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René Barbier- Prince of Priorat

June 10: If Angelo Gaja is the uncrowned Prince of Piedmont (Piemonte), Rene Barbier who owns Clos Mogador in Gratallops in Priorat, certainly deserves to be crowned as the Prince of Priorat (Priorato) as he has been able to bring the obscure region in the forefront of Spanish wines with a soul, writes Subhash Arora who recently met him at a Tasting in Priorat and visited his winery for an exclusive interview.

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Talk about DOCa Priorat wines in Catalonia (Cataluña) and the first name that comes to mind is Alvaro Palacios not only because he has become an iconic name in less than two decades but is the undisputed global brand ambassador of Priorat. However, the man who has been responsible for bringing the renaissance of Priorat is René Barbier, a native of Tarragona, who motivated and catalysed Palacios and three other quality European wine makers to come to Priorat in Tarragona and produce wine in the late 80s, bringing a colossal change in the quality and style of wines which until then were known to be of poor quality and barely drinkable – certainly not export-worthy.

He was thus also instrumental in making Gratallops the village in which he set up base, the most important and biggest wine village with 27 of the 92 wineries being in this village, making it the 'wine capital' of Priorat.

René Barbier Dynasty

The 62- year old bearded René Barbier is a 4th generation René Barbier christened simply as René Barbier. His 38 year old son of the same name (no. 5) works with him as well as independently with wife Sara Pérez, daughter of Josep Lluís Pérez who is one of the four producers brought into the fold by Barbier and who owns Mas Martinet. The young couple already has a 6-year old son by the same name (no.6) to carry on the dynasty that originated in Gigondas, South of France. Though born in Tarragona, the mother tongue of our protagonist continues to be French and he speaks little English (the son acted as an interpreter for the interview).

René no. 4 who worked with his father having a winery in Penedès admits that his father used to make low quality wines. After his death his mother was obliged to sell off the brand to Freixenet, the leading Cava producer. He vowed to make high quality wines one day and while moving to Rioja Baja where he started working for the acclaimed Palacios Remondo winery, he started buying tracts of land in 1975-76 and had bought 10 hA by the eighties. He also bought a small winery in 1978. 'I used to visit several areas and I had identified Priorat for its excellent soil and good climate and decided to own vineyards to produce DO Priorat wines,' he says. He now owns 20 hA of parceled vineyards.

'While working with the Palacios family, I won the Best Export Manager in Spain Award in 1984 although I did not know a word of English,' he says with a twinkle in his eyes. 'French was implicit in wine back then,' he adds. Álvaro Palacios assisted him in sales in the Rioja winery, according to him.

'I decided to move back to Tarragona in the late eighties. I managed to convince Alvaro who has been like a son to me and join hands and move to Priorat. Alvaro had spent a few years in Bordeaux studying enology and viticulture and was as keen and passionate to produce Grand Crus level wines that could compete with the best in France,' says René.

It is recent history now that the Famous Five- René Barbier (Clos Mogador), Alvaro Palacios (who made the iconic L'Ermita), Josep Lluís Pérez (Mas Martinet), Daphne Glorian (Clos Erasmus and Carles Pastrana (Clos de L'Obac) were responsible to first produce quality wines (they made the wine together in 1989 at a rented winery). He admits that the sudden shift in trends for red wines especially in the US where they liked approachable wines with power and concentration and yet with aging potential, helped. (The 60 Minutes programme on the American TV about The French Paradox helped increase the sale of red wines exponentially and the timing was seemingly right for these five producers to benefit from the new trend).

A strong proponent of Terroir, René says he is committed to *vinos de terroir*, wines that have typicity of the soil with excellent minerality and complexity due to Llicorella (schist/slate) rather than making wines that could be considered his signature wine. His viticulture philosophy to leave the grapes to ripen to full maturity has been also responsible for quality improvement in Priorat. He has also been proponent of using the indigenous varieties Garnacha and Cariñena rather than international varieties; this has proved to be the foundation for the notable wines of the region.

He is also the one who has been able to promote the concept of 'Clos' which means 'one piece of land'. 'I got the idea from Burgundy', he says. He is also supporter of the idea of Village wines, 'Vino de Villa' and 'Vino de Finca'- single vineyard wines.

Although the iconic wines L'Ermita and Clos Erasmus have attained the status of Cult wines, it does not faze René. 'My philosophy is to be able to make more bottles of a high quality wine rather than small quantity of a top class wine. While each of those bottles are limited to a couple of thousand bottles a year, we produce 30,000 bottles of our top wine Clos Mogador!' he says with modesty and a look of confidence. He also affirms that he prefers to make wines in a more classic style.

Now that he has fulfilled his ambition of making René Barbier synonymous with high quality wines, what are his plans for future, I ask? 'You ask my son, he says, looking at him and with a hearty laugh. 'I think to maintain the quality and stability is my concern. We are producing between 45-50,000 bottles and we would like to stay there.'

He had started a project jointly with Christopher Canaan, President of Europvin and owner of Clos Figueras in Gratallops, in the neighbouring Montsant where he is credited being also in the forefront of improving quality. He has now sold his share to Christopher, according to the junior Barbier.



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His son may have plans to expand though. With his wife Sara Perez who works with her father at Mas Martinet, he owns new vineyards near Gratallops. They are already using the grapes to produce younger wines which are being sold in a 6-bottle pack at Clos Mogador.



René Barbier with his wife and son

René may not as effusive and articulate as Álvaro but he is equally popular overseas. When I visited the winery, I met half a dozen people who had come for tasting his wines. One of the couples was from California. Their son-in-law who is in the wine business, had convinced them to visit Priorat and definitely visit Clos Mogador.

René Barbier name may be slightly known for the wrong reason in India through the importer of Freixenet by Global Tax Free who was importing the earlier label, Clos Mogador would be an excellent addition to any 5-star hotel list looking for wines with a soul for their discerning connoisseur clients.

Subhash Arora

Comments:

Jordi Suárez Baldrís Says:

Dear Subhash Arora, It has been very pleasant for us to read your interesting article on Priorat and René Barbier. It is an honour for Priorat DOQ to appear in such an important magazine.

Best regards. Jordi Suárez, DOQ Priorat.

Posted @ June 14, 2011 13:10

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