

Cava-and-not-Cava

Or, 'The Many Names of Quality Spanish Fizz (most of which are actually Catalan)'

How to refer to the sparkling wines of Spain?

It's a trickier question than one might think, at first ...

If asked: "tell me about Spanish sparkling wine?"

Most would probably go, "oh, you mean Cava?!"

And for most that probably means an inexpensive, aspiration-free fizz along the lines of Prosecco and Loire sparklers. For the most part, this gets the job done. Or does it?

Before we get into the complexities underlying this question, let's skim the surface of the Cava¹ idea.

Cava is dominated by large industrial producers – just three of them are responsible for 95% of production under the 'Cava' rubric. Taken quantitatively, Cava *is* inexpensive, aspiration-free fizz ... and this 'brand' of wine *is* currently fighting (and losing) a qualitative race to the bottom against 'Prosecco'. Cava can, however, be pretty damned fine fizz, and would-should-be rated much more highly than its not-Champagne competitors ... were it not for that damned pesky 95 percentile.

So, what is a good Cava?

Typically, Cava is a Blanc de Blancs sparkling wine made in the same manner as Champagne. Apple-fruited and earthy, Cavas have a reasonably full, gentle spuma, and are nicely shaped by easily digestible soft acidity². Almost all Cavas are single vintage wines (the warmth of Penedès means the wines do not need so much ageing and blending for the acidity to be tamed³). As most is consumed immediately, however it is common for Cavas at entry level price points to be released without vintage specification. Cava takes its name from 'caves', in the form of natural underground cellars, as with historical Champagne. The term used in Spain to indicate that secondary fermentation and ageing take place in the same bottle as one consumes is 'Mètode Tradicional', and the process is identical to 'Méthode Champenoise'.



Not all Spanish Fizz is Cava

Right now, there is *much* more than Cava production shaping a rapidly evolving Spanish fizzscape:

Firstly, Cava is far from a homogenous idea: despite the dominant market visibility of cheaper styles, there are also producers of quality, delicious (sometimes expensive) aspirational fizz. By aspirational, we mean not simply giving up the notion of excellence as a battle already-and-forever won by the Champenoise. But, secondly, apart from DO (Denominació d'Origen) Cava, there are several (competing) appellations/identities under which quality sparklers can be released.

Many questions exist about how best to represent the notion of quality:

- Does Cava need to be 'fixed'?
- *Can it* be 'fixed', to meaningfully accommodate the industrial giants and their fairly awful wines *and also* to coherently promote quality, even prestige bubbles?
- Or do we need to define Cava as an entry/value idea and have another, premium rubric?

These are merely rhetorical questions by now.

They could and should have been systematically addressed. Sadly that boat (planned, reasoned, future thinking) has sailed, and sunk. Meanwhile a miscellany of unsightly hulks clutter the harbour ...

¹ Cava (pronounced **cahh**-vuhh)

² The generic name is Vinos Espumosos – foamy wines.

³ Acidity may be legally added. While Cava is not legally delimited to the Penedès pre-littoral, 99% comes from there.

What to call 'Quality Spanish Fizz' is a mad battle between five 'appellative' contenders, none of which are remotely satisfying by themselves (there *is* no backable winner here), and together, they constitute a mess:

1. There is, of course, Cava, as currently regulated by the control board of DO Cava. And there are four competing organisations challenging Cava's right/ability to promote quality fizz⁴:
2. Within DO Cava, there is a rogue group called Corpinnat⁵. Corpinnat is an EU-registered brand name shared by an egotistical band of six producers self-regulating for quality within DO Cava. Corpinnat imposes some marginal quality commitments above the norms of Cava while taking the safe option of still being able to use the umbrella of the Cava name. Wines labelled "Corpinnat" wafted (on a breeze of aftershave, hubris, corduroy and tweed) into the market in late 2018.
3. DO Penedès (a table wine DO) has a sub-appellation called Clàssic Penedès, regulating quality fizz. This alternative to Cava as a quality-oriented association commenced in 2013 and by 2018 represented 16 producers. Like Corpinnat, the quality strictures of Clàssic Penedès are reasonable advances on the regulations of DO Cava, but are not entirely satisfactory.
4. Meanwhile, a once-significant producer of quality Cava, Raventos i Blanc withdrew from DO Cava in 2012. They later declining to enter 'Clàssic' and have since also refused to join the Corpinnat mob. Instead, Raventos i Blanc started their own would-be appellation - Conca del Riu Anoia, which remains a crowd of one.
5. Soon (from 2017 harvest) producers in DOCa Rioja will be authorised to release the first Viñedos Singulares Espumosos de Calidad: "Riojan single vineyard quality sparklings". The qualitative regulations of this new appellation are similar to those of Corpinnat and Clàssic Penedès. The name, in its bureaucratic über-blandness, however, is even worse than its ultra-lame competitors! The first Riojan quality single vineyard sparklers enter the market at the end of 2019⁶.

Leaving aside the new Riojan wines, the battle to harness the notion of Quality Spanish (albeit almost entirely Catalan) Sparkling is split between four competing "brands": 'Cava', 'Corpinnat', 'Anoia' and 'Clàssic'. All of this within a single valley just south of Barcelona!

Why the left always loses

It's worth underscoring the tragi-comic dimensions of this commotion.

Some (older readers) will be familiar with the 1970s Monty Python film, "The Life of Brian", which excoriates the tendency of The Left in politics to split on issues of ideological correctness, to thus approximate a rabble and hand victory to The Right. This was a key factor in how the Franco-catholic terror alliance prevailed during and ruled after the Spanish Civil War⁷. The analogy is eerily relevant today⁸. In October 2017, Spain's neo-fascist Prime Minister Rajoy⁹, sent in the army to disrupt non-violent civilian protest by Catalan separatists in Barcelona. Rajoy then manipulated Spanish corporate law to facilitate a capital strike against Catalunya, which was gleefully embraced by the two giants of Cava production: Cordoniu and Freixenet: 'Black Death'¹⁰ was now to be a Riojan brand!¹¹

⁴ Less germane to the quality conversation, there are a bunch of other sparkling types in Spain under various names including various Viña de Mesa and large regional appellations, irrelevancies like PetNats and more. Note also, another methodology, apart from Mètode Tradicional (Champenoise) is also legal. This is 'Ancestral', which are un-disgorged wines given sparkle by closing the bottle during the primary alcoholic fermentation (a partial fermentation in normal vats is suspended then resumed in the tirage bottle), making a sparkling without sugars other than those of the fermented fruit.

⁵ Calling something a 'rogue group' is normally political speak for "people we don't like" ... which *is* exactly the case here (more on why I particularly dislike CORPINNAT follows, but the unpalatable name is somewhere to start)!

⁶ Despite my quibble about the rubbish moniker, the separate appellation is a necessary, valid GI.

⁷ The Ken Loach movie, 'Land and Freedom' (1995) is poignantly instructive on this point.

⁸ See the last page for a brief parody, based on the Monty Python movie.

⁹ This dirtbag was booted out of office in mid-2018, sadly not on account of his neo-facism, but for a rather more blandly Spanish reason altogether – common, everyday corruption!

¹⁰As a Melbourne waiter of my acquaintance habitually termed Freixenet's cheap Cava brand, 'Cordon Negro'!

¹¹ In the end, this threat was not acted upon.

In the Monty Python yarn, the term used for leftist factionalism was ‘splitters’. Similarly, Corpinnat, Anoia and Clàssic are all ‘splitters’, too concerned with their own particulars and splitting the market into four (including Cava Reservas) very similar competing banners.

Raventos i Blanc’s admirable, if quixotic stand could easily be made under the Clàssic Penedès banner. As for Corpinnat, please yourself whether you find in favour of blowhard ego or economic cowardice as the basis of their decision to not join with the almost identical quality assurances already appellationed as Clàssic Penedès. I detail below the minor differences between the qualitative strictures of these competing banners (likewise the new Rioja appellation). Each of these holds themselves to be a little purer, a little more ‘correct’ than each of the others, thus embracing separatism rather than unifying (preferably under an attractive rubric). Surely, though it is possible to be more pure on your own recognisance, while helping build a centre which can hold¹².

All this is about is the quest for an appellation name under which to rally against Champagne (and even bloody Prosecco for that matter) in the battles of the market. It makes no sense to be coy about how tough that battle is. The Champenoise are already in there, dominating a market in which they are easily understood, with an established reputation, and with an appealing-sounding, geographically-descriptive name. Offering the market a choice between Anoia, Clàssic Penedès and Corpinnat entails so much explanation (all of it ideological hair-splitting), we are simply handing the game to the French. And none of the names appeal: Corpinnat is ridiculous to any but a Penedès patriot. It seems highly unlikely that Anoia will win the day, and the non-abbreviated ‘Conca del Riu d’Anoia’ is so clunky that the shopper is already in the Champagne aisle, which leaves us with ‘Clàssic’, sounding rather like a cola brand.

What *do* you want to call Quality Spanish Fizz? Right now, it has five names. And this is as sad as all heck, as there are many wines, Cava and Not-Cava alike, which are delicious, stylish, distinctive and great value. If the heart of affordable quality fizz is the Reserva equivalent (which approximates entry Champagne), here are the similarities and differences across the competing camps.

Criteria	Cava Reserva	Anoia Reserva	Clàssic Reserva	Corpinnat Reserva	Rioja single vineyard
Age	15 months	18 months	15 months	18 months	18 (24 for reserva)
Organic	No	Yes, and b/d	Yes	Yes	Yes
Estate fruit	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Grape varieties	Broad range	Indigenous Penedès	Broad range	Broad range	Broad range

RULES AND FACTS ABOUT THE VARIOUS APPELLATIONS

1: DO CAVA

Ordinarily, the first thing we imagine with an appellation is a line in the dirt, physically demarcating the area to be named. After the physical area is defined, wine styles, grape varieties and production methods are legislated. DO Cava is not like this: it’s an anomaly within the world of wine appellations, as it is not strictly geographical. The vast majority of Cava comes from Penedès, just south of Barcelona. However, Cava is not a geographical appellation, and is thus not limited to Penedès. When the time came for a Cava appellation to be normalised in line with EU appellation laws (1989), the idea of Cava as a certain style of sparkling wine had already been licensed under Spanish law in a number of disparate regions: Aragon, Rioja, Valencia, Navarra and more were historical homes to Cavas licensed under Spanish law. Existing Cava producers were given permission to continue to operate and label their wines as Cava. Since then, however, new producers seeking to label themselves as Cava are only licensed within the boundaries of DO Penedès.

At present, the status of Cava is a locus of turbulent debate. The point made by internal rebels and dissidents alike is that DO Cava does not strive for, nor signify quality sparkling in the manner that Champagne does (the C word is rarely used and the French are habitually wished away). There *is*, in fact

¹² After Yeats, ‘Slouching Towards Bethlehem’: “Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold, mere anarchy is launched upon the world” (yeah, I know it’s ironic quoting an Irish fascist in a piece based on supposed Catalan leftism, but it’s a nice quote ...)

good and even great Cava within the DO ... but there *is also* the lake of unaspiring, uninspiring cheap fizz which gives Cava a less than compelling name around the world. This leaves the door wide open for the ongoing dominance of Champagne in the quality fizz market, and has Cava fighting for market share with the (equally unimpressive) cheap sparklers of the Loire and Prosecco.

Within DO Cava, there *is some* official movement towards quality, such as the recent (November 2017) introduction of site specific wines, which can be labelled 'Cava de Paraje Calificado'. This is a classification for place-naming¹³ of Cavas by stricter viticultural criteria. As well as site-specific, these Cavas must be vintage wines and may only be released in the Brut categories (Brut, Extra Brut and Brut Nature). They are required to have a minimum of 36 months lees-ageing; a higher requirement than the Gran Reserva classification¹⁴. These are expensive wines and Cava de Paraje Calificado (Cava of authenticated location) is not a name that will digest easily in non-Spanish markets. No natural (or plausibly successful) nickname or shorthand exists however to help these wines challenge 'Champagne', which remains rather catchier.

The birthplace of Cava

Cava is an appellation regulating a little short of 300 producers. Cava's origin, and contemporary heart, is the valley of Rio Anoia in Penedès, producing 95% of Spain's Cavas. Just south along the coast from Barcelona, the region consists of a plain bound by two ranges of near-coastal mountains, most notably the enormous Montserrat which towers over the key villages, Sant Sadurn d'Anoia and Villafranca del Penedès. The pre-littoral (just inland from the coast) plain is gently hilly ground between 100m-300m above sea level, and the area is roughly rectangular, bound by higher hills on the western side of the Penedès valley.



Penedès has mild winters, hot and often damp summers. Rainfall is light but adequate; the vines can bud and the fruit ripen well without much of the frost risk which plague lower-lying vineyards in other regions. The Anoia Valley is typified by a shallow topsoil of loam and clay over a fresh, chalky calcareous base easily penetrated by vine roots. There are 3 broad sub-regions: Penedès Superior (higher altitude), Penedès Central (the heart of the valley), and Penedès Maritim (coastal). These further divide into eight sectors: Conca del Riu Anoia (Anoia River valley); Valls de Bitlles i Anoia (valleys of the Bitlles and Anoia Rivers); Conca del Riu Foix (Foix River valley); Serra d'Ancosa (the Ancosa range); Massís del Garraf (the Garraf Massif); Costers d'Ordal (slopes of Ordal); Marina del Garraf (Garraf shore); and Costers del Montmell (slopes of Montmell).

The rules of Cava

9 months is the minimum of developmental ageing for Cava, from the time of tirage to disgorging. After 15 months ageing on lees in bottle, Cava is classified as 'Reserva' and after 30 months, 'Gran Reserva'.

Depending on the grams per litre of residual sugar, Cavas are classified into Brut categories up to 12 grams per litre and then sweeter categories:

CAVA BRUT

Brut Nature: up to 3 g/l, Extra Brut: up to 6 g/l, Brut: up to 12 g/l.

CAVA DULCE

Extra Seco: 12 -17 g/l, Seco: 17 - 32 g/l, Semi-Seco: 32 - 50 g/l and Dulce: more than 50 g/l residual sugar.

¹³A 'Paraje' is the Castellano equivalent of the Catalan 'Partida', the 'Pago' in Andalucia, Piemonte's 'Menzioni' or the French 'Lieu-dit', signifying a wine produced in a geographically coherent, perhaps special, relatively small place.

¹⁴The grapes must be manually harvested from vines over 10 years old; maximum yield of 8,000 kg per hectare. The wines must be estate-vinified. The base and the finished wines need to be qualified, fully traceable and then receive a quality control label.

Legal varieties for producing Cava¹⁵

Most Cavas blend three local white varieties: Macabeo, Xarel.lo, Parellada. Chardonnay is making inroads, but the traditional white varieties predominate. Cavas are Blanc de Blancs by tradition but not by legal definition, and red grapes feature a little in some base wines. Some houses also make dry Pink Cavas, which may be made as an admixture of some red grapes to a white wine base, from red grapes with little skin contact, or as varietal wines from the pink-fleshed Trepát.

THE FRAGMENTING OF CAVA

2: CORPINNAT

In October 2018 a new EU-registered brand will hit the market. An association of six Cava producers has arrogated themselves a separate identity within Cava. Corpinnat wines are to be Reservas with a minimum of 18 months bottle age. They are to be produced from organically grown, manually harvested fruit from DO Cava producers located in Penedès. There is no ruling in favour of estate-grown fruit (rented, controlled viticulture is permitted), and the use non-local varieties is allowed. The only positive difference of note between these criteria and those of 'Clàssic' (below) are an extra three months bottle ageing – this is a putative extra level of quality easily attained on one's own recognisance, and no justification for the Corpinnat group not to have joined the existing Penedès appellation. These companies are attempting a 'have my cake and eat it too' critique of Cava quality while retaining use of the market access/consumer recognition perhaps afforded by the Cava identity. The unappealing tag, means, 'more-or-less', Heart of Penedes. Cor is Catalan for cradle, and Pinnat references the latin etymological root of Penedès (Pinnae). This name obviously made sense in Catalan, in a series of Penedès corporate boardrooms, among a colloquy of blazer-and-corduroy-clad, aftershave-drenched sexagenarian males. It's very difficult to imagine the name achieving 'connect' in the broader market. 'Clàssic', would have become a very strong idea with the support of these rogues, however ...

3: PENEDES CLÀSSIC

An earlier split from Cava came with the introduction of Clàssic Penedès as a sub-appellation inside DO Penedès. The sub-appellation was founded in 2013, with the first wines released in 2014.

The evolving criteria for this appellation (the current rules have applied since November 1, 2018¹⁶) are:

- All wines are to be single vintage and vintage-dated;
- 100% organic and certified (55% of Penedès fruit *is* certified organic);
- entirely Penedès-grown and entirely estate-grown fruit;
- aged for a minimum of 15 months, and thus equivalent to Cava's Reserva wines.
- Only brut-spectrum wines are permitted.

¹⁵ The full list of varieties: **Blancos:** Macabeo (Viura), Xarel.lo, Parellada, Malvasía (Subirat Parent) y Chardonnay.

Tintos: Garnacha, Monastrell, Pinot Noir y Trepát (Trepát is only legal for making Pink Cava).

Macabeo/Viura

Of Catalan origin, Macabeo is also planted in Rioja, where it is known as Viura. It has big, tight bunches of thick-skinned berries, yielding well, but susceptible to bunch rot. In Catalunya, it forms the basis of most Cava blends and makes modest varietal table wines – light, floral, simple but fresh and pretty. In Rioja (and to a much lesser extent Rueda) it can be successfully barrel-and-bottle aged to make complex golden, autumnal whites, where ageing artefact covers up for low acidity. It is picked relatively early to provide much of the aroma and floral character in Cava blends. While sometimes criticised for tending towards neutrality, good viticulture yields wines of finesse, with floral, spicy, herbal aromas.

Xarel.lo (char-rell-low, aka Cartoixa in Priorat, Pansa Blanca in Alella, Prensals Blanc on Mallorca)

Xarel.lo grows in small, loose bunches of thick-skinned berries which ripen mid-season between Parellada and Macabeo. It is powerfully perfumed and makes full-flavoured, structured wines. Relatively tannic and acidic, this is the variety which provides the structural foundation of Cava. Excessive crop levels and over-ripening can lead to rubbery characters and an earthiness akin to the smell of TCA.

Parellada (pa-rey-yada):

Originating in Aragon, Parellada is productive, with large bunches of very late-ripening delicate fruit. It provides an aromatic, light wine with fruity acidity principally used in Cava sparkling blends. As with Xarel.lo and Macabeo, Parellada is also planted throughout Catalunya for producing table wines.

¹⁶The stipulation of only organically grown fruit was phased in from 2013-2017 and finally mandated from October 2018.

'Clàssic' Miscellany:

- In 2018, there were 18 producers of Clàssic' Penedès.
- Since discrete village-based estates are the basis of these wines, sub-regionality becomes possible in labelling and marketing.
As with Corpinnat, Chardonnay is legal, with Chenin Blanc and Gewurztraminer also tolerated.
- 750ml & magnums must be sold in the tirage bottle, smaller and larger formats may be bottled using the transfer method after maturation is complete.
- Un-disgorged wines (minimum of four years' bottle ageing) labelled as 'No Degorjat' or 'No Degollat'.

4: CONCA del RIU ANOIA

Cava was first produced in 1879, by Josep Raventos, then GM at Cordoniu. Josep was the ancestor of the contemporary quality producer, Raventos i Blanc. Raventos i Blanc were long proud of 'l'hereu': their continuous thread within the history of Cava. In 2013, they severed this connection and left DO Cava after more than 130 years. Their ideal is an appellation of organic-biodynamic, single-estate, indigenous varietal viticulture from the Anoia Valley, realising vintage sparklings with a minimum of 18 months' lees-ageing. The full title of this would-be appellation is 'Conca del Riu Anoia' (the Anoia River Valley). It's a very long bow to draw, but maybe one day 'Anoia' will stand in to signify a place, a sparkling style and a notion of quality in just the same way that 'Champagne' does. Maybe ... but right now, all the rats are leaving on other ships.

MEANWHILE, OVER IN RIOJA

5: DOCa RIOJA: Viñedo Singular Espumoso de Calidad

A future competitor to Catalan quality fizz producers looms in the west. As part of DOCa Rioja's reluctant moves towards being a quality regulator, a new Single Vineyard Riojan sparkling category will soon hit the market. The first wines to be launched under the (dramatically underwhelming) tag, "Viñedo Singular Espumoso de Calidad" (Single Vineyard Quality Sparkling Wine), will enter the market from the 2017 harvest. These single vineyard wines (which must first qualify as Riojan village wines – Vinos de Pueblo) will be long-aged, made from organic, estate-grown fruit from old vines (minimum 35 years).

- Cropping levels are to be below the Riojan average, fruit must be hand-picked and gently pressed (only 62 litres of juice can be taken from each 100 kilos harvested). The vineyard must have been controlled by the vignerón for at least 10 years.
- Only Brut-spectrum wines will be permitted.
- pH is to be in the 2.8-3.2 range.
- 15 months is the minimum time of bottle ageing. This is equivalent to the Reservas of Cava, but the Reserva term in Rioja will only apply after a minimum of 24 months in bottle.
- A Gran Reserva equivalent, to be called Espumosa de Calidad 'Gran Añada', for wines aged 36 months in bottle.

IF 'THE LIFE OF BRIAN' WAS REMADE AS A PARODY OF CAVA AND NOT-CAVA APPELLATIONS ...

Imagine the cast list for "Life of Brian 2, in which Brian is a marketeer wondering under which rubric to release his new high quality sparkling. It's too neat for words:

Reg, Judith and Francis are the PFJ (People's Front of Judea), aka the producers of 'Clàssic'.

Then we have The Judean People's Front, aka the Corpinnat producers.

There's the Judean Popular People's Front, akin to Raventos i Blanc, standing alone as Anoaia.

Finally, there are the Romans, aka DO Cava.

Brian: Excuse me. Are you the Judean People's Front?

Reg: Fuck off! 'Judean People's Front'. We're the People's Front of Judea! 'Judean People's Front'?!

Francis: Wankers.

Brian: Can I... join your group?

Reg: No. Piss off.

Brian: I didn't want to sell this Cava. It's only a job. I hate the DO as much as anybody.

Judith: Are you sure?

Brian: Oh, dead sure. I hate the DO already.

Reg: Listen. If you wanted to join us, you'd have to really hate the DO.

Brian: I do!

Ref: Oh, yeah? How much?

Brian: A lot!

Reg: Right. You're in. Listen. The only people we hate more than the DO are the fucking Judean People's Front.

PFJ: Yeah...

Judith: Splitters.

PFJ: Splitters...

Francis: And the Judean Popular People's Front.

PFJ: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Splitters. Splitters...

Loretta: And the People's Front of Judea.

PFJ: Yeah. Splitters. Splitters...

Reg: What?

Loretta: The People's Front of Judea. Splitters.

Reg: We're the People's Front of Judea!

Loretta: Oh. I thought we were the Popular Front.

Reg: People's Front!

Francis: Whatever happened to the Popular Front, Reg?

Reg: He's over there.

PFJ: Splitter!!!