

How Priorat Raised The Bar For Spanish Wines

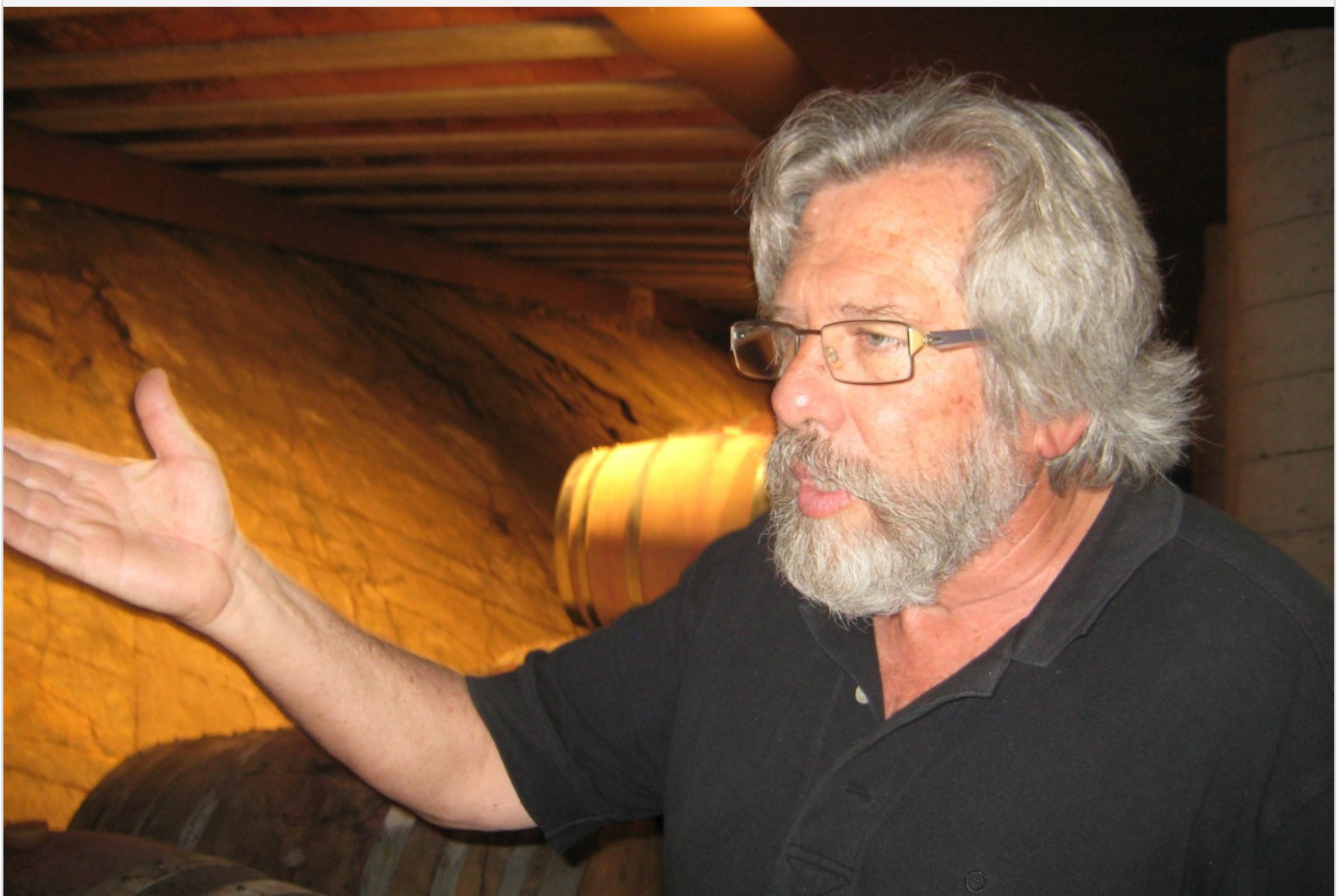
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in: DRINKING



8.4.15 - It is extraordinary to consider that about 20 years ago Priorat was an unknown name in the roll call of Spanish wine regions. Today, much has changed. Priorat is now one of just two regions with a designated DOCa classification, a step up from plain DO, the other being Rioja.

A band of friends



René Barbier was the first of a group of winemakers to buy land outside the village of Gratallops, the estate that was to become world famous as Clos Mogador. Credit: Copyright 2015 Rosemary George

It began in the late 1970s, when René Barbier bought land outside the village of Gratallops, the estate that was to become world famous as Clos Mogador. The first wine was made in 1989 and Barbier was joined by what he calls a band of *copains*, friends who had worked or studied together and went on to develop their own estates, such as Alvaro Palacios from **Rioja**. However, Priorat has always been a wine area, with vineyards run by the priory of Scala Dei, the ruins of which nestle at the foot of the dramatic cliffs of Montsant. In 1835, the Spanish government confiscated all church property, and then the region suffered badly from the phylloxera (the aphid that was imported into Europe on American vines and ultimately destroyed most of the vineyards of Europe, until the remedy of grafting European vines onto American rootstock was discovered). The aphid blight resulted in a drop in the vineyard land from 10,000 hectares (nearly 25,000 acres) of vines to barely 2,000 hectares (50 acres) today.

Dramatic landscape



The landscape is dramatic and viticulture is tough in the Priorat region. Credit: Copyright 2015 Rosemary George

The landscape is dramatic and viticulture is tough. You look at steep slopes and narrow terraces and realize how the lure of urban life in nearby Barcelona or Tarragona was irresistible for many of the farmers who had been scraping a living from their vines. But today there is a new appreciation of the quality of Priorat, based on wonderful old vines, Grenache Noir and Carignan, as well as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. For white wine, there is Grenache Blanc, Macabeo and Pedro Ximenez, and more recent introductions, such as Chenin Blanc and Viognier.

A special soil among the slopes



In the region, the intensity of the flavors conjures up the steep hillsides, with alarming gradients. Credit: Copyright 2015 Rosemary George

So what accounts for the typicity of Priorat? There is no doubt the wines convey a strong sense of place. The intensity of the flavors conjures up the steep hillsides, with alarming gradients — a vineyard tour is an exhilarating experience, and certainly not for the faint-hearted without a head for heights. The vineyards follow the contours of the land, so the aspect changes and the altitude varies considerably. Then there is the soil, the characteristic *llicorella*, which is a type of schist, some 300 million years old. It is this schist that separates Priorat from adjoining DOs such as Montsant and Terra Alta and gives freshness to the wines, balancing the sometime heady alcohol levels that result from the warm summers.

Barbier set the pace at Clos Mogador and others have followed. At the end of the 1980s there were six wineries; today, there are 104, such has been the breathtaking rate of growth. However, the vineyard area has not grown significantly. Vineyards have changed hands and where once grapes were delivered to the village cooperative they are now vinified by new owners, or by people taking a new look at their land.

From experiment to winery



David Marco and his family began making wine as an experiment in 2004. Credit: Copyright 2015 Rosemary George

David Marco from Marco Abella in the village of Porrera is one such example. His family have had vineyards in the area for centuries. He had worked as an engineer in telecommunications and his wife was a lawyer, and they had increased the family vineyard holdings with the idea of simply selling the grapes. However, in 2004 they decided to make some wine as an experiment, and they were so pleased with it that they took the dramatic decision to give up their jobs and build a winery. I was lucky enough to taste that first wine and delicious it was too, fully justifying the career change.

Marco now makes three at least reds, Loidana from younger vines, from equal parts of **Grenache** and Carignan with 20 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, with elegant red fruit, well-integrated oak and a fresh finish. He explained that the influence of the Mediterranean is important, giving a good difference between day and nighttime temperatures. Mas Mallola comes from old Grenache Noir and Carignan, as well as a little Cabernet Sauvignon, from a particularly dramatic vineyard with a 200-meter difference in altitude between the top and the bottom. In the best years, he also makes separate cuvées of Grenache Noir and Carignan from the same vineyard. And then there is Clos Abella, which is

predominantly Carignan, with sturdy fresh fruit. Carignan has often been decried, but tasting Priorat certainly prompts a drastic reconsideration of the quality and potential of this grape variety. White Olbia is a blend of Viognier and Grenache Blanc, with a little Pedro Ximenez and Macabeo, with some rounded textured fruit on the palate and well integrated oak.

A \$4 taste led to a vineyard



Christopher Cannan is an Englishman who discovered Priorat in the early 1980s in San Francisco. Credit: Copyright 2015 Rosemary George

Christopher Cannan is an Englishman who discovered Priorat in the early 1980s in San Francisco, where he happened to drink a bottle from Scala Dei that cost just \$4, and it was delicious. He has long been a friend of René Barbier, and when Barbier told him in 1997 that there was a vineyard going for a song, 10 hectares (about 25 acres) for £30,000 (about \$46,500), Cannan succumbed to the temptation. He made his first wine at Clos Figueras in 2000. He now owns 18 hectares of land, 12 of vines, with **olive trees** as well, and rents an additional four or five hectares, to make a range of finely crafted wines.

The white wine, Font de la Figuera was an accident. They had ordered Cabernet Sauvignon vines and did not realize that they had been sent Viognier until the vines were well established. It seemed a pity to pull them up. Blended with some Chenin and Grenache Blanc, the wine has delicate peachy fruit. Serras del Priorat, from 60% Grenache, 20% Carignan, with some Syrah and a little Cabernet Sauvignon, has ripe fresh fruit, with a little oak. Font de la Figuera also comes from the same four grape varieties. The Cabernet Sauvignon accounts for less than 5% of the blend, but it gives backbone and structure, and the wine is dense and rich, but always with a fresh finish, even if the alcohol level is nudging 14.5%, even 15%.

The flagship wine Clos Figueras comes from 60-year-old Grenache Noir and even older Carignan — records were lost in the Civil War — with a touch of Cabernet Sauvignon, fermented and aged in barriques. It was ripe but elegant. And our tasting finished with Cannan’s first wine, 2000 Font de la Figuera, enjoyed over lunch in the welcoming winery restaurant on the edge of the village of Gratallops. It was deliciously mature, and as Cannan put it, “still at cruising altitude,” with some leathery maturity, a touch of minerality and a fresh finish, illustrating convincingly that Priorat amply deserves its newfound reputation.

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