



## Priorat Hits its Prime

No longer a hidden jewel but forever hidden away, Priorat now ranks among the world's great wine regions.

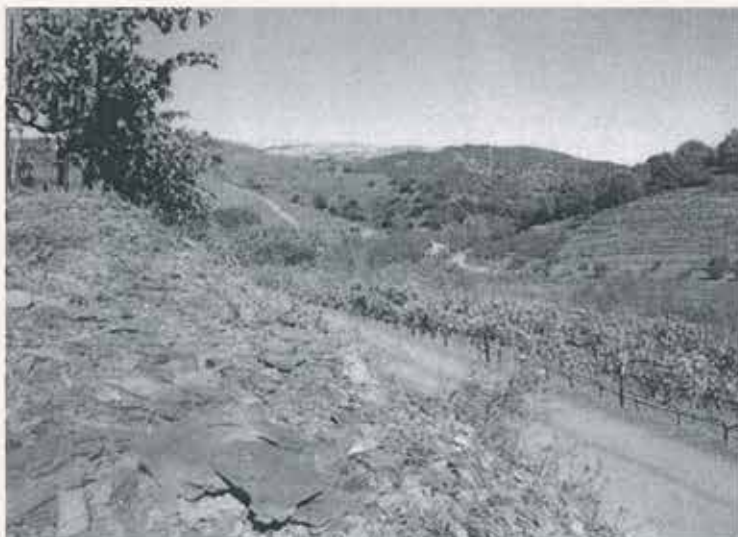
BY MICHAEL SCHACHNER



In May I took my third trip since 2005 to Priorat, an ancient wine region situated at the base of the Montsant bluffs. Priorat is located about 90 minutes south and inland from Barcelona, the anchor city of Catalonia in northeast Spain. The wild flowers were in full bloom, the weather was ideal, and the Garnacha, Carignan and other vines were beginning to pop. Compared to colorless March or scalding July, Priorat and its tiny villages, serpentine roads, terraced vineyards and slate-based hillsides never looked so inviting.

I was participating in a program called EspaiPriorat, an inaugural gathering of international wine press and trade members sponsored by the Denominación d'Origen Qualificada of Priorat. We had come to this sparsely populated, hard-to-reach region to meet the winemakers and winery owners and to taste their burly blends of old-vines Grenache, Carignan, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot. Present were the modern pioneers—Alvaro Palacios, René Barbier of Clos Mogador and Sara Pérez of Mas Martinet—but also many of the newer players who, over the past decade or more, have helped propel Priorat to its current level: one of Spain's top three regions for red wines along with Rioja and Ribera del Duero. In that category I also include Vall Llach, Mas d'en Gil, Clos Figueras and Joan Simó, among others. And there were some new discoveries as well: a lusty pair of red blends from Ferrer Bobet, which has only a few vintages under its belt; the stately white wine made from the Garnacha Blanca grape by La Conreira d'Scala Dei; and Terroir Al Limit's Burgundian-styled red and white wines made by the South African-German team of Eben Sadie and Dominik Huber.

Overall, the quality of the wines was very high, almost as high as the power quotient of the average Priorat red. Because these wines are made largely from old vines (40 to 100 years old) that yield very small amounts of intense grapes, alcohol levels run from 14% up to about 16%. The wines are massively structured with big, grabby tannins. Another key characteristic among Priorat reds is a strong mineral element that stems directly from the soils the vines grow in, or lack thereof. Priorat is known for being covered in broken down slate, what's called schist in English and llicorella in Priorat. This is inert base material, which keeps vigor down and imparts unmistakable minerality to the wines.



Settled in the 12th century by Carthusian monks from France who built the Priory of Scala Dei, the Priorat region has experienced significant growth over the past two decades. Beginning in the late 1980s, Priorat started a transformation from forgotten and dilapidated to where it is today: fully functioning and at its peak. In 1990, there were all of eight wineries producing wine in the Priorat. Today there are more than 90. Twenty years ago there were 359 grape growers in the region compared to more than 600 today. And plantings have tripled, from 765 total hectares (about 1,800 acres) to nearly 2,000 hectares (about 5,000 acres).

Garnacha is the region's leading red grape, followed by Carignan, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot; among white grapes, Garnacha Blanca is the leader, followed by Macabeo (also known as Viura). Due to low production and the difficulties associated with making wine in a hardscrabble, remote place such as Priorat, prices tend to be high, ranging from the low \$20s up to hundreds of dollars a bottle for the most rare and lauded wines, i.e. Alvaro Palacios' L'Ermita.

The following are five recommended Priorat wines that I tasted at EspaiPriorat and that are currently for sale or will soon be available in the U.S. market:

**Alvaro Palacios 2009 Camins del Priorat:** "The roads of Priorat" draws from vineyards in several of the nine miniscule towns located within the Priorat region. Made from 40% Garnacha, 40% Carignan and 10% each Cabernet and Syrah, this "starter" Priorat retails for under \$20 and offers an introduction to the style, flavors and power of the Priorat.

**Mas d'en Gil 2007 Coma Vella:** At 60% Garnacha with 20% Carignan and 10% each of Cabernet and Syrah, this is a concentrated, higher-end wine with a powerful brandied cherry character, schist and length. About \$45 a bottle.

**Ferrer Bobet 2008:** A pure and crisp expression of Priorat terroir. Lively, deep and showing elegance as well as power. About \$60.

**Mas Martinet 2008 Bru:** A 5-grape blend led by Garnacha that's dark and handsome, with softer tannins. This is the "front door to the Priorat," says winemaker Sara Pérez. About \$30.

**La Conreira d'Scala Dei 2010 Les Brugueres:** An elegant, quasi-Burgundian Garnacha Blanca that's tropical on the nose but offers steely acidity and a tight, lemony character. Great for seafood and summer vegetables. About \$30.

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