

# The New York Times

A version of this article appears in print on August 13, 2014, on page D4 of the New York edition with the headline:

“Overlooked Everywhere but Catalonia”

## Cava Is Overlooked Everywhere but Catalonia

By ERIC ASIMOV



Ton Mata's family owns Recaredo, founded 90 years ago by Mr. Mata's grandfather.

ST.-SADURNÍ d'ANOIA, Spain — If ever a grape needed a champion, it may well be xarello. It suffers pronunciation woes (in Catalan, it's shah-RELL-lo; in Castilian, hah-RELL-lo; in English, zah-RELL-oh). It has spelling issues (it's often written xarel-lo among numerous other renderings). Most important, it is guilty by association as a key component of cava, the Spanish sparkling wine that most people consider at best cheap and cheerful and at worst a headache in a glass.

Fortunately, xarello could have no more ardent and convincing a proponent than Ton Mata, whose family owns Recaredo, founded 90 years ago by Mr. Mata's grandfather here in this center of Catalanian cava production in the Penedès, about 30 miles west of Barcelona.

"Xarello is an original, wonderful, great grape," he said as we walked through his biodynamically farmed vineyard on a sunny afternoon in June. To the north, Montserrat rises up in impressive crags, blocking cold winds from chilling the vines. From the south, moist breezes from the Mediterranean keep the vines from getting too hot.

"It's not exuberant — it's not an impact grape," Mr. Mata said. "It's deep, subtle and transparent. Even we don't know the limits of this grape."

A handful of meticulous, quality-conscious cava producers like Recaredo, Gramona, Mestres, Bohigas, Castellroig and Raventós i Blanc are determined to explore those limits. In the process, they hope to

change fixed opinions that consign cava to the bargain bin. It may not take much more than a bottle of Brut Nature Gran Reserva 2008, Recaredo's basic cava, to make that case. It's feathery light, snappy yet elegant, lightly floral with a welcome touch of bitterness, a delicious cava with finesse.

The Gran Reserva costs around \$30, considerably more than the \$6 or so for a bottle of the mass-produced Freixenet Cordon Negro Brut. Recaredo also makes a number of astonishingly good higher-end cavas, like the 2001 Turó d'en Mota, made entirely from a parcel of xarello planted in 1940. The 2001 was pure, fresh, incredibly subtle and very expensive at \$175 or so.

Subtlety? Finesse? Complexity? Anybody who ever lubricated an undergraduate party with cases of cheap cava would be befuddled by the notion. Yet cava does have a significant asset compared with other popular sparklers like prosecco: It's one of the few sparkling wines that is required to employ the same traditional techniques used for Champagne, rather than bulk-production methods. After cava producers make a still wine, they bottle it with a sweet mixture and yeast, as in Champagne. The wine undergoes a second fermentation in the bottle, which produces the bubbles.

A multitude of grapes are permitted in cava, including Champagne's chardonnay and pinot noir, but the best are made of the three traditional grapes: xarello, macabeo (known as viura in Rioja) and parellada. Depending on the vintage, Recaredo Brut Nature is generally 50 to 65 percent xarello, with the remainder made up of macabeo and parellada.

"In the 1980s, we planted chardonnay and pinot noir — everybody did," Mr. Mata said. "Now, no. We don't want to make something like Champagne. Here we have the opportunity to make a sparkling wine of xarello. It's unique." He said that of roughly 20,000 acres worldwide of xarello, 90 percent of it was in the Penedès.

Cava can be made all over Spain, but 95 percent of it comes from Catalonia, which has a historic connection to Champagne, said Xavier Gramona, whose family has made cava since the early 20th century.

“Most cork suppliers to Champagne were Catalan,” Mr. Gramona said. After phylloxera, a vine-killing aphid, devastated the Champagne vineyards around the turn of the 20th century, he said, Catalonia sent still wines to Champagne, which used them to make sparkling wines. Nonetheless, Champagne’s worldwide reputation has done little to repay Catalan wine producers for their help.

“People believe top sparkling wine must be Champagne, or it’s not top,” Mr. Gramona said.

Carefully made cavas like the 2001 Turó d’en Mota can age beautifully. A 2002 III Llustros Gran Reserva from Gramona was fresh and floral, with a lovely light fruitiness. A 1997 Mas Via Brut Gran Reserva from Mestres was full of complex lemon, herbal and floral aromas and flavors that lingered long after you swallowed.

To emphasize the age-worthiness of cava, Mr. Mata took me into the Recaredo cellars, where he pulled out a bottle of 1984 Reserva Particular, the last vintage made when Mr. Mata’s grandfather was alive. The Reserva Particular blend is actually 60 percent macabeo (also an underrated grape, Mr. Mata said) and 40 percent xarello. It was remarkably like an older Champagne, yet lighter in texture, with lightly caramelized flavors of truffles, minerals and chamomile, a beautifully expressive wine at a peak.

The best cava producers take great care in overseeing their vineyards. Recaredo is certified biodynamic and uses only grapes from its own vineyards. Gramona farms organically and biodynamically, and it works with the soil scientists Claude and Lydia Bourguignon, who were integral to restoring the depleted soils of Burgundy in the 1980s. Mestres is striving to become organic.

“Over 300 companies make cava, but maybe only 10 grow the grapes and make the wine,” Mr. Mata said. “Producers are alienated from growers and distant from the terroir. If more producers made cava from their own vineyards, our prestige would grow.”

Not surprisingly, people drink a lot of cava in Catalonia. Good cava goes brilliantly with the plates of jamón Ibérico and olives that seem to appear spontaneously at any gathering, along with the ubiquitous pan

con tomate, a delicacy made of the yeasty local bread rubbed with half a tomato, doused with olive oil and sprinkled with salt.

Most cava producers also make still wines of cava's constituent grapes. I've never had one made of parellada, which seems to play a subordinate role to the other grapes. I've had mildly interesting wines made of macabeo, which, of course, as viura is used for the great traditional white Riojas of López de Heredia. Xarello holds the most interest. Recaredo makes Can Credo, a beautifully textured, 100 percent xarello wine that, unfortunately, is not imported to the United States.

Still, xarello shows best as cava, which, if made meticulously by producers and given a chance by consumers, can be wonderful in its own right.

Email: [asimov@nytimes.com](mailto:asimov@nytimes.com). And follow Eric Asimov on Twitter: [@EricAsimov](https://twitter.com/EricAsimov).

A version of this article appears in print on August 13, 2014, on page D4 of the New York edition with the headline: Overlooked Everywhere but Catalonia.

---

© 2014 The New York Times Company

# The New York Times

A version of this article appears in print on July 8, 2015,  
on page D4 of the New York edition with the headline:

“Overlooked Everywhere but Catalonia”

“The best in my opinion, was the Recaredo  
(...) The flavors were more steely, herbal  
and mineral. I loved the lacy texture of the  
Recaredo and its great finesse”.



# The New York Times

FOOD

## Cava Sparkles on Its Own Merits

Wine School

By ERIC ASIMOV JULY 2, 2015

Briskly uncork a bottle of cava, the sparkling wine of Spain, and you will hear the festive pop so dear to revelers around the globe. Ease it open ever so slowly, and instead you'll hear the soft, contented sigh that may signal an evening of sparkling romance.

Either way, they are the sounds automatically associated with Champagne. Yet cava is something altogether different, sparkling wine from a Catalonian viewpoint.

Just about anywhere in the world where wine is made, sparkling wine is made, too. Very little of it has to do with Champagne, beyond the obvious cue of the bubbles.

Yet consumers so often lump all sparkling wines into one large group with distinctions only by price: Champagne and cheaper Champagne alternatives. It makes as much sense as assuming all white wine is the same because it more or less shares the same color.

Despite the bubbles in common, you will taste no two wines more different than, for example, prosecco and sparkling Vouvray. They come

from different places, are made of different grapes, employ different methods of production, express entirely different cultures and, in the end, smell, taste and feel different. You can draw the same distinctions about most sparkling wines. Not everything with wheels is a car.

Welcome back to Wine School, where the taxonomy of wines is not simply a matter of superficial categorization, but of taking careful note of real, discernible differences.

Here's how it works: Each month, I pick a category of wine and suggest a few representative examples. Over the course of the next few weeks, you acquire one or more of the bottles and drink them in a congenial environment with food, family and friends, paying close attention to your own experience. The next month, we convene here again and discuss the wines. I hope you will post your observations along the way at [nytimes.com/food](http://nytimes.com/food).

Careful observation is the key. While it's entirely possible, and often preferable, simply to enjoy wine without thinking too hard about it, an even greater pleasure comes from noticing its nuances and distinctions.

The ability to do this comes not from having special powers of taste or smell, but from the habit of observation. As with cooks who no longer require the guidance of recipes as they become more comfortable and experienced in the kitchen, so it is with wine drinkers. The more varieties of wines you drink and scrutinize, the easier it becomes to articulate their characteristics and what appeals to your own taste.

Cava is a case in point. It is not only a victim of its association with other sparkling wines, it is also guilty of a checkered past. Cava is produced by the millions of bottles, and much of it is not very good, the product of an ethos that values quantity over quality.

I spent some formative years drinking bad cava because it was a sparkling wine that I could afford, and it did not leave a good taste. It took quite a while — within the last decade, really — before I tried a cava that

changed my mind. But eventually, between drinking cavas that changed my mind and visiting cava country in the Penedès region of Catalonia, I learned that cava could be wonderful if the grapes were farmed conscientiously and the wine made with utmost care.

Cava, in fact, shares the same production method as Champagne. After the grapes are made into a still wine, that wine is bottled and a secondary fermentation is induced in the sealed bottle. With no means of escape, carbon dioxide, a byproduct of that fermentation, provides the sparkle.

Where cava differs from other sparkling wines is both in the grapes and in the places they are grown. The primary grape of cava, xarello, is grown almost nowhere else in the world but Catalonia. It's subtle, and when grown with care expresses the characteristics of its terroir. Many grapes are permitted in cava, including the Champagne duo of pinot noir and chardonnay, but the best and most distinctive cavas are made of xarello along with two other grapes, macabeo and parellada.

Cava can legally be made anywhere in Spain, but most of it, including the best versions, come from the Penedès. This lack of rigorous standards for cava has prompted some producers to remove themselves from the oversight of the cava authorities. These producers, including Raventós i Blanc, one of my suggested producers, effectively make cava, but they do not call their wines cava.

The three wines I suggested, the Raventós i Blanc de Nit 2012, the Gramona Gran Cuvée Brut 2009 and the Recaredo Gran Reserva Brut Nature 2008, are each entirely different, giving a taste of the range of possibilities available to cava producers. The Raventós, in fact, is a rosé, a combination of the three classic cava grapes with 5 percent monastrell, known in French-speaking circles as mourvèdre, which adds the color and some complexity.

It's a terrific wine: fresh, lively, dry and tangy with the hint of an underlying berry flavor. Several readers suggested that the color may have influenced their perception of a berry flavor. This is entirely possible. Colors

have been shown to stimulate moods, so why not flavors? Still, it seemed real to me.

The Raventós is not only younger than the other cavas, but it was also fermented and aged briefly in steel tanks before returning to the bottle for its second fermentation.

The 2009 Gramona was made entirely differently. It has a significant portion of chardonnay in the blend, 30 percent. And the wine was aged in French oak barrels for a year, then received significant bottle aging. Both of these factors account for the wine's toasty flavors and rich texture. It is a more voluminous wine than the others: more spicy, less herbal, yet balanced and graceful.

The third cava, and the best in my opinion, was the Recaredo. It, too, had some barrel aging, but the toastiness was more subtle than in the Gramona, the flavors more steely, herbal and mineral. I loved the lacy texture of the Recaredo and its great finesse. Yet it was substantial as well, with flavors that remained long after I swallowed. Its bubbles, as one reader, Dan Barron of New York, pointed out, were the finest of the three.

I was happy to see that several readers found their reintroduction to cava a revelation. "I had pretty much abandoned cava as a sparkling alternative," David Stalder of Las Vegas wrote. "I won't shy away from it in the future."

Rick J P of Vancouver, British Columbia, got a firsthand lesson in the difference between good and generic cavas. The generic bottles, he found, were not bad, just one-dimensional. "The Raventós, on the other hand," he said, "was multilayered and exceptional."

It is important to remember that these are entry-level cavas from among the best producers. Each makes even better bottles that are still relatively inexpensive. One reader, JKM of Washington, stepped it up by buying Gramona's Imperial Gran Reserva 2007, made with a much smaller proportion of chardonnay and aged longer, which sells for about \$30 in

New York. He loved it.

“The wine was a different beast compared to those I’ve purchased from supermarket shelves,” he wrote. “With Champagne commanding ever higher prices, being able to purchase a gem like this for half the price seems almost criminal. Not that I mind.”

Ah, the comparison with Champagne. I suppose it’s inevitable. Yet I do hope one day that selecting a cava will not be simply a matter of price, but of a desire for its winning characteristics. Then cava will have gotten its due.

Email: [asimov@nytimes.com](mailto:asimov@nytimes.com). And follow Eric Asimov on Twitter: [@EricAsimov](https://twitter.com/EricAsimov).

A version of this article appears in print on July 8, 2015, on page D4 of the New York edition with the headline: A Sparkling Wine Has Rewards All Its Own.

---

© 2016 The New York Times Company