

## Sara Perez i Rene Barbier: DOQ PRIORAT i DO MONTSANT

### Generational change, anyone?

We are standing face-to-face with the future here. Sara was the host of my very first vineyard and winery visits in Spain, many years ago. At the time, she was a young, energetic and very intelligent winemaker, just starting to stretch her wings. She was working under her father, Jose Luis Perez at Mas Martinet, one of the famous 'Priorat Five' who started the new wave Rebirth of Priorat Cool.



But even in outright youth at the time, Sara had her head fully around what was, what had been, and what would be the future in Priorat and Montsant ... and she was already starting to work on her own break-out projects. 15 years down the track, she runs Mas Martinet outright. And she has two beautifully-realised solo projects, owned and run in conjunction with her now husband Rene Barbier. I met Rene the same day I met Sara and spent time with he and his father, Rene Barbier Senior, another of the 'Priorat Five' at Clos Mogador. And yep, Rene Junior (hereafter, simply Rene) was every bit as switched on, full of respect for the past, curiosity for the future, and fire for the hell-yeah-right-now as was Sara! This was in 2000. Sara and Rene hooked up. Four children later, Rene now runs Clos Mogador just as Sara is Mas Martinet, and partners Sara in life and their personal projects spanning Montsant and Priorat terroirs.

If that wasn't cool enough, they have a third solo project 'La Vinya del Vuit' – a partnership between eight young spark-plugs of Priorat, who share a unique ancient Priorat vineyard just out of Gratallops. The past, present and future of Priorat are in very good hands. Lovely people, committed, energetic-yet-relaxed, quietly confident and doing very, very good things.



## **'LA UNIVERSAL' – Venus i Dido, DO MONTSANT**

La Universal is an estate purchased by Sara in 1999. It is on Montsant soils, just outside of Falset where the road forks to either Porrera or Gratallops. It is home to Sara and Rene's family, as well as a discrete wine estate.

Venus is a fun name, inspired by Boticelli, and is given to the main wines of the project: the Venus wines come from Universal's granite soil and some rented vineyards of clay-limestone at Marça, just south of Falset. The second wines, white and red, all come from Universal and are called Dido (Dido was the lover of Venus's son, Aeneas in mythology). "The Universal" is a further joke, invertedly referring to how tiny the project is – the antithesis of universality.

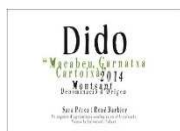
Sara started Venus and Dido in 1999 (before she and Rene hooked up) and invited Rene as a partner in 2004, just as Rene invited Sara to partner him in the DOQ Priorat properties which he had bought. Most of La Universal was planted by Sara in 1999, mainly to Garnatxa with a bit each of Syrah, Cabernet and Merlot. 4 hectares, though, is pre-existing old-vine Samsó on calcareous soils.

Apart from the limestone Samsó vineyard, the soils of Venus are granite and sand (the only granite in the region), yielding wines with very good freshness. Sara wants to make wines that are "fresh: fruity, but not easy". That said, Sara and Rene are moving away from French grapes, and the future will see increasing focus on local Priorat varieties. As noted elsewhere, however, the Merlot in Dido and Syrah in Venus are very useful in helping the finicky local Garnatxa Negra to start fermenting.

### **La Universal 'Dido' Macabeu-Garnatxa Blanca, DO Montsant**

Dido Blanc was first released in 2007. It's a Macabeu-Garnatxa Blanca blend of 70 year-old vines from the home block north of Falset and another just south in Marça. The blend also features a little of the low alcohol, higher acid Pansal Blanc, plus some Garnatxa Gris and Cartoixa (Xarel.lo). The white is fermented in large ceramic tank and concrete eggs – It's a natural fermentation of inoculated local yeast. There's some skin contact (15% is macerated 5 days to form a 'pie de cuba', or fermentation starter. After 4 days a further 20% is added for 24 hours and the rest is pressed straight off) and the Garnatxa Blanca (with some Garnatxa Gris) is aged in barrique for texture, giving lots of honey and spice to the blend. This base is later blended with reductively handled, long-ageing Macabeu.

#### La Universal 'Dido' Blanc Macabeu blend



60% Macabeu, 30% Garnatxa Blanca, 10% Cartoixa/Garnacha Gris. Aged in foudre and concrete. *Golden, marmaladey, rich-bitter. Peachy perfume with pressed flowers, lemon thyme, mint and hissop. There's a granitic crunch on the nose, too. Tastes of boiled sweets, wax, straw, barley water, verbena hedge flower. Warm, soft, good movement and no cloy. Sandy, elegant honey-rich spiciness.*

### **La Universal 'Dido Rosé – la Solucio Rosa', DO Montsant**

Dido Pink is Garnatxa and Caranyena with 30% Macabeu white, aged in a 40 year old Mosel vat. It has a long fermentation in old wood then further ageing in amphorae and large vat, with SO2 at bottling in small measure. *Complex wine of bitter herb, amaro, citrus peel, a touch of spice. Great acid and freshness despite all the theoretical impact of wild winemaking it's mild, smooth and easy. It's not a 'rosé', but then it's not anything else either ...*

### **La Universal 'Dido' Garnatxa Tinto blend, DO Montsant**

Sara's tribute to "youth, tenacity, love and Grenache". Who can argue ...?

Organically grown on a 10 hectare plot of degraded granite (Montsant's only gravel patch), Dido has been in production since 2005. The blend is 86% co-fermented Garnatxa-Syrah (1/5 is Syrah, which helps the local Garnatxa ferment better), with 7% each Cabernet and Merlot. It's picked early, and needs to be largely de-stemmed, so the fermentation takes place in two parts. A 15% portion is used as a starter – whole bunches take wild yeast and are covered with sulphur for 8 days. This is then released into the balance of the fruit, de-stemmed and un-sulphured, and away we go. After fermentation in old hogsheads, the wines are long-aged, more than 18 months – a first year in large raw concrete and then a further 6 months or so in large Foudre of 5000 litres.

#### La Universal 'Dido' Garnatxa Tinto blend

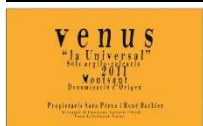
*Bright and fresh red cherry fruit marked by mint and scrubby little herbs, the wine shows the clear crunch of granite soil. It's a red fruit wine marked by mineral earth on nose and palate, with the soil imposing a sense of austerity and order. There's restraint, easy and space, a sense of the country air, perhaps. The quite gentle fruit in the show is*

*moderated further by cheek-cleaning grapeskin tannin. It's juicy and direct with macerated herbs, licorice and briar in lovely pastille fruit. It's briar-herb-brambly, with a nice little nudge of spice, allspice husk and leather. Clear and direct, with absolutely no wine-making clutter, it is delicately structured and savoury. Dido is a smasher!*

#### **La Universal 'Venus' Garnatxa Tinto blend, DO Montsant**

Since 2001. Venus blends the soil of the home block at Falset with more ferrous soils from Marça (a village south towards Capçanes). The final blend from the two soils is 60-20-20 Garnatxa-Samsó-Syrah, and there's less than 4000 litres. Venus is made and aged 16 months in foudre (they buy 1 new each 3 years). Whole berries, de-stemmed are fermented on stems with indigenous yeast in open wooden vats for around 30 days. Ageing is subtle, 20 months in 4,000 litre old clean French oak vats, and a small amount in 300 litre barrels.

#### La Universal 'Venus' Garnatxa Tinto



*Black raspberry fruits and a potpourri of dried country herbs – lavender, mint, thyme and sinsimella. Marked by the leather and spice of Samsó, it's anisey-beefy but entirely without heaviness, and has a lovely fresh and easy release. Spicy, chewy, floral-sweet pippy-purple fruits have a fine, open developed balsamic herbal expression (marjoram and mossy thyme) and a deep*

*sense of the earth. Spice and herb mark Venus at all points, particularly the gentle finish, It's very well-composed with all elements working together: fruit, wood, herb, dirt, tannin, acid, sky and country air. With age, the beefstock and earth deepen and the wine lays out beautifully- it's long, supple and easy.*

#### **La Universal 'Venus' Cartoixa Blanc, DO Montsant**

First released from the 2013 harvest, Venus Blanc is an un-sulfured single barrel of Cartoixa (Xarel.lo), 300 bottles only. Not yet shipped to Australia.

#### **Sara i Rene Viticultors, PRIORAT**

**PARTIDA BELLVISOS Garnatxa Blanca, DOQ PRIORAT, Vi de Vila de Gratallops**

**PARTIDA BELLVISOS Garnatxa Tinto, DOQ PRIORAT, Vi de Vila de Gratallops**

**PARTIDA PEDRER Garnatxa Tinto, DOQ PRIORAT**

**La Vinya del Vuit Carinyena Tinto: DOQ PRIORAT**



In Priorat, Sara and Rene make 4 wines in a pair of distinct projects.

From their own vineyards, just north of Gratallops, they make a white and red from Bellvisos, a vineyard entirely in Gratallops and are thus carry Vi de Vila and Partida appellation specifics. Nearby, Partida Pedrer is a vineyard straddling Gratallops and Torroja municipalities and does not qualify as a village wine. A second project, 'la Vinya del Vuit' is a partnership among 8 (ie Vuit) young wine people of the region, of which Sara and Rene number 2 of course.

A very steep 4 hectare, 90 year old vineyard, Bellvisos was an abandoned, uncultivated and slope of 'finger slate' (see pic) when purchased by Rene in 2001. Planted in 1915, it was later abandoned: vacant 30 years, it had never seen chemicals. After renovation and recovery, the first vintage was 2004. Bellvisos has a curious laminated slate, taking the form of crumbled fingers, which make it impossible to form the usual dry stone terraces. The vineyard has two faces, looking slightly east and west of north respectively. Very steep, the unbroken soil is nurtured in its natural form with light tilling by mule and applications of herbal teas and milk.



Bellvisos is home to a rare patch of old vine Garnatxa Peluda (the French Grenache grape), along with Garnatxas Negre y Blanca and Caranyena (aka Samsó). Bellvisos sits high up above a tight, heavily forested valley along the old walking trail north from Gratallops towards Torroja. Bellvisos literally means ‘beautiful views’: from its peak one can look south across the valley to see hill-top Gratallops marked out against the skyline. Look to the west across the valley that leads to Torroja and through the pine and oak forest one spies L’Ermita. Although only a couple of kilometres out from Gratallops, it’s right on the brink of the Vi de Vila limit of Gratallops – a few hundred metres to the east and one is in the municipality of Porrera, and any further north is Torroja (500 metres away is a Clos Martinet vineyard, Cami Pesseroles, which is a Vi de Vila of Torroja).

Note, we call Bellvisos a vineyard (a finca or vinya), but technically according to DOQ appellation it is a Partida (as is Pedrer, below). Both are continuous and singular stretches, but they are classified as ‘places’ – little sub-regional areas. This is a familiar concept: Bierzo is currently being mapped according to Parajes (Moncerbal and Las Lamas being parajes while La Faraona is a discrete vineyard according to classification), and the same concept is used in France to describe historical partitions of village lands into lieux-dits. The ‘partida’, Bellvisos, is, literally, a “small part” of the Gratallops municipality. When Rene purchased Bellvisos, it was on the understanding that he was getting an old vine Carinyena plot. When the vineyard had been pruned and brought back to life and order, they found that about 40% was Garnatxa Peluda! The wine is signed ‘Ariadna’ by Sara I Rene’s daughter of the same name, who was born on the day they first took a crop from Bellvisos.

#### **Rene i Sara Viticulturs ‘Partida Bellvisos’ Garnatxa Blanca, Vi de Vila Gratallops**

First made in 2009 from the tiny volume of old Garnatxa Blancas scattered through Bellvisos. There are only 300 bottles made from a single barrel. 80% Garnatxa Blanca with Macabeo and Trepal Blanc. This is fermented in small clay amphora capped by skins for 20 days then aged 18 months in old wood. Un-sulphured.

#### Rene i Sara Viticulturs ‘Partida Bellvisos’ Garnatxa Blanca Vi de Vila Gratallops



*Lemon skins, wax, tangerine and vanilla in golden jar preserve fruit with macerated hay, rancio honey, damp clay, bitters and meadow herbs. The mouth has the dimension of Orkney whiskey, mead jolted by citric electricity. It is oily and mineral at once, with grip, spice, volume and lift making for a really engaging mouthfeel. A rounded middle yields to a long, herbal and chalky finish. It's complex without clutter and well organised without any sense of regimentation. Wild, fabulous, beckoned from earth, its textural interest is near unreckonable.*

#### **Rene i Sara Viticulturs ‘Partida Bellvisos’ Garnatxa-Samsó, Vi de Vila Gratallops**



Samsó de Coster, Garnatxas Peluda i Negre. Fermented in 300 litre old wood, aged in foudre. As with many of Sara I Rene’s wines, a ‘pied-de-cuve’ is created: easier varieties to ferment (in this case, Garnatxa Peluda, and in Montsant the Syrah) are set to spontaneous fermentation and once up and about, this active fermentation is used to get the tricky local Garnatxa Negre going (Carinyena is last picked and becomes the third element of a natural fermentation).

Partida Bellvisos is bottled half in 750ml and magnum, with the large format to be released in tranches at 10, 15 and 20 years old. Even the 750s on current release have been held back though, going into the market 3 or 4 years further developed than most of its peers – gifted the time it needs to reveal its true personality and balance. A wine of delicate roundness with peppermint, licorice, tree bark, iron and llicorella rock freshness.

#### Rene i Sara Viticulturs ‘Partida Bellvisos’ Garnatxa-Samsó Vi de Vila Gratallops

*Really classical, it smells of fresh rain lifting off hot slate, with bitter medicinal herb and balsamic aromas ... bracken, tobacco, fennel, thyme, hay, truffle and honey in the ashy smell of llicorella. There’s leather and ink in spiced plum and sloe berry fruit, with llicorella all through. An open, wonderfully elegant style with a very fresh mineral finish.*

#### Rene i Sara Viticulturs ‘Partida Bellvisos’ Garnatxa-Samsó 2004 Magnum Vi de Vila Gratallops

*Brilliant mature and balsamic nose of medicinal bitters and truffle-glazed meats, spicy and dry with sloe berry complexity. Has a long easy palate with lovely lift and run, earthy kohlrabi mingling with pepperminty garriga.*

#### **Sara i Rene Viticulturs ‘Partida Pedrer’ Garnatxa Tinto (un-sulphured), DOQ Priorat**

Pedrer is a Partida slightly further north along the valley between Partida Bellvisos and L’Ermita, on the old track from Gratallops to Torroja. One kilometre up the valley, 50% of the vineyard is in the municipality of Torroja. As it is

made in Gratallops along with Partida Bellvisos (both are handled by Rene at Clos Mogador), it does not qualify as a Priorat Vi de Vila, for such must be grown, made and bottled within a single village after which it may be named.



Rene purchased Partida Pedrer and planted it himself in 2000 to Garnatxa Negra (there's also a little French-origin Mourvedre). With a cool northerly aspect, Pedrer is planted to cuttings from several noteworthy old vineyards: Clos Mogador, La Vinya del Vuit and Espectacle (a Montsant vineyard near Cabaces in the north-west). Pedrer is a wine of the morning sun and the shadiness of the valley. A fermentation starter is commenced with unbroken whole berries, while the balance of the fruit is crushed and goes through a long soak on skins. Pedrer is made and bottled without additives (including oak). It's fermented in 200 litre amphorae, the clay for which is sourced from a nearby river, and aged in 380 litre versions of the same for 16 months. Rene likes the low aromatic impact of clay's micro-oxidative porosity, and believes it helps retain purity and smell of place. Pedrer was first produced in 2010.

#### Rene i Sara Viticulturs 'Partida Pedrer' Garnatxa en sol de llicorella

*Smells of bright raspberry, malt, herbs and a coal dust mineral-earthiness. There are wafts of fine balsamic botanicals - mint and pine, heather and lavender in a subtle breezy register. It's a wine of lovely gentle structure – earth-spiced tannin is delicate, with a 'nip' from spectacular natural fruit acid. This and the cooling, minty-metal tang of the llicorella affect wonderful natural cut - the finish is a 'walk-off, whistling' affair. Fine, focused, relaxed.*

### **La Vinya del Vuit: DOQ PRIORAT**

René Barbier, Sara Pèrez, Iban Foix, Julian Basté, Philippe Thevenon, Ester Nin, Montse Mateos, Núria Pérez  
*“Que un lloc no existeixi, no significa que no s’hi pugui viatjar”*  
Catalan which translates roughly to *“although a place doesn’t exist, it doesn’t mean you can’t go there ...”!*

### **La Vinya del Vuit Samsó Tinto, DOQ Priorat**



Vinya del Vuit is a project of Sara, Rene and 6 other young friends from the region. The project commenced in 2001 with the purchase of an outrageously uneconomical old vineyard. It’s more than 100 year-old Samsó or Carinyena, planted in 1912, as part of the first wave of Priorat’s rebirth after phylloxera. First release was 2002.

In a way, the wine is a statement of generational shift – although now Sara and Rene run their family properties (Mas Martinet and Clos Mogador, respectively – two of the original ‘Priorat Five’), back when this idea got up and running they were just starting out ... young, keen and hungry. Along with the other 6 (also local industry “kids” at the time), they purchased Vuit as an entirely neglected - abandoned and overgrown - ancient vineyard. At 350m altitude, it’s south out the back of Clos Mogador and Finca Dofi, on the Cami towards Bellmunt from Gratallops. As with all of Sara and Rene’s wines, it is organically farmed, tilled by mule and made with yeasts native to the vineyard and spontaneously fermented.

The soil of Vuit is blue-brown llicorella, formed in long-and-wide flat leaves, with fennel and mint growing wild throughout. Farmed ecologically, the vineyard is about 95% very old vine Samsó with a tiny bit of co-picked Garnatxa Blanca scattered through the vineyard. There is also a very small patch (60 vines or so) of extremely old Garnatxa Tinto at the bottom of the vineyard – usually, this barely yields at all! It’s a warm, slow-ripening site, facing south-west. Of 1.5 hectares, half now is young plantings massale-selected from the old vineyard. Another 0.5 hectare vineyard north towards la Vilella Baixa is also included, which means that the wine cannot be labelled as a Vi de Vila de Gratallops, as not all the fruit is from the same village. Overall, the yield is so low that it takes 10 vines to make a bottle of wine. The wine is fermented in open-topped 500 litre barrels and most years is aged 18 months in 2 barrels each of new, one and two year-old French and Austrian 300 litre oak.

#### La Vinya del Vuit Samsó

*The smell is gorgeously terroirist: hay, honey and truffle lifting up from llicorella. There are warm brown spices – nutmeg and clove, freshened by the cold-rock black-licorice. The fruit is slick with glycerol, has very fine tannin and a lovely gliding oak carriage. Inky, spicy, warm, medicinal-balsamic - the wine is firm, but has a lovely sense of glide and great shape overall. Rounder than Garnatxa wine, but not too dense ... it’s surprisingly nimble, in fact.*