

WINES OF SPAIN

PRIORAT WINES

Top of the class!

From a late start in the 1970s, the wines from Catalonia merit the highest certification among Spanish wines. Reports **Rosemary George**

It is extraordinary to consider that 20 years ago or so Priorat was a virtually unknown name in the roll call of Spanish wines, whereas today it is considered to be the finest wine of Catalonia, and is one of just two wines that merit the highest accolade of Spanish wines, a DOCa, or Denominación de Origen Calificada, as opposed to plain DO, (Denominación de Origen), the other being Rioja. The vineyards cover a handful of villages, just inland from the lively city of Tarragona, with its fine cathedral and Roman amphitheatre. The small town of Falset, just outside the vineyard area of Priorat, is the best place to stay, with the Hostal Sport providing comfortable rooms and a regional menu complete with a comprehensive, and indeed tempting, wine list.

Priorat has always been a wine area, with vineyards run by the monks of the Priory of Scala Dei, the ruins of which nestle at the foot of the dramatic cliffs of Montsant. In 1835 the Spanish government confiscated all church property and the priory was destroyed, and then the region suffered badly from phylloxera, resulting in a steep drop in the vineyard land from 10,000 hectares of vines



to barely 2,000 today.

The story of modern Priorat began in the late 1970s when René Barbier bought land outside the village of Gratallops, creating the estate that was to become world famous as Clos Mogador. The first wine was made in 1989 and René was joined by what he calls a band of copains, friends who have worked or studied together, who went on to develop their own estates. These are now among the prestigious names of Priorat, such as Alvaro Palacios from Rioja, Mas Martinet, Clos Erasmus and Clos de l'Obac.

The landscape is dramatic and viticulture is tough. You look at steep slopes and narrow

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terraces and realise how the lure of urban life in nearby Barcelona or Tarragona was irresistible for many of the farmers who had been scraping a living from their vines. But today there is a new appreciation of the quality of Priorat, based on wonderful old vines, Grenache Noir and Carignan, as well as more recent Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. Among white wines there are Grenache Blanc, Macabeo and Pedro Ximénez, and new introductions such as Chenin Blanc and Viognier.

So what accounts for the typicity of Priorat? There is no doubt that the wines convey a strong sense of place. The intensity of the flavours conjures up the steep hillsides, with alarming gradients – a vineyard tour is an exhilarating experience, and certainly not for the faint-hearted with no head for heights. The vineyards follow the contours of the land, so the aspect changes and the altitude varies considerably. Then there is the soil, the characteristic llicorella which is a type of schist, some 300 million years

Terraced vineyards of Clos Figueras at Gratallops, Priorat in the province of Tarragona, Spain

MAP OF SPAIN





Above: René Barbier of Clos Mogador. Below: The characteristic llicorella soil which is a type of schist, some 300 million years old

Christopher Cannan first discovered Priorat in the early 1980s, when he was in San Francisco and happened to drink a bottle from Scala Dei that cost just four US dollars



Above: Christopher Cannan of Clos Figueras made his first wine in 2000. Below: David Marco from Marco Abella in the village of Porrera

old. It is this schist that separates Priorat from adjoining DOs such as Montsant and Terra Alta and gives freshness to the wines, balancing the sometime heady alcohol levels that result from the warm summers.

René Barbier set the pace at Clos Mogador and others have followed. At the end of the 1980s there were just six wineries; today there are 104, such has been the breathtaking rate of growth. However, the vineyard area has not grown significantly. Vineyards have changed hands and where once grapes were delivered to the village cooperative they are now vinified by new owners, or by people taking a new look at their land.

David Marco from Marco Abella in the village of Porrera is one such example. He explained that his family have had vineyards in the area for centuries. He had worked as an engineer in telecommunications and his wife was a lawyer and they had increased the family vineyard holdings with the idea of simply selling the grapes. However, in 2004 they decided to make some wine, just as an experiment, and they were so pleased with the result that they took the dramatic decision to give up their jobs



and build a winery. I was lucky enough to taste that first wine and delicious it was too, fully justifying the career change.

David now makes three reds. Loidana from younger vines, from equal parts of Grenache and Carignan with 20% Cabernet Sauvignon, with elegant red fruit, well integrated oak and a fresh finish. He explained that the influence of the Mediterranean is important, providing a good difference between day and night time temperatures. His Mas Mallola comes from old Grenache Noir and Carignan, as well as a little Cabernet Sauvignon, from a particularly dramatic vineyard with a 200 metre variation in altitude between the top and the bottom.

In really good years he also makes separate cuvées of Grenache Noir and Carignan from the same vineyard. And then there is Clos Abella which is predominantly Carignan, with sturdy fresh fruit. Carignan has often been decried, but tasting Priorat wines certainly prompts a drastic reconsideration of the quality and potential of this grape variety. David's White Olbia is a blend of Viognier and Grenache Blanc, with a little Pedro Ximénez and Macabeo, with rounded textured fruit on the palate and well integrated oak.

Christopher Cannan is an Englishman who first discovered Priorat in the early 1980s, when he was in San Francisco and happened to drink a bottle from Scala Dei that cost just four dollars and found it delicious. He has long been a friend of René Barbier, and when René told him in 1997 that there was a vineyard going for a song – 10 hectares for £30,000 – Christopher succumbed to the temptation. He made his first wine at Clos Figueras in 2000. He now owns 18 hectares of land, 12 of vines, with olive trees as well, and rents a further four or five hectares, to make a range of finely crafted wines.

The white wine, Font de la Figuera Blanco was an accident. They had ordered Cabernet Sauvignon vines, and did not realise that they had been sent Viognier until the vines were well



The dramatic cliffs of Montsant with steep slopes and narrow terraces

established and it seemed a pity to pull them up. Blended with some Chenin and Grenache Blanc, the wine has delicate peachy fruit.

Serras del Priorat, from 60% Grenache, 20% Carignan, with some Syrah and a little Cabernet Sauvignon, has ripe fresh fruit with a little oak. Font de la Figuera also comes from the same four grape varieties. The Cabernet Sauvignon accounts for less than 5% of the blend, but it gives backbone and structure, and the wine is dense and rich, but always with a fresh finish, even if the alcohol level is nudging 14.5°, even 15°.



The flagship wine Clos Figueras comes from 60-year-old Grenache Noir and even older Carignan (records were lost in the Spanish Civil War) with a touch of Cabernet Sauvignon, fermented and aged in barriques. It is ripe but elegant. Our tasting finished with Christopher's very first wine, 2000 Font de le Figuera, enjoyed over lunch in the welcoming winery restaurant on the edge of the village of Gratallops. It is deliciously mature, and as Christopher put it,

“still at cruising altitude”, with some leathery maturity, a touch of minerality and a fresh finish, illustrating convincingly that Priorat amply deserves its newfound reputation.

At Clos Mogador, Rene Barbier has continued to develop his wines. He exudes irresistible energy and enthusiasm and took us on an exhilarating drive through his vineyards. He is passionate about biodiversity, and works biodynamically, with minimal treatments in both vineyard and cellar. He depends on solar energy and the vineyards have their own springs, enabling him to irrigate his young vines. His oldest are over 100 years old, and he now has a total of 50 hectares of vines, including some of the highest vineyards in the area, at 800 metres which constitute a joint project with Christopher Cannan, but in Montsant rather than Priorat. In the cellar as well as in barrels, both large and small, and in concrete eggs, he has amphorae, for which the clay comes from their own lands.

Tasting with René is an exciting experience. First we tried Manyetes, a pure Carignan from 60-year-old vines, which was finely crafted with balanced tannins, its elegance quite belying



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the scorn sometimes heaped upon Carignan. Clos Mogador, which is 50% Grenache, with Carignan, and some Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon was firm and structured, with youthful red fruit and plenty of potential.

And the white Nelin was a real discovery, with the blend including some 100-year-old Grenache Blanc, as well as younger Grenache, and some Macabeo, and various other traditional and more innovative grape varieties. The wine is partly fermented on its skins, in both amphorae and barriques, and has a wonderful fresh minerality and a long finish.

To show how well his white wine ages, René opened a bottle of the 2007, which had evolved



Top: Ruins of the monastery of Scala Dei. Priorat's ancient vineyards were run by Carthusian monks. Above: A wine tasting in progress inside Scala Dei

beautifully, with firm minerality, balanced with some exotic fruit. We finished with a 30-year-old Rancio, a wine that was once traditional to the area, aged for 25 years and subjected to the extremes of temperature in both summer and winter. It was rich and intense, and a great note on which to leave Priorat.♦