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Wine safari in Priorat

Priorat is only an one and half hour drive or 160 kilometres from Barcelona. Priorat is also one of two regions in Spain that have received the prestigious DOQ designation of quality (the other is Rioja). Wines from Priorat are known for their potential to age well and their unique bouquet; they are considered luxury brands among wine connoisseurs. But Priorat is also one of Europe's most impressive wine regions. It is a small region -- just 11,000 hectares -- but very unlike the typical, classic notions of what vineyards look like. After all, there aren't very many places in the world where one can see grape vines growing on the sides of steep cliffs. All around, as far as the eye can see, are mountaintops clothed in a light blue haze. The sun shines almost all day; summers are long and hot and winters are cold, although people say it never freezes in Priorat. The climate is mostly continental, but the caressing Mediterranean breeze from just over the mountains can sometimes be felt, too.



Gratallops, a small mountain village with a population of 250, lies at the heart of Priorat. Gratallops received city privileges in the year 1258 but has been inhabited for much longer. Its name in Catalan means "the place where wolves scratch", but no one remembers why. Of the two hotels in Gratallops, Cal Llop is the more charming. A true boutique hotel seemingly in the middle of nowhere, each of Cal Llop's ten rooms is decorated differently. The hotel reminds one of a slightly rowdy bohemian oasis in which a centuries-old patina melds with spots of contemporary colour. The owner, Cristina Jiménez, notifies guests that it is best to arrive either in the morning or after six in the evening, because the middle of the day is siesta. Cal Llop is located on a pocket-shaped plot at the end of a steep stone street in the very centre of the village. All around are only mountains and cliffs strewn with vines. It's a harsh yet majestic beauty that immediately pulls the visitor into a different rhythm of life. The hotel building was originally built in the 13th century and rebuilt in the 18th century. A small restaurant -- one of the very few in the village -- is now situated in the former horse barn. Jiménez's dog sleeps sprawled out in front of it and pretends to guard the property.

Jiménez herself is from Casablanca. She later lived in Madrid and ended up in Gratallops on account of being a passionate lover of wine. She laughs that mostly two types of tourists come to the sleepy little village: mountain climbers and wine connoisseurs. The Cal Llop house wine, created specially for the hotel by the Sao de Coster winery, is proudly displayed on the shelf. The label is a bit wild, and the sign next to the bottle shouts "no sulfites". Jiménez explains that the owner of the winery, oenologist Fredi Torres, is from Galicia, grew up in Switzerland, has travelled extensively and even worked as a DJ before he finally found his life's calling: wine. He came to Priorat ten years ago...and came down with a bad case of wine fever. He bought a field of grape vines that had almost died out and rejuvenated them. He is a strict follower of the biodynamic principles of farming and ploughs his 45-degree-angle fields with a mule. He is particularly proud of his Canyarets 2008, a wine made from only the best fruit of 85-year-old Carignan grapevines.

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Una Meisterere and Andrejs Žagars



In a way, passion is the essence of Priorat. And passion was also what lured the legendary René Barbier III to Priorat. In wine circles Barbier is known as "the pioneer" and the reason for the region's current status. Barbier is the soul of Priorat's most prestigious winery, Clos Mogador. He is also the descendant of an old family of French winemakers whose history dates back to the 19th century, when they owned 1500 hectares of vineyards in southern France. In 1880 the family's vines were destroyed by the phylloxera plague and they moved to Catalonia. There they established a new vineyard that the owner, Leon Barbier I, named in honour of his son, René I. Everything went well for a time and the winery was passed on to the next generation, Leon II and René II. But then Rene II suddenly passed away at age 50. It was the time of Franco's dictatorship in Spain, and the family winery was bought by a company of questionable reputation. After the fall of Franco's regime, the Barbier family could no longer afford to buy its winery back. Instead, it was bought by the giant Freixenet, which kept the René Barbier name. Needless to say, the two René Barbiers have nothing in common anymore. Or, as René Barbier III says, "That's all history." Everyone in the wine world knows what's what anyway.

René Barbier III studied economics and oenology. When he and his wife arrived in Priorat in 1979, it was a completely different place. "This has historically always been a wine-growing region, all the way back to the 12th century, when the Carthusian monks brought the first grape vines here. In 1893 the region was hit by the phylloxera plague from southern France, and many of the locals moved to Barcelona or Tarragona. When I arrived here, countless families had already left Priorat because it was too difficult to make a living here. A part of the vineyards had already been abandoned for many years. In addition, no one here had previously thought much about quality."



When asked why he chose precisely Priorat, René Barbier III laughs and says it was because he's always liked the "wild West". Then he invites us into his 4x4 vehicle, because Priorat and Barbier's philosophy of winemaking can only be understood once it is seen in person. And a 4x4 is needed to navigate the small roads that wind like a snake between the mountains and rocks. Surrounding flora and fauna get thrown and blown into the vehicle, but Barbier laughs that by local standards this road is a fine highway. The harvest has just begun, and the hills are full of hunched-over figures picking grapes and placing them in boxes.



Barbier shows us the vineyard where it all began. These are the oldest grapevines in the region -- they are 100 years old but still producing. "Carignan," he says. Barbier began by replanting the old vines; then he gradually established new terraces and renewed the old local varieties of grapes. He harvested his first grapes in 1983. In 1989 alone he planted 10,428 grapevines, four mulberry trees, four cypresses and three bay laurels. And, he persuaded other winemakers to move to Priorat. Four of them remained and established wineries of their own: Mas Martinet, Clos Erasmus, Clos de l'Obac and Alvaro Palacios. Together with Barbier's Clos Mogador, they are known as the "big five" of Priorat.



By 1990 all of Clos Mogador's terraces had been planted with grapevines. In 1993 a Priorat wine, Clos Mogador 1991, was first judged by Robert Parker's prestigious The Wine Advocate. This set off a snowball effect: if in the 1990s only 15 Priorat wineries had been registered as DOQ, then by now that number is over 100. But it is René Barbier III's philosophy of wine-growing that made Clos Mogador a legend. From the

very beginning he has made wine using organic methods, and soon he will also receive the proper certification. "People in the wine industry have always known that we grow our grapes organically. Previously, a certificate might not have been so important, but now it is." But biodiversity has always been more important to Barbier than organic farming methods. "That means leaving everything the way it is. The wine grows up as a part of a natural environment." In effect, it grows almost as it would in the wild. The grass, bushes, trees...nothing is touched or disturbed, and moving about the Clos Mogador property is like a true safari ride. "We're not just talking about plants, but of the whole natural environment, all of the wildlife. There are many gardens around here, lots of chickens and rabbits. Everything together, and wine is but one part of it all." Of course, under such conditions the grapevines produce less than they would with conventional farming techniques, but the quality of the grapes and their ageing potential is uncomparably higher. Across the road, Barbier points to an immaculately cultivated vineyard with fat bunches of grapes hanging like necklaces. "Pesticides," he says.

Clos Mogador has 50 hectares of grapevines and produces wines only from grapes grown on its own property: Garnache, Carignan, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah. The winery currently produces an average of 46,000 bottles a year and is now officially run by Barbier's son, René IV, who has worked side by side with his father since 1992. René IV continues the traditions established by his father and represents the new and bold generation of winemakers that, among other things, does not use artificial yeast, experiments with making sulfite-free wines, uses fewer new oak barrels in favour of ceramic containers, and so on. In addition, René IV is married to another bold winemaker, Sara Perez. She is the daughter of Josep Lluís Perez, also of the "big five". Together, they have four children and own a winery of their own, Sara i René Viticultors. In 2002 they bought a vineyard on a very steep incline. The vineyard has trees and bushes growing in the middle of it and was abandoned before the wine industry began using pesticides and herbicides. They plough the field with mules and farm it with biodynamic methods. They use only natural yeasts in their wines and since 2012 do not add sulfites to it.



Later, when we taste the Manyetes 2010 red wine (named after a nearby village) with René Barbier III, he tells us it is made of Carignan grapes from an old vineyard that has been pesticide-free for ten years. "You can still taste it in the wine. It has many more pronounced flavours, more minerals. You can feel that the vineyard is not yet completely alive; it will need at least another ten years before it is completely revitalised. Then everything will have returned: the little insects, the microorganisms."

True, there is another side to all of this. When the people of Priorat left their homes during the industrialisation of the Franco era because they could no longer survive off of the land, it was precisely pesticide use that preserved the old grape varieties. "Even though in a way it's controversial, if the fields had not been subjected to pesticides, we would no longer have the old grapevines. When they were abandoned, they were preserved as if in a tin. The soil itself had died, but the vines were still capable of being replanted." Referring to Manyetes, Barbier says that his greatest challenge right now is to revitalise the soil. At Clos Mogador, on the other hand, he began completely from scratch in healthy soil that had previously been used as household fruit and vegetable gardens.

In parting, Barbier gives us a large almanac covering the whole history of his winery, beginning with his first steps in Priorat. The introduction explains, "To taste a wine is to taste the spirit of where it has been made. The moment is ephemeral, but you will remember it forever." And anyone who has ever been to Priorat will agree with that.

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