

WINES OF THE TIMES | ERIC ASIMOV

Priorat Reds Raise a Critical Question

They've evolved from brutally powerful to fresh and elegant.

FASHION IS NOTORIOUSLY FICKLE. But hemlines have nothing on wine.

The difference is that in fashion, styles change because a huge industry depends on persuading consumers that new clothing is necessary even if the old clothing still has years of life.

But wine has no need to create turnover. Each bottle can be poured out only once; the obsolescence is natural. So what accounts for changing styles over time?

Is it the power of wine critics? Or possibly consumer demand? Maybe it's climate change? Or, as one recent article suggested, blame the accountants?

It's interesting to ponder that question while considering the case of Priorat, a wine that rose to wild acclaim toward the end of the 20th century from a dormant, little-known region of Catalonia in northeastern Spain.

The initial excitement seemed to die down by around 2010, yet the wine remains popular, if not widely known. The best examples have remained expensive, \$100 a bottle or more. Over time, the wines have changed noticeably.

Priorat has been a source for wine for nearly a millennium, since Carthusian monks established a priorat — Catalan for priory — in the 12th century and planted vines. It's a forbidding place to farm, a series of steep slate hills southwest of Barcelona that thrust upward in a series of jagged slate slopes at sometimes ridiculously sharp angles.

Phylloxera, the aphid that ravaged European vineyards, devastated Priorat in the late 19th century. For most of the 20th century, it was a sleepy place, its vineyards diminished. Production was dominated by cooperatives, who largely made cheap, indifferent wine.

Priorat's rediscovery was spurred by young French and Spanish winemakers who recognized potential in the old stands of garnacha and carifena planted in what the Catalans call llicorella, the stony soils of brown slate that occasionally sparkle with quartzite.

From its modern inception, Priorat has generally been a burly wine, rich and alcoholic, as garnacha and carifena, also known by their French names grenache and carignan, can often be. Yet over the last 20 years it has rarely stayed the same.

At the beginning of this century, Priorats often seemed musclebound and brutally oaky. Its tannins could be impenetrable, and the texture was sometimes thick and syrupy.

Back then, that powerful style for red wines, promoted by influential critics, dominated many regions. Priorat, like Châteauneuf-du-Pape, another grenache-based wine from the southern Rhône Valley of France, epitomized that approach.

Over the last two decades, however, I have seen Priorat evolve. It has shed the exaggerated style and the fascination with too



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much oak, too much fruit and too much alcohol. The international grapes that were planted at the beginning of Priorat's renaissance, like cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah, have faded to bit players, allowing the traditional local grapes to define the wines.

As it has changed, has Priorat's innate identity emerged? Or is this another in a series of metamorphoses, determined by whatever drives wine styles? In pursuit of answers, or at least of inspiration that might one day lead to answers, the wine panel tasted 20 red Priorats from recent vintages, primarily 2015 and 2016.

For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by two guests: Alex Raji, the chef and proprietor, with her husband, Eder Montero, of four restaurants in New York (El Quinto Pino, Txikito, La Vara and Saint Julivert Fisheries), and A. J. Ojeda-Pons, beverage director at Mercado Little Spain in Hudson Yards.

WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE of Priorat? It's clear that producers have striven for and succeeded in making wines of freshness and elegance. These are still big wines — only one of 20 was under 14 percent alcohol, and most were 14.5 percent to 15.5 percent. Yet for all their size, the best of these wines showed finesse and precision, structure, purity and great minerality.

Years ago, these wines were tough to drink with a meal because they were so overwhelming. Now, Alex said, "With so many I said, 'I want them with food!'"

It's hard to account for the evolution, except to say that all over the world the Goliath wines of 20 years ago have moved toward becoming Davids, fleet and agile rather than hulking giants. It would be easy to conclude that this is simply another stylistic oscillation, and that more will come.

I don't think so, though. It seems to me that wines have returned to classical conceptions of what they ought to be, after a period of strange extravagance in which wine was amplified because, for the first time, producers had the wherewithal to do it. Maybe that's out of our system, and once again, wine is something that can be served

at the table.

This is not to say that the wines of today are anything like they were 50 or 75 years ago. Too many other variables, including science, technology, education and climate, prevent that from ever happening.

Nor will we ever think of wine in the same way that people thought of it a century ago, when, with a few exceptions, wine was mostly a local industry. Now, it's global, prized around the world rather than a few isolated outposts. Aesthetic and health standards are different. People are more educated about wine, and have far more choices.

Today, diversity reigns. If consumers want powerful, dense, oaky wines, they can still find them, although as far as we could tell from our tasting, not so much in Priorat. Our favorites were floral, with stony mineral flavors and fruit that was juicy and appetizing rather than syrupy.

"These were concentrated without being clunky or cloying," A. J. said.

The bad bottles? We found only a few, and they tended to be overly rustic or marred in some other way rather than exaggerated or oaky.

WE DID SEE TWO main types in our tasting, those with the structure to benefit and evolve from aging, and those that seemed delicious right now. Our favorite, the 2016 Clos Mogador, was from the family of René Barbier, one of the pioneers of Priorat's resurrection. It was ripe, lively and fresh, with floral and mineral flavors. It was also the most expensive bottle in our tasting at \$99, near our \$100 spending limit.

Our No. 2 bottle was the balanced, elegant and focused 2015 Salmos from Familia Torres, a big producer with interests all over Spain and South America. No. 3 was the 2015 Bellmunt from Mas d'en Gil, an easygoing, lovely wine — made from young vines — that was floral and fruity, with mineral flavors. It was our best value at \$25.

Our top tier also included the 2016 Laurel from Clos I Terrasses, spicy, earthy and herbal; and the 2016 Les Crestes from Mas Doix, another fresh, easygoing wine like the Bellmunt, with bright floral and fruit

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Tasting Report Style or Identity?

★★★ Clos Mogador Priorat 2016 \$99

Lively, fresh and balanced, with floral, mineral and ripe fruit aromas and flavors. (Europvin U.S.A., Los Angeles)

★★★ Familia Torres Priorat Salmos 2015 \$38

Balanced, elegant and focused, with aromas and flavors of crushed rocks, flowers and red fruits. (Ste. Michele Estates, Woodinville, Wash.)

Best Value

★★★ Mas d'en Gil Priorat Bellmunt 2015 \$25

Dense but not heavy, with easygoing aromas and flavors of flowers, red fruits and stones. (Regal Wine Imports, Moorestown, N.J.)

★★★ Clos I Terrasses Priorat Laurel 2016 \$53

Balanced, juicy, layered flavors of spicy, earthy fruit and herbs. (Eric Solomon Selections/European Cellars, Charlotte, N.C.)

★★★ Mas Doix Priorat Les Crestes 2016 \$29

Fresh, juicy and easygoing, with bright herbal, floral and exotic fruit flavors. (Eric Solomon Selections/European Cellars)

★★½ Costers del Priorat Priorat Pissarres 2015 \$42

Rich and lightly fruity, with earthy, stony flavors and a touch of licorice. (De Maison Selections, Chapel Hill, N.C.)

★★½ Familia Nin-Ortiz Priorat Planetes de Nin Garnatxes en Àmfora 2016 \$40

Light-bodied and pretty, with fresh aromas and flavors of flowers and herbs. (Eric Solomon Selections/European Cellars)

★★½ Mas Martinet Priorat Clos Martinet 2015 \$82

Smoky, spicy and quite fruity, with a savory, mineral underpinning. (Peter Weygandt Selections/Weygandt-Metzler, Unionville, Pa.)

★★½ Clos Galena Priorat Crossos 2016 \$22

Fine and floral, with balanced, vibrant flavors of herbs, red fruits and minerals. (Snarky & Spirited, Groton, Conn.)

★★½ Alvaro Palacios Priorat Les Terrasses 2016 \$45

Juicy and easygoing, with aromas and flavors of flowers, red fruits and licorice. (Rare Wine Company, Brisbane, Calif.)

What the stars mean Ratings, up to four stars, reflect the panel's reaction to the wines, which were tasted with names and vintages concealed. The wines represent a selection generally available in good retail shops and restaurants and on the internet. Prices are those paid in the New York region. Tasting coordinator: Bernard Kirsch.



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flavors.

Next were five bottles we liked very much, including the stony licorice-scented 2015 Pissarres from Costers del Priorat; the fresh, floral 2016 Planetes de Nin Garnatxes en Àmfora from Familia Nin-Ortiz, made entirely of garnacha aged in amphora; the spicy, savory 2015 Clos Martinet from Mas Martinet; the vibrant, balanced 2016 Crossos from Clos Galena; and the juicy, easygoing 2016 Les Terrasses from Alvaro Palacios.

We also very much enjoyed bottles from Scala Dei, Terroir al Limit and Pasanau, though they did not make our Top 10.

Short of a return to grandiosity, what lies ahead for Priorat? Considering how far the region has come in the last 30 years, it's easy to imagine it resting on its laurels.

Yet much is still to be learned, especially about how the microclimates and soils differ in the various subregions. In an effort to gain a clearer understanding of the terroir, the local authorities have come up with Vi de Vila, in which wine from 12 areas may add the name of the local village to their labels if they meet certain criteria.

The intent is to increase the sense of place within Priorat and to determine the stylistic characteristics of the villages. Dispassionate observers might consider this part of the Burgundification of Priorat. Burgundy, after all, is very much in fashion right now.