

# WINE News

*Meet some new old vines this spring.*



## MARCH 2, 2020 FEATURES

- 2 Laventura's Rioja; Miguel Merino's Dream
- 3 Montsant Companion; Get to Know Portugal
- 4 Of Cava and Other Spanish Bubbles

## The New Classic Wines of Spain and Portugal

By Kirk Walker

**This is a great time for wines from the Iberian Peninsula.** Dollar for dollar, these wines are some of the most exciting wines in the store. Yet, these countries tend to be overlooked. Outside of a handful of classic appellations, most casual wine consumers do not know the wine regions, where they are located, nor what type of wines are made there. Or, they have not had the best experience with one or two of those wines. How do wineries get more attention, when there is already so much good wine in the world? Make better wines that show off the advantages that they have! Let's start with the history of the area. There's a long history (back to the Phoenicians, long) of viticulture here. Where does that pay off?

Grapes that are uniquely adapted to their region. Spain is the second most mountainous country in Europe. Unique and varied geology and topography give winemakers unique and varied grapes to make their wines. Next, are the old vines. It's crazy to me that there are so many old plantations out there that were not being utilized. And let's not forget the producers' willingness to work hard. Most of them have no laurels to rest on. And if they do, they are not content to do so. The efforts of the producers in this newsletter showcase not only the gifts of this peninsula, but also a dedication to utilizing those gifts to craft wines that are true representations of origin—and also just downright delicious.

**2017 Quinta Vale D'Aldeia "Foral de Meda" Douro (\$9.99)** The Douro river valley is one of the great wine regions in the world, with its dramatic vineyards and dramatic climate making for striking wines. But what I love about this wine is that it has a more settled personality. You can see where the high highs could be with its pretty red fruit and muted florals, yet they have a reserved quality to them. The fruit pops on the palate, there are soft tannins, and it has that classic Douro spice. It is clean, easy, and terrific company—like an old friend with whom you once had wild times, but now you both are content with a little less drama in your life.

**2012 DiT Celler "Selenita" Montsant (\$29.99)** We rarely have the opportunity to taste Montsant with bottle age. This wine has just come into its own, yet shows a great deal of potential. A blend of Garnacha and Samsó that is grown in one of the region's famous pinyolencs soils (stones that look like olive pits and are high in calcium), this is dark but is not brooding. It's aromatically very complex, with layers and layers of spice, fruit, and minerality. The palate is cool, developed, and integrated. The tannins are present but not intrusive, and it has a fantastically long finish. This could be a road map to the future of Montsant.

**2015 Raventós i Blanc "de la Finca Vinya dels Fòssils" Gran Reserva Conca del Riu Anoia (\$34.99)** The name is a mouthful and so is the wine. Made from Xarello, Macabeo, and Parellada, biodynamically grown in fossil-rich marine soils, aged for three years on lees, and bottled with no dosage, this bottle rocks—pun intended. Dynamic limestone bubbles with an effusive, Mediterranean twist. There is a little spice, but it is deep, complex and long. **93 VN**



## Laventura: Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained

By Tim Telli

**Laventura is the brainchild of Bryan MacRobert.** Yes, that doesn't sound very Spanish to me either, and that's because he is not from Spain, but a native of South Africa. Coming from another country with a long history of wine production results in a blend of Old World and New World winemaking traditions that are truly exciting. He works with small vineyard plots of vines between 40 to 90 years old. Vineyards are worked and picked by hand, and fruit is taken to his modern winemaking facility in the town of Logroño, in the heart of La Rioja.

**2018 Laventura Viura Rioja (\$25.99)** Fresh and bright, this is a great example of the Viura grape. There is a lovely intensity to the fruit here, with flavors of lemon peel and white flowers all framed by beautiful acidity and hints of subtle oak from the aging in larger wooden vats from famed Austrian barrel producer Stockinger. The vines are grown in limestone soils, which provide plenty of minerality. Extended lees contact adds to the complexity and gives hints of nuts. This is a refreshing wine with great balance that would be perfect with paella or seafood.



**2017 Laventura “Lanave” Rioja (\$17.99)** This is the only blend in the lineup, being equal parts of old vine Tempranillo and Garnacha from all three subregions of Rioja. This is a dense wine that is dark and brooding, with flavors of dark cherries and strawberries backed by refined tannins. Pair with some grilled lamb and you will be happy. **91 JS**

**2018 Laventura Garnacha Rioja (\$25.99)** Garnacha from the slopes of Sierra la Hez, in the Rioja Oriental subregion. With its classic Garnacha flavors of kirsch and spice that are deep and richly fruited, this is a very mineral-driven wine that really shows its terroir of well-drained rocky soils and high altitude. It is very tasty and opens up with air, showing its complex nose and sweet, red-fruited finish. A glorious example of pure, varietal Grenache, this is a joy to drink.



## Bodegas Miguel Merino: A Dream Come True

By Will Blakely

**A veteran of the wine business, Miguel Merino retired in the 1990s to fulfill his dream of making outstanding Rioja wine.** Lovingly referred to as “the hardest-working man in Rioja,” he has brought a tireless passion to winemaking indicative of his deep love for Rioja's roots. Boasting prized parcels in the village of Briones, a top site in Rioja Alta coveted for both its chalky soils and cool, ocean-facing mesoclimate, Bodegas Miguel Merino continues to craft immaculate wines, at once classically Rioja but with a modern sensibility. From vines up to and over 80 years old, these wines seamlessly combine vivid purity of fruit with generous new oak.

**2017 Miguel Merino Blanco (\$45.99)** Mostly Viura with a touch of Grenache Blanc, this charming white showcases not only the terroir of these high-altitude vineyards, but also the brilliant winemaking at play here. Orchard pear, lemon peel, almond blossom, and fine lees form delicate layers on top of a strong backbone of acidity and limestone minerals, finishing with fleshy stone fruit and just a hint of flint. One could draw a connection to cru Burgundy. **91 JS**

**2013 Miguel Merino “Vitola” Reserva (\$24.99)** Coming from vines with an average age of 40 years, this cuvée delivers a tremendous amount of



flavor with relative ease. It evokes juicy cherries jubilee and red plum, backed by vanilla, black pepper, and clove courtesy of the combination of new American and French oak. Superbly concentrated, it also provides ample lift and a savory complexity that compels careful and continued examination.

**2013 Miguel Merino Reserva (\$34.99)** From older vines (between 50 and 80 years old), this wine takes on a new level of sophistication. It displays darker, more brambly fruit than its younger counterpart, which serves as a tantalizing appetizer for a deeper, more nuanced profile. Velvety tannins wrap elegantly around a core of stewed meat, exotic spice, mocha, and black truffle, culminating in a finish that seems to stretch toward eternity.

**2016 Miguel Merino “La Loma” (\$54.99)** The crown jewel of the Bodega's current releases is made up of grapes from a single vineyard site planted in 1946. Decadent yet balanced, it demonstrates the pinnacle of Merino's winemaking accomplishments. Rich plum and cassis ride atop chalky minerals and vibrant acidity, countered by bitter baking chocolate, achieving an almost impossible concentration of flavor without losing control. With the terroir on full display here, this is undoubtedly world-class wine. **92 JS**



## Montsant Companion: Blended Beauty in the Shadow of Priorat

By Kirk Walker

**Montsant has lingered in the shadows for a long time.** The prestige and prices of Priorat have loomed large over its neighboring region. Which is ironic, as the mountains of Montsant all but surround and directly influence the climate of Priorat. The wines of Montsant are mostly blends, with the dominant grape varieties being Garnacha (Grenache) and Samsó (Carignan), but it is not uncommon to find Syrah, Cabernet, and other distant Grenache relatives. It is those mountains with their varied expositions, and most importantly, varied soils (granite, schist, limestone, sand, and everything in between) that make Montsant so exciting. Different soils, same grapes, different blends. Wines can be made here that are unlike those of its neighbors, or anywhere else in the world. With an eye to explore the vast and relatively untouched Mediterranean mountain landscapes, the latest generations of winemakers and viticulturists search out and revitalize old vineyards or bring new plantings online. It's an exciting time for this region.

**2017 Lectores Vini "La Selección" Montsant (\$19.99)** This is a polished Montsant. It is a blend of Garnacha, Samsó, and Macabeu, where the polish and the refinement of the wine comes from the efforts in the vineyards rather than in the winery. It's bright,

elegant, and finely textured. There are fine shadings of fruit with whispers of earth and herbs. With a chance to breathe this wine becomes seamless, gliding across the palate with unobtrusive energy. The farming here is organic with a biodynamic influence, and the winemaking is done with minimal intervention. This wine is everything you (and I) want from a blend of this nature. It speaks to the fruit, and more importantly, the limestone-rich soils the fruit comes from.

**2017 Celler de Capçanes "Mas Donis" Old Vines Montsant (\$12.99)** This was one of my first introductions to the region, many years ago. It is incredible how good this wine has consistently been, and even more incredible how reasonably priced it has remained. This should be a first ballot, all-star wine bargain from Spain. This is Garnacha, Samsó, and Syrah grown on granite and schist soils. The nose is aromatic with dark fruits, spice, and a savory undertone thanks to the Syrah. The palate is awash with those same dark fruits from the nose and fleshed out with ripe, easy tannins. **91 RP**



## Portugal: Underrepresented and Underappreciated

By John Summers

**We tend to shy away from what we don't understand, and that certainly seems to be the case with the dry wines of Portugal.** While the revered sweet Port wines of the Douro Valley certainly put this ancient country on the map of important viticulture many centuries ago, those who are willing to explore the other facets of this isolated slice of the Iberian Peninsula are rewarded with thrilling wines at inexpensive prices. Yes, there are hard-to-pronounce and unfamiliar indigenous Portuguese grape varieties to contend with. But any devotee of fine wine, given the time to appreciate these wonderfully unique varieties and how they harmonize together with traditional blending practices, will find a bounty of world-class bottlings.

Portugal, in general, has a Mediterranean climate not dissimilar to ours here in California. It is walled off from Spain by mountains just as we are from the Great Basin to our east, and has in common a massive ocean and breathtaking coastline to the west. Additionally, there are significant regional variations on that climate. From north to south, we explore the three most substantial and frequently imported regions for red wine: the Douro, Dão, and Alentejo.

**2013 Quinta dos Murças Reserva Douro (\$44.99)** A distinctive sense of place shines through in this phenomenal Douro red. Notes of baked black plum, black raspberry, and currant are framed by hot stone, leather, sweet tobacco leaf, espresso, baking chocolate, dark spice, and a dash of vanilla. There's a great convergence of both power and poise, with fresh focus and well-integrated tannin carrying the flavors through a long finish. Devotees of the famed wines of Ribera del

Douro in Spain would be well served taking a trip downriver for this striking example of a classically Portuguese old-vine Douro blend. Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, Sousão, Tinta Amarela, Tinta Barroca, and Tinta Roriz (Tempranillo). **94 WE**

**2016 Adega de Penalva "Indigena" Tinto Dão (\$11.99)** Inviting tones of poached plums, black fig, ripe black cherry, and black raspberry intermingle with complexities of mulling spices, violets, sandalwood, and black tea in this charming blend from the Dão region of central Portugal. The woody spice notes of the Jaen grape component really shine through. Medium-bodied, harmonious, genteel, silky textured, and extremely well priced, it's a perfect choice for casual dinners and gatherings with friends. Undeniably delicious and over-delivering at the price.

**2017 Esporão "Colheita" Red Blend Alentejo (\$15.99)** This blend of Aragonês (Tempranillo), Cabernet Sauvignon, and Touriga Franca from the Alentejo region proves a sturdy companion at the table. Zesty notes of ripe raspberry, dried cherry, and fresh plums combine with accents of clove, black tea, brick dust, red rose, leather, and tobacco to form an admirably rustic profile. Possessing ample tannin and countryside character, it positively cries out for service with fatty Portuguese or Spanish sausages and meaty stews. Fans of Carignan will find a lot to love in this tasty and unpretentious bottling.





Blossoms herald springtime in Sant Sadurn d'Anoia. (Photo courtesy of Raventós i Blanc.)

## Spanish Bubbles: Delicious, Complicated, Exciting

By Kirk Walker

**Now is probably the best time we have ever seen for Spanish bubbles.** I am just calling them Spanish bubbles because the industry is in a little turmoil over names and regions right now. At K&L we have them all, because as long as it tastes good, they can call it whatever they feel like, be it Cava, Conca del Riu Anoia, Clàssic Penedès, or Corpinnat.

Cava and its historical mass production of lower quality wines is at the heart of the problem. Before Crémant became a big thing, before Prosecco, before California sparkling wine, there was Cava. Everyone could afford to celebrate with Cava. Thank you, Cava. Now, many of us find ourselves in a fortunate position where we can spend a little more. And we want better quality, more distinctive, characterful wines. Made from grape varieties Xarello, Macabeo, and Parellada, the bubbles from Catalonia are some of the most exciting bubbles in the world. (I don't know about you, but as much as I enjoy the company of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, I need variety.) The Mediterranean climate and the soils give us more flavors to enjoy, while the desire to exceed the expectations of the region has everyone raising their game. These are wines that want to win you over.

**2015 Jaume Giró i Giró Brut Nature Elaboració Artesana Reserva (\$24.99)** This wine speaks of extended aging on the lees. It's a vintage wine that is disgorged for shipment, so this bottling has well over the minimum 15 months that a Reserva Cava requires. That aging gives this sparkler a delicious yeasty character that's backed with cool orchard fruits and minerality. It's almost like toasted sourdough bread. This is brut nature, but remember the climate—this is nowhere near the latitude of North Dakota, like Champagne. The fruit more than balances the low dosage. This is a Cava that, while a good *aperitivo*,

wants to be served at the dinner table—maybe because of the little bit of Chardonnay that makes it into the blend of traditional Cava varieties.

### **2017 Raventós i Blanc “de Nit” Rosé Conca del Riu Anoia (\$23.99)**

This winery does not believe in Cava, so much so that they left the appellation and created their own. They only make vintage, biodynamically grown wines, all from this small region. Talk about having a vision and dedication to follow it. This pale, elegant, and long sparkling wine is my favorite rosé in the store for less than \$35. The color comes from Monastrell, which also delivers a delicate and aromatic red fruit character that you cannot find from the typical varieties that give a rosé its hue. That red fruit is backed with citrus, cool stone fruits, soft floral tones, mouthwatering acidity, and minerality. This is very dry but not austere—just one sip makes you crave more.



### **2014 Avinyo Brut Nature Reserva Cava Penedès (\$23.99)**

Here is a winery that has no problem with its Cava appellation. Made from all estate fruit, and all organically grown, this is a wine that shows off the classic calcareous clay soils of Penedès. It's a Reserva that is aged on its lees long enough to be called a Gran Reserva—30 months. And it's another brut nature offering, but don't let that scare you away—this is a wine of delicate fruit, great aromatics, and very fine minerality. I love the latter so much in this wine. It is almost powdered with a fine, salty minerality like a truffle is powdered with cocoa, but it has bubbles and it is a liquid! This wine tastes so good, I could drink it all day.

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