrus fruit. Soft and easygoing on the palate, it gives a very open aftertaste, marked by the long ageing. A most affordable luxury. **Drink** 2021-2024 **Alc** 12%



Mas Comtal, Xarel·lo Clàssic Penedès Reserva Brut, Catalonia 2016 90

£16 L'Autre Vi

Textbook expression of the Xarel·lo grape variety in a Catalonian sparkling wine. Austere, tense, fresh but not crisp, balanced and firmly structured. More characterised by the variety than by the ageing; not particularly complex but very open. Affordable, a good wine with which to get to know the fine sparkling wines of this area. Organic. **Drink** 2021-2022 **Alc** 12%



Can Sala cellars, Sant Quintí de Mediona