

Grupo Codorniu in Spain – My Impressions

Grupo Codorniu is no longer just a Cava house, but a global winemaking concern with wineries across Spain and in the new world. My impression of the group is that it is committed to technological investment and raising quality in the winemaking process, and that it is looking to create wines largely in a modern, international style.

I was impressed with every winery we visited, although there did seem to be a general move away from traditional Spanish styles. I hope that as Codorniu invests in modern winemaking practices, it does not neglect native grapes and traditional wines.

At the forefront of Codorniu's modern revolution is Raimat, a vast estate that dominates the Costers del Segre DO, covering 2,245Ha of vine - twice the acreage of the English wine industry. The estate is a patchwork quilt of global varieties from Malbec to Sylvaner, as well as Spanish stalwarts like Godello, Albarinho and Tempranillo - all tended to perfection with precision viticulture techniques. In Raimat's tasting room we tried, amongst other offerings, Abadia, a Cabernet-Merlot-Tempranillo Crianza, made in a traditional style with plenty of old oak spice. Winemaker Olivia Salas explained that she expected Abadia to gradually fade out of production as younger international tastes demand varietal wines with new oak and forward fruit. A number of winemakers we spoke to expressed this interest in making more modern styles, and dropping the Crianza-Reserva-Gran Reserva hierarchy which they see as enforcing outdated ties between quality and oak influence.

Compared to Raimat, Scala Dei - Codorniu's Priorat interest - is thoroughly *garagiste*, producing some 6,000 cases a year. Winemaker Ricard Rofes is determined to make wine with regional typicity, to which end he is uprooting Cabernet Sauvignon vines across his plots to focus on locals Garnacha and Cariñena. In many of his sites old vines of these two varieties grow intermingled, a situation which I suspect would leave Raimat's precision viticulture team in need of a seat and a glass of water.

The wines are superb, in particular the flagship Cartoixa, a storm of broodingly deep fruit and gripping tannic structure. The Crianza had slightly less grip but was unmistakably of the same cloth as Cartoixa - both wines showing delicious Garnacha fruitcake spice and, in the older examples, some vegetal complexity.

Ricard was good enough to grant us a taste of his labour of love, a barrel-aged Garnacha Blanca straight from the wood. "A white grape with a red soul" is a description they give Garnacha Blanca in Priorat - Perfect! Even this region's whites are full-bodied reds. The wine was, he explained, a prototype that he'd convinced Scala Dei's owners to invest in, despite their concerns that white Priorat would struggle to find a market. Fleshy, opulent and well integrated, it impressed all of us. Despite the presence of some Chenin Blanc to tighten the wine up, some might find it a little flabby, but then, elegance has never been the watchword of this DOc.

Ricard should be applauded for pursuing regional typicity, but the presence of Cabernet tannins and Chenin acidity were important components in his wines. Perhaps the lesson here is that you can benefit from international grapes without losing your regional identity.

Cava's identity is firmly established: ever since Don Raventos presented his first bottle of traditional method fizz to 1872 Barcelona, it has been Spain's answer to Champagne - even borrowing the Appellation name until the 1970s. Codorniu has worked successfully for the inclusion of Champagne varieties in Cava production, with Chardonnay taking a leading role in many of its white bruts.

Of the wines we tasted, only the basic Classico was entirely composed of Xarel-lo, Macabeo and Parellada. Simple but effective, it was outshone by the Anna de Codorniu Brut, Spain's most popular cava, a soft, floral, 70% Chardonnay blend. At the top end the Champagne-styled Jaume de Codorniu Brut, with its slightly yeasty, perfumed nose and persistent mousse, was a class above and a viable alternative to good NV Champagne. Composed with 50% local varieties, it still had Catalan style, with a characteristic approachably soft acidity indicative of a warmer climate which allows Codorniu to construct the majority of its Cavas from single vintage blending.

Down in Rioja, Codorniu is busy whipping Bodegas Bilbainas into shape - a historic Rioja producer which had fallen into some disarray before the Cava house purchased it in 1997. Speaking to winemaker Andrew Halliwell it was clear that maintaining Bilbainas' disparate vine parcels and keeping order in a sprawling ancient cellar was a continuous trial, and for its part, Codorniu has invested in technological winemaking methods and turned the bodega towards more modern Rioja styles - meaning 100% Tempranillo wines, with more body and alcohol, and less oxidative, tertiary characteristics.

Bilbainas' portfolio is strong, and its La Vicalanda wines are delicious modern Rioja, but I was struck by the Vina Pomal Reserve 2003. The only wine on tasting not from 100% Tempranillo, it was pale and light in body, nicely developed, made to a classic style that the producer is looking to move away from. I feel that would be a mistake. Classic Rioja may not be flavour of the month but it will always have a following. It would be a shame for Bilbainas to ditch Rioja and chase overbearing new world styles. In particular their Vina Zaco 2006 seemed to ape the darker, liquorice characteristics of Ribero del Duero Tempranillo, or full-bodied new world reds - it was the only wine in the tasting that disappointed our group.

Must modern wineries make modern wines? It's fitting that Raimat should. The Coster del Segre is not Burgundy, it is a recently-created DO, and Raimat is a market-oriented winery. If Codorniu had intended to be buffered by regional restrictions they would have bought land in Montalcino. Bilbainas, however, should mind that it continues to produce wines that taste like Rioja, even if it does choose to exclusively follow the modern style. In Priorat and in Codorniu's Cava winery, I felt this balance between the regional and the international, the traditional and the modern, was very well judged, and from a purely sensual perspective, I enjoyed Grupo Codorniu's wines, across the board, immensely.