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It's not just the wildly beautiful mountain vineyards, and the fine wines they produce, that make Catalonia's Priorat region so special. It's the local welcome too, says Nick Rider



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Photographs by **Tim E. White**

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"I NORMALLY STOP HERE JUST TO WALK up to the top so that people can feel the place," says Valentí Llagostera of Mas Doix winery.

We've been driving along a winding dirt track through a lush wooded cleft from Poboleda, deep in the Priorat wine region of southern Catalonia when, after one more bend, we see the vineyard, high up on a crest like a great green pyramid.

Trudging up ever-tighter turns in the path, we stop at a spot where Valentí has provided a table and a few chairs. As we look back the evening sun picks out the details of a Mediterranean *Lord of the Rings* landscape of endless twists, turns, wooded crags and folds in the ground, with deep shadows and, every so often, curving green rows in the most unlikely places indicating vines.

A compact area just 45 minutes north-west of Reus, the Priorat has a special aura in the wine world and touring the region is a unique experience. For 20 years, international wine critics have drooled over the new Priorats, as innovative winemakers propelled the name to DOQ (Denominació d'Origen Qualificada) status - a qualification it holds only alongside the much larger Rioja.

Valentí points out the features of the natural environment that give the wines their unique characteristics. There is little rain, yet strong winds and cold winters. The soil is made up of a black slate and quartz called llicorella, rich in minerals but with only thin, dusty topsoil and no surface water. To reach water, the vine roots must tunnel downwards like gnarled tentacles, sometimes for 15m through cracks in the rock. The best vineyards are cramped, fearsomely steep terraces where standing upright for a few minutes can be a struggle. It seems an extreme, even masochistic, place to choose to grow grapes. But, as another of its master winemakers, René Barbier, points out: "In vines, all extremes are good."

Priorats are typically rich reds, but also whites and even rosés. The combination of dryness, temperature extremes and llicorella give the wines a unique blend of concentrated power, minerality and complexity. As Carles Pastrana of vineyard Clos de l'Obac puts it, these are wines that "never leave you indifferent".

It was medieval monks who first began making wine here, but after a devastating vine plague in the 1890s (one extreme that wasn't so good) most vineyards were abandoned - and it took until the late 1970s for the revival to get going. Pastrana, Barbier and three other friends took over an old farm in the village of Gratallops, now the hub of the Priorat wine world, to try out their own ideas. Locals initially thought the "bunch of hippies" were crazy. Today, each of the five has a winery whose products are rated among the world's finest. Not that they planned it at the time. At his exquisite Clos Mogador vineyard, René says: "This for me was always a place for tranquillity. Now the business has become very important, but it wasn't foreseen."

Young locals saw what the newcomers were doing and put their families' old vineyards back to work, like Joan Sangenís at Cal Pla, a magnificent cellar built by his family in 1814 in the village of Porrera. Nearby is another small winery, Vall Llach, part-owned by a Catalan singer, Lluís Llach and opened in the 1990s. International winemakers came too, seeing Priorat as an ideal place to produce really distinctive wines.

All of which makes it an exceptional place for wine tourism. There's no intimidating stuffiness or bus-tour anonymity about visiting vineyards and cellars here; instead, individual winemakers' passion for what they are doing shines through brilliantly.

"I know every vine, and whenever I have a moment I come to see them," says Francesc Capafons of Cellers Capafons-Ossó. He is no newcomer, but one of a family that first grew vines in the Priorat 250 years ago. As we walk around the perfect natural amphitheatre of his Mas de Masos vineyard, he enthusiastically proffers clumps of fennel, lavender and thyme - taken from an intoxicating array of herbs that he lets grow so their aromas "stay in the ground".

US magazine *Wine & Spirits* placed Mas de Masos - a superbly deep wine to be explored over a long lunch - among the 100 best in the world. There's no grandeur to the tasting room though, and guests sip the internationally renowned drink in the small farmhouse kitchen.

Exploring the many paths that snake around the valleys is another appealing way to get to know the area - and a maze of herb-scented old mule trails makes this place superb walking territory. Local company El Brogit Guiatges offers Trek and Wine hikes with multi-lingual guides that end with a cellar visit. One afternoon, I follow guide Txell Omella along a switchback path and up a giant ridge to reveal a hidden valley of long-abandoned vineyards and wild flowers. Looking down, a fabulous view frames the whole of the Priorat and it is clearly worth the climb.

On the Priorat's eastern flank is a place walkers will find particularly rewarding - looking like another Hollywood CGI concoction. The ancient village of Siurana is situated on an immense crag, with sheer 800m drops on three sides. From one corner, a precipitous path leads to La Trona (the throne), a theatrical natural platform beneath a rock canopy. The view is down over the gorge of the Siurana river

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and across to an infinity of green ridges and vines. There are few better places to appreciate a view of this region, where the natural environment and hard work of skilled locals results in world-class wine.

As Valentí puts it: "The whole of the Priorat is a magical place."

TOURING THE PRIORAT

There are more than 90 wineries in the Priorat. All welcome visitors but advance reservations are usually required. Here are the details for those mentioned in our feature, and you can also book tours through visitpriorat.com. For trekking and wine visits, see elbrogit.com

- 1 **CELLER VALL LLACH** Porrera, tel. +34 977 828 244, www.vailllach.com
- 2 **CLOS MOGADOR** Gratallops, tel. +34 977 839 171
- 3 **CELLERS CAPAFONS -OSSÓ** Falset, tel. +34 977 831 201, www.capafons-osso.com
- 4 **CLOS DE L'OBAC** Gratallops, tel. +34 977 839 276
- 5 **MAS DOIX** Poboleda, tel. +34 628 800 466, www.masdoix.com

THE TASTE OF PRIORAT

The best Priorat wines are those with the fine, grainy tannins of old vines grown on the steep llicorella slopes with Garnacha (or Grenache) and Cariñena (Carignan) grapes. These wines express best the Priorat terroir — intense, with a distinctive herbal nose and full flavour, a little oak in the background adding a rich, nutty, toasty texture. The blends on the other hand, usually made with Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot, are well-crafted, ripe with spicy palates, lovely minerality and a sweet, fruity, spicy edge on the nose.

WHERE TO STAY IN THE PRIORAT

These small hotels and B&Bs are perfect for resting after a long day at the vineyards. Find more at prioratrural.com

CAL COMPTE

Ultra-comfortable modern rooms in an 18th-century village mansion that Anna Figueras and her family have restored to become a very special B&B.

Torroja del Priorat, tel. +34 619 023 779, www.calcompte.com

CAL LLOP

A neat and welcoming boutique hotel with an airy contemporary restaurant, surprisingly all squeezed into a venerable house in old Gratallops.

Gratallops, tel. +34 977 839 502, www.cal-llop.com

MAS FIGUERES

A garden pool is one special bonus at this 19th-century mansion. Breakfasts include fabulous fresh juice.

Between Falset and Marçà, tel. +34 977 178 011, www.masfigueres.com

MIRADOR DE SIURANA

Sleek luxury hotel and restaurant, with pool and superb views, on the cliffs outside Siurana.

Siurana, tel. +34 977 821 472, www.miradordesiurana.com



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