



CATALONIA

Where the wine is as fiercely independent as its people.

BY MICHAEL SCHACHNER

Last fall, four out of five Catalan voters cast ballots to secede from Spain. While it may have rattled politicians in Madrid, it was a just straw poll, not an official referendum on independence. The Catalonian provinces of Barcelona, Tarragona, Lleida and Girona remain, at least for now, part of Spain.

But in the same way that Catalans have a culture that differs greatly from their Castilian, Galician or Andalusian countrymen, Catalonian wines have little in common with those from the rest of Spain.

Catalonia's 10 denominated wine regions focus mostly on so-called Mediterranean grape varieties, primarily Garnacha and Carignan (also

called Cariñena or Samsó) among red grapes, and Garnacha Blanca and Xarel-lo among white grapes.

There is also Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah and Trepat planted throughout Catalonia, as well as the white varieties Parellada and Macabeo (Viura in Rioja), which are primarily used for the production of Cava, Spain's premier sparkling wine.

Catalonian wines tend to be full-bodied and high in alcohol, due to the grape varieties and the region's warm weather conditions. But Catalonia's best wines also feature intense minerality derived from vineyards planted on granite, chalk and especially, fractured slate soils.

Priorat

A quarter-century ago, the Priorat, located about 90 miles southwest of Barcelona in Tarragona province, was a collection of dilapidated Roman terraces that had seen centuries of neglect.

In 1989, however, a group of pioneering winemakers that included René Barbier, Alvaro Palacios, Daphne Glorian, Carles Pastrana and Josep Lluís Pérez—all still active in the region—joined to produce a single high-quality wine from grapes harvested near the town of Gratallops.

Today, you can no longer count the region's vineyards and wineries on your fingers, thanks to the 5,000-plus acres of vineyards now spread throughout this rugged, hilly region. To say the Priorat has boomed is an understatement. There's more wine coming from one of Spain's most blessed terroirs than ever before.

What makes the Priorat unique from the rest of Spain and much of the world is that its century-old vineyards, meticulously reclaimed by the aforementioned "Gang of Five" and others, are planted with 360 degrees of exposure.

Some portions of the Priorat are influenced entirely by the nearby Mediterranean Sea, with humidity and warm nights factoring into the overall terroir. Other micro-zones pick up drier continental influences, and thus are cooler in the spring and fall, but warmer during the summer.

The Priorat is one of Spain's hilliest regions, with vineyard elevations ranging from several hundred feet above sea level to over 2,000 feet. Winemakers can opt to make traditionally powerful wines from lower *costers* (hillsides planted with bush vines), or experiment with lighter, potentially more elegant raw materials taken from cooler vineyards at higher elevations.

Regardless of exposure or elevation, there's an overriding character to Priorat wines, which are largely based on old-vines Garnacha, Carignan and small amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah.

These are predominantly big, dark, powerful wines with minerally depth derived from the region's decomposed slate soils, known as *licorella*. Alcohol levels usually exceed 15% abv, with flavors revolving around ripe black fruits, oak framing and a



potent core of minerality.

In general, Priorat wines are some of Spain's most expensive offerings. This reflects Priorat's rise in reputation and popularity, but also the high cost in farming steep hillsides. Despite increased plantings over

the past couple of decades, the region's miserly old vines produce the best wines, but in equally miserly quantities.

A visit to the Priorat reveals a region caught between rural traditions and the 21st century. For every modern, architecturally

impressive bodega like that of Alvaro Palacios or Ferrer Bobet, there's someone making several hundred cases of wine out of a former grain mill, municipal building or monastery.

Some of these arriviste wines are over-ripe, out of shape and ponderous. However,

when you come across a great Priorat blend, the combination of complexity, depth, power, fine oak, minerality and overall balance can knock you out.

"Priorat wines are powerful, but they can also be elegant and complex," says Ricard

95 Clos Mogador 2012. This Garnacha- and Carignan-led blend from the village of Gratallops is highly aromatic and focused in the mouth, with strong tannins. Flavors of buttery oak, schist, blackberry and cassis culminate with mocha, vanilla and a sense of greatness. Best from 2017–2025. *Editors' Choice.*
abv: 15.5% **Price: \$90**

94 Mas d'en Gil 2009 Clos Fontà. Cedar, maple, blackberry and schist aromas precede a tannic, firm, but not overpowering palate, with flavors of blackberry, cassis, fig and vanilla. This Garnacha-Carignan blend will be best from 2017–2024. *Classical Wines. Editors' Choice.*
abv: 15% **Price: \$98**

93 Vall Llach 2012 Porrera Vi de Vila. Mildly raisiny on the nose, this smells of boysenberry and crème de cassis. Chewy, tannic and heavy in its youth, this Carignan-based offering from vineyards near the town of Porrera yields blackberry, cassis and prune flavors, with a toasty, chocolatey, oak-heavy finish. Best from 2016–2021. *Folio Fine Wine Partners.*
abv: 15.5% **Price: \$65**

92 Genium Celler 2009 Costers Vi de Guarda. This is a Carignan-led big boy that's layered and heady, with fiery aromas of cinnamon, baking spices, schist and red-berry fruits that include licorice. Deep, dark plum and berry flavors are long on the finish, with notes of leather and wild herbs. Best from 2017–2025. *Grapes of Spain. Cellar Selection.*
abv: 15.5% **Price: \$70**

91 Scala Dei 2010 Cartoixa. This is ripe and a bit oaky and creamy up front, with schisty berry scents. It's controlled on the palate, with cherry, currant, plum, coconut and marzipan flavors. An oaky, rooty finish comes with a deep berry aftertaste. Drink this Garnacha-led wine through 2021. *Aveniü Brands, Inc.*
abv: 15% **Price: \$100**

90 Alvaro Palacios 2012 Les Terrasses. Cherry, cassis and plum aromas are forward and aggressive. In the mouth, this blend of old-vines Garnacha, Carignan and Cabernet Sauvignon shows generous fruit supported by strong tannins. Minerally flavors of plum and berry finish long. Drink through 2017. *Rare Wine Co.*
abv: 14.5% **Price: \$40**

Rofes, winemaker at Scala Dei, Priorat's original monastic winery, with roots that go back to the 12th century. "You should be able to drink a good wine when it's young, but the wines do evolve and age well for about seven to 12 years."

Montsant

Montsant is like a mini Priorat, wrapping around the region like a horseshoe, with similar elevations and similarly composed soils.

Formerly known as the Falset subzone of the mostly undistinguished Tarragona wine region, Montsant became its own denomination in 2001. Like Priorat and the lesser-known, more southerly Terra Alta region, Montsant is largely a Mediterranean-influenced region with a familiar roster of grapes: Garnacha, Carignan, Syrah and Garnacha Blanca.

“Montsant is special, and because it’s not as known as the Priorat, the wines are well priced for the quality,” says André Tamers, founder of De Maison Selections, the importer for one of Montsant’s top wineries, Cellers Joan d’Anguera.

Montsant wines straddle the fence between power and precision. Because the reds are usually based on Garnacha, Carignan and Syrah, expect ripeness and high alcohol levels. But grown at elevations close to 2,000 feet in high-mineral, schist-based soils like those in Priorat, Montsant wines can be alluring, refined, mineral-ly and should rank high on one’s Catalonian wish list.

“Like many places in Spain and throughout the world, Montsant is evolving,” says Tamers. “I began working with the Anguera family more than 15 years ago, after Josep d’Anguera had introduced Syrah to the region.

“But when he passed away about 10 years ago and his sons took over, they were enamored with making the big, heavy, extracted wines that were popular at the time. But now, they have discovered the righteous way of elegance, and I think the wines have never been better.”

The same could be said for Montsant as a whole.



92 Can Blau 2011 Mas de Can Blau. Charred on the nose, this blend of Garnacha, Carignan and Syrah is loaded with blackberry, licorice and hickory aromas. Lush, ripe and strong as an ox, with oaky flavors of vanilla and coconut that settle on chocolate and blackberry. The finish echoes with licorice and vanilla as well as chewy tannins. Drink through 2021. Gil Family Estates.
abv: 15.5% Price: \$45

90 Joan d’Anguera 2012 Finca L’Argatà. Schisty cherry, raspberry and strawberry aromas are subtle and floral. This blend of Garnacha and Syrah is quite fresh, with flavors of mineral plum and currant supported by oak and vanilla. The finish is racy and peppery. Drink through 2018. De Maison Selections.
abv: 14.5% Price: \$31

90 Portal del Montsant 2010 Santbru. This white wine opens with aromas of beeswax and lanolin that are textbook Garnacha Blanca. This also feels waxy. Nutty, oaky, toasted flavors suggest peach and papaya, while the finish is long and complex. Drink now. CIV/USA.
abv: 14% Price: \$43

Terra Alta

As its name implies, this is the highest winemaking region in Catalonia, with elevations up to 3,000 feet. It’s also the *denominación de origen* (D.O.) that’s furthest inland, where schist and llicorella give way to chalk-based soils.

In Terra Alta, red grapes are mostly Garnacha, Carignan, Syrah and small amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Morenillo, a grape that’s akin to Pinot Noir, but is nearly extinct and doesn’t exist outside of the region.

These are mostly full-bodied red wines with freshness fostered by elevation. Because the region is just now emerging, pricing is attractive.

For example, Celler Piñol, an organic winery in the village of Batea, makes several excellent wines that sell for less than \$50. Sa Natura, its Carignan-led blend, boasts the highest quality-to-price ratio of any wine in this tasting.

The highest-scoring Garnacha Blanca was also a Celler Piñol, the 2011 L’Avi Arrufi, one of the most complex and vital of the variety tasted to date. Made from 50- to 80-year-old vines and aged eight months in French oak, it’s the type of wine that fans of white Burgundy would be wise to try.

“I am continually impressed by the quality of wines being produced in Terra Alta,” says Brett Matthew, sommelier and beverage director with Terra Momo Restaurant Group in Princeton, New Jersey, who crafts wine lists deep in Spanish selections at his Mediterranean restaurants. “It’s a place that looks similar to my home state of Colorado. Also, the viticultural history of the area is amazing when you consider that winemaking predates Roman occupation.

“Terra Alta has a bright future, both in the general wine industry and with wine geeks like me who enjoy quality wines from obscure places.”



92 Celler Piñol 2011 Sa Natura. Aromas of coffee, black pepper and herbs get this five-grape blend off to a fine start. A flush palate does nothing to set it back, while flavors of ripe blackberry, meaty plum and savory spices finish with notes of leather and licorice. Drink through 2020. Olé Imports. **Editors’ Choice.**
abv: 14% Price: \$24

91 Celler Piñol 2011 L’Avi Arrufi. Quality Catalonian Garnacha Blanca is distinct, and this is waxy and mature on the nose, with scents of peach pit and apricot. This feels full and peachy, but also brightly acidic. Papaya and stone-fruit flavors finish pulpy and balanced. Drink through 2017. Olé Imports. **Editors’ Choice.**
abv: 14.5% Price: \$49

90 Edetària 2012 Via Edetana. Generous berry aromas smell almost floral. This wine feels soft in the middle, but stout along the edges. Blackberry, plum and cassis flavors finish with hard tannins and a sense of extraction. Get on board for a full, chunky, satisfying Garnacha-based ride. T. Edward Wines Ltd.
abv: 14.5% Price: \$20

Penedès, Costers del Segre & Conca de Barberà

The vinous pride of Barcelona province is the Penedès, home to the lion's share of Spain's Cava industry as well as a handful of notable still-wine producers.

Further inland from Penedès, on the border where Tarragona province touches up against Lleida province, is the Conca de Barberà D.O. Here, red wines made from Spain's signature grape, Tempranillo (locally called *Ull de Llebre*), are often blended with Cabernet Sauvignon.

And hidden away within the interior Catalonian confines of Lleida province is the Costers del Segre region. Also a Cabernet hotbed, the local Trepát grape enters the fray to add lightness, acidity and floral qualities to heavier multigrade blends primarily based on Tempranillo and/or Cabernet Sauvignon.

Together, this trio of largely unsung regions exemplifies what Catalonia does well when not concentrating entirely on Garnacha and Carignan.

The Penedès, whose border begins about 40 miles southwest of Barcelona, is one of Spain's highest yielding regions, thanks to the huge volume of white grapes needed for Cava. One can find the occasional good Xarel-lo here, as well as a few white blends that are fresh and pleasant, for instance, Marqués de Gelida's value-priced 2013 organic Xarel-lo.

If you're seeking a serious Penedès wine, though, the award-winning Torres Mas La Plana is a signature single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon produced in the heart of Cava country. The 2010 vintage—the 40th bottling—is one of the best the winery has produced.

"Throughout Europe, but for sure in Spain, 2010 was an outstanding vintage," says Miguel Torres Maczassek, CEO of the Torres Group. "We are certain this is one of the very best Mas La Planas ever bottled.

"People don't think of the Penedès as a source for great table wines, and that's mostly because it's so closely associated with Cava. But Mas La Plana is something we take great pride in. My father [Miguel A. Torres] always believed that this could be an icon wine."



Lesser known than the Penedès are Costers del Segre and Conca de Barberà. Costers del Segre holds less than a dozen wineries, the largest of which is the mammoth Raimat. But sip a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Tempranillo and Garnacha from

a smaller bodega like Mas Blanch I Jové for high-quality wine at a fair price.

Nearby Conca de Barberà is similar—with roughly 20 wineries, it's still flying under most people's radars. But, much like Priorat 25 years ago or Terra Alta 25 months ago,

the wine industry here has only one direction to go: up.

One of the vehicles that may earn Conca de Barberà more notoriety is Trepát, a grape that Jorge Pérez, head of Spanish and South American imports for New York-based

importer T. Edward Wines, believes could produce wines on par with the top Gamays of France.

"Conca de Barberà has 1,000 hectares of the world's 1,100 hectares of Trepát," he says. "In the right hands, for example, some-

93 **Torres 2010 Mas La Plana 40th Vintage (Penedès).** Spain's preeminent Cabernet Sauvignon is excellent in its 40th edition. Aromas of rooty spice, licorice, tar, herbs, cassia and prune are complex, while this single-vineyard wine is tight at its core. Flavors of currant, toast, vanilla, pepper and stewed meat finish with firm acidity, but also creamy weight. Best from 2017–2030. Ste. Michelle Wine Estates. **Cellar Selection.** **abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$70

91 **Clos Pons 2010 Roc Nu (Costers del Segre).** This blend of Garnacha, Cabernet Sauvignon and Tempranillo opens with leathery, earthy aromas that suggest coffee grinds, black olive and stalky berry fruits. In the mouth, there's a layered feel and spicy flavors of baked berry fruits and black cherry. Drink through 2022. RMB Imports. **abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$30

91 **Mas Blanch I Jové 2011 Petit Saó (Costers del Segre).** Cherry, currant and mineral aromas are fresh and appealing. This blend of Tempranillo, Garnacha and Cabernet Sauvignon is lithe on the palate, while toasty, mineral berry and cherry flavors finish with notes of licorice, cocoa and herbs. Drink through 2019. Aviva Vino. **abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$18

90 **Mas Foraster 2011 Josep Foraster Criança (Conca de Barberà).** Minerally power pushes the bouquet on this Cabernet Sauvignon-led blend that includes briary berry and spice aromas. Chewy, round and full in the mouth, this delivers foresty berry flavors, herbal notes, mushroom hints and peppery spice on the finish. Drink through 2018. T. Edward Wines Ltd. **abv:** 14% **Price:** \$17

89 **Marqués de Gelida 2013 Old Vines Xarel-lo (Penedès).** Wild flower and melon aromas are light and easy. This organic white varietal feels stony and citric, while flavors of lime, orange and mango finish with freshness and modest weight. Fine Estates From Spain. **Best Buy.** **abv:** 12.5% **Price:** \$12

89 **Parés Baltà 2011 Hisenda Miret Microcuvée Garnatxa (Penedès).** Floral cherry and plum aromas turn more rubbery and raisiny as this airs out. Lifted and deep on the palate, this deals lightly herbal flavors of plum and cherry cough drop, while the finish is oaky and resinous. Drink through 2020. Broadbent Selections, Inc. **Cellar Selection.** **abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$50

one like Josep Foraster, it has the potential to be the Spanish version of Cru Beaujolais. Foraster's production comes from the oldest Trepát vineyard in the region; it's only three hectares [less than eight acres], but it's more than 50 years old." 🍷