

(Clockwise from right) The vineyards are still worked by horses and mules; professionals tasting wine at the Espai Priorat conference; grape bushes being trimmed; and invitees at Clos Mogador

• ERIC D'HEROUVILLE



How Priorat is rebuilding itself

Just two hours from Barcelona, this hidden gem is known more to wine experts than tourists. With exceptional terroir and elegant 90-pointer reds, vintners are now looking to tradition and new technology to build a strong reputation



del Montsant is magnificent, much like the wines of Priorat DOCa that the 55 invitees, wine professionals and journalists tasted. Almost all red, they are powerful but far more approachable than earlier, thanks to new skills and technology, like less deliberate extraction of tannins and larger barrels like *foudres* to gentle the oak influence, that bolster the still-traditional winemaking practices. The grapes are predominantly Garnacha (Grenache) and the last few years have seen a new passion for Cariñena (Carignan), which is lately receiving respect as a 100% varietal wine. More international varieties – Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot – have been added in the last decades, too. “Priorat is transforming itself into something greater than it ever was. There’s a freshness in the wines today that wasn’t there 20 years ago,” a wine critic declared.

Standing out

Every wine region in the world is an expression of its terroir: the climate, soil and terrain. In Priorat, this is a perfect storm of uniquely difficult factors. Many of the tortuously hilly slopes of non-terraced vineyards called *costers* (Catalan for steep slope) are still worked by mules and horses; the climate is dry, arid even, leading to the right ripening season; and finally the soil itself, known locally as *llicorella*, is a marvellous soft, mineral-rich composition which gives the wine its complexity and power. “Priorat managed to balance flora and environment, as we started planting at a time when eco-friendly sensitivity had begun. So we skipped the era of aggressive agriculture,” explains René Barbier of Clos Mogador, one of the pioneers of the wine resurgence here. Now with a new classification system, Priorat will be valued more than ever, he adds.

“Our soil and terroir are distinctive. The schist soil [magnesium and potassium-rich metamorphic rock], dry climate and Mediterranean sun mean low yields and concentrated wines,” Valenti Llagostera, co-founder of top producer Mas Doix, tells me. “Our wines also have freshness and elegance... let’s not forget that wines are there to be enjoyed!”

Here is a difficult life, but the passion and pride of the community towards their wine is palpable. “The small yield of our vines and the difficulty in working the land makes it impossible for us to compete in price, but we can be a reference for unique wine,” concludes Barbier.

Indeed they can.



Vine and dine



Two days ago, Álvarez’s welcome address, accompanied by Spain’s iconic wine producer Alvaro Palacios, was not in a conference room but on the windy slopes of Ermita de la Consolació de Gratallops. It seemed apt, overlooking sweeping hills and misty valleys. This was followed by a tapas-style dinner at Les Figueras, the restaurant and homestay owned by another pioneering Priorat producer, British expat Christopher Cannan (pictured, right). We dined on tortillas, fresh-carved Catalan ham and my favourite, Galician-style octopus with cachelos or potatoes accompanied by a range of wines from participating producers. Later, Cannan, originally a wine exporter in Bordeaux, recounted the story of his move to Priorat.

In 1983 he tasted a bottle of Scala Dei 1974, the only privately-owned estate at the time. Intrigued, he met Palacios, and French expat winemaker Barbier. The latter had already bought the now-renowned Clos Mogador (in 1979), and when Cannan showed his wine to famous wine critic Robert Parker, he gave it massive scores in his *Wine Advocate*. Thereby began the new era of Priorat’s wine story.

The quaint Les Figueras is one of the draws in the village of Gratallops. “The philosophy is simple: food with high-quality local ingredients, and vegetables from our own garden,” Cannan tells me. His Ecuadorian chef’s menu is arranged to pair with wine. His B&B, one of the few to date in the area, attracts foreign tourists as well as Spanish. “What is necessary is more infrastructure for tourism. In the future, we could be in a situation where there are

too many tourists for this small region,” says Cannan. Right now, Priorat benefits enormously from the proximity of Barcelona, and wine lovers make day or overnight trips.

Some of us were lodged at Terra Dominicata, Priorat’s only luxury hotel, owned by another major winery, Trossos. Waking up to birdsong was extraordinary and the food was of luxurious standards – homemade pâtés, jams and charcuterie. One night, we dined with individual groups of winemakers. The rich Nelin 2016, a rare white Grenache crianza by Clos Mogador (only 7,000 bottles, vinified for 12 months in large oak barrels) paired effortlessly with my fish course, more so with Barbier sitting across from me talking about it. The soft-spoken Miguel Torres Maczasseck poured out his Priorat star, Perpetual, while Mas Doix’s 1902, a stunning red wine from 100-year-old vines was introduced by founder Valenti Llagostera (pictured below, right). We finished off with a rich biodynamic rancio by winemaker Meritxell Pallejà, a young mother who had earlier brought her baby to her conference presentation. Is it difficult to manage both baby and wine-making? I asked her. Not as difficult as managing the land, she smiled.



•• RUMA SINGH

At the closing gala dinner of the three-day bi-annual Espai Priorat wine conference, Sal-lustia Álvarez, president of the regulatory body DOQ Priorat, stood to address the gathering of wine professionals and producers at the elegant Restaurant Amics in Buià i Giné winery. Behind him, framed by the wraparound glass windows, a blood orange sun was sinking over the vineyards. It could have made for an award-winning image in *National Geographic*, but it was just another day in Priorat.

Priorat is small, a tiny hidden gem better known to wine experts than tourists, with just 2,000 hectares under vine, 575 winemakers and 109 wineries – and just two hours from Barcelona. Along with the more widely-popular Rioja, it is also one of only two DOCa (Denominación de Origen Calificada, the official guarantee of quality and origin) in Spain. After suffering devastation with the phylloxera outbreak in the 19th century and the 2008 Spanish financial crisis, it is now focussing on rebuilding its reputation in the wine world.

A sense of place

The Espai Priorat conference – held in the massive hall of the Carroixa de Scaladei, an imposing 12th century Carthusian monastery – saw two days of structured interactions with 36 of its top wine producers. The monastery in the foothills of the imposing Sierra



Finding wine nirvana

While there has also been a gradual opening up to wine tourism, Priorat is no Barcelona. No, a visit here is to take a deep dive into pure wine nirvana. Here are no distractions – no clubs, discos or large hotel chains, and a mere 9,000 inhabitants. The winding roads, lately tarmacaded, link the tiny, picturesque villages. Hotels and homestays are boutique, and most restaurants offer delicious local food of high quality. The luxury here is that of peace, serenity and wide-open spaces. Winery visits are intimate, usually with the owner doing the honours. Old basket presses sit alongside steel and concrete tanks. But it is the wines that are worth travelling miles for.

Our group’s final visit was to the Alvaro Palacios winery. A precious opportunity, we tiptoed through cool damp cellars, gawked at *foudres* filled with wine from his iconic vineyards like L’Ermita (described as a ‘spine-tingling iconic wine’ by *Decanter*). Later, as the sun set, we tasted barrel samples of his wines, almost impossible to source even at massively high prices. Here were fruit-rich and supremely elegant wines, unfurling in our glasses, already drinkable but bursting with the promise of greatness to come.

