

Àlvaro Palacios, DOQ Priorat

'Camins del Priorat': young vineyards planted with local Garnatxa material – the renewal of Priorat

'Les Terrasses': all old vines from the 'Cims' or hilltops, Caranyena with Garnatxa – historical Priorat

'Vi de Gratallops': village wine – the rebirth of site-specificity in Spain

'Finca Dofi': Gratallops vineyard planted early 1990s and re-planted ongoing to recuperated heritage Garnatxas

'L'Ermita': heritage vineyard, the repository of Priorat's purest and most original Garnatxas

'Les Aubaguetes': significant vineyard with its own Garnatxa, from the southern village, Bellmunt.

"I come from a family that wanted to save the patrimony of these lands"

Àlvaro is one of the group of 5 famed 'pioneers' who arrived in Priorat in 1989 primed to recover and reinvent the remnant old local Garnatxa of the region. In the intervening 25 years, an enormous transformation has been wrought – not just in the fortunes of Priorat wine, but in the strength and confidence of an entire local community and its economy. Priorat is a wonderful place, old and mystical country of great natural beauty. Its best wines harness this countryness and encapsulate it through the delicacy of Garnatxa, and Àlvaro is its most skilled and subtle exponent.



Àlvaro's wines express Priorat in a regional hierarchy commencing with the two regional wines, Camins del Priorat (younger vines) and Les Terrasses (old costers). Thereafter, he works mainly in the village of Gratallops, where his bodega is located: there's a village wine, Vi de Vila Gratallops, and two single vineyards, Finca Dofi and L'Ermita. In 2014, he branched out from Gratallops, purchasing the 'Aubaguetes' vineyard in the village of Bellmunt, south of Gratallops across the Siurana valley.

Àlvaro's holdings are a mix of old vine Garnatxa and Caranyena and newer plots of Garnatxa planted to heritage genetic material selected from his best vineyards. These constitute the renewal of 'the Patrimony of Priorat' – the continuity of a 2,000 year legacy of constant genetic adaptation. This commitment to a 'historical' future in Priorat is an extremely deep one for Àlvaro, resulting from a quarter-century of accretive thought and understanding.

Originally, Àlvaro worked with introduced French varieties, along with the others of the group known as 'Los Closos' (for each of the 5 originally called their personal project 'Clos-This-or-Clos-That' – Clos Dofi, Erasmus, Mogador, Martinet and de L'Obac). The others were very keen on Cabernet, Syrah and Merlot and Àlvaro planted these too. It says much about the definite nature of the Priorat terroir that varieties as disparate as Cabernet and Garnatxa can be meaningfully subsumed by the soil and unified in blends which look utterly Prioratish no matter their composition!

However, into his second decade of work in Priorat, Àlvaro came to consider the French varieties a historical mistake and commenced re-engineering his plantings to eradicate the strangers in favour of indigenous Garnatxas, largely taken from the L'Ermita vineyard¹. In Àlvaro's words, "the music, the poetry, finesse and vibrancy is in the Garnatxa". L'Ermita has been free of French grapes since 2006, with Dofi and Gratallops being made from pure Priorat cultivars since 2011. Eventually, Àlvaro's wines will be nearly all Garnatxa, although there will always be a place for some characterful old vine Caranyena.

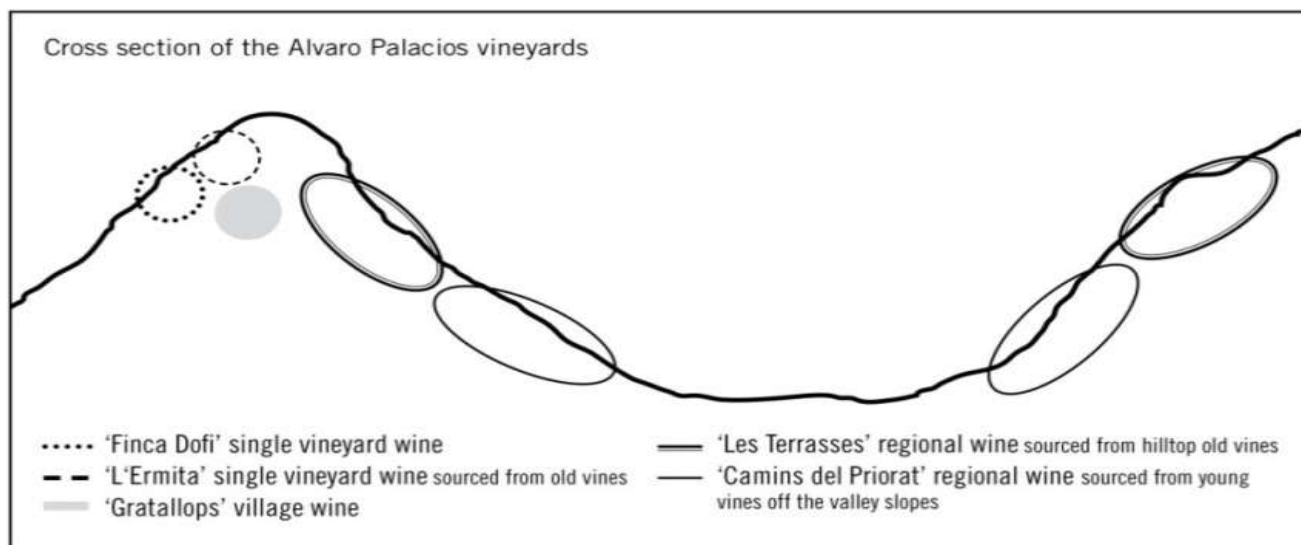
ÁLVARO PALACIOS 2016 PRIORAT HARVEST

This harvest features wines with vibrant acidity in a warm, dry year

Winter was dry, with some humidity in spring (half of the year's 353 litres fell from March to May), and June through September was the longest dry spell since Àlvaro's arrival in Priorat. Small berries were set and did not dry out despite the hot, dry ripening season. In the final phase, the vines stopped by themselves and acid stayed high; when weather cooled and the vines started to move again although acidity dropped it was from a high level and the wines have nerve and vivacity.

Relevant dates in L'Ermita vineyard: budding March 29, flowering May 24, veraison July 21, harvest 26-28 October (most of the other vineyards were picked 1-2 weeks earlier ... L'Ermita always comes in last).

¹ Finca Dofi stands as a very clear statement of Àlvaro's persistence with genetic rebirthing, and is planted to three different local Garnatxas. One family of 3 'clones' comes from L'Ermita, another from 'les Aubaguettes' in Bellmunt, which Àlvaro purchased in 2014 and a third from a vineyard north in La Vilella Baixa.



Álvaro Palacios 'Camins del Priorat'

Camins is a summation of the region, taking quality fruit from 60 growers and 7 of the 12 villages of Priorat. In part, it expresses vineyards being replanted to local Garnatxas, but it also serves as home for French varieties culled from the site-specific wines.

The 'Camins' are the pathways of Priorat (in *castellano*, 'Caminos'), linking villages up and down the hillsides from valley floor to mountain top. The regional council has recently completed renovation of many old Camins, so one can now happily hike from place to place away from the motorways. Fond of a walk and a think, Álvaro named his entry-level release after these paths. 'Camins del Priorat' is a regional wine, taken from younger vines below the hilltops, throughout the hills and valleys along the pathways of Priorat. Typically, 2/3 Garnatxa and 1/3 Caranyena. De-stemmed, fermented in open concrete, wood and inox vats, and aged 8 months in larger, old French oak. *Flint, granite, almond, lavender, cherries, pomegranate and Mediterranean freshness – it's Priorat Garnatxa!*

Álvaro Palacios 'Camins del Priorat' Garnatxa blend



The joyous Priorat Garnatxa tells of orange juice and ruby grapefruit perkiness are abundant, being the last note on the nose and the cheeriest aftertaste, leaving the wine fresh and vibrant on nose and in mouth. Its darker elements are herbed and spiced, nutty tree wood, rose hip and parsnip, and ashy-earth. It's both prettily-fruited and mineral-edged, with a deep, pure earthiness and fine, delicate tannin. Abundantly energetic and aflow with red florality in the mouth and on the nose, as per the label.

Álvaro Palacios Velles Vinyes 'Les Terrasses'

Les Terrasses, like Camins is a regional wine, but is defined as '*Velles Vinyes en costers*': taken solely from old mountain bush vines grown on the llicorella (slate) soils of the Cims or hilltops around the rim of Priorat's high country. It faithfully reflects the historical material Álvaro discovered on arrival in 1989. Les Terrasses is a high quality wine and is significantly good value for an authentic, delicious Priorat with genuine old vine character. Fruit is taken from 80 historical plots scattered through 6 of the 12 Priorat villages, from vines aged 60-90 years and cropped around 1.5 tonnes/hectare. Winemaking is as for Camins, but aged 12 months and bottled unfiltered. Over recent years, it has slowly changed to a Garnatxa-dominant wine as more mature Garnatxa grown *en costers* is available.

Álvaro Palacios 'Les Terrasses' Garnatxa-Caranyena



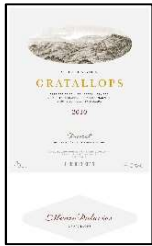
Garnatxa with 45% Caranyena. Ashy, deep and dark with rosehips and leathery spice under cherry blossom, with a dash of orange juice. Solid-fruited thanks to the pruney old vine Caranyena, it's garnet coloured, opening to a velvety floral-spice fan on the nose and a mouth-feel wedded to its stony earth origin. Fluent and long, a steely slate freshness underpins the fruit, reflecting the llicorella. The fruit is floral, slinky, dark and abuzz with briary herbs.

Álvaro Palacios 'Vi de Vila Gratallops'

In conjunction with the Consejo Regulador, Álvaro successfully lobbied for legalisation allowing the naming of wines according to their Village location. Prior to this, a perverse illegality applied, whereby growers were not allowed to use Village names on their wines. There are now 12 legal Priorat Vi de Vila sub-regional village appellations. The first release of such was Álvaro's 2007 'Vi de Vila Gratallops'.

The fruit source is Álvaro's various holdings in-and-around Gratallops, 8.5 hectares in 10 parcels other than Finca Dofi and L'Ermita. The wine's composition for the first vintages was roughly 1/3 each of Garnatxa, Caranyena and Cabernet. From 2011, it's Garnatxa with about 15% old-vine Caranyena and some white. De-stemmed, spontaneous fermentation in open wooden vat, macerated 40 days, 16 months in mid-sized 1-2yo French oak. Unfiltered.

Álvaro Palacios 'Vi de Vila Gratallops'



Gratallops is a lovely pale pomegranate colour. The nose is equally balsamic and floral, reflecting the astringent oils of its home among Holm Oak, Mediterranean Pines, Lavender and more. Beneath, a lash of Llicorella's ashy earth. Strung through these botanicals are the delightful, pretty-pulpy red cherry and red apple fruits of Priorat Garnatxa, with a tell of blood orange flesh and rind. It's a beautifully balanced wine with great fluidity through persistent gentle tannins and spicy-acid in a grapefruit citric tangy finish. Less glyceric than 'Grenache', this is a crystalline, crisp, clear expression of Garnatxa via the mineral, smoky freshness of the Llicorella. Pure, inviting, persistent and gentle.

Álvaro Palacios Vi de Finca Bellmunt 'les Aubaguetes'

This is a marvellous vineyard in the village of Bellmunt, an old mining town on the southern border of Priorat. Aubaguetes (meaning, the shady vineyard, thanks to its cool northern exposure) faces across the Siurana valley to its sister over the way, Finca Dofi in Gratallops. It's a 115 year-old patch planted to its own Garnatxa genetics with 20% Caranyena and some white grapes, all 'grown en costers'. The vineyard is dominated by blue mineral schist loaded with zinc, aluminium and granite, and contains a streak of ferrous clay too. It's a small vineyard of 1.34 hectares, much of which remains unplanted since Priorat's abandonment post-Civil War. Augabuetes is very steep, and ranges between 220 and 290 metres in altitude.



Álvaro has long taken fruit from Aubaguetes. Every year his componentry tasting bench ended up with the same two wines set aside as the most glorious expressions of Priorat: L'Ermita, and Aubaguetes. Álvaro purchased Aubaguetes (from Salvador Torre, who was ready to retire at 93) in 2013, and after 2 years of viticultural renovations (raising the bush vines 'en parra', restoring old pruning methods, and re-asserting organic work with mules), Aubaguetes entered the market as a Vi de Finca wine from 2015. Previously, this precious material went into the old vines blend, 'les Terrasses'. It's 80% Garnatxa, with Caranyena and a bit of white.



Álvaro Palacios Vi de Finca Bellmunt 'Les Aubaguetes'

Wild cherries and the wood of a cherry tree, massive balsamic complexity, with green fennel, violet, rose hip, blood orange and cold dark tea, briars and an old cob tobacco pipe ... freshened by white wine-like acidity over very austere slate and citric acid. Deep, serene, earthy yet bright, rounded, floral-vegetal-orange-rich. It has an outstanding tannin line, with acid weaving and spice in layers. You can feel the wash of the cool breezes enjoyed by Aubaguetes – it's extraordinarily lively, perfumed, lifted and glorious.

Álvaro Palacios 'Finca Dofi' and Álvaro Palacios 'L'Ermita'

When Álvaro went to Priorat in the late 1980s, he bought 'L'Ermita' - the largest single plot of old vine, local Garnatxa left, at just 1.4 ha. At the same time he planted 'Finca Dofi'². Once, both wines featured French varieties, but both are now pure Priorats, 'L'Ermita' since 1996 and Dofi from 2011.

These beauties are smokily mineral from the schist soil: soot, as in chimney dust, is the best descriptor of aroma, and it has a very cool, steely tang in the mouth. They are redolent of cherry blossom, wild herb, orange peel and

²Although it features a 'dolphin' on the label, Finca Dofi is a joke reference to Álvaro's status as the 'dauphin' (young prince) to Rene Barbier!

grapefruit, with red currant, blood plum and rosehip. They radiate in the mouth, shiny, pure and fine, expansive and yet breath-takingly deft, nervy and ethereal. Not all wine is like this, certainly not all Priorat, but not everyone is Álvaro Palacios ... these are wines for lovers of delicacy, poise and refinement. They are wonderful examples of the vivacity that world-class organic viticulture practiced at a special site can achieve in extremely sensitive hands.

ÁLVARO PALACIOS 'Finca Dofi'

Planted in 1991 at around 300 metres altitude, Dofi is on ferrous brown and yellow slate laden with active calcium ("an ocean made desert") – a more voluptuous, more energetic soil than L'Ermita. Still, the soil is poor enough that its grasses are cut back, as the vines don't need any competition for nutrient in the dry, poor soils. Dofi is planted to three genetic versions of the local Garnatxa: that of 'L'Ermita' itself, one from the 'les Aubaguetes (the Shady Vineyard)' at Bellmunt to the south of Gratallops, and another strain from La Vilella Baixa.



There are now, in fact, two Finca Dofis. Álvaro's original planting is 8 hectares at the top of the ridge line along from the winery at Gratallops, facing south towards Bellmunt. The second, more recently-planted aspect of Dofi is the hill-slopes hanging below the ridge line, facing towards Torroja, mimicking L'Ermita (see photo above). Here are 12 hectares planted in 2012, roughly half each north and east facing. These beautiful vineyards have had the highest possible care in their creation. They are massed with typical local balsamic plants – wild-growing lavender, fennel and thyme. Organically farmed, protected by valerian and cereal infusions and sprayed with mined sulphur, with added nutrient from sheep/cow poo every 3 years. Dofi is de-stemmed, gently crushed, fermented in open vat with pigeage and 42 day maceration, before aging in new French barrique, bottled unfiltered and unfinned. Garnatxa with 4% Caranyena.

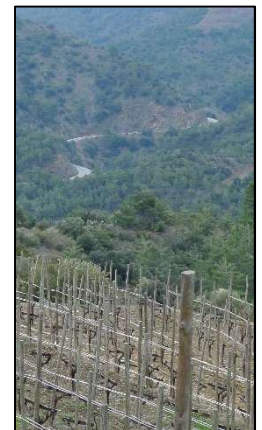
ÁLVARO PALACIOS 'Finca Dofi'



Thanks to its soil, Finca Dofi has more cherry-pith textural richness than the delightful austerity of the Gratallops village wine. Dofi is loaded with medicinal brushy-bitter herbs and earthen hill-country smells. The nose tingles with pink grapefruit among Mediterranean balsam. The palate has wonderful sweet-spiced pippy richness, and full tannins decorated with herbs. A vibrant OJ-acid inflection gives freshness and rips all into an electric line. The palate is lively and vital with no heft despite its richness and power.

ÁLVARO PALACIOS 'L'Ermita'

A conical, or bull-nosed, very steep hillslope. Facing north-east at 350-430 metres altitude, it's planted to roughly 90% Garnatxa, with Caranyena (this goes into 'Gratallops') and a tiny bit of white (a mix of PX, Macabeu and Garnatxa Gris). The soil is cold, high acid and alive with minerals, (zinc, lutites, aluminium). The *llicoreall* is metallic blue-green slate (compared to the more ferrous pinky-brown slate of Dofi), with some quartz conglomerate. These are pre-Cambrian soils 300+ million years old formed deep (5-50 kilometres) in the earth's crust. These erupted in Priorat during the Carboniferous period (approximately 250 million years ago, similar to Bierzo, the Douro, Alsace and Cote Rotie). L'Ermita is planted at 4,600 vines/hectare, all trained 'en parra' (bush vines trained on a 2 metre pole) and tilled by mule. Harvested is in late October, all berries are hand de-stemmed and selected, and the wine is fermented in open wooden vats and aged in new French barriques before bottling without fining or filtration.



ÁLVARO PALACIOS 'l'Ermita'



The nose is glorious: great richness, open, imbued with movement through garriga smells of snipped sour herbs. Smoked berries are run through with bosky smell of sticks, lavender and sour-edged flower petals. Creamy, wild red berries are touched purple, edged beautifully to sweet'n'sour with orange juicy acidity, layered with herb-vegetal-spice and open to an acid-mineral thrill at the end. Powerful, harmonious, heavenly.