

Serra i Barcelo, DO Montsant and DO Terra Alta

Wines Imported:

OCTONIA Garnatxa Tinto, DO Montsant

AUCALÀ Garnatxa Blanca i Garnatxa Tinto, DO Terra Alta

Josep Serra is (4th generation) winemaker of the Serra-Barcelo family property in Montsant. The family comes from Ribera del Ebre (in Catalan, this is the Ebro River valley between Montsant and Terra Alta). As well as Garnatxa Tinto in DO Montsant, Josep makes Garnatxa Blanca and Tinto in neighbouring DO Terra Alta.



Josep started out as winemaker at the Falset co-op in Monstant from 1994-2002. He was then winemaker at Mas Perinet from 2002-2009, making both Priorat and Montsant wines from a bodega in each DO. Mas Perinet was one of the Pop Singer start-ups in the 1990s fools' gold rush to harvest Priorat Parker Points, and has since been sold to a big US combine – but that's not Josep's fault! After Mas Perinet, Josep was responsible for viticulture and winemaking at Godelia in el Bierzo, working as a consultant while readying the two small family projects described here.

OCTONIA GARNATXA and THE MONTSANT VINEYARDS

Josep's Montsant bodega is in the village of els Guiamets, just West of Capçanes village, in which municipality Josep has 2.2 hectares across two plots (which are in the footprint of Vila Capçanes). These were planted in 1940. Organically grown, 'Els Ponts' faces north-west while 'Mas d'en Fornos' faces south-east, at around 200 metres. Both plots have bush vines on steep, stony terraces, at 5000 vines/hectare. The climate is heavily influenced by the nearby Mediterranean and rainfall is around 400mm. being Montsant, you'll expect limestone of course, but these parcels also feature granite, ferrous clay, sand, slate and pink 'Margas'.



The Vineyards

els PONTS

With 56% Garnatxa, 35% Garnatxa Peluda and 9% Samsó, the 2.5 hectares of calcareous soil in els Ponts is the more fertile of Josep's two plots, both of which are heavily marked by surrounding Bosque and Garriga - scrubby woodlands and herb lots. Garnatxa Peluda (Hairy Grenache) is a floral, minty, tight and saline Garnatxa, yielding more reliably in hot dry years on the water-stressed calcareous pebbly clays. It has a full gram/litre more acid than Garnatxa Negra, thanks to a lower transpiration rate.

MAS d'en FORNOS

The very steep terraces of 'Fornos' are planted 50/50 to Garnatxa y Samsó, goblet-pruned and trained 'en Parra'. Low yields (800grams/vine) only become wine at a rate of 2kg/750ml bottle: it takes 2 ½ vines to produce a bottle! The upper part of the vineyard is clay-sand under the bosque (redolent of fennel, scrubby mint and rosemary oils) which crowns the hill. The lower half is pebbly-chalky-sand.

WINE-MAKING

There is a thorough selection process at picking and a second manual selection in the bodega, after which the fruit is gently de-stemmed by hand. The wines are aged in low toast 400 litre French oak for 16 months or so, having previously been fermented in the same wood: the barrels are stood on one end, with the head removed to allow an open top for plunging. Once the fermentation is complete, the barrel head is closed. The wines undergo a slow malolactic conversion during 4 months in barrel, and then age

on lees. After egg white fining, the wines are free-run-decanted unfiltered to bottle during an appropriate moon phase in January.

Octonia tastes as much like its site(s) as any wine I have seen. Expect wines with a Garnatxa profile nuanced with a ferrous mineral edge and touches of soft blackberry, along with the usual floral red raspberry and mirabelle fruit, with lashings of minty *Garriga*, balsamic herb and scrubby *Bosquey* woodsiness ... These beautiful wines have volume without heft, tannins melding with mineral-herb and lovely natural acid freshness. They are moulded to beautifully fit and occupy rather than challenge the mouth. These are wines of remarkable textural clarity, with relatively low glycerol, leaving room for the earth and bosque to interplay. Movement is as important as fruit density to the resultant mouth-feel. *Octonia* is named after the 8 petalled flower-of-life emblem.

Octonia Garnatxa



In summary, sour cherry, a touch of choc, scrub and the red dirt smell of the hill. It's a violet-tinged deep ruby to look at, and smells first-up of mature red-purple rose petals. Spiced quince summarises its earthy sweetness, or sweet earthiness - either way, it's indivisible. Fine low-glycerol fruit is gently spiced, starting out lipstick-tannined and releasing a wild strawberry/forest fruit perfume cloud which extends into brushy garriga and shrubby bosque smells of place by mid-palate (rosemary, fennel, thyme, pine-mint). It releases to a gentle fan of grape-skin, acid and earth with soft perfume continuing at end.

AUCALÀ Garnatxa Blanca, DO Terra Alta

Josep Serra also gives us a fantastic textured Mediterranean white, beautifully rich, yet free of excess glycerol and florality. In DO Terra Alta, Josep grows Garnatxa Blanca from several plots around the village of Gandesa, in the locale known as Aucalà. The landscape here is dominated by Mediterranean pine. Prior to commencing with his own wine, Josep for 10 years was the winemaker-consultant to Editaria, perhaps the region's best wine until the advent of Aucalà, which considerably exceeds it. 2013 is the first Aucalà release. In Terra Alta, Josep owns 2.5 hectares and rents (with full viticultural control) a further 7.5 hectares of 45 year old goblet-pruned bush vines.



DO Terra Alta

Literally meaning 'high country', this small DO (established in 1982) is west of the Priorat-Montsant region, inland from the delta of the Rio Ebro. The Terra Alta crater is bound by the Els Ports Serra (much like the Priorat hills within the Serra Montsant). The DO has 5 co-ops and 50 cellars taking 5,000 tonnes of fruit from 1200 growers, mainly working with Garnatxa Blanca (although there is some good Carignan here too). The main town is Gandesa in the centre of the region, where the soils are the freshest and make the most mineral wines. Most wine is sold in bulk in plastic (*a granel*), with about 400,000 bottles produced. Like Montsant before it, Terra Alta has historically been used a source of bulk grapes for production of DO Penedes wine by the industrial giants of Catalunya.

Gandesa has a marvellous feature in the form of the old town co-op, usually referred to as a "Wine Cathedral". Designed and built by Gaudi pupil Cesar Martinell in 1910 as part of the modernist revolution in Catalan architecture, it features fine, elegant vaulted ceilings in the form of the Vuelta Catalana, much like a Gaudi church. The original Martinell cellar is now a wine museum and the co-op operates out of a second Martinell structure across the road, built in the 1930s. Josep makes his wine

here. Other Martinell “wine cathedrals” can also be seen in the Terra Alta village of Pinell de Brai and the wine co-ops of Falset and Cornudella in Montsant (see: www.catedralsdelvi.cat).

THE TERRA ALTA VINEYARDS

Near Gandesa in the centre of Terra Alta, Josep’s vineyards are at between 300-450 metres altitude and share agricultural space with almonds, olives and a tiny industry of cherry and peach growing. The calcareous chalk soil is called *Pedra de Cala*, and is very crumbly and soft, historically used for hand-made bricks. There are also some pockets of clay, sand and pebbles among the fresh mineral chalk. Delicacy is further promoted by high diurnal temperature range (as much as 18 degrees of night time cooling). Through most of the year the dry *Garbinada* wind from the south-west and the cold *Cerç* from the north-west dominate, while in September the region sees cooling ‘*Seré*’ breezes from the north. Summer is long, hot and dry, winter is very cold, with some risk of spring frost. It’s dry country, with rainfall in the 350-400mm range per annum.

Josep purchased vineyards in Terra Alta in 2010, making his first vintage here in 2013. His vineyards cover 3 tiers, descending from *Partida Sendrozes*, through *Partida Calas* to *Partida Aucalàs* (from which the project takes its brand name). They are east facing and open to a freshening coastal breeze coming from the Mediterranean across the *Baix d’Ebre* (delta of the Rio Ebro).

Josep’s vineyards are planted to local autochthon strains of Garnatxa Blanca taken from *Horta de San Joan* (the highest part of Terra Alta), between the towns of Gandesa and Bot. The bush-vines produce relatively open bunches with small berries, and grow easily and healthily. In the main, Josep’s vines are planted on R-110 rootstocks (phylloxera came quite late to Terra Alta, around 1908). Low intervention winemaking, organic viticulture.

AUCALÀ Garnatxa Blanca de Vins Vells amb les seves lies fines (old vines aged on fine lees)

This is *very* cleverly made, all in the name of retaining natural acid freshness. A form of green harvest takes place a couple of weeks earlier than the bulk of the pick, and this fermentation forms an indelible acid base. Stainless steel fermented (in 3,000 litre foudre) then aged inert for five months (on a library of *Aucalà*’s historical lees). Cultured with neutral *Bayanus* yeast, the fermented wine is moved by nitrogen, which is bubbled up from under the lees once every 5 days, a reductive movement of the lees which is protected from oxygen at all times. Stabilised mono-proteins (glycerol) allow bottling without any stabilisation or additions. Expect fennel, almond and rosemary (the smell of these hills), chalky salinity.



Freshly earthy, it’s all lemon drop stained w quince, white nectarine and cut green pear. A floral wine of great depth, it has a lovely detailed mouthfeel, running on the crunch of granitic sand. It’s mineral and remarkably dancey for a relatively powerful white, the only sticking point just back of mid palate being the feel-memory of an anise lolly you sucked yesterday. Has all the generosity you might seek, and absolutely all the freshness, line and order you crave.

AUCALÀ Garnacha Negre

30-50yo Garnatxa Negre, with 11% Caranyena, fermented in 8,000 litre inox, with pumpovers and foot pressing. 20% ages 5 months in old 400 litre French oak, but most is matured on lees in stainless steel.



Fine and fresh (that lean chalk soil), it leads with red apple and poppy flower, then a touch of darker interest sneaks out below. Based on delicate rosehip red tea, it’s simple, neatly formed, easy and lovely. The tannins are chalky, there’s a twist of briar in the jolting pomegranate acidity, a delightful lack of glyceric sweetness, replaced by punch, tang, jolt and run. Great, uncomplicated fun.

Octonia Garnatxa 2009

50% Garnatxa Tinta, 35% Garnatxa Peluda, 15% Samsó.

Black raspberry, herb snap, earth and graphite nose. In the mouth, nicely ripe, softly mature quince and cranberry fruits nestle with forest leaves, bracken and fallen fruits in an amalgam of sweet, leathery mineral-studded tannin, acid and earth. The dry balsam characters of mature bark and forest leaves mark the wine with the complex botanicals of the site, as does the deep fresh-metal acidity of the mineral earth. The wine is relaxed and natural, not over-controlled and has lovely restrained glycerol releasing to floral lift and fresh acid relief to finish.

Octonia Garnatxa 2010

In summary, sour cherry, a touch of choc, scrub and the red dirt smell of the hill itself.

It's a violet-tinged deep ruby to look at, and smells first-up of mature red-purple rose petals. Spiced quince summarises its earthy sweetness, or sweet earthiness - either way, it's indivisible. Fine low-glycerol fruit is gently spiced, starting out lipstick-tanned and releasing a wild strawberry/forest fruit perfume cloud which extends into brushy garriga and shrubby bosque smells of place by mid-palate (rosemary, fennel, thyme, pine-mint). It releases to a gentle fan of grape-skin, acid and earth with soft perfume continuing at end.

Octonia Garnatxa 2011

2016 note: Plummy fruit in baked earth with ginger spice and punchy little purple flowers. Mineral earth melds with gentle tannin and lightly spiced acidity to affect a nice slow, gentle draw along the palate. Structural purity and certainty without force are a feature and the fruit follows along chatting happily like kids on an outing, safe and secure in parental care. The finish features lovely herb bitterness and is typically earthy, red soil softly abuzz with its gently electric acidity.

2018 note: Boozy and briary, red florals with an electric jolt of acidity. Soft and open, with sweet and spicy blackberry fruit, it's a wine of appealing shape. Laden with earth, bark and spice, the tannin is sweet and slinkily vegetal. Delicate and lovely, it's hard to believe it's the product of a hot, hot year.

AUCALÀ Garnatxa Blanca de Vins Vells amb les seves lies fines 2016

Steel can mineral with a touch of nut, mid-weight with toasty earth and a nice sense of polish.

AUCALÀ Garnatxa Blanca de Vins Vells amb les seves lies fines 2014 (old vines aged on fine lees)

Lovely fruit is juicy and fine in the cut green apple and green melon spectrum. The palate is textured and savoury without cloying. It's waxy and deep with nice lift and a wonderful, textural acid line showing off the fresh chalky-mineral soil. There's very well controlled build, which honours line above all. It's limpid and beautifully nuanced with saltiness reflecting the former sea bed soils. The spicy textural extract at finish is way too fine to call phenolic. It's subtle, but very satisfying, with little dots of herb, and touches of grass in a pebbly mouthfeel and everywhere the fine chalky soil shows clearly.

AUCALÀ Garnatxa Blanca de Vins Vells amb les seves lies fines 2013 (old vines aged on fine lees)

Rich with some barrel spiciness, the nose has the smell of nutty tannin in fresh-cut white fruit - custard apple, feijoa ... and a touch of earthier spiced quince. The palate is a joyful romp of rich, buoyant fruit wonderfully constrained structurally by extremely neat spice, tannin grip from oak, fine acidity and flashing minerals a-plenty. There's orchard-fruit perfume a-plenty in the back palate with lovely acidity, and a touch of refreshing astringency to close. Such a cleverly constructed (and delicious!) wine. All the tells suggest a wine which will build into something rich, liquorous, peach-nectary and oily, but all the fine structural elements of saline, flint-smelling soils, natural acidity, minerality and spice means that it just can't get to peachy.

A history of Octonia by James Vercoe

2010

Woodsy brambles and a slight hint of descaled coconut. So us boil and turning dried leaves (super autumnal). There is a pine needle-com-pine resin character and ferrous-ironstone billy (red bush) tea. Dusty tannins, almost soft and metallic, a powerful energy that till feels somehow nervous. A good wine but socks still firmly on...

2011

Campari and burnt orange rind with wild herbs and blood orange liquorice. Layered with a sense of vibrant 'being'. The tannins are dusty and warm like a sunburned terracotta. A whisper of red fruit but this has a clove and amaro heart.

2012

Rust & red berries with wild mint, rosemary and citric thyme. This is sanguine with a real iron-oxide tang. The palate is glyceric and rich, but flows openly. Red petals and pine needles with an amaro-rootsy bitter with soft powdery tannins.

2013

Lavender and red heather, amapolas and cherry pips. There is a sour blood plum character with a crushed-carbon and red dirt savouriness. The fruit is somewhere between maraschino and raisin with black cranberries and a soft glycerol with wild rosemary and essential oils, rooibos tea and the softest tannins that are just...

2014

The most lifted and high toned. Blackberries and blue bells. The palate is open with dark Forrest fruits and creeping up the nostril with the volatile rosemary oils, stems and flowers. The tannins are a little brash but has great herbal whack. Montsant-cum-Lirac?