



The Marcus Friday Wine Club Blog

The Sommelier in The Office



Sunday, March 10, 2013

From Estrella Damm to Can Roca

Football is an ideal vehicle for selling beer in Europe as in America, but the televised advertisements for the beverage on the two continents take forms as different as the sports. The Spanish beer Estrella Damm is currently running a [90-second spot](#) that perfectly illustrates the country's attitudes toward food. A fishing boat bobs along the Mediterranean on a sunny day. There's a shot of Hideki Matsuhisa, a sushi chef at Koy Shunka in the Barcelona, then one of FC Barcelona star Cesc Fabregas, before the fishermen pull in a net full of shrimp. Matsuhisa pulls out a cutting board, rubs it with wasabi, prepares eight pieces of shrimp sushi, and offers them to the crew. The men enthusiastically consume the shrimp with Estrella Damm, then start kicking around a spherical buoy, which one of the seamen heads into the water. Undaunted, the crew cracks open more Estrella Damm and sits arm in arm on the bow of the ship in the sun.

The ad reflects a culinary culture that obsesses over freshness, is open to influences from around the world, and believes food should be playful and fun, tenets so pervasive that a mass-market beer commercial can celebrate them. For the last decade, the high-end standard-bearer for this approach was El Bulli, the shrine to molecular gastronomy in northeast Spain. Ferran Adria closed the restaurant in 2011, and the mantle has been handed over to Celler Can Roca in the town of Girona, about an hour north of Barcelona.

Founded in 1986 by chef Joan Roca I Fontane and sommelier Josep (younger brother Jordi later joined as the pastry chef), Can Roca has become more experimental over time. When I went four years ago, it offered appetizers, entrees and desserts along with longer tasting menus, but now only the latter are available, one comprised of Can Roca classics, the other of Joan's current creations. I had the latter and enjoyed it thoroughly, from the white asparagus ice cream with dried ground truffle to the grilled whole prawn – perhaps an homage to [Extebarri](#), the Basque temple of grilling – and sea bream and mullet.

I spent much of the meal reading Josep's wine list, which shows a love of Burgundy and German Riesling as well as Spanish wines, a diversity you'd rarely see in France or Italy. There are even about ten wines from the Jura producer Jean-Francois Ganevat. Josep pairs wines with each course, and he isn't afraid to break out some of his older bottles. A 1998 Lopez de Heredia reserva blanco was unexpectedly floral on the nose but had the producer's customary cleansing acidity on the palate, and the 1973 gran reserva blanco was intensely earthy – one of the sommeliers said it smelled of white truffle – but again with perfectly fresh orange peel on the finish. It reminded me of a scene in the great 1973 Spanish movie [The Spirit of the Beehive](#) where a father takes his two young daughters out to pick mushrooms, and it was a little like a sherry bottled in 1966 that Josep poured when I asked him about sherries, a number of which he has on his list.

Can Roca takes reservations many months in advance and is priced like the Michelin three-star that it is, though the wines remain a good value. Bargain-hunters averse to planning can head to Falset, two hours south of Barcelona, where Celler de l'Aspic has a wine list that would do any restaurant would be proud at prices that make a cheapskate salivate, especially when paired

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- ▼ 2013 (9)
 - ▶ [June](#) (1)
 - ▶ [April](#) (2)
 - ▼ [March](#) (2)
 - [From Estrella Damm to Can Roca](#)
 - [The Paradox of Priorat](#)
 - ▶ [February](#) (3)
 - ▶ [January](#) (1)
- ▶ 2012 (25)
- ▶ 2011 (20)

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with a €30 menu that includes an amuse, four courses, and dessert. Chef and owner Toni Bru is generous in all respects. Beyond the portion sizes, ingredient quality, and prices at his restaurant, when I told him I was going to Can Roca a few days later, he said he was headed up for dinner the day before my reservation and would tell Josep Roca I was coming. Sure enough, Josep was waiting for me when I got to his restaurant. "You are famous in Priorat," he said with a smile.

For all of its openness to foreign influence, Spain has great food traditions of its own, which Oriol Rovira celebrates at Els Casals, a restaurant, hotel, and farm in the mountains north two hours north of Barcelona. He's cooked at a number of great restaurants, including Taillevent in Paris, but his model, he said, is cucina povera, the food the peasants eat. My meal at Els Casals began with a delicious curlicue of a chitlin seasoned with a touch of pepper and lemon peel and a fresh pate topped with a white bean puree. A small dish of beautifully prepared chicken accompanied by a huge bowl of leek mousse followed, then suckling pig with a potato puree that was really a delivery device for good melted cheese.

The Spanish affinity for Riesling reached even here; the sommelier/waiter/chauffeur David (he picked me up from the bus stop in a nearby town that morning) smiled when I ordered a 2008 Zusslin, a Riesling from Alsace, and he brought small samples of various wines throughout the meal, ending with a rare Catalanian red that like Madeira is deliberately exposed to heat and tasted like balsamic vinegar, unsweetened chocolate, and tobacco. That may not sound good, but the flavor grew on me, and I could see sipping an ounce of the stuff late on a summer night while sitting on the porch at Els Casals with my feet up, looking at the mountains.

I also encountered the local cuisine on the €20 lunch menu at Mon Vinic, a wine bar in Barcelona that pours several dozen wines by the glass and had hundreds for sale by the bottle. Their eggs gently scrambled with green onion and morcilla, or blood sausage, was at once comforting and elegant, the kind of dish you could eat once a week for years on end. It went perfectly with an Amontillado sherry that had the complex nose of a good Scotch and the clean finish typical of sherry, but it would also have been great with an Estrella Damm.

Posted by David Marcus at 9:56 AM No comments:



Saturday, March 9, 2013

The Paradox of Priorat

For two nights last month, I was the only person at Hostel Elvira in Gratallops, a small village in northeast Spain. Not just the only guest – the only person. When the taxi driver dropped me off at the residence at 6:00 P.M. on a Sunday evening, he used his cell phone to call the number listed on the front door, then drove off. Fifteen minutes later, a car arrived and parked at the agricultural cooperative across the narrow street. A woman hopped out, let me into the hostel, turned on the heat and hot water, gave me the keys to my room and a brief orientation, and left. Fortunately, I was full from a late, large lunch at Celler de l'Aspic in the nearby town of Falset, because none of the four restaurants and three stores in Gratallops is open on Sunday night. I could channel-surf the hostel's cable television or watch the sun set behind steep hills covered with olive trees, grape vines and almond trees whose white flowers were beginning to bloom.

The combination of extreme remoteness and modern technology is typical of Priorat, until the last few decades a poor region that for a century had lost population to cities where jobs were in far greater supply. It's mountainous terrain cold in the winter and brutally hot in the summer, one ungenerous to farmers and often too steep to work by tractor.

The locals have grown grapes for centuries, Grenache and Carignan, from which they made rustic wine for their own consumption. The vines were not trained in rows but planted individually on soft slate through which the roots of the plant burrowed in search of water. As some farmers abandoned their vineyards when they moved, the grapes continued to grow in fields left to wild grasses and trees.

In 1979, René Barbier, the scion of a Franco-Spanish winemaking family that had sold its firm to the cava producer Freixenet, started making wine in Priorat at what became Clos Mogdor, which is about a ten-minute walk from Hostel Elvira in Gratallops. Others followed. They brought with them other varietals and modern wine-making methods. The heat, harshness of the land, and in some cases the age of the native Grenache vines resulted in low yields with high sugar levels that produced intense wines with high alcohol levels.

That style of wine was perfect for the 1990s, when thanks in part to Robert Parker robust red wines were in high fashion. Priorat's wines bore some resemblance to the Grenache-based Rhone wines such as Chateauneuf-du-Pape that Parker popularized, a similarity that helped drive demand for Priorat.

Parker's power has receded, and a new generation of Priorat winemakers is emerging. Some have grown up in the region, but land and housing here remain affordable, and aspiring winemakers continue to come to Priorat, bringing with them their own tastes and methods. The one constant is high alcohol; a wine must have at least 13.5 percent to be labeled Priorat, and it would be hard to make a wine with less than that given the conditions here.

René Barbier's son, also named René, still makes Clos Mogador with his father, but he's experimenting as well. The son is about 40, with a wife and four children, but when he was younger he worked harvests in the Southern Hemisphere, which exposed him to other wine-making techniques. The harvest in California occurs at about the same time as it does in Priorat, so he couldn't go to Napa Valley, but as an 18-year-old he did venture to Lubbock, Texas in August to pick grapes before returning to do the same in Priorat. René is remarkably honest about his winemaking, and he even took from a barrel what he admitted was a bad Grenache, whose shapelessness will destine it for some end other than a bottle of Clos Mogador. The most interesting wine René offered me was a Grenache aged in amphora, or a large clay pot, which was beautifully fresh and tasted of cranberries and orange.

He's also making wine from White Grenache and Macabeo, a relative novelty in Priorat, where 95% of the wine is red. René makes Mogador with his father, he collaborates with his wife, who runs Mas Martinet, one of the other five original Priorat producers, and he and wife own vineyards with three other couples with whom they make wine, but the whites are his project. That reminded me of Telmo Rodriguez in La Rioja, whose father insisted on making Remelluri reds until a few years ago but allowed the son to make the whites. René smiled with recognition and said he remembered tasting the first Remelluri whites in the mid-1990s; they were a revelation, he said. The next day I visited Mas Martinet, which is also innovating by replacing the Cabernet and Syrah vines introduced in the 1980s with Grenache and making a little rancio, a red wine that's exposed to oxygen and heat and thus acquires a flavor reminiscent of Madeira.

The commercial possibilities of Priorat attracted Rhone winemaker Phillip Cambie and Rhone wine merchant Michel Tardieu, who in 1999 launched Mas Alta, a ten-minute drive from Gratallops on steep, winding roads that offer stunning vistas onto the surrounding mountains and villages. The wines are big but not absurdly so, since Mas Alta doesn't use that much new oak, and well-made if to my taste unexciting. But these wines aren't made for my taste; they're made for a specific, well-heeled segment of the export market, and the owners' expertise in navigating that market is a critical skill given the EU's heavy regulation of the wine trade.

My last visit in Priorat was with Fredi Torres, a Spanish native who was raised in Switzerland, where he studied oenology in college. Fredi came to Priorat to work for René Barbier and ended up buying vineyards nearby, one of them across a road from one of René's. Those plots are steep enough that they have to be worked by mule, and Fredi occasionally lets René house his animal in a small stone hut on Fredi's land. I was surprised to learn that some mules, like the one Fredi worked with for many years, can be quite tractable; that animal is pretty much retired, and her successor is younger and more of a challenge. The mule is the only way Fredi can work one of his vineyards, which is covered not with soil but with soft slate stones and is so steep that I worried I would slide all the way down the hill with every step I took.

Fredi greatly prefers Carignan to Grenache, and he's one of the few people to make wine entirely from Carignan, which is much more commonly a blending grape. After two days of tasting Grenache, I found that Fredi's wines had a nerviness that should develop beautifully as they age. He's recently added capacity, having purchased an abandoned vineyard whose 80-year-old Carignan vines had grown wild for a generation. He wasn't crowing about their age, though; instead, he was worried about the quality of the grapes they would produce in their first year free of underbrush in a long time.

Posted by David Marcus at 7:38 AM 2 comments:



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