

Celler Scala Dei, *vis de vila del Priorat*

Scala Dei is one of the 12 'villages' of appellation Priorat. Now, technically, it's not a village – it lacks a pub, post office, fountain or some such (although there's probably a fountain as I recall ...) thing that makes a place a town. And there are two different wine business which use the place's name on their labels, la Conreria Scala Dei, and this one, Scala Dei as such.

The place is home to the fabulous historic ruins of the Priory of Scala Dei, since partially restored. Here, in 1194 French monks built a monastery, established farms, gardens and wine culture. For 600 years, they then went about manipulating and extorting from the local peasantry per the general business model of expansionist Catholicism, perhaps the most ruthlessly organised of all organised superstition syndicates. Hundreds of years of carefully fostered ignorance later, it remains the 'spiritual' centre of the contemporary wine appellation, DOQ Priorat (Prior-at derives from Prior-y).



In 1835 a great revolution saw the prayerful cast out, the network of monasteries was disbanded and their misappropriations were returned to the folk. A collection of families bought the estate, which failed after phylloxera and the civil war, but was re-founded as Cellers de Scala Dei in 1974. The 1974 Scala Dei wine the first bottled wine in Priorat's contemporary era.

From the small main town square, you look north past the old monastery, up to the towering flank of the Montsant, an edifice of noble rock, promoted by the canny distributors of cant as the 'Scala Dei' or Stairway to God. This is genuinely remarkable country.

Here in Scala Dei, way up in the north of the valley, is a markedly different Priorat. The climate here is fresher and more moist, and much of the terroir here is limestone riddled with brilliant clay. There is far less blue steel and licorice minerality. The wines are lighter and more transparent, very nimble compared to the power found further south in more typical slate-soiled villages like Gratallops. Here, Garnatxa is queen, with very little Caranyena evident. The wines have freshness, bright fruit, spice and tension, growing at as much as 800m of altitude.



Celler Scala Dei's winemaker is Richard Rofes, who has been making in the region for more than 20 years and at Scala Dei since 2008. Richard trained under local legend, Joan Ausens at the viti school in Falset (Joan was for long Alvaro Palacios's head man). Richard also credits our own Stephen Pannell for alternative understands of working with Garnatxa in its Aussie guise as Grenache, gleaned during the 2008 southern harvest.



Scala Dei Garnatxa

Scott says:

Funky earth dominates nose, perhaps evidence of the reductive tendency of raw concrete. A line of lean-sour herbal balsam opens to vegetal red floral, rock rose, gardenia, geranium and some mint. The palate comes together in a sour red tea line, almost like gum and leaves of a gum tree, with a touch of dark make spice at back. It's fluid, low glycerol and gentle with easy run, a quiet and quite lovely little thing with a slate hint waiting out back to bring it all home, where a bracken flush of local balsam joins in a finish that is the wine's best part.

Nicola's take:

Fragrant nose of redcurrant, maraschino cherry, red plum skin, violet and rose petal. Lovely red dirt earthiness with a touch of potting mix. It's surprisingly light-bodied, but with that lovely spicy lift of Garnatxa. Well-integrated, fine-grained tannins. The way the acid thread weaves its way through the wine is sensational, really bringing all the wine's elements together. Wholesome, balanced and really easy-drinking. What a lovely thing!

