

VIEW FROM THE CELLAR

By John Gilman

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QUINTA DO NOVAL'S BRILLIANT NACIONAL



The superb Port Lodge of Quinta do Noval is quite unique in this historic and beautiful region of Portugal, as it takes its name not from the founder or historically important shipper in its past, but rather from its breathtaking one hundred and forty-five hectare vineyard that lies in the heart of the Douro. The Quinta do Noval vineyard dates back to 1715, when it was first listed on the land registers of its time, but certainly it did not come into world-wide prominence until the Portuguese family of Rebello Valente became its owner. The family, who came into this property at the start of the nineteenth century due to their connections with Portugal's very powerful Prime Minister at the time, Marquês do Pombal, were instrumental in developing Quinta do Noval as we know it today and oversaw this estate for nearly a century. In the wake of phylloxera ravaging the Douro Valley in the 1880s and 1890s, the property was put up for sale and in 1894 it was purchased by the Port shipper of António José da Silva. Senhor da Silva, undertook the mammoth task of replanting the phylloxera-ravaged one hundred and forty-five hectare vineyard onto American rootstocks and started the modern renaissance of Quinta do Noval. However, a funny thing occurred while the quinta was being replanted in the first decades of the twentieth century, as a very small section was selected by Senhor da Silva to attempt to retain the indigenous Portuguese vines, and his team undertook an intensive program of fumigating the soil with a sulfur solution over a prolonged period of time and replanted this section on Portuguese rootstock as an experiment in 1925. There are no records to indicate why the team at Noval chose this specific section to try and purge the soil and retain Portuguese rootstocks here, as twentieth century fire destroyed much of the lodge's records from this time,

but one has to assume that this particular section of the vineyard was holding up much better under the strain of phylloxera than any other. This was the start of the Nacional bottling at Quinta do Noval, which would not see this wine actually separated out and bottled on its own for approximately another thirty-five years, but the traditional, Portuguese vines were eventually planted in this tiny parcel at the time the rest of the quinta was grafted over onto American rootstocks.

How this tiny, 1.6 hectare subsection of the Quinta do Noval's one hundred and forty-five hectares was able to withstand phylloxera (after the soil was aggressively fumigated) is a bit of a mystery, but for some reason, it seems that the root louse simply did not adapt well to this small plot of *terroir* in the heart of this towering vineyard, and ever since the start of the twentieth century, the vines in this small parcel have remained planted on their original Portuguese rootstocks and today, produce an utterly unique vintage Port that is in many ways a window into the style of the wines of the Douro in the early centuries of Port production. For, over the years, all the remainder of the Douro Valley's soaring hillsides of vineyards have been also grafted over to American rootstocks to protect against a recurrence of phylloxera, and it is only the tiny Nacional parcel that remains on the original Portuguese rootstocks. While still some of the original Portuguese vines from the first replanting of the Nacional parcel remain from 1925, today the average age of the vines in this small section average about thirty years of age. The proprietors at Quinta do Noval have undertaken to plant alternating rows of vines in this section, with one row being planted on Portuguese rootstocks and the next on vines that have been grafted over onto American rootstocks, so that the entire parcel in which the Nacional vines are planted encompasses 2.5 hectares, but with only 1.6 hectares of these vines actually on the indigenous rootstocks. As Christian Seely, current director of Quinta do Noval observes, "it is fairly easy to spot the Nacional rows of vines in high summer in the vineyard, as the leaves are a bit less brilliant green at the peak of the growing season, the vines themselves tend to be a little less in girth than the corresponding American-grafted vines, and the bunches and the individual berries are much smaller on the indigenous vines."

However, while the parcel of indigenous rootstock was planted originally after phylloxera in 1925, it was not until 1931 that the house of Quinta do Noval decided to bottle the production from this small parcel on its own and a legendary wine was born. In this year, the lodge of Quinta do Noval undertook the risky move of declaring a vintage, along with only two of its neighbors in the trade, as many houses decided to forego a declaration despite the obvious quality of the grapes in '31. The reason for this is that the very good 1927 vintage had been pretty much universally declared, and as this was at the height of the great depression, sales of vintage Port had been sluggish and most lodges felt that the market, still awash in very significant stocks of the '27s, would not be able to absorb another vintage declaration- despite the high quality of the grapes in 1931. Quinta do Noval took the chance on declaring a 1931, and in this vintage the team decided to also bottle the production from the Nacional parcel on its own and the very first bottling of Quinta do Noval Nacional was produced. It has turned out to be one of the legendary Ports of the twentieth century, and though I have never had the good fortune to cross paths with a bottle of the '31 Nacional, it is widely reported to still be at its absolute apogee and a magical bottle of vintage Port. This is a pretty strong testament to the unique quality of the indigenous rootstocks in the Nacional vineyard, as one must consider that this parcel was only

started again after phylloxera in 1925 and the 1931 Nacional is the product of grapes produced on seven and four year-old vines!

The quality of the 1931s from Quinta do Noval, as it was not only the miniscule quantities of the '31 Nacional that earned this house a much wider reputation, for the regular bottling of vintage port from the lodge in 1931 is also reported to be absolutely stellar, really brought the estate to the forefront of top Port producers in the two important export markets of this era- the United Kingdom and the United States- and it is really from this vintage that one can see Quinta do Noval joining such other illustrious Port lodges as Taylor's, Fonseca and Dow's at the very pinnacle of quality Port in the minds of Port lovers at the time. The time of the release of the 1931s at Quinta do Noval was at time of transition for the lodge, as António José da Silva's son-in-law, Luiz Vasconcelos Porto was about to succeed his father-in-law at the head of Quinta do Noval in the mid-1930s and one imagines that the decision to bottle the 1931 vintage was a joint decision taken by the two gentlemen who were so important to the renaissance of this lodge in the first half of the twentieth century. However, this period of history at Quinta do Noval must remain partially speculative, as virtually all the historic records of the lodge were destroyed in a fire that swept their offices in Vila Nova de Gaia in 1981. The tenure of Luiz Vasconcelos Porto at the head of Quinta do Noval was a golden age for the lodge, as the terraced vineyards were rebuilt and widened to take much fuller advantage of sun exposure, and during his time at the reins of the firm, the quality of the wines here never dropped from the magical quality evidenced in the 1931s. Luiz Vasconcelos Porto was also the first to develop a new category of Port during his tenure, as Quinta do Noval created and released the very first "Late Bottled Vintage" Port in the 1954 vintage. Señor Vasconcelos Porto continued to run Quinta do Noval with great *élan* until his retirement in 1963, when he passed on the baton to his two grandsons, Fernando and Luiz Van Zeller, whose family continued to run the property with varying degrees of success until it was acquired by AXA Millésimes , the vineyard holding group of French insurance giant AXA.

The years at Quinta do Noval under the aegis of AXA Millésimes has seen another renaissance of the estate, as with the reins in the very able hands of Christian Seely, who arrived as director of the lodge in 1993, the estate has made dramatic improvements in all facets of the vineyards and winemaking facilities. Much of the one hundred and forty-five hectares of vines in the quinta have been replanted since 1993, and Christian Seely undertook to move all of the winemaking and cellaring facilities out of Porto and Vila Nova de Gaia and establish a full-time winery at the vineyards, so that now all vinification and cellaring of the wines of Quinta do Noval is done in the temperature-controlled facilities located right at the vineyard. Mr. Seely, after spending his first eight years with AXA Millésimes as the Director of Quinta do Noval, replaced Jean-Michel Cazes as the Managing Director of all of the AXA Millésimes estates in 2001, though he continues to still directly run Quinta do Noval. However, one of the things that has emphatically not been done at Quinta do Noval under the watch of Mr. Seely is any change in the Nacional bottling, as Christian likes to say "that when it comes to Nacional, I firmly believe if it is not broken, there is no reason to undertake to try and fix it!" His team at the lodge is headed by Technical Director and Chief Winemaker and Blender, António Agrellos, who has been with Noval in this capacity since 1993. Under the aegis of these two gentlemen, the wines at Quinta do Noval have never been better.

The *terroir* from which Nacional springs is not visibly different from any of the other fine vineyard parcels in the one hundred and forty-five hectares of the Quinta do Noval, with the soils primarily a blend of schist, with a relatively high percentage of potassium, and fingerings of clay, pitched on the wide terraces first established by Luiz Vasconcelos Porto, and yet, somehow, the indigenous rootstocks here seem to have relatively no difficulties with phylloxera and this unique and magical example of vintage Port is able to be crafted from this tiny sub-parcel in the quinta. The vines are planted in a section of the soaring amphitheater that lies just below the nineteenth century family house that adorns the property, with the interspersing of indigenous and American rootstock-footed rows of vines in this parcel meaning that approximately six thousand Nacional vines grow in this small piece of vineyard. From these six thousand vines, the lodge can produce anywhere from one hundred and ninety to two hundred and fifty cases of Nacional in any given year, as the indigenous vines are far less vigorous than those planted on American rootstocks. Typically, most of the vines in the Quinta do Noval will deliver yields of between thirty and thirty-five hectoliters per hectare, but the Nacional vines are far more draconian in terms of yields and an average for these vines usually falls around twelve hectoliters per hectare. The Nacional vineyard rows are planted with a combination of Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, Tinto Cão and Sousão. Christian Seely observes that “there was just a bit of white and pink grapes also planted in the Nacional parcel in the old field blend system, but we took those out as soon as we arrived at Noval.” While there remains a few truly ancient vines here in the Nacional rows- perhaps with one or two that are truly pre-phylloxera in age- the average age here is now around thirty years old for these indigenous vines. The Nacional parcel has a northeasterly exposition, making these vines typically the last to be picked at the end of September or the beginning of October and are harvested completely by hand.

The grapes produced from these indigenous vines are treated exactly the same as all others destined for vintage port production at the estate once they reach the winery, with the grapes trodden by foot in a small, ancient granite *lagar* that was built solely to accommodate the production of Nacional grapes and which is continually trodden during the initial maceration period of two days (not always by the team of men, as the four in the morning punch-downs can now be done by an automated machine designed specifically by the Noval team in 1994 to fit their antique *lagares*). The wine then ferments until it reaches a point of 8 Baume, at which point grape neutral brandy is added to bring the wine up to twenty percent alcohol and stop the fermentation, with the customary level of residual sugar of a vintage port. The young Nacional is then racked off and aged in an old wood, 2500 liter barrel (or pipes as they are called in the Port trade) for two years, with the wine tasted at intervals to decide on its ultimate quality in any given year. If it is found to be of outstanding potential, it is bottled at the two year point and another vintage of Nacional is on the way. If the quality is not thought to be up to the extremely high historic standards of Nacional, the wine is then used for blending purposes for Quinta do Noval’s very finest Tawny Ports. While Nacional is often crafted in declared vintages at Noval, it has frequently been of sufficiently superb quality to merit its own bottling in years that were not generally declared vintage Port years. Hence for example, the Nacionais that were released in non-declared vintages such as 2001, 1999, 1982, 1975 and 1967. On the other hand, the Nacional bottling is sometimes not produced in high quality years that are declared, so there is no Nacional bottlings in 1997, 1983 or 1977. As Christian Seely observes, “when we taste Nacional in the cellars, the wine will generally tell us if it wants to be bottled on its own and there are certain years where not everything in the vineyard is up to declaring a vintage, but the Nacional

will be a wine of such insistent character that one knows that it must be bottled on its own.” What is certain is that whenever a Nacional is produced, it is destined to be a gloriously beautiful bottle of vintage port that will last anywhere from fifty to one hundred years and will almost always vie with the very greatest wines of the region during the course of its long life.

Not surprisingly, given how much smaller the yields are from the indigenous vines that Nacional springs from in top years, the wine often starts out life with more overt power in its personality than the regular Quinta do Noval vintage port bottling. Throughout its history, the wines of Quinta do Noval have always been renowned for their elegance and perfume- never as overtly powerful for instance as the wines from Taylor’s or Dow’s out of the blocks- but a young vintage of Nacional hides this inevitable personality behind a rather powerful structure in its early years. I should note that in the last few years of Noval’s ownership under AXA, the depth and structural integrity of the regular Noval vintage bottling has gone up considerably from what I remember from the young vintages of the 1980s, and the magical 2007 Quinta do Noval was certainly the most profoundly powerful and promising non-Nacional bottling from the lodge that I have ever had the pleasure to taste. But, that said, it seems quite fair to say that the Noval style will always be one of very perfumed elegance at maturity, as this seems to be the real strength of this beautifully situated amphitheater of a vineyard right in the heart of the Douro. Nacional, while starting out life typically more powerful than the regular bottling here (this was very much in evidence with the 2003, 2000 and 1997 vintages where we tried the two Noval bottlings side by side at our tasting here in New York), eventually evolves into another very elegant and perfumed vintage port as it reaches its full maturity, which is usually after about thirty years of bottle age. What the wine almost always retains from its indigenous vines is a very sappy signature of red or black cherry fruit at the core that remains with the wine for many decades and is one of the great signature elements of Nacional.

While the Nacional bottling from Quinta do Noval has been with us since the 1931 vintage, it has always been a very difficult wine to find in the marketplace, as its tiny production quantities have always made it the rarest wine in the world of vintage Port. The most prolific vintage of Nacional has only produced two hundred and fifty cases of the wine, which is just a drop in the bucket at Quinta do Noval, which will typically produce anywhere from three to five thousand cases of vintage Port in a declared vintage. Even though the proprietors at Quinta do Noval have always kept back only a very tiny percentage of the production for the estate’s own library, the size of this plot simply makes it almost impossible to find the wine in the market in quantities larger than a bottle or two, and often one needs to be a very, very good client of a favored merchant to even know that a bottle or two of Nacional might indeed be available. In fact, according to Christian Seely, throughout the decades of the 1970s and the 1980s, the estate did not even officially commercialize Nacional, as it was simply reserved as a thank you for Quinta do Noval’s most important clients around the globe. I had heard stories when I first started in the wine trade in the early 1980s, of Quinta do Noval distributors here in the states eagerly waiting for the arrival of the palates from the lodge to arrive in their warehouses, so that they could break them down and see how many bottles of Nacional might have been included on the shipment. Today, the wine is now officially commercialized under the AXA Millésimes umbrella, but it is still strictly allocated to Quinta do Noval’s best clients and it remains a wine that is almost always seen on a bottle by bottle basis on the open market. In fact, I have never

actually seen a case of Nacional in more than thirty years in and around the wine trade, and during my nearly twenty years as a wine merchant, I never once sold a bottle of Nacional!



While the focus of this article is on the magical bottling of Nacional, one should not overlook the fact that Quinta do Noval's "regular" vintage Port is also a superb wine and one of the great wines from this region. When I was first starting out in the wine trade in the 1980s, the lodge was in a bit of a dip in quality, as the Van Zeller family at this time had many relatives with an ownership interest in Quinta do Noval and the inevitable philosophical disagreements about direction and investment in the property most certainly must have caused a bit of drift at the head of the estate. However, the handful of bottles of older vintages which I have tasted from Quinta do Noval that date back to the days of the leadership of the lodge under Luiz Vasconcelos Porto (who did not retire until 1963) clearly indicate that the vineyard of Quinta do Noval is one of the greatest in the Douro and that the potential has always been inherent in this vineyard to produce a wine at the same lofty levels of quality as the most famous in the world of Port, and it is abundantly clear that it is not only the fabled Nacional parcel that is hallowed *terroir*. While the only recently-tasted old vintage of Quinta do Noval I have a note on is the beautifully ethereal 1955, I have little doubt that the wines being produced today at the lodge have even greater potential than these magical wines of the first half of the twentieth century and that one must be very careful to not associate the greatness of Quinta do Noval solely with the legendary Nacional bottling. In fact, the 2007 Quinta do Noval is one of the very greatest young vintage Ports that I have ever had the pleasure to taste and is clearly a legendary effort that one day will

offer up every bit as much celestial enlightenment in the glass as a wine such as the 1963 Nacional!

Quinta do Noval has produced a Nacional bottling for the market in the following vintages: 2003, 2000, 1997, 1996, 1994, 1991, 1987, 1985, 1984, 1983, 1982, 1980, 1978, 1975, 1970, 1967, 1966, 1964, 1963, 1962, 1960, 1958, 1955, 1950, 1945, 1934 and 1931. Whether or not small amounts of Nacional were produced and retained solely for the library of the lodge is a matter of speculation, but human nature being what it is, one has to imagine that there are a few other vintages of Nacional that have been consumed by the proprietors over the years or which still lie buried deep in the cellars of the estate. The particularly long gap of Nacionais between the 1934 and the 1945 suggests that there may have been some awfully good family drinking going on with small quantities of Nacional during this stretch of vintages, but the wines did not see the light of day. As one can see from the list of vintages declared of Nacional, the decade of the 1980s saw an awful lot of years deemed worthy of the production of Nacional, and while I have not recently tasted any of these vintages, one must expect that the sheer number of years that Nacional was released at this time is an indication that not all was completely right with the estate in this era and this decade may well not have produced the most profound examples of Nacional. I am sure that their absence from our lineup at the tasting was more than mere coincidence. I should also note that the name of Quinta do Noval Nacional does not originate with the important grape variety of Touriga Nacional, but rather refers to the Portuguese rootstocks on which the vineyard is planted and from which the wine finds its origins.

Most of the following wines were drunk at a stunning vertical tasting organized by Quinta do Noval held here in New York in September of this year. The lodge presented three vintages of their vintage Port bottling and Nacional side by side to start the tasting- the 2003s, 2000s and 1997s, and then served another nine vintages of Nacional back to the beautiful 1962 to round out the tasting. It was an historic opportunity that does not appear very often, as Nacional is an extremely rare wine and I was certainly not the only journalist that jumped at the opportunity to savor so many vintages of Nacional at a single sitting. I have augmented my notes from the tasting with a few other Quinta do Noval vintages that I have sampled in the last few years- first and foremost the legendary 2007s that were crafted at the lodge in this magical vintage. As the notes will show below, there was no Nacional produced in the 2007 vintage (or perhaps it has not yet been released?), but the house is now producing a second wine called Silval that is also a stunning vintage Port in this great year. Silval is only produced in top years and is made from a combination of fruit from the quinta and other purchased grapes from top vineyards in the region. It is produced in exactly the same manner as the regular vintage bottling of Quinta do Noval and Nacional, with foot trodding in granite *lagares* and is aged in older pipes for two years prior to bottling. The main difference is that this wine is produced with an eye towards earlier accessibility than the regular vintage bottling or the Nacional, so that Quinta do Noval fans can enjoy this wine without having to tuck it away in the cellar for twenty years or so. I should also note that the estate is now also producing a number of dry wines from the quinta- two of the reds were served with the lunch after our tasting. I am sure that they are very good wines, but after the stellar lineup of vintage Ports, it was really a very difficult setting to get a good idea of the true character of these dry reds and I did not end up taking notes on the wines. I look forward to trying them again, but following on the heels of the '63 Nacional was perhaps not entirely fair to the wines!

2007 Quinta do Noval “Silval”

The Silval bottling from Quinta do Noval, which is effectively their second label vintage port, is very lovely in 2007, as the wine displays dramatic depth of fruit and great purity and solid structural integrity. The superb bouquet soars from the glass in a complex blend of black cherries, black raspberries, tar, licorice, lovely soil tones, delicate smokiness and cedar. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and rock solid with sappy fruit at the core, with ripe, beautifully-integrated tannins, tangy acids, great focus and a very long, pure and palate-staining finish. This is made in a more forward style that will not insist on long aging before it begins to drink brilliantly, but it will have no difficulties aging for at least the next thirty-five years. A lovely example of the vintage. 2014-2050. **91.**

2007 Quinta do Noval

The 2007 Quinta do Noval is one of the most powerful and pure examples of this wine that I have ever had the pleasure to taste. There will be no Nacional bottling this year, as the entire production of Nacional has gone into the vintage bottling of Noval. The bouquet on the 2007 Quinta do Noval is magical, with its bottomless depth and glorious purity combining to offer up a magical mélange of black cherries, dark plums, black raspberries, a touch of tar, bitter chocolate, a great base of soil, fennel seed and cedary wood. This really smells of young Nacional this year. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and beautifully balanced, with a rock solid core, stunning purity, firm, substantial tannins, stunningly tangy acids and profound length and grip on the endless finish. It is a good thing that Quinta do Noval did not make a Nacional in 2007, as it would probably have to be scored in excess of a hundred! This is clearly the greatest young vintage of Quinta do Noval that I have ever had the pleasure to taste. 2030-2130. **97+.**

2003 Quinta de Noval

2003 is not my favorite vintage port year, as the torrid conditions that prevailed in this summer throughout Europe were also in play in the Douro. However, I have found the 2003 Ports to be a bit less marked by the scorching summer signature than some other regions on the continent, and the 2003 Noval is a very good bottle in the making, offering up a ripe nose of black cherries, road tar, a touch of meatiness, bonfires and just a whiff of raisin in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly powerful in style, with a fine core, very suave tannins and a long and youthful finish. This is a very good wine, but the backend shows a bit of the incipient pruniness of 2003, and the wine closes with a bit of heaviness as well on the tail end of the finish from the very ripe profile of this year. It is not a bad wine, but when one looks at the quality of a wine like the 2007 Noval, there is little doubt that the 2003 is not in the same league as that legend in the making. But, still a good and serious example of the vintage. 2023-2075. **89.**

2003 Quinta de Noval Nacional

The 2003 Nacional is a decided step up from the regular bottling of Noval in this vintage, as it does not show any hints of overripe tones to come on the finish and has plenty of that sappy black cherry fruit in evidence that is the Nacional calling card. The deep and very sappy nose jumps from the glass in a mix of plums, black cherries, tar, woodsmoke, lovely spice tones, soil, a hint of cedar and a nice topnote redolent of lavender. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very powerful, with a rock solid core of fruit, ripe, firm tannins, quite good acidity for this torrid vintage and outstanding length and grip on the impressively fresh finish. I do not think this will ever eventually escape completely from the style of the vintage and is probably

not destined to be a legendary example of Nacional, but it really is a pretty stunning 2003. 2025-2100. **92+**.

2000 Quinta de Noval

At age twelve, the 2000 Noval is in a very closed and adolescent stage and I may well be underestimating its ultimate potential. The deep and fairly sullen nose reluctantly offers up scents of cassis, black cherries, chocolate, a bit of hung game, gentle tarry tones and hints of raisin in the upper register. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, primary and seemingly a bit “dulled” at the present time, with a very solid core of fruit, firm tannins and a quite long, but reserved and unevolved finish. This is clearly in its dumb phase right now and it is really hard to get a read on just how good this wine will ultimately become, but I take it as a very positive sign that the hint of raisin on the nose is not replicated on the backend of the palate, as is the case with the 2003. It should eventually merit a score at the top end of the range, but it is hard to be truly confident with a wine this shut down. 2020-2075. **89-91+?**

2000 Quinta de Noval Nacional

Interestingly, the 2000 Nacional is nowhere near as shut down as the regular bottling in this vintage and really shows lovely potential on both the nose and palate. The superb nose jumps from the glass in a sappy mélange of black cherries, plums, tar, a touch of mint, very refined soil tones, violets and a bit of cedar. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very vibrant, with great mid-palate depth, firm, ripe tannins and a very long, quite powerful and still very youthful finish. While this too is quite primary in terms of development, it shows decidedly more delineation at this point than the more sullen regular bottling and will clearly prove to be a superb example of the vintage. That said, it too is in its dumb phase and it may well prove that my score will end up being rather conservative for the ultimate quality of this vintage of Nacional. 2025-2100. **93+**.

1997 Quinta de Noval

I have always liked the style and shape of the 1997 vintage ports and the '97 Quinta do Noval was showing beautifully at our September tasting. This is still a very young port, but it has emerged from its period of hibernation and its ultimate quality is quite easy to read, as the wine jumps from the glass in a fine aromatic mélange of black cherries, black raspberries, a touch of heather, cigar smoke, lovely soil tones, coffee grounds, cedar and the first stirrings of some autumnal notes in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and vibrant, with a superb core, fine focus and a very long, tangy and ripely tannic finish. This is going to be an outstanding vintage for Quinta do Noval. 2017-2075. **93+**.

1997 Quinta de Noval Nacional

The 1997 Nacional is a stunning young wine, but at least at this early stage, there is not a dramatic distance in quality between it and the regular bottling of the 1997. Of course, over the coming decades, this may change. At the moment, the 1997 Nacional offers up a very deep and powerful nose of black cherries, chocolate, plums, dried roses, tar, lead pencil, Cuban cigar wrappers and the first incipient notes of the brown sugar and gentle notes of honeycomb that will emerge with many more years of bottle age. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, with a sappy core of fruit, suave tannins and simply outstanding length and grip on the focused and still very youthful finish. This will be a great wine at its apogee and there is a distinct possibility that I am underrating its potential. 2022-2100. **94+**.

1996 Quinta de Noval Nacional

The 1996 Nacional offers up a stunningly complex and bottomless nose, but it is not quite as vibrant as the 1997. The beautifully complex bouquet wafts from the glass in a mélange of

cassis, black cherries, tar, cigar ash, dark soil tones, a bit of coffee grounds and a dollop of cedar. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, powerful and rock solid at the core, with still some fairly substantial, youthful tannins to resolve, lovely focus and balance and stunning backend intensity on the still fairly adolescent finish. This is not as refined a vintage of Nacional as either the 2000 or the 1997, but there is an awful lot of stuffing here that will carry this wine a very, very long way in bottle. 2020-2100. **93.**

1994 Quinta de Noval Nacional

The 1994 Nacional is a legend in the making and an awfully good inaugural Nacional for the new team that arrived at Quinta do Noval in 1993! The utterly sublime nose delivers a magical and still quite youthful mélange of black cherries, cassis, tar, cigar smoke, heather, lead pencil, spiced meats and a beautifully complex base of soil. On the palate this gentle giant is just beginning to stir from its period of adolescent slumber and is a full-bodied, stunningly deep and pure wine of monumental length and grip. The focus is flawless, the core is sappy and bottomless, the tannins now only moderately chewy and the finish absolutely endless, vibrant and inherently suave in nature. This is still very early days for the '94 Nacional, but this will be a legendary vintage of this great wine. 2020-2100. **97+.**

1985 Quinta de Noval Nacional

The decade of the 1980s was not considered one of the finest in the history of Quinta do Noval, as disagreements amongst different family members about the eventual direction of the estate led to some of the less distinguished wines in the illustrious history of the domaine. However, despite that, the '85 Nacional is really quite a lovely drink- perhaps not quite as profound as it should have been in the context of how these ungrafted vines usually perform in top vintages, but nonetheless, a very satisfying bottle of Port. The deep and complex nose is ever so slightly raisiny in its fruit profile, offering up notes of dried black cherries, pepper, fennel, tobacco, a touch of new leather, a lovely base of soil and just a faint whiff of caramel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and shows a superb backend, with moderate tannins, fine focus and lovely length and grip on the finish. The mid-palate depth here is good, but not great, and the customary sappy core of beautifully pure black cherry fruit that is the calling card of Nacional is not particularly prevalent in the 1985. But, though this is not a legendary effort of Nacional, it is still a very tasty bottle. 2009-2040. **90.**

1978 Quinta de Noval Nacional

This is one of the first vintages of Nacional that I ever had the pleasure to taste, and it is a lovely bottle that perfectly captures the opulent character of Nacional. Despite the decade of the 1970s not considered one of the strongest in the history of the lodge, there is no denying that this is a truly stunning vintage of Nacional. The bouquet on the 1978 is deep, complex and flashy, as it offers up notes of candied cherries and plums, orange zest, tobacco, just a touch of raisin, clove-like spices, minerals, and cedary wood. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and rock solid at the core, with melting tannins, tangy acids, fine focus and a very, very long, complex and powerful finish. The fact that I do not drink enough Nacional is abundantly clear when a glass of this lovely elixir is placed in my hands. A great bottle. 2005-2040. **95.**

1975 Quinta do Noval Nacional

The 1975 vintage is not a legendary one for Nacional, but the wine is still full of charm and the complexity of full maturity. The complex and ethereal nose offers up scents of cherries, cigar smoke, heather, coffee, *sous bois*, clove-like spices and a touch of ginger honey in the upper register. On the palate the wine is fullish, complex and intensely flavored, with lovely filigree, moderate depth, melting tannins and lovely length and grip on the finish. This is a touch

low in acidity by the very high standards of Nacional, but this is a very, very pleasant drink. 2012-2035. **89.**

1970 Quinta do Noval Nacional

At our tasting in New York in September, several folks around the tables opined that they had tasted even more profound bottles of the '70 Nacional and that our sample bottles were not as profound as others they had tried. Given how beautifully the wine showed, I can only say that I would be ecstatic to taste a pristine example! The utterly stunning nose wafts from the glass in a complex and vibrant mélange of cherries, orange zest, cigar smoke, coffee, spice meats, beautiful soil tones, ginger honey, autumnal overtones and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and dancing on the palate, with a lovely core, melting tannins, tangy acids and stunning length and grip on the beautifully focused finish. This is a glorious wine and I am now fully prepared to search to the ends of the earth for an even better example of the '70 Nacional! 2012-2050. **95.**



1967 Quinta do Noval Nacional

The 1967 Nacional was one of my sentimental favorites of this tasting, as it offers up a gloriously complex and vibrant personality on both the nose and palate that are the stuff from which legends are made! Christian Seely likes to observe that the '67 Nacional “is a bit of a wild child”, as it offers up an almost exotic and utterly profound bouquet of cherries, cigar wrapper, gingery spice tones, a glorious base of complex soil, quite pronounced notes of spiced meats

(almost Gevrey-Chambertin-like!), herbs, honeycomb, clover and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and simply stunningly complex, with that Nacional sappiness at the core, glorious delineation, tangy acids and brilliant length and grip on the seamless and utterly suave finish. The '67 Nacional is at its absolute zenith of peak drinkability, but it still has decades and decades of life still ahead of it! 2012-2050+. **96.**

1966 Quinta do Noval Nacional

As 1966 is one of my absolute favorite Port vintages, I was extremely excited to try the 1966 Nacional, as I had never had the good fortune to cross paths with this wine previously. It did not disappoint my very considerable expectations, soaring from the glass in a heavenly mélange of cherries, blood orange, ginger honey, Cuban cigar smoke, cloves, a brilliantly complex base of soil, a touch of coffee, celery seed and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and brilliantly complex, with a superb core of fruit, melted tannins, tangy acids and a magical, dancing and very transparent finish of boundless energy and length. The finish is just now beginning to develop some of the savory notes of old vintage Port, and amazingly, this great wine may even gain in complexity with further bottle age. 2012-2050+. **97+.**

1964 Quinta do Noval Nacional

The 1964 Nacional does not quite possess the same stuffing and multi-dimensional personality as the greatest vintages of this wine in this superb decade, but it is no slouch and there is an awful lot to like about this stylish and superbly complex middleweight. The lovely and relatively high-toned nose jumps from the glass in a mix of oranges, brown sugar, forest floor, lovely soil tones, celery seed, coffee and a dollop of honey in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and lacy in its complexity, with fine focus and balance, impressive soil drive and lovely length and grip on the fully mature finish. This lacks a bit of the vibrancy of fine acidity that is found in the 1970, 1967 and 1966, but it is a lovely wine for drinking over the next several decades. 2012-2035. **90.**

1963 Quinta do Noval

While the legendary '63 Nacional is rightfully the first wine Port lovers think of when this vintage is mentioned at Quinta do Noval, one should not forget that in this great year the lodge produced two profound wines, not only one! The '63 Quinta do Noval is a stunning bottle of Port that is at its absolute apogee of peak maturity, but still has decades and decades of life ahead of it. The gorgeous nose wafts from the glass in a blend of black cherries, fresh-culled mint, lovely soil tones, a touch of nuttiness and a gentle topnote of meatiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and gloriously complex, with a great core of fruit, a very powerful personality for mature Quinta do Noval, moderate tannins and stunning length and grip on the beautifully focused and quite tangy finish. This is a great drink already, but it may yet improve with further bottle age. It is one of the great, unsung '63 Ports. 2012-2075. **94+.**

1963 Quinta do Noval Nacional

I had never tasted the legendary 1963 Nacional previously, and this stunningly pure and still almost youthful wine was every bit as profound as its reputation suggests. The glorious nose erupts from the glass in a sappy mélange of red plums, cherries, heather, coffee, cigar smoke, clover honey, a brilliant base of soil, orange zest and incipient notes of celery seed and other savory delights. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still rock solid at the core, with glorious transparency, melting tannins, laser-like focus and brilliant soil drive on the very, very long and tangy finish. Like several other of the very best 1963 Ports, the '63 Nacional is still a fairly young wine and will continue to dazzle for another fifty or sixty years. It was an absolute privilege to taste this legendary wine! 2012-2075+. **100.**

1962 Quinta do Noval Nacional

The 1962 Nacional is a stunning wine that is drinking at a great level of maturity, and it is clearly one of the magical vintages of Nacional for current consumption. The utterly pure and still vaguely sappy nose soars from the glass in a stunning array of aromatic fireworks, offering up scents of black cherries, heather, a hint of chocolate, beautifully complex spice tones, ginger honey, dried violets and a gloriously complex base of soil. On the palate the wine is very, very pure, full-bodied and wonderfully transparent, with a superb core of fruit, tangy acids, exceptional focus and simply stunning length and grip on the very complex and *à point* finish. I have been fortunate to taste the 1962 Nacional on three separate occasions in the last few years and the wine has consistently been brilliant! 2012-2050+. **95.**

1955 Quinta do Noval

I have only tasted the '55 Noval on a couple of occasions, and I have been quite impressed each time. The bouquet is refined and very pure, as it offers up a mélange of red cherries, dried berries, cigar wrappers, a distinctive Fonseca-like note of fresh mint, floral tones, cedary wood and a lovely base of soil. On the palate the wine is only medium-full, but suave and complex, with lovely intensity of flavor (rather than any real power), and a long, transparent and classy finish that is just beginning to show a bit of its spirit as it nears its fiftieth birthday. There is not quite the transcendental nature to the '55 Noval as is found in the '55 Taylor, but this too is a lovely wine that still has plenty of life ahead of it. I wish I had a bit of this in my cellar. 2004-2025+. **92.**

CHÂTEAU PAPE CLÉMENT 'S FALL FROM GRACE



Château Pape Clément as night descends on the estate in Pessac-Léognan.

Château Pape Clément has long been one of my absolute favorite estates in all of Bordeaux and for many years I made a point of buying this wine for my cellar in most top vintages. When I was first starting out in the wine trade back in the early 1980s, Château Pape Clément was known far and wide in the business as “The Poor Man’s Haut-Brion”, based on its utterly quintessential Graves character and its outstanding quality year in and year out. The estate is one of the oldest wine-producing in Pessac-Léognan, being able to trace its roots back all the way to 1299, when it was given to Bertrand de Goth by his brother from the family’s copious land holdings on the occasion of Bertrand being named Archbishop of Bordeaux. Bertrand de Goth’s ecclesiastical career would culminate a few years later when he was named Pope in 1306, taking his title under the name of Pope Clément V, from which the estate takes its name to this day. As Pope, Bertrand made a few waves right out of the blocks, refusing to travel to Rome for his coronation, but receiving his title in Avignon, and he would eventually purchase the small city of Avignon from the King of Sicily; Avignon would become the Papal summer residence during his reign and lead to eight French Popes sitting in residence in Avignon during the papal schism. This period also helped produce what is today one of the Rhône’s great viticultural regions, Châteauneuf du Pape, as the popes in Avignon and their entourages were great wine lovers and did much to promote vineyard plantation during the Avignon papacies. However, Clément V’s property in the Graves (which would eventually become Château Pape Clément) passed on at the time of his ascension to the Holy See to the next Archbishop of Bordeaux in 1306 and remained owned by the church up until the French Revolution.

During the period of ownership by the Archbishop of Bordeaux, the wines of Pape Clément were never commercialized and were likely retained solely for the pleasures of the

ecclesiastical table. Today, the estate totals just over thirty-two and a half hectares of vines planted in the Bordeaux suburb of Pessac, not far from Haut-Brion and La Mission Haut-Brion, and like these other two estates, it is completely surrounded by suburban sprawl. However, during its era of church ownership, Pape Clément had a much smaller area under vines, and was planted entirely to red grape varieties at this time, as the fine white wine of Pape Clément was not to be introduced from vineyards on the estate for many centuries to come. A succession of private owners in the wake of the French Revolution turned the estate into a viable commercial endeavor, with land added and further vineyard plantations realized, but it was not until the property was purchased by Jean-Baptiste Clerc in 1858 that it was brought up to its current thirty-two and a half hectares of vines. During the nineteenth century, the reputation for high quality of Pape Clément's wines was firmly established in the Bordeaux marketplace, with the wine largely considered second only to Haut-Brion in quality in the Graves and selling at the same prices as Médoc Second Growths during this era (one wonders why it was not included in the official 1855 classification). Monsieur Clerc owned the property from 1858 until his passing in 1890, and from this point forward, the fortunes of the estate were a bit patchy, with some owners (understandably) neglecting the property during the upheavals of two world wars and economic crises during the first four decades of the twentieth century. In fact, as World War II raged on throughout Europe in the late '30s and '40s, Pape Clément was quite derelict and it seemed at that time quite likely that the property would eventually be carved up and subsumed under suburban houses.

Happily, a new owner came on the scenes who had entirely different plans for Pape Clément, as a *vigneron* and poet named Paul Montagne purchased the property in 1939 and (once opportunity allowed at the completion of hostilities) he began the revitalization of the estate. The property's vineyards had been absolutely ravaged by hail damage in 1937, so there was a lot of work to be done in the vines when Monsieur Montagne took over the reins of the estate. Once the second world war was ended, investments in the vineyards and *chais* were commenced by Monsieur Montagne, and the star of Pape Clément began to once again rise in the firmament of the classed growths. One of the early moves that Monsieur Montagne made to improve the quality of the wines at Pape Clément was to hire the services of a young oenologist named Emile Peynaud to oversee the vinification and *élevage* of the wines, which of course turned out to be a very good move for quality. However, as we will see, hiring consulting oenologists in the future here was not to realize quite the same string of successes as the property experienced under the steady hands of Monsieur Peynaud. In any event, the vast majority of the time under the leadership of Monsieur Montagne was to prove to be a golden age for Château Pape Clément, and the wines produced at the estate that I have tasted from the decades of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s are amongst the finest wines produced in all of Bordeaux during this epoch.

Today, the estate is co-owned by Léo Montagne, the son of Paul, and his son-in-law, the flamboyant Bordeaux entrepreneur, Bernard Magrez. Monsieur Magrez began directing the estate in 1985, and his early years were marked by a string of outstanding vintages at Château Pape Clément, as the wines from 1985, 1986, 1988, 1989 and 1990 are certainly amongst the finest ever produced at this estate in the twentieth century. At the time, Monsieur Magrez had hired Bernard Pujol as the technical director and general manager of the domaine. Monsieur Pujol oversaw a string of outstanding Pape Cléments during his tenure, which lasted through the 1998 vintage. In 1999, Monsieur Pujol left Château Pape Clément to form a *négociant*

partnership with Hubert de Bouard, owner of Château Angélus. After the departure of Monsieur Pujol from the estate, the winemaking direction at Château Pape Clément was turned over to the consultancy of Michel Rolland by Monsieur Magrez, and the quality of the wines here plummeted with the abrupt change in direction brought about by the Rolland “recipe” of late harvesting, full malolactic fermentation in barrel, a high percentage of new oak and plenty of micro-oxygenation during the *elevage* of the wine. Not surprisingly, the scores for the “new” Château Pape Clément mounted in some (less than) critical wine circles for the Rolland versions of this estate, but, for long-time fans of the wines of Pape Clément (such as myself), the Rolland era at this property has been a very discouraging period in its history. Of the wines I have tasted here crafted under the oversight of Monsieur Rolland, only the 2008 and 2010 have shown any real potential, while wines from years such as 2000, 2005, 2006, 2009 and 2011 have been wines of highly questionable balance that seem likely to eventually dry out from excessive wood tannin without ever really blossoming.

But, the focus of this article is not to lament what has been lost at Château Pape Clément since Monsieur Pujol’s departure in 1999 and the arrival of Monsieur Rolland to overhaul the vinification techniques and *elevage* of the wine, but rather to celebrate the great wines that were made here before his arrival in these cellars. Several long-time fans of the estate’s wines back in its golden age today are quick to point the finger of blame at Bernard Magrez for what they see as the precipitous drop off in quality at the domaine since the keys to the cellar were handed over to Michel Rolland, but, this strikes me as doing a disservice to the superb wines that were made here during the initial fifteen years of Monsieur Magrez’s leadership of the estate. Certainly it is not possible to find fault with the truly lovely wines made at Château Pape Clément from the advent of the Magrez era here in 1985, and up until at least the vintages of the mid-1990s, these were wines that were every bit as superb as the magical Pape Clément bottlings of the ‘50s, ‘60s and ‘70s. I am sure that the signing on of Monsieur Rolland has been a financially successful move by the estate, as it is my distinct impression that Robert Parker’s knee jerk reaction to any property that hires Monsieur Rolland’s firm is to boost up the scores of the wines (and the prices inevitably follow upwards), but the higher profile of Château Pape Clément in the marketplace today under the Rolland consultancy should not obscure the fact that the intrinsic quality of the red wines here has noticeably dropped during this same time frame. It is sad that a man such as Monsieur Magrez would be willing to sacrifice his reputation for pursuing excellence and his superb track record of success earned during the early years of his tenure here by allowing a wholesale switch in style at Château Pape Clément.

In any event, the vineyards themselves at Pape Clément remain much as they have always been in recent times, so there is always the hope that one day Monsieur Magrez will wake up, fetch a bottle of the lumpy 2000 Pape Clément *rouge* out of the cellar, be utterly dissatisfied with how the wine is failing to evolve positively with bottle age, and show Monsieur Rolland the door and return this estate to its former grandeur. Of the 32.8 hectares under vine at the estate, fully thirty hectares are committed to red wine varieties, with only 2.8 hectares planted to white wine grapes. For centuries it has been recognized that Pape Clément has one of the greatest *terroirs* in all of Bordeaux, which no doubt is where the original comparisons to Haut-Brion got started. Of the thirty hectares of red varieties, these are split between sixty percent cabernet sauvignon and forty percent merlot. In the early decades of the twentieth century, there was still some cabernet franc planted at Château Pape Clément, which dated back to the era of Jean-

Baptiste Clerc, but whatever cab franc that had been retained through the early parts of the past century did not survive the hail damage of 1937. The cabernet sauvignon is generally planted on the property's *terroirs* that are the classic gravel mounds of the Left Bank, with a combination of sandy soils and gravel often interspersed with varying levels of limestone. These more gravelly soils tend to lie on the western side of the *vignoble* of Pape Clément, whereas those on the eastern end of the estate have decidedly more clay in the soil and are a perfect home for the merlot which is planted in this area. Both the cabernet sauvignon and merlot vines average about thirty years of age at the estate these days, with the oldest vines in the forty year range.

For many years, the glorious white wine of Château Pape Clément was reserved primarily for the private consumption of the Montagne family (or for events at the château) and constituted only a tiny, tiny percentage of overall production of the estate. Back in the old days it was typical for the estate to only produce about a thousand bottles of white wine each year. This was another of the brilliant moves made early on in Monsieur Magrez's tenure, as he decided to expand the amount of vineyard land committed to white wine varieties in the late 1980s and today's 2.8 hectares of white wine grapes at Château Pape Clément is a direct result of his inspiration in those early days. The white wine vineyards are planted to a mix of forty percent sauvignon blanc, thirty-five percent semillon, sixteen percent sauvignon gris, with the remaining nine percent planted to muscadelle. Château Pape Clément Blanc is one of the great white wines of Bordeaux, and in many vintages the only wine that with some regularity eclipses it in quality is the famed Haut-Brion Blanc. I have always ranked Pape Clément Blanc at the very highest level of white Graves bottlings, alongside those of Domaine de Chevalier Blanc and La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc (formerly Laville Haut-Brion) at the very pinnacle of dry white Bordeaux. Like all of the top white Graves bottlings, today Château Pape Clément Blanc is a pretty oaky white wine, and presently the wine is routinely raised in one hundred percent new oak barrels each year. In the more difficult white wine vintages in Bordeaux in the last few years, perhaps the wine has suffered a bit from a lack of flexibility with the oak regime for the white wine at the estate, so that the last truly profound Château Pape Clément Blanc is really the 2006, but in general, the quality of the white wine has been more consistently excellent over the last dozen years here than has been case for the red wine.

The style of Pape Clément Blanc is typically one of great beauty, with a distinctively floral aspect from the combination of a fairly high percentage of muscadelle in the blend (as well as perhaps the sauvignon gris?), augmenting classic white Graves notes of lime, fresh fig, grapefruit, cut grass, petrol and beeswax. While I am not certain that the white wine varieties are planted to the soils that contain the most limestone on the property, there is a distinct *terres blanches* shading to the lovely soil tones in Pape Clément Blanc that leads one to believe that this is indeed the case. The wine is typically not quite as powerful in personality at top vintages from Domaine de Chevalier, La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc or Haut-Brion Blanc, but it is never short of complexity, intensity of flavor or soil signature and is often the most complex in its youth of the "Big Four" of the dry white wines of Pessac-Léognan, and the wine has a glorious track record for aging long and gracefully. However, like all of the top white wines of the Graves in recent times, my experiences with Pape Clément Blanc indicate that the estate has certainly not been immune to the vagaries of premature oxidation, and at least in vintages from 1994 forwards, it seems best to assume today that premox may play a role in the wine's evolution in bottle and drinking the wine on the earlier side (than at least was customary pre-1994) is

probably a sound strategy. I would dearly love to see Pape Clément Blanc raised in a lower percentage of new wood, as this should allow the glorious *terroir* of this estate to shine out even more profoundly in the wines, but at least in top white Graves years such as 2006, I can find no complaints with the outstanding quality of this bottling.

However, the current status of the red wines at Château Pape Clément are another matter entirely. While I have not tasted the 1998 Pape Clément, which was Monsieur Pujol's last vintage at the estate, I have been very happy with the red wines I have tried from the property during the other vintages of the 1990s, and ecstatic with the quality of the wines in the 1985 to 1990 stretch. But, from the 2000 vintage forward, I have certainly found the signature of *terroir* in the Pape Clément *rouge* bottlings to be vanishing under the heavy boot prints of Monsieur Rolland's cellar regimen, and it seems that it is only when Mother Nature steps in and makes it more difficult for the Rolland recipe to be implemented fully (such as in 2008) that some of the former grandeur of Pape Clément can still be found front and center in the wines. Other recent vintages suffer, in my opinion, from too much new oak, too little soil signature (probably from the aggressive micro-oxygenation techniques championed by Monsieur Rolland's team to play with the texture of the young wine or the full malo in barrel) and an overall lack of complexity *vis à vis* the wines of the pre-Rolland era. What has been gained by engaging the pricey services of Monsieur Rolland- other than the predictable higher Parker scores? Certainly the textural sophistication of the wine early on has been enhanced in top vintages (which of course is the point of the heavy micro-oxygenation manipulations during the cellar treatments), with a velvety sheen added that can easily seduce the easily-seduced. However, this is only true in certain top vintages, as in other years, the heavy dose of wood tannin from the ratcheting up of the percentage of new wood used here and the carrying out of the malo in new barrels has often offset the glossier texture from the micro-oxygenation. This characteristic is particularly strident in the 2011 and 2009 Pape Cléments and will probably prove to be terminal in the long run for both these vintages.

It is still far too early to say definitively that the new Rolland-era Pape Cléments will fail utterly (as it is also far too early to anoint them with messianic acclaim by those who see Monsieur Rolland as having a Midas touch), but it will take a bit of divine intervention to get some of these recent vintages of red wine here at Pape Clément up off the mat and into the same quality level as the wines from the 1985 to 1996 era, when Monsieur Pujol and Monsieur Magrez were conspiring to make wines at the highest level in the history of this superb estate. I have no idea what caused the split between these two gentlemen in 1999, but it saddens me to think that from the day Monsieur Pujol walked off the property for the last time, the quality of the red wines here at Pape Clément has fallen precipitously.

Château Pape Clément Blanc

2011 Château Pape Clément Blanc

The 2011 Pape Clément blanc is one of the weaker vintages of this superb bottling that I have tasted in many years. The wine shows distinct signs of uneven ripeness, as there are some rather ripe tones on the nose, but a peppery aspect on the backend that is typical of some less than ideally ripe grapes in the cuvée. The nose offers up a blend of orange, pink grapefruit, a nice dollop of cut grass, white pepper, petrol and vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is medium-full and very easy-going on the attack, with modest depth and distinctly peppery acids on the

backend that conveys a strong sense of uneven ripeness. This is still okay, but by the very lofty standards of Pape Clément blanc, this is a pretty disappointing vintage for this wine. 2012-2025. **87.**

2010 Château Pape Clément Blanc

In many vintages, Pape Clément Blanc is my favorite wine in the region after Haut-Brion Blanc, and the 2010 is again very long on personality and complexity. But this is a wine that really shows the ripeness of the vintage, and while it is flashy in a Las Vegas sort of way, it will never be ranked amongst the great vintages of this lovely wine. The complex and very ripe nose offers up scents of figs, candied limes, petrol, cut grass, a touch of orange zest and a judicious framing of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and really borderline overripe, with a fine core of fruit, quite good focus and complexity, but soft acids and a touch of backend burn from the high alcohol. This has to be well in excess of fourteen percent alcohol this year, and it is a style of Pape Clément Blanc that will have to be drunk up quite briskly. 2011-2017. **86.**

2009 Château Pape Clément Blanc

Like almost all of the white wines in this vintage, the 2009 Pape Clément Blanc is on the soft side and will want drinking up early on in its lifetime. But in terms of balance and complexity, this is one of the very best examples of the vintage. The superb nose jumps from the glass in a blend of lime zest, grapefruit, fresh cut grass, beeswax, spring flowers, gentle notes of petrol, lovely, chalky soil tones and a judicious touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and very suave, with lovely complexity, respectable mid-palate depth and lovely focus and balance on the gently zesty finish. There are not sufficient acids here to make this a long-lived wine, but at least there is enough to keep it bright and light on its feet over the next half dozen years or so. In the context of the 2009 white Graves vintage, this is a revelation. 2010-2020+? **90-92.**

2007 Château Pape Clément Blanc

Château Pape Clément Blanc is usually one of the best white wines made in Bordeaux, but the 2007, which was raised in one hundred percent new oak, has not reached the customary level of quality that is usually a given with this fine estate's white wine. The nose on the '07 is deep and really very, very classy, as it offers up scents of lemon zest, beeswax, fresh figs, spring flowers, white soil tones, gentle notes of petrol and plenty of vanillin oak. However, on the palate the magic is lost, as this medium-full wine is a bit undone by its oak component, with the wood pinching the finish and sticking out a bit on the backend. The attack is very suave and classy, but is there enough stuffing to ever seamlessly integrate all of the wood? Perhaps yes and perhaps no- only time will tell. But clearly they had great raw materials at Pape Clément this year, but chose to make the white wine as they always do, rather than adapting their approach to the style of the vintage. 2010-2020+? **87.**

2006 Château Pape Clément Blanc

The 2006 Château Pape Clément Blanc is one of the stars of the white wine vintage in the Graves, as the wine offers up a gorgeous and beautifully balanced nose of figs, lime zest, freshly-cut grass, incipient notes of petrol, beautiful chalky soil tones, beeswax and vanillin oak. This wine was aged in one hundred percent new oak, but shows no signs of over-oaking, as the wood is beautifully integrated into the body of the wine. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and racy, with lovely mid-palate depth, impressive complexity and great length and grip on the poised and classy finish. As superb as this wine is, I would love to see it with half as much

new oak, as I think the combination would allow an even more profound expression of its underlying *terroir*. But this is a very high class example of the vintage. 2012-2030. **94.**

1993 Château Pape Clément Blanc

The 1993 Pape Clément Blanc is a beautiful wine that is now fully into its apogee of maturity and drinking splendidly. The deep, superbly complex and very classy nose wafts from the glass in a blend of quince, fresh figs, green apples, petrol, chalky soil tones, orange peel, a touch of vanillin oak, very gentle grassiness and a bit of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and gracefully balanced, with a fine core, lovely length and grip and a focused, complex and zesty finish. I love Pape Clément Blanc at its peak, which the fine 1993 has now reached. It will continue to drink well for at least another twelve to fifteen years- and perhaps far beyond that. 2011-2025+. **94.**

Château Pape Clément

2011 Château Pape Clément

The 2011 Château Pape Clément was not showing well at all at the UGC event, and I did not have a chance to visit the estate and check to see if the wine is really as over-oaked and out of balance as it appeared in all the samples at our tasting. The nose is certainly quite classy (albeit without any soil tones!) in its blend of black cherries, dark berries, Cuban tobacco and lead pencil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very suave on the attack, with a good core of fruit and fine delineation, but with a very dry, astringent backend of hard skin tannins and uncovered wood tannins from the new oak. The samples we tasted were really very, very astringent on the finish and this is one wine that I am not sanguine about it ever being able to integrate all these day tannins. If I were going to drink it, it would be early on, as this seems simply destined to dry out with bottle age. 2014-2020+? **80.**

2010 Château Pape Clément

The 2010 Pape Clément has turned out very well indeed, and while I would still prefer to see it in the guise of an unabashed champion of traditionalism, it is hard not to enjoy the more modern rendition in the context of its success in this challenging vintage in the Graves. The ripe nose is deep, complex and classy, as it offers up scents of black cherries, cassis, Cuban cigars, soil tones and plenty of spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very suave on the attack, with impressive complexity, good depth at the core and very good length and grip on the fairly tannic finish. Today the new oak obtrudes a bit on the finish, but one hopes that there is sufficient stuffing to carry the wood tannins along with those from the skins. I am still not convinced that the new style here is an improvement upon the old, but this is at least very well done in 2010. 2020-2060. **90+.**

2009 Château Pape Clément

The 2009 Pape Clément offers up a nose that reads like a “who’s who” of France’s most celebrated *tonneliers*, along with scents of blackberries, chocolate and Cuban tobacco. Clearly this is a wine that is trying to emulate the Lafite school of “*luxe*” winemaking and new wood shopping. On the palate the wine is medium-full, long and reasonably seductive, with the finish currently a bit dry from new wood that is not yet integrated, but with sufficient stuffing to eventually do the job. The finish is pretty long and will one day be nicely polished. This is an utterly suave, refined and misguided wine that has completely squandered the magical *terroir* of Pape Clément. 2015-2025. **83-85.**



2008 Château Pape Clément

The 2008 Château Pape Clément is a very impressive example of the vintage and a wine that I much prefer over their more seductive and overtly oaky 2009. Here, the 2008 vintage has provided a backbone in the Pape Clément that harkens back to some of my favorite past vintages from this estate (and I have an awful lot of this estate's wines in my cellar dating back to the 1986 vintage), and while the wine is decidedly more new oaky in profile than those great wines in the '86 to '95 stretch, this is still a very good bottle in the making. The nose is deep, beautifully complex and not too marked by its new wood, as it offers up scents of red and black cherries, Cuban tobacco, a classic touch of nuttiness, gravelly soil tones and a potpourri of spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and very suave on the attack, but with good reserves of fruit at the core, very impressive nascent complexity and most impressive length and grip on the ripely tannic and beautifully balanced finish. It will take a good eight to ten years for the new wood to be fully integrated here, but there are no issues with ultimate balance and this will be a very lovely wine at its apogee. 2018-2040+. **93.**

2007 Château Pape Clément

The 2007 Château Pape Clément is a pale shadow of the almost successful 2006, as the '07 seems to be a wine that has resulted from the same formula in the cellar that messed up the great (and decidedly more concentrated) raw materials of the '06 vintage, and with the more *tendre* style of 2007, the wine is really a mess. The nose is completely resinous today from its raw oak, with notes of black cherries, chocolate and nutskins struggling to come to the surface under the onslaught of new wood. On the palate the wine is fullish, long and astringent, with a sad veneer of new oak completely dominating the wine from the mid-palate back. This is another

property that is very well-represented in my own cellar, but nothing in the last several years has been even remotely successful. Will this ever provide a modicum of pleasurable drinking? **78.**

2006 Château Pape Clément

The 2006 Château Pape Clément is a beautifully made and refined wine under its veneer of new oak, which unfortunately is too strident and pumped up to seamlessly integrate with the serious juice underneath. The bouquet offers up a classy mélange of plums, black cherries, Cuban tobacco, lovely soil tones and a less than classy blast of heavy-handed vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and quite lovely on the attack, with fine mid-palate depth and an overtly woody, dry and sawdusty finish. A pity, as this could have been a terrific example of the vintage. It pains me to see Château Pape Clément made in this manner, as I have a cellar full of wines from this estate, and just recently tasted great bottles of the '61 and '64. Why there was any need to change a formula in the cellars that had produced such brilliant wines over such a long stretch of time is utterly incomprehensible to me, but the new style is flawed and the sooner it is scrapped, the sooner Château Pape Clément can return to the forefront of properties in the Graves. 2012-2030? **84-87?**

2005 Château Pape Clément

Pape Clément is another of my one-time favorites in all of Bordeaux, and I am very content to still have good quantity of the 1986, 1990 and 1994 vintages of this wine in my own cellar, as I would never want to own a bottle of this very sad 2005. Michel Rolland has been in residence here as the consulting winemaker since 1999, and he has utterly taken the heart and soul out of what was once one of the most compelling wines to be found in the region. The 2005 was predictably aged in one hundred percent new oak and had its malo done in new wood, and the wine has emerged eviscerated and utterly devoid of interest. The sad, woody nose offers up notes of dried out black fruit, tobacco, herbs and a boatload of oak spice. No doubt the budget for new oak from one of the tonier *tonneliers* in France was quite high here. On the palate the wine is medium-bodied and really very pinched in the mid-palate from the excessive oaking, with a thin, dried out core of fruit, and a dull, oaky and dry finish that closes with uncovered oak tannins. For this they paid Monsieur Rolland a fee! The 2005 Pape Clément will probably never be drinkable with any degree of charm. A tragic loss of one of the most profound *terroirs* in all of Bordeaux. 2010-2030? **78-82?**

2000 Château Pape Clément

What a shame that the wonderful 2000 vintage was wasted at Pape Clément by crafting a boringly modern and concocted version of claret. The overly worked nose offers up scents of black cherries, chocolate, raw new oak and a touch of nutskin. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, four-square and marred by uncovered, bitter wood tannins on the finish. The uncovered wood cuts the finish short with a blast of sawdusty oak. Perhaps I just caught this wine at an extremely unfavorable moment in its evolution, but when I tasted this in March of 2010 it was hard to even imagine this wine ever righting the ship. This wine was served double blind to me, so my score is certainly not indicative of having an axe to grind with the new style at Pape Clément. This wine just really is poorly balanced and is a sad reflection of the new direction of this once great property. ??? **71-80+?**

1996 Château Pape Clément

In 1996, Pape Clément was still very much a classically styled claret and the wine shows very good potential to eventually blossom from behind the substantial tannins of the vintage and turn into a lovely wine. The nose is a youthfully complex blend of black cherries, dark berries, tobacco leaf, earth, smoke, dark chocolate and just a touch of spicy new wood. On the palate the

wine is deep, fullish and still quite primary, with lovely focus, very good mid-palate depth, firm, but well-integrated tannins and lovely length and grip on the chocolaty finish. This should prove to be a lovely example of the vintage and it will be interesting to see if it always retains a bit of a firm edge from '96s massive tannins, or if this eventually blossoms into a classic example of Pape Clément . 2018-2050. **91+**.

1995 Château Pape Clément

It had been several years since I last tasted the 1995 Pape Clément and the wine is showing lovely potential and is now only a few years away from primetime drinking. The deep, soil-driven nose offers up scents of roasted cassis, road tar, cigar smoke, herb tones, a lovely base of soil and a nice touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and just a touch rustic in terms of structure, with a lovely gloss of pure fruit on the attack, a very good core and still a fair bit of firm tannins perking up the long and still fairly youthful finish. This is an old school Pape Clément that fully needs its requisite two decades in the cellar before it starts to really drink at its potential. 2015-2045. **91+**.

1994 Château Pape Clément

The 1994 vintage at Château Pape Clément is an unqualified success and this is one of the best wines I have tasted from this vintage in Bordeaux. At age eighteen, the wine is really just beginning to edge into its plateau of maturity, offering up a deep and classic nose of cassis, dark berries, cigar ash, gravelly soil tones, a bit of tobacco leaf and a nice framing of cedary wood. On the palate the wine is deep, impressively full-bodied for the vintage and nicely complex, with good mid-palate depth, modest remaining tannin, lovely acids and impressive length and grip on the focused and classy finish. This is old school Pape Clément- at least in terms of its soil signature and complexity, and I am quite delighted to still have a goodly supply of this totally underrated wine still sitting in my cellar. 2012-2035. **90**.

1990 Château Pape Clément

The 1990 Pape Clément is another outstanding example of its vintage and clearly shows that Monsieur Magrez and Monsieur Pujol were at the top of their games during this era at the estate. The deep, complex and utterly classic nose wafts from the glass in a fine mix of red and black cherries, tobacco leaf, iron-infused soil tones, incipient notes of nutskin, a lovely base of gravel, just a touch of medicinal overtones and a touch of new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and shows of lovely succulence on the attack, with very good depth at the core, modest tannins and fine length and grip on the focused and very well-balanced finish. This is one 1990 that does not show a lot of the roasted character of the vintage and is a lovely wine for drinking over the next several decades. It is a bit more advanced than the more powerful 1989, but it is a fine success. 2012-2040. **93**.

1989 Château Pape Clément

Pape Clément made a beautiful example of the vintage in 1989, with the plushness of ripe fruit that characterized the vintage beautifully displayed across the lovely soil-driven personality of the estate in this epoch. The wine is still quite youthful, but offers up a deep and classy nose of black cherries, tobacco leaf, nutskins, gravelly soil tones, fresh herbs, a judicious touch of new oak and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, long and developing very well indeed, with lovely secondary complexity already emerging, a fine core of fruit and very good length and grip on the complex and still fairly tannic finish. This is still early days for this lovely '89. 2015-2050+. **93+**.

1986 Château Pape Clément

The 1986 Pape Clément was the first vintage of this wine in many years to garner any positive attention from Robert Parker, and the early promise it showed out of the blocks remains in evidence, but the rather tough structure of the '86 vintage must be waited out before this wine really starts to deliver a lot of pleasure on the palate. The first rate nose offers up a really lovely blend of sweet cassis, dark berries, black truffles, Cuban cigars, gravelly soil tones, a touch of new wood and a bit of cigar ash in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and shows off a great core of sweet fruit, with still some firm tannins buttoning up the backend, good acids and very fine length and grip on the focused finish. This still seems right on track for an excellent apogee of drinkability, but it remains too young for primetime drinking at age twenty-five. 2017-2050. **92+**.

1982 Château Pape Clément

The 1982 Pape Clément has never had a great reputation, as it is before the arrival of Bernard Magrez here, but I quite liked the wine. It is perhaps a bit more rustic in style than the wines from 1985 forwards, and reminds me a bit of a riper and fleshier version of the 1975, which I quite enjoyed drinking in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The wine shows off the lovely ripe fruit of the vintage in its complex and mature bouquet of red and black cherries, cigar smoke, iron-infused, gravelly soil tones, a bit of charred wood, herb tones, hints of gamebird and the first gentle stirrings of the nutskin to come with further bottle age. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and ever so slightly angular, but with a good core, still a bit of tannin, fine focus and a long, complex and gently tarry finish. This is a very good wine that may not be in the league with the wines from 1970 back or from 1985 forwards to 1996, but it is a far more honest example of Pape Clément than a wine such as the 2000 or 2005. 2012-2040. **88**.

1970 Château Pape Clément

The 1970 Pape Clément is a lovely example of the vintage that is now at its apogee and shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon. The wine offers up a classic bouquet of cassis, dried cherries, cigar ash, gravelly soil tones, coffee, tobacco leaf, fresh herb tones and a lovely, smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and velvety, with no rough edges, melting tannins, lovely focus and balance and a long, complex and beautifully refined finish. This particular bottle is a bit more vigorous than the last one I crossed paths with and still has plenty of life ahead of it. A classic Graves. 2011-2025+. **92**.

1964 Château Pape Clément

This is one of the best vintages of Pape Clément that I have ever tasted, and happily, I have been fortunate to taste this wine with some regularity over the last couple of decades. This most recent bottle was showing beautifully, offering up a brilliant aromatic mélange of black cherries, sweet dark berries, Cuban tobacco, sweet leather, a complex base of dark soil tones and a touch of nutskin in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and utterly pure, with stunning complexity, a lovely core, suave, seamless structure, and absolutely stunning length and grip on the tangy, silky and beautifully focused finish. There is not remaining tannin here, but I would bet this wine continues to drink brilliantly for decades to come, as it is flawlessly balanced. 2010-2035. **95**.

1962 Château Pape Clément

The '62 Pape Clément is a stunning bottle of wine that is clearly at the same level of quality of the wines made from 1985 to the present day. On the nose the wine has transitioned over the last several years from the black fruity side of the ledger to now show much more red fruity tones in its beautiful mélange of cherries, blood orange, nutskins, beautiful spice tones,

sweet Cuban cigar, gravel, a touch of celery seed and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is now deep, fullish and very pure and complex, with beautiful transparency, a lovely core, melting tannins and absolutely superb length and grip on the utterly suave finish. Just a beautiful wine that continues to cruise along with great style and vigor. 2012-2030+. **92.**

1962 Château Pape Clement (served from magnum)

As good as the '62 Pape Clement is still in regular bottle, the magnum, as one would expect, is even better. The bouquet is deep, vibrant and hauntingly beautiful, as it offers up notes of dark berries, red cherries, hot wax, singed tobacco, a touch of nutskin, and a lovely base of gravelly soil tones that certainly recall nearby Haut Brion. On the palate the wine is fullish, round and beautifully complex, with a lovely core of sweet fruit, impeccable focus and balance, and a very long, complex and utterly pure finish that closes with excellent grip and a lovely note of cedar. High class wine that will clearly cruise along at this magical level for several more decades in magnum. What a crime to think of how this property has been turned over into the hands of Michel Rolland as consulting winemaker these days! 2007-2030. **93.**

1961 Château Pape Clément

I had not tasted the 1961 Pape Clément in a few years, and this was clearly one of the best examples of this brilliant wine that I have ever tasted (not that I have had the wine on more than a handful of occasions previously). The bouquet is deep, vibrant and stunning, offering up classic Graves notes of blackberries, black truffles, chipotle peppers, layers of soil tones and a topnote of violets. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, refined and laser-like in its focus, with all of the elegance and intensity of flavor that are the hallmarks of the 1961 vintage. The finish is very, very long, seamless and utterly brilliant, with still a touch of remaining tannin that promise to carry this wine down the road with great style for several more decades. 1961 Pape Clément is not one of the châteaux one immediately thinks of when the greatness of the '61 vintage is discussed, but it is clearly one of the absolute stars amongst the stellar constellation of 1961 claret. It has years and years of life still ahead of it. 2010-2040+. **95+.**

1959 Château Pape Clément (magnum)

This note was a little difficult to come by, as I arrived back from a vinous whirlwind tour of Europe and walked into three days of heavy-duty tasting here in New York. I survived the first night's tasting, but jet lag caught up to me and I was only able to sleep four hours in preparation for the second evening's tastings. I weathered well the Coche-Dury vertical that was first off on day two, but collapsed on the couch between the 1976 Lafite in magnum and a mini-vertical of Trotanoy. The following day I was given a glass of the preserved '59 Pape Clément (which I had slept through), which the owner said was just beginning to open up on day two! This is a lovely, black fruity middleweight. The nose is sweet and elegant, with scents of plummy fruit, roasted tobacco, chocolate, herbs, earth, and a touch of new wood wafting from the glass. Medium to full-bodied, round, sweet and beautifully structured on the palate, with layers of ripe fruit, fine focus, melting tannins, and a long, complex, creamy finish. The last time I had this wine, it seemed more ready and *à point*; this showing was a bit more black fruity and seriously Graves-like. Needless to say, I may be underrating this wine a tad, given the rather idiosyncratic nature of collecting this note. 1999-2010. **9**

HOMAGE TO CATALUÑA RECENTLY TASTED CATALÀN WINES



Beautiful terraced vineyards clinging precipitously to the mountainsides in Priorat.

The region of Cataluña stretches across much of northeastern Spain, nestled up against the southern flanks of the Pyrenees to the north and with the beautiful city of Barcelona serving as its axis point. It is a region of breathtaking vistas and a multiplicity of *terroirs*, as this area is both ruggedly marked by its many mountain ridges and profoundly shaped by its close proximity to the Mediterranean Sea that lies to its east, with some terraced vineyards clinging closely to sweeping mountainsides that directly overlook beaches just below. Winegrowing in Cataluña dates back to pre-Roman times, with the Phoenicians having first brought the art to this region of Spain, as recent discoveries of Phoenician amphora off the shores of the northernmost DO (or Designation of Origin- the Spanish equivalent of the French *Appellation Contrôlée* classifications) of Empordà confirm. However, grape growing in this region only became widespread during the Roman era, with the Romans building many of the vineyard terraces along the hillsides that are still in use in so many of the sub-regions of Cataluña to this day. In present times, one of the southernmost DOs of Priorat is the best-known of the Catalàn winegrowing regions, with its rugged, mountainous terrain and recently reclaimed, ancient vineyards providing one of the most dramatically beautiful backdrops for a vineyard visit as can be found anywhere

in the world. It is a happy coincidence that Priorat would be the most famous of the wine-producing sub-regions of contemporary Catalunya (or Catalonia in its Anglicized spelling), as a generation ago, winegrowing was largely a forgotten art in Priorat and this heavily rural and mountainous DO was one of the most poverty-stricken regions in all of Spain, and the rise to popularity of these wines has been one of the most important and socially beneficial stories in the world of wine in the last twenty-five years. Small towns here were slowly dwindling in population, as young people forsook the region of their families in search of economic opportunities in the cities, with the older people who stayed behind suffering from ill health and malnutrition from the rural poverty endemic in Priorat at the time. Today, thanks to the popularity of the wines of Priorat, these once-fading towns have found a new life, with the wine economy bringing both tourists and overall rising economic standards to all in the region. It is one of the happiest stories to be found in the wine world today.

However, while Priorat is the most well-known sub-region in Catalunya today, it is one of the smallest and, at least to my palate, one of the least interesting for lovers of traditionally styled wines. The *terroirs* here in Priorat are certainly superb, with many of the older vineyards hovering around a hundred years of age, and there may well be great promise to be found one day from the wines of Priorat, but this is also a very hot region that lends itself to a style of wine that is very ripe, powerful and often way over the top in alcohol. Priorat is now best-known for these big and strapping wines, which have found great favor with other wine critics and led to high prices and a vigorous presence in export markets around the world, but to my mind, the vast majority of wine producers here are yet to truly find their way and the future may be even brighter in the region if these bodegas can learn to manage the heat of summer here and produce wines at lower octane that place this singular *terroir* and old vine fruit at the center of their wines. Today, to my palate, the far more interesting wines of Catalunya are to be found far from the sweeping mountainous landscapes of Priorat, in DOs of more moderating climactic conditions and equally beautiful, if presently less well-known *terroirs*. For Catalunya is a region of great diversity of *terroir*, with many soils comprised of varying degrees of clay and limestone, but also with many vineyards rich in grey slate or granite as well. At one time, the Mediterranean Sea filled much of Catalàn basin, and the water's retreat created the great multiplicity of complex *terroirs* that now define the soils of Catalunya, so that many grape varieties can thrive here when well-matched to their underlying soils and microclimates. Happily, there are many examples of producers today championing indigenous Catalàn grape varieties such as Xarel-lo, Macabeu, Carinyana, Trepat and Garnaxta, which are on the rise in vineyards here after a serious influx of French varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Merlot and Syrah were planted in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

For many years, the most famous producer in Catalunya was Miguel Torres, based in the central region of the Penedès and founded in 1870. Torres remains one of the giant Catalàn producers, with much of their success based on their ability to beautifully match French varieties such as cabernet and chardonnay to the superb soils found in the region. While Miguel Torres has been a very major player in the realm of Catalàn wines since its foundation in 1870, it was really not until the late 1970s that they achieved international fame for their wines and forged a large presence on the export wine markets around the globe. In 1979, the Torres family's top wine, the Gran Coronas "Black Label" from the 1970 vintage placed first at an important blind comparative tasting in Paris (these tastings were quite *en vogue* at the end of the '70s) which

included several major Bordeaux and Rhône wines and the Torres family name soon became synonymous with Catalàn wines outside of Spain. The Grand Coronas “Black Label” was a wine made up primarily from cabernet sauvignon (with a bit of tempranillo and another grape blended in back in those days) that was grown in the Mas la Plata vineyard outside of the Torres’ home winemaking facility in the municipality of Vilafranca in Penedès, and this continues to be the top bottling from this very, very large and very high-quality winery. Today, this same wine bears the name of its vineyard on the label and is comprised entirely of cabernet sauvignon, but it remains spiritually quite consistent with the 1970 vintage of this wine that really put the firm on the international wine scene more than thirty years ago and is one of the wine world’s finest cabernet sauvignon bottlings.

Besides still wines, Cataluña is also the primary home to Spain’s large sparkling wine industry, with Cava one of the most important wines found across virtually all of the DO’s in the region. I will be writing a full feature on Cava in an upcoming issue of the newsletter, but have included in this piece a bit of background on Cava, as well as winery profiles and tasting notes on the Cava producers who I had the pleasure to visit during my two week stay in Cataluña this past summer. Interestingly, though the DO of Cava is not exclusively reserved for the sparkling wines produced in Cataluña proper and can be used anywhere in Spain, the region is responsible for well over ninety-five percent of all the sparkling wine made in the country- making Cava essentially at Catalàn wine. The Cava market is currently dominated by a few giant producers, such as Freixenet and Codorniu, who generally emphasize low prices over high quality, but their dominance of a huge share of the market with rather bland wines should not distract one from the reality that there are a fairly significant cadre of high-quality producers of Cava in Cataluña that produce some stunning and completely unique sparkling wines. In fact, only six percent of the producers of Cava actually grow their own grapes and make their own wines, and it certainly seems that this is the dividing line between those who make excellent wines and those who do not, and it is from this “Six Percent Club” that one finds the outstanding wines that should define Cava for wine lovers in search of high-quality and complex wines of impressive breed and balance. Generally, top-end Cava is quite different from Champagne, with less of a toasty personality from its aging on the lees and less weightiness on the palate, due to the more ethereal nature of wines based on the traditional Cava grapes such as Xarel-lo, Macabeo and Parellada. (Macabeo, which is known as Viura in Rioja, is also widely spelled in Cataluña as Macabeu- so much so that each time I settled on one spelling, the other spelling began to pop up with increasing frequency in the literature and in the end I was left with no clue which is the more prevalent spelling and I have used them indiscriminantly for each other!) Several top Cava producers have planted the grapes of Champagne as well to augment these traditional grapes, so that one can certainly find well-made Cava made with both chardonnay and pinot noir in their blends, but the trend here amongst the very top producers seems to be moving rather decisively towards of wines based primarily on the “big three” traditional grapes: Xarel-lo, Macabeu and Parellada. As Cataluña in general is a very warm climate, I am not really sure how well pinot noir is adapted for such summers (beyond some singularly cooler spots), but certainly the chardonnay grape has shown many examples of producing very good wine in well-suited Catalàn microclimates. So, one should be careful not to exclude chardonnay from the list of grapes that produce the best examples of Cava, but the majority of top Cavas that I tasted in preparation for this report relied primarily on the grapes of Xarel-lo, Macabeu and Parellada.

While there is an awful lot of good news to be found amongst the top producers in each Catalàn DO, I am told that there are still plenty of rather heady, jammy red wines being made across this large region, as there are plenty of producers who have not been immune to the trend towards more internationally-styled, headier high octane wines that have equally damaged the reputations of Spanish wine regions such as Rioja and Ribera del Duero in the last couple of decades. Much of the blame for this can be laid at the doorsteps of a few wine critics and the importers who helped craft these high alcohol, jammy and often, very new oaky wines that were tailor-made for the rather uncritical palates of these journalists. Happily, on my recent visit to Catalunya, I did not cross paths with a lot of these styles of wines, which certainly seem to be decreasing in popularity amongst the important sommeliers and wine enthusiasts most in love with the wines of Spain in general, and Catalàn wines in particular. One hopes that a generation down the road, we will look back on the 1990s and early 2000s as just a momentary phase when these so-called “Mediterranean Wines” had the ascendancy over more classic styles, and we can all toast the Renaissance of Spanish wines that took root at the dawn of the new millennium. Certainly, I visited several estates that are light years removed from the oaky jam juice school of modern winemaking, and it seems very likely that Catalunya will prove to be one of the leading wine-producing regions in this country in championing a return to lower octane and more soil-driven wines in the years to come. In particular, the more westerly and rather remote region of Catalunya centered around the very small city of Tremp in the DO of Costers del Segre, with vineyards planted at high elevations of around a thousand meters, looks very likely to develop into one of the most exciting Catalàn sub-regions in the years to come. The recent planting of vineyards here by Torres is probably a very good indication that the future for this sub-region is very promising indeed. Historically, the mountains around Tremp once housed plenty of vineyards, but most of the vineyards were abandoned many, many years ago and are only now beginning to be reclaimed; I have little doubt that a generation from now, this will be one of the greatest wine-producing regions in Spain. But, more on that later.

As mentioned above, Catalunya is a warm region for wine growing, with summers typically quite hot and exceedingly dry. Drip irrigation is allowed across the region, but the best producers are very careful to use this minimally and only to keep vines still maturing in drought conditions, rather than using the technique to pump up yields. One of the most interesting approaches to drip irrigation that I have ever heard was discussed by one very talented winemaker here, who seeks to use a Spartan application of water to the vines to keep their maturation process slow and steady, with an eye towards having the plants not burn up acidity in the hot summers. (Based on the wines I tasted from this estate, he has really done an excellent job with this approach in the vineyards, and if the estate will back off the new wood a bit in their top bottlings, this will be one of the greatest estates in Spain- but we will go into that in more detail below.) However, the close proximity of much of the vineyard land in Catalunya to the Mediterranean Sea also means that there can be cooling breezes at night, which allow grapes to retain acidity, and this factor is often amplified by the thermal blocking of mountains around certain vineyard areas, which can keep these cooling airs from the sea in specific sections of the region where vines are planted. There is also the cooling factor at night in many vineyards from their elevation, so surprisingly, for a region that really is quite hot during the growing season, there are a great many wines that show truly excellent acidity. The Catalàn wine regions are not uniquely planted to vineyards, as this is a beautiful region of mixed agriculture, with fruit, olive and nut trees also planted quite widely across Catalunya. While most of the growing season here

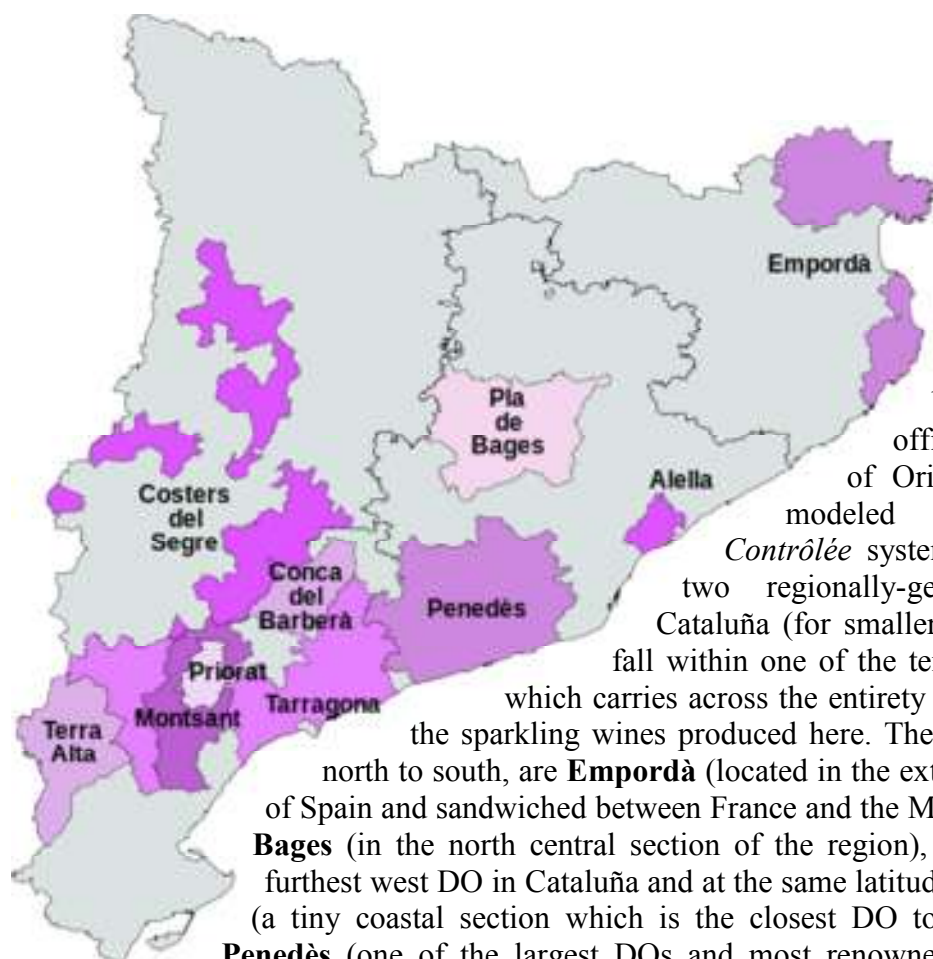
is very dry, the winter most often is quite rainy and hydric reserves in the soils and reservoirs here are generally refreshed every winter.

The wines of Catalunya seem to be equally successful across the spectrum of red, white, sparkling and rosés, and I even tasted a few sweeter-styled wines that were excellent. There is also no real dividing line of quality between wines produced from historically indigenous grapes of the region and those produced from imported French varieties, such as cabernet sauvignon or chardonnay, as I tasted outstanding wines during my visit to Catalunya from both schools. However, at least in terms of uniqueness on international export markets, it strikes me that the more Catalàn wines produced from indigenous grapes, the greater will be the ease of these wines making their mark and expanding their share of the global wine market. For, no one who has tasted across a selection of wines from top Catalàn producers is likely to state that the French variety imports produce more complex and compelling wines than the wines made from traditional grapes here, and the growing trend of more hectares of vineyards being planted to grapes such as Xarel-lo, Carinyana and Trepát seems to indicate that the Catalàn producers themselves are quite cognizant of the fact that it will be easier in the future to excel on the international market with grapes more unique to their region and historical vinous legacies. So, what are these wines like?

As I noted above, I will write up the sparkling wines of Catalunya, their great Cava, in more depth in the feature on these wines in a coming issue, and hence, will not go into them in depth here. But, suffice to say that Cava from one of the “Six Percent Club” is certainly one of the greatest of Catalàn wines and a wine worthy of far more respect in the world of wine than it heretofore has received. The still white wines are really quite superb at the most traditional end of the spectrum, with the myriad of various *terroirs* scattered across Catalunya capable of producing some truly outstanding white wines. For the most part, these are dry white wines, but I did taste a handful very impressive examples of slightly sweeter styled wines made from riesling and gewurztraminer that show that this is not only a place for dry white wines. But, that said, the vast, vast majority of top Catalàn white wines here are dry wines. As is the case in many other white wine-producing regions around the globe, the white wines of Catalunya are not the best carriers of new oak, with their unique expressions of *terroir* easily masked by a heavy hand with the new wood, and this still being Spain, there are certainly plenty of examples of rather oakly and one-dimensional white wines to be found in Catalunya. Often, these wines show fine potential under their veneer of vanillin oak, but the impressive delicacy of many of these wines is obscured by oak and there is little doubt that the most complete and compelling Catalàn white wines are wines of little or no new wood. When the wood is not dominant, the superb soil tones of Catalunya can take center stage- particularly in whites crafted from the traditional white wine grapes in the region- and these can be outstanding white wines. Of all the indigenous grapes of the region, Xarel-lo is clearly the most popular now for dry white winemaking, and it seems pretty clear that a consensus is developing amongst the top Catalàn producers that this is the most interesting indigenous grape variety for producing dry white wines of complex fruit and spice aromatics, coupled with excellent transparency for translating the complexities of *terroir* into the finished wines.

Amongst the imported white wine grapes, I had a preference for the chardonnays that I tasted over most of the examples of sauvignon blanc and viognier that I tried, but this may well

have been simply the fairly small cross section of wines I tasted from French imported grape varieties. Chardonnay can really do quite well here if it is matched seamlessly to its *terroir*, with good acidity and impressive complexity of both fruit tones and soil. The few pure sauvignon blancs that I tasted were good, but seemed to lack a bit of complexity from the heat of the days here during the growing season, and as I am not really a big fan of the more overripe style of viognier championed around the globe today, the wines made here in that style were not particularly appealing to me. The dry rosés that I tasted on my visit were more of a mixed bag, with many a bit heavy-handed or candied in style, but this category of wine was clearly not an emphasis at any of the estates that I visited, so I do not really have a firm sense if this cross section was indicative of the potential of Catalàn rosé in general, or simply a reflection that the estates I visited place far more emphasis on their reds, whites and Cava. But, clearly along with Cava, it is the red wines of Catalunya that are today the greatest wines of the region, and this is true both of wines made from more recently-arrived, international grapes such as cabernet sauvignon or more historically indigenous grapes such as carinyana or trepat. In fact, as the notes below will attest, there are truly some world class red wines being produced today across the wide regions of Catalunya, and it is my distinct impression that this is only the tip of the iceberg, as more modern aspects of Spanish wine culture start to further recede here (such as high alcohol and lots of new oak), the red wines of Catalunya are only going to improve.



Today, the vast region of Catalunya is broken up into ten official DOs (or Designation of Origin) which are roughly modeled on the *Appellation Contrôlée* system of France, as well as two regionally-general designations of Catalunya (for smaller sub-regions that do not fall within one of the ten larger DOs) and Cava, which carries across the entirety of the Catalàn region for the sparkling wines produced here. These regions, running from north to south, are **Empordà** (located in the extreme northeastern corner of Spain and sandwiched between France and the Mediterranean Sea), **Pla de Bages** (in the north central section of the region), **Costers del Segre**, (the furthest west DO in Catalunya and at the same latitude as Pla de Bages) **Alella** (a tiny coastal section which is the closest DO to the city of Barcelona), **Penedès** (one of the largest DOs and most renowned as being home to the

Miguel Torres winery empire, centered around the small and lovely city of Vilafranca), **Tarragona** (continuing down the Mediterranean coastline from Penedès), **Conca de Barberà** (just inland from Penedès and Tarragona), **Priorat** (a tiny, hot, mountainous DO filled with ancient vines and the most famous Catalàn wine estates outside of Torres), **Montsant** (Priorat's neighbor that has been heretofore as well known for its excellent olive oils and nut and fruit trees as for its wines, but a region that is a bit more temperate than Priorat and shows enormous potential) and **Terra Alta** (the southernmost DO in Catalunya).

As I noted in the beginning, I spent roughly two weeks tasting across Catalunya during the mid-summer of 2012, and it is primarily from this visit to the region that the lion's share of these notes has been accrued. I have organized the report along geographic lines, with each subsection on a specific Catalàn DO starting out with a winery profile of any estates I may have visited on the trip, followed by additional tasting notes on wines sampled between the time I returned to the states in mid-July and the publishing of this feature. This is far from an in-depth article on Catalàn wines, as the region is vast enough that we were only able to visit one or two producers each day during our trip, with plenty of time spent hurtling through the beautiful vistas of Catalunya in the van on our way to some of these more remote wineries, and of course, a bit of time had to be saved to spend in Barcelona on the way in and out of the wine-producing regions during the trip. This was my first visit to the region, which was organized by the Catalàn wine growers' association, Associació Vinícola Catalana, and I am hardly an expert on the wines of the region after one well-organized visit to Catalunya. But, we were able to cover a lot of ground on the trip and the wineries picked to visit were, for the most part, right up my alley stylistically, and I found an awful lot of wines that I would be delighted to drink frequently and have in my cellar during this two weeks. Beyond the wines of Miguel Torres, I was pretty much a novice in the realm of Catalàn wines, for I have not been too interested in the wines of the most famous DO in the region, Priorat, given the pretty serious stylistic disconnect between most of the wines of Priorat and what I personally value in the world of wine. And, while the folks we visited with in Priorat on the trip were absolutely warm and gracious, and the vineyard visits were absolutely spectacular to anyone with an appreciation of the beauty of nature, the wines on this leg of the trip were far less interesting to me than many of the others I crossed paths with and which heretofore I had little or no experience. I left Barcelona at the end of the trip with a bit of sadness that the visit was over and I cannot wait until I have a chance to return and continue to learn more about this absolutely beautiful corner of the world and the lovely people who produce such soulful wines.

I have listed the notes that follow, first and foremost, geographically working from the northernmost region of Empordà and working south towards Priorat and Montsant (I did not have the opportunity to visit any producers in the southernmost DO of Terra Alta). Within each geographical region, I have listed first the wineries that we visited during my trip to Catalunya, followed by any notes on other wines from this particular region that I sampled either on the trip (having spent the better part of a day at Barcelona's incomparable and very highly recommended wine bar, Monvinic) or back here in New York. For ease of location, where a winery produces wines from more than one sub-region of Catalunya (or even further afield in Spain) such as Miguel Torres, I have grouped all the wines for this winery under the main region where they are located, rather than split up the winery's bottlings in each geographical section. So for example, the Priorat bottlings from the Empordà-based winery of Castillo de Perelada are listed at the end

of the section of their profile in the Empordà section, rather than on their own in the Priorat section of tasting notes.

Empordà- Costa Brava- Wineries Visited

Castillo de Perelada (Empordà- Costa Brava)

Castillo de Perelada is an important winery in Empordà, and to my thinking, if they can shake free of the miasma of excessive new wood that plagues so many wines throughout the world, this will be one of the most exciting wineries in all of Spain. But, today, there is just a bit too much new wood for me here at the top end of the range- and too much new wood that is not particularly well integrated into the body of the wine and sticks out as uncovered wood tannins on the backends of several of the wines. There are some very good wines a bit lower down the food chain and the quality under the veneer of new oak is readily evident in each and every wine that I tasted from Castillo Perelada, but at the present time, these are very well-made wines that are not crafted in a style that I find completely compelling. The winery takes its name from the imposing castle of Perelada, which was purchased by the current owners family back in 1923. Back then, when Miguel Mateu purchased the castle (which dates back to the Middle Ages) and its monastery, he undertook to reinvigorate the estate's wine-making traditions and set about purchasing and planting vineyards. During the course of his life, Señor Mateu was good friends with Salvador Dali and the artist would often offer his guests to his home a glass of Perelada's Brut Rosé Cava upon their arrival. Today, the Perelada estate is run by his grandson, Javier Suqué, with the estate producing a full range of still and sparkling wines (made from purchased grapes), as well as running a five star hotel, a golf course and a myriad of other highly successful business ventures. Today, Castillo Perelada now owns fully 150 hectares of vines in Empordà and produces a roster of very well-made, modern styled wines that are very popular both in the Spanish home market and in the wider international wine scene. In addition to their home winery in Empordà, the family firm also purchased a Cava facility in Vilafranca in Penedès in 1979 as a center for their sparkling wine production and now makes a roster of wines from Priorat under the Casa Gran del Siurana label.

Today, the Export Director of Castillo Perelada is David Rovira Parker, who was noteworthy during my visit to Cataluña for his very thoughtful discussion of his approach to very light drip irrigation as a means of maintaining maturation during periods of hydric stress and avoiding the plants burning up their acidities in the grapes in the heat of the season. This technique is readily apparent across the board in the Perelada wines, which have lovely detail and vibrancy from bright acids- now, if they would only back off a bit on the new wood. I drove my colleagues on this Catalàn trip a bit bonkers on this visit, as we arrived late and after a tour of a couple of the beautiful vineyards that the estate owns (including the breathtakingly beautiful seven hectare Finca Garbet that overlooks the Mediterranean Sea in the northern corner of Empordà) we settled in to a large and generous lineup for tasting at what was a very late hour (to non-Catalàns!) and I had a host of questions about new oak and the like during our tasting. As the notes below will attest, there is some awfully good viticultural work being done at Castillo Perelada these days and I have little doubt that under what I find to be rather excessive use of new wood are a treasure trove of beautifully-crafted wines quite reflective of their various terroirs. But, right now, the wines here are still caught in that 1990s mindset of top wines needing very high percentages of new oak (and the predictably attendant, very heavy glass

bottles), and I hold out hope that the future may see more of these wines aged in older barrels, as the potential here is enormous and I would dearly love to see more terroir front and center.

Cava Brut Reserva NV- Castillo Perelada

The non-vintage Brut Reserva from Castillo Perelada is made up of a blend of the “Big Three” of Xarel-lo, Macabeu and Parellada and the wine is aged for eighteen months prior to disgorgement. Castillo Perelada purchases their needs for their Cava program, but I am not sure if this is made from purchased grapes or if the estate buys juice and does the blending in house. In any event, this is a very good bottle of Cava, offering up a quite floral nose of tart orange, green apple, lovely minerality, lime zest and a musky floral topnote. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and frothy, with bright acids, good focus and lovely length and grip. This is good juice that cannot quite scale the heights of the best examples from the “Six Percent Club”, but is very well-made and is a very good value. 2012-2017. **88.**

Cava Brut Rosé NV- Castillo Perelada

The current release of Salvador Dali’s house wine is really quite lovely. The *cépage* here is a blend of Trepát, Monastrell and Pinot Noir and the wine is aged twelve months on its lees prior to disgorgement and preparation for release into the market. The color is fairly dark cherry and the wine offers up a fine bouquet of strawberries, cherries, a touch of clove, blood orange and a nice base of soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with good balance, frothy *mousse* and lovely length and grip on the focused finish. Good juice. 2012-2016. **89.**

Cava “Cuvée Especial Rosado” Brut NV- Castillo Perelada

The Cuvée Especial Rosado from Castillo Perelada is quite different from their Brut Rosé bottling, as this is made up of one hundred percent Trepát. This is a fairly dark-colored rosé Cava, offering up a fine and “winey” nose of cherries, cranberries, orange rind, rye toast and a gentle smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish, crisp and complex, with elegant *mousse*, fine mid-palate depth and very good length and grip on the tangy finish. This is a rosé Cava that would be much more at home at the table, rather than served as an aperitif- which of course is what the wine above is made for! Good juice. 2012-2017. **89.**

2008 Cava “Gran Claustro”- Castillo Perelada

Though this is all made from purchased grapes, it is really quite good. The wine is a blend of Chardonnay, Parellada and Pinot Noir and is aged for twenty-four months on the lees prior to disgorgement. The nose is quite toasty in its blend of apple, bread dough, stony minerality, a touch of nuttiness and a nice, smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly complex, with a youthful touch of austerity today, fairly elegant *mousse* and good length and grip on the focused finish. The dosage here is only 1.1 grams per liter, which makes this very dry out of the blocks and a touch more dosage might make for a bit more generosity at this early stage. But, all in all, not a bad drink at all. 2012-2018+. **89.**

2011 Garnaxta Blanca- Castillo Perelada (Empordà)

The 2011 Garnaxta Blanca from Castillo Perelada is a very pretty wine, with only moderate complexity, but a lovely sense of balance and bounce on the finish. The bouquet is a stylish blend of tart pear, lime peel, spring flowers, gentle minerality and just a touch of leanness. On the palate the wine is fullish and succulent, with a good core, sound acids and good length and grip on the light on its feet finish. Quite tasty and well-made. 2012-2014. **89.**



Castillo Perelada's beautifully-situated vineyard of Finca Garbet overlooking the Mediterranean Sea in Empordà.

2010 “3 Fincas”- Castillo Perelada (Empordà)

The 2010 “3 Fincas” bottling from Castillo Perelada is a lovely wine that I would love to see emulated a bit in the upper level bottlings here. The wine is raised entirely in four and five year-old barrels for eight months (seventy percent American oak, thirty percent French), and is a very civilized fourteen percent alcohol. The *cépage* is comprised of Garnaxta, Samsó, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. The 2010 offers up a very lovely nose of red and black cherries, chocolate, a touch of tree bark, a fine base of soil and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and modestly tannic, with impressively bright acidity, lovely focus and fine length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This is a very, very well-made wine and a superb value! 2012-2018+. **90.**

2007 “5 Fincas”- Castillo Perelada (Empordà)

With the “5 Fincas” bottling we are already moving in a stylistic direction that I find less interesting than with the “3 Fincas” cuvée, but this is still a successful wine in its style. Here the wood regimen is fifty percent new American barrels and fifty percent one year-old French barrels, with the aging regimen stretched out to twenty months. The alcohol is also higher here, at 14.5 percent, though this may be more a reflection of the character of the 2007 vintage than any preference on the part of the winemaking team. The nose is sappy and quite flamboyant in its ripe mélange of black cherries, chocolate, a touch of coconut (from the American oak) and lead pencil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very nicely balanced, with a sappy

core of fruit, lovely focus and good length and grip on the opulent finish. The combination of higher alcohol and more new wood has decreased the complexity here in comparison to the “3 Fincas” bottling, and while this is still a tasty bottle, it is more “worked” and less interesting than the above. 2012-2020. **88.**

2009 Finca Espolla- Castillo Perelada (Empordà)

The fifty hectare Espolla vineyard is located in the foothills of the Pyrenees and is densely planted to a combination of Monastrell, Garnaxta, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. The soil here has a very high content of slate. The 2009 bottling is a blend of only Syrah and Monastrell and was raised entirely in new French barrels for fifteen months. This is a very classy wine that will need a couple of years to fully absorb its new oak (of which a bit of wood tannin is still present on the backend), but should prove to be outstanding. The deep and complex bouquet jumps from the glass in a blend of *garrigue*, black cherries, eucalyptus, dark berries, dark soil tones and spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very suave and classy on the attack, with a fine core, moderate tannins (as mentioned above, some from the new wood), lovely focus and impressive complexity on the long and very promising finish. Give this a few years in the cellar to round off its wood tannins and then drink it over the ensuing fifteen to twenty years. 2015-2030+. **92+.**

2009 Finca Malaveïna- Castillo Perelada (Empordà)

The Malaveïna vineyard is one of the more recently-planted by the estate, but one would not know that this is a wine produced from relatively young vines, as it is outstanding. The soils here in Finca Malaveïna are red clay and pebbles and the vineyard is planted to Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Garnaxta and Syrah- all of which figure in the blend of the 2009. The wine tips the scales at 14.2 percent alcohol, but shows no signs of heat or overly generous ripeness and is truly exceptional, delivering a classy bouquet of cassis, black cherries, eucalyptus, woodsmoke, espresso and a nicely-drawn base of lead pencil from the new French wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and suave on the attack, with tangy acids, excellent focus and balance, a fine core and a very long, ripely tannic and complex finish. This is a very high class wine! 2015-2035. **93+.**

2007 Finca La Garriga- Castillo Perelada (Empordà)

The La Garriga vineyard is the oldest in the Perelada holdings, planted primarily to sixty and seventy year-old Samsó and Garnaxta vines, though only the Samsó was used for this bottling. Sadly, this was one of the more egregiously over-oaked wines in the lineup, and though there is clearly a superb wine under the wood, I do not expect it to ever get out alive. The nose is very marked by its aggressively spicy new wood, with scents of black cherries, dark berries and soil submerged under the onslaught of oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very polished on the attack, but already a touch dried out on the backend from oak tannins and not likely to ever recover. A pity, as there is really good juice under the trendy new oak massacre. 2014-2020? **83.**

2006 Gran Claustro- Castillo Perelada (Empordà)

The 2006 vintage of the estate’s flagship bottling of Gran Claustro has still not been released, but is due out into the market soon. This is another wine that could be great, but struggles under its lumber. The wine is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Garnaxta and Samsó and was raised (I assume) in one hundred percent new French wood (probably from Taransaud). The wine has sufficient stuffing to probably carry its wood eventually, but it is stifled under the oak influence and is currently a bit pinched on the backend as well from wood tannins. The nose is a classy blend of cassis, dark berries, eucalyptus, coffee bean and plenty of

spicy new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite suave on the attack, with a good core, fine focus and a bit too much wood on the backend adding oak tannins and pinching the amplitude on the backend. This could have been a great wine with a lot less new wood, but there is probably enough stuffing here to eventually absorb the oak. 2016-2035. **87+**.

“Ex Ex 9”- Castillo Perelada (Empordà)

The “Ex Ex” collection at Castillo Perelada, which stands for Exceptional Experience, is based on a number of experimental wines that the winery produces in very small quantities every year- primarily for research purposes to guide planting and vinification techniques in the future. Occasionally, one of the experimental lots turns out so good that it is marketed under the “Ex Ex” label in very small quantities. The Ex Ex 9 is a blend of Sangiovese and Nero d’Avola from the two vintages of 2010 and 2011 and under two hundred bottles were produced. The wine was raised half in new barrels for fifteen months (the 2010 wines?) and half in new barrels for three months (the 2011 wines?). The bouquet is deep and absolutely superb, offering up scents of black cherries, cassis, a bit of tariness, eucalyptus, slate soil tones and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and tangy, with lovely focus and complexity, a solid core and excellent length and grip on the ripely tannic and very well-balanced finish. No wood issues here! 2014-2030. **92+**.

2006 Finca Garbet- Castillo Perelada (Empordà)

The 2006 Finca Garbet bottling, from the beautiful vineyard pictured above, is a blend of fifty percent each of Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon and was aged in new French wood for fifteen months prior to bottling. This is another Castillo Perelada wine that could have been stunning with less new wood, but it is probably deep enough to eventually absorb its wood. The nose is quite marked by its spicy new oak (Taransaud?), as it offers up scents of cassis, black pepper, *garrigue*, lead pencil and oak spice. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and beautifully elegant and transparent on the attack, with good mid-palate depth, but a bit too much new oak for its own good on the moderately tannic finish. The new oak here rather dominates the nose and clamps down the backend. Given that this is already a six year-old wine, one has to assume that these conditions are going to be permanent for the wine. Too bad, for while this is still a solid glass of wine, it could have been stunning with less wood. 2015-2025. **88**.

Casa Gran del Siurana is a new venture undertaken by Castillo Perelada in the Priorat, which was begun with vineyard plantings and terrace restorations in 2000. The property takes its name from an ancient farmhouse in the vineyards that once housed the branch of the Carthusian monks of Scala Dei, who introduced winegrowing in this region in the twelfth century. There are ten hectares of vines around the ancient farmhouse, and an additional forty hectares of terraced vineyards on classic, steeply-pitched slate soils on a farm called La Fredat. As is typical with many of the wines from the Priorat, the lower octane bottling here was far more interesting to my palate.

2011 “GR- 174”- Casa Gran del Siurana (Priorat)

The 2011 “GR-174” bottling tips the scales at a full fifteen percent of alcohol and is a blend of Garnaxta, Cariñena and Cabernet Sauvignon. The nose is deep and jammy, offering up scents of raspberries, *garrigue*, coffee and a touch of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and blurry from its ripeness, with a bit of backend heat, soft tannins and little focus or structure. This is pretty restrained jam juice, but, jam juice nonetheless. 2012-2018. **84**.

2007 Cruor- Casa Gran del Siurana (Priorat)

The 2007 Cruor bottling, which comes in at a much more civilized fourteen percent alcohol, is far more interesting to my palate than the above. The blend here is Garnaxta, Cariñena, Syrah, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon and the wine is aged for fourteen months in new French barrels. The nose is already quite evolved, offering up scents of dark berries, cigar ash, spices, woodsmoke, herbs and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and only a touch jammy, with complexity, focus and very well-measured tannins. The finish is long and shows good grip, though it is quite low in acidity. Not bad and my favorite of these three Priorat wines. 2015-2030+? **89.**

2008 Gran Cruor- Casa Gran del Siurana (Priorat)

The 2008 Gran Cruor is primarily a Syrah-based wine, with ninety percent of the blend made up of this grape and the balance a blend of Cariñena and Garnaxta. The wine is aged for a year and a half in new, French barrels and the 2008 tips the scales at a full fifteen percent alcohol. The nose is quite marked by its new wood, but underneath offers up scents of cassis, black raspberries, a touch of pepper, *garrigue* and a sandalwood tone from the spicy oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and impressively focused for its octane, with a nice touch of stony minerality perking up the backend (which was nowhere to be found on the nose!). The finish is long, ripely tannic and shows good grip and no signs of heat. This is not bad and would probably be really interesting at a half degree lower alcohol and raised in one-wine barrels. 2015-2030+. **88.**

Empordà- Other Wines Tasted

2010 Terro Remota Caminante Blanco (Empordà)

Terra Remota is owned by the husband and wife team of Marc and Emma Bournazeau, who are residents of Perpignan, France (just over the border), as Marc's family was forced to emigrate from Spain to Perpignan during the Civil War. This very pretty and stylish white wine is a blend of forty-five percent Garnaxta Blanco, thirty-five percent Chenin Blanc and twenty percent Chardonnay. The nose is deep and complex, offering up a very classy blend of lemon, pear, white soil tones, a hint of green olive and a topnote of spring flowers. On the palate the wine is fullish, crisp and nicely transparent, with sound framing acids and good length and grip on the focused finish. This is not the most complex white in the portfolio, but it is a very satisfying bottle that offers up good depth and breadth of flavor, which, I suspect, will grow exponentially in complexity as the vines get older here. Very elegant juice. 2012-2016+. **88.**

2010 Blanc de Gresa- Vinyes d'Olivardots (Empordà)

While I tasted the 2010 Blanc de Gresa from Vinyes d'Olivardots at a luncheon at El Cellar de Can Roca during my trip to Catalunya, their two reds wines reviewed below were tasted back here in New York in October. The Blanc de Gresa bottling is a one-third each blend of white garnaxta, grey garnaxta and white cariñena that hails from extremely old vines in the range of ninety to one hundred and ten years of age. The vineyard is inland from the Mediterranean and is an alluvial mix of sand and gravel. Both the white and grey garnaxta portions of the blend are barrel fermented in new French barrels and the white cariñena is fermented in stainless steel. The wine is a ripe, but well-measured at 13.5 percent alcohol in 2010 and offers up a lovely bouquet of white peach, casaba melon, lovely, dusty minerality, a touch of bergamot and a nicely restrained base of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and very suave on the attack, with super balance, nice framing acids, lovely complexity and fine length and grip on the

finish. I do not think that this wine was built for long aging, but for drinking over the next two or three years, it is a lovely bottle. 2012-2015. **91.**

2010 Amic Clos d'Agon (Empordà)

Clos d'Agon is a relatively new project started by several Swiss wine professionals, who brought in Peter Sisseck of Pingus as their consulting winemaker. The Amic bottling from Clos d'Agon is comprised of sixty-four percent Garnaxta, seventeen percent Merlot, ten percent Cabernet Sauvignon, seven percent Syrah and two percent Monastrell, and is aged for six months in new French oak. The 2010 Amic weighs in at 14.5 percent alcohol and offers up a spicy nose of raspberries, a bit of cocoa, *garrigue*, smoke and plenty of spicy (Taransaud?) new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and carries its ripeness quite well, with solid depth, moderate tannins and a fair bit of wood tannins perking up the long finish. This is a well-made wine, but it is rather international in style, which is a bit of a shortcoming in my book. Not bad. 2014-2025+. **86.**

2009 Camino Vi Negre- Terro Remota Camino (Empordà)

The 2009 Camino Vi Negre from Terro Remota Camino is a lovely red wine from Empordà, with its alcohol nicely scaled at fourteen percent and the beautiful *terroir* found here front and center in the wine. The blend on the 2009 is comprised of forty percent Garnaxta, thirty percent Syrah, twenty percent Cabernet Sauvignon and ten percent Tempranillo. The outstanding nose offers up a deep, pure and very refined blend of cherries, blood orange, a touch of cocoa, lovely spice tones, fresh nutmeg and a violet topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, medium-full, bright and tangy, with lovely intensity of flavor, melting tannins and a long, complex and beautifully focused finish. This is a beautiful bottle that shows off just how special this region can be when new oak is not the focal point of the equation. 2012-2020. **92+.**

2009 Clos d'Agon Tinto (Empordà)

This is the flagship bottling from Clos d'Agon, and ironically, I find it decidedly less interesting than their Amic lower level cuvée. The 2009 Clos d'Agon tips the scales at 14.5 percent alcohol and offers up a ripe and spit-polished nose of black cherries, chocolate, a bit of spice, a bit of olive and a generous coating of sexy, Lafite-like new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and velvety, with low acids, ripe fruit, good depth and a long, ripe and modestly tannic finish. The tannins here are ripe and polished, suggesting micro-oxygenation was part of the cellar formula for this wine. There is just a bit of sourness from the alcohol on the backend, but the wine is not really hot. This is not bad, but again, rather simple and international in style, with very modest complexity out of the blocks and not much promise of developing any with bottle age. 2015-2030? **86.**

2008 Clos d'Agon Tinto (Empordà)

The 2008 Clos d'Agon Tinto is a full half percent lower in alcohol, weighing in at only fourteen percent. The nose is a bit more black fruity than its 2009 counterpart, as well as more youthful in its mélange of black cherries, cassis, Catalàn fresh herbs, a nice base of sandy soil and a nice base of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and structured, with a good core, a fair bit of heat on the backend, firm tannins and a long, slightly heady finish. Oddly, even though this is lower in alcohol than the 2009, it shows a bit more heat on the backend. This seems a bit charmless today, but perhaps a bit of bottle age will help it rally. Right now, it is hard imagining it rising above the second division. 2018-2030+? **85.**

2008 Vd'O 1.08 "Terroir Varietal" Cariñena- Vinyes d'Olivardots (Empordà)

The "1.08" bottling of old vine Cariñena from Vinyes d'Olivardots hails all from a single vineyard called Vinya de l'Avi that was planted in 1946. This vineyard is primarily grey slate in

its soil composition, and the 2008 (from a cooler vintage one must remember) comes in with a stated alcohol level on the label of fifteen percent. Despite the high octane, this wine is really quite good, with only a bit of backend heat betraying its headiness. The bouquet is deep, black fruity and complex, offering up scents of dark berries, espresso, a bit of roasted game, lovely soil tones that really speak of their slate origins, woodsmoke and a touch of tree bark. The wine is a bit jammy on the nose with aeration- a lower alcohol level would certainly snap up the precision here- but, this is impressively complex and happily not hit with a lot of new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and black fruity, with a fine base of soil, a good core, low acids, modest tannins and very good length on the slightly hot and velvety finish. At a lower octane level, these old vines would really shine and this could be an absolutely stunning wine! It is not bad as it is, but there is so much untapped potential here as to be frightening! 2012-2018+? **86.**

2008 Vd'O 2.08 "Terroir Varietal" Cariñena- Vinyes d'Olivardots (Empordà)

The "2.08" bottling from Vinyes d'Olivardots hails from an even older plantation of Cariñena that dates all the way back to 1909, and which comes from the vineyard of Hort d'en Joan. The soils here are sandy, rather than the slate soils of Vinya de l'Avi and the wine is quite different as a result- despite it also tipping the scales at a full fifteen percent alcohol. These old vines (just short of one hundred and ten years of age in the 2008 vintage!) have produced a very aromatically complex wine, offering up scents of black cherries, dark berries, hung game, a touch of eucalyptus, dark soil tones and a touch of Catalàn spice tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and again quite velvety, with a lovely core of fruit, impressive elegance for its octane, low acids and very good length and grip on the slightly heady, modestly tannic and creamy finish. There is just a touch of backend sourness here from the uncovered alcohol, but the wine is remarkably cool and elegant on the attack for such ripeness. That said, sadly the 2.08 does not carry its alcohol quite as well on the backend as the 1.08 bottling. As is the case with the above wine, there is brilliant potential that is being squandered here by picking so late and allowing the sugars to climb out of control, but the old vines have fought valiantly against the ripeness and the wine is really not too bad, despite its excessive alcohol! 2012-2018+? **85.**

2007 Perafita- Celler Martin Faixó (Empordà)

I had a chance to sample this wine during a talk with Ferran Centelles, the former sommelier at El Bulli (a great guy by the way) during our trip to Catalunya. The wine is made up of a blend of forty percent cabernet sauvignon, thirty-two percent garnaxta and twenty-eight percent merlot, but unfortunately, tips the scales at a rather robust fifteen percent alcohol. The nose is ripe and dark, offering up scents of roasted cassis, coffee grounds, chicory, dark soil tones and hung game. On the palate the wine is fat, full-bodied and heavy as its fancy glass bottle, with fine mid-palate depth, ripe tannins and good length on the decidedly low acid finish. The wine does carry its alcohol very well for fifteen percent, but it is overripe on both the nose and palate and is decidedly not my style of wine. 2012-2017. **83.**

2007 Camí de Cormes- Celler Roig Parals (Empordà)

The Camí de Cormes bottling from the Empordà winery of Celler Roig Parals is made up of the estate's oldest vines- a one hundred and ten year-old parcel of Samsó (or Cariñena) that is planted "bush" style on an alluvial base of sand and clay. The wine is aged in larger French barrels (*demi-muids*) of 400 and 500 liters, of which one-third are new, one-third are one-wine barrels and one-third are two-wine barrels. The 2007 tips the scales at a full fifteen percent alcohol, and yet amazingly, the wine does not show any signs of overripeness on the nose or any backend heat! The lovely nose is a blend of roasted black cherries, coffee, *garrigue*, a fine base of soil, a touch of green olive and a civilized framing of spicy oak. On the palate the wine is

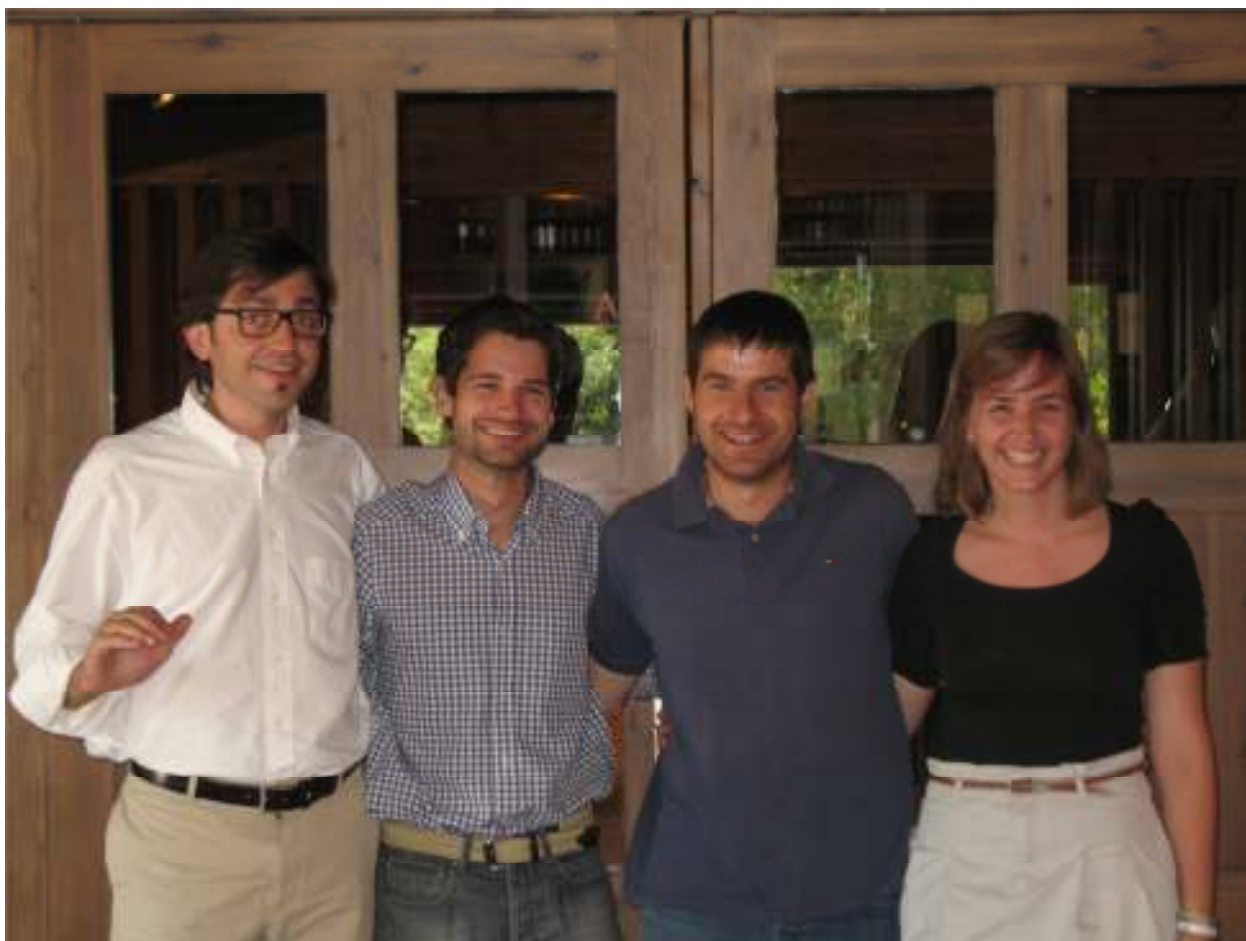
deep, full-bodied and quite plush on the attack, with a fine core of fruit, soft tannins and a very long and complex finish. This is a lovely wine, but I would dearly love to see what these venerable old vines could really do if harvested at fourteen percent potential alcohol- there has to be a lot of soil expression here that has been lost at this octane level! But, that said, this is one of the finest high octane wines I have ever had the pleasure to taste. 2012-2020. **92.**

Pla de Bages- Wineries Visited

Bodegas Abadal (Pla de Bages)

Bodegas Abadal lies on the central plain of the Bages region of Catalunya, with a long history of family winemaking nicely interspersed with a young and energetic new generation in charge of the property. The estate is owned by the Roqueta family, with Valenti Roqueta currently the President of the winery. His son, Ramon Roqueta is now in charge of much of the day to day operations at the domaine, working alongside the winery's Director General, Jordi Montserrat. They make for a very thoughtful and highly-talented young team, and the wines from this domaine are some of the very best-kept secrets in all of Spain. The estate houses a beautifully-preserved, twelfth century farmhouse that has been in the family for generations and for centuries housed the winemaking facilities, which today are next door to a modern and nicely understated winery. One of the things that the estate has championed for many years now is the white wine variety of Picapoll (which originated in the Languedoc region of France and found its way across the Pyrenees and down into Catalunya), from which the Abadal team makes a single varietal bottling and a blended cuvée that includes twenty percent Macabeu. Picapoll is a truly dynamic and compelling variety that seems to excel in the terroirs of Pla de Bages and I hope that we will see more of this superb white wine grape planted across Catalunya in the not too distant future, for if the Abadal bottlings are any example of how well this grape does here, then this is a variety to expand plantings of in the future in this region. But, Picapoll is not the only game in town here, as the entire Abadal lineup is comprised of beautifully made wines across the board, with complexity, harmony and the inimitable terroir of Catalunya often front and center and the use of new wood quite restrained in most of the cuvées.

One of the really interesting aspects of the long family tradition here at Abadal is that the cellars have a handful of old batches of wine done in an old-fashioned style of letting the wine just sit in barrel with a thin flora over the top- as would be done in Sherry production. The winery calls these "Vi Ranci" wines, and though they have never made them commercially available, the team here is considering releasing a very small number of bottles of a few of them in the not too distant future. During our visit we had a chance to taste a fifty year-old cuvée, that was probably made from Garnaxta Blanca (the family has no extant records of what went into these old cuvées a generation or two ago) and is now probably between sixteen and seventeen percent alcohol and is quite dry in style. We had it with a cheese course after lunch and it was truly stunning- if these wines are ever made available on the market, they will be worth a serious search to find a bottle or two.



Abadal's dynamic young team, with Jordi Montserrat on the far left and Ramon Roqueta to his immediate right.

2011 Picapoll- Bodegas Abadal

The 2011 Picapoll from Abadal is really a superb white wine, with a verve, bounce and impressive base of soil complexity that drives its medium-full format nicely. The beautifully aromatic nose jumps from the glass in a complex mix of lime, white peach, gentle notes of lavender, bergamot, almond blossoms and a nice base of Catalàn soil tones. On the palate the wine medium-full, bright and beautifully delineated, with a fine core, excellent acidity (one of Picapoll's calling cards and very important in hot viticultural regions such as Pla de Bages) and excellent length and grip on the focused finish that closes with a nice touch of green olive. This is a delicious and very classy bottle of low fat white wine that would be equally fine at the table or served as an aperitif. 2012-2015. **93.**

2011 Abadal Blanc- Bodegas Abadal

The Abadal Blanc cuvée is a blend of sixty percent Chardonnay, thirty percent Sauvignon Blanc and ten percent Picapoll, which is raised entirely in stainless steel tanks. The 2011 offers up a fine nose of apple, white flowers, lime peel, a touch of pink grapefruit, lovely soil tones and a gentle topnote of jasmine. On the palate the wine is fullish, fresh and shows good mid-palate depth, with crisp acids and good focus and grip on the well-balanced finish. This is not quite as complex on the palate as the nose promises, but it is a tasty and well-made wine. Is there any possibility that the chardonnay and sauvignon blanc vines are on the young side? 2012-2015. **87.**

2009 Abadal Nuat- Bodegas Abadal

The Abadal Nuat bottling is a white wine cuvée that is blend of eighty percent Picapoll and twenty percent Macabeu and which is aged for ten months in stainless steel tanks prior to bottling. This is a longer *elevage* than the straight Picapoll bottling, as this wine is built for a bit of aging potential, as opposed to the immediate appeal of the above wine. The 2009 is now at a gorgeous stage, offering up a complex and beautifully aromatic bouquet of lime, a touch of pineapple, gentle notes of beeswax, citrus blossoms, a complex base of soil and a nice topnote of fresh rosemary. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a superb core of fruit, fine focus and a very long, complex and perfectly balanced finish. The addition of the Macabeu here adds more mid-palate depth and a bit more body to the blend and really dovetails seamlessly with the aromatic expressionism of the Picapoll. Fine, fine juice. 2012-2018. **93+**.

2011 Abadal Rosat- Bodegas Abadal

The Abadal Rosat is made up of a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and the indigenous grape of Sumoll, and it is not a bad bottle, but is a bit too “candied” for my palate to get top marks. The very pretty nose offers up scents of cherries, a touch of *garrigue*, dried roses and salty soil tones. On the palate the wine is fullish, bright and balanced, with a core of candied fruit and just a touch of backend tannin on the finish. Not bad, but I would love a bit more purity to the fruit expressions here and a bit less of that candied element. 2012-2013. **86**.

2010 Cabernet Franc- Tempranillo- Bodegas Abadal

The Cabernet Franc-Tempranillo blend from Bodegas Abadal is outstanding and an excellent value. The cab franc vines here are between ten and fifteen years of age, while the tempranillo were all planted twenty-five years ago. The wine is aged for four months in a combination of one, two and three year-old barrels, with seventy percent of the wood of European origin and thirty percent from America. The bouquet is youthful and very promising, offering up scents of cassis, dark berries, a touch of tree bark, woodsmoke, lovely soil tones and just a hint of oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still quite primary, with a fine core of fruit, very good acidity, moderate tannins and excellent focus and grip on the well-balanced and quite long finish. All this lovely wine needs is a year or two in the cellar to really come into its own! 2013-2020+. **90+**.

2008 Abadal “5” Merlot- Bodegas Abadal

This wine takes its name from the five different vineyard sites that the estate has planted to merlot, all with unique *terroirs* that add to the complexity of the final blend. The wines is aged entirely in one-wine barrels for twelve months prior to bottling and really is a superb example of how well this variety will do in the right spots in Cataluña! The superb nose jumps from the glass in a complex mélange of dark berries, black cherries, espresso, a lovely base of soil, tobacco leaf and just a touch of wood. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and very classy, with great purity on the attack, fine mid-palate depth, absolutely exquisite balance, modest tannins and admirable complexity and grip on the focused and utterly refined finish. This is a very, very fine bottle of merlot. 2012-2020. **92+**.

2007 Abadal Seleccio- Bodegas Abadal

The 2007 Seleccio is a very interesting wine, but it is one of the few cuvées here that is raised in one hundred percent new oak and it is less persuasive to my palate as a result. If this was raised all in one-wine barrels, like the merlot, it might be a bit brighter and even more interesting. The *cépage* is a very unique blend of forty percent Cabernet Sauvignon, thirty-five percent Cabernet Franc, fifteen percent Syrah and five percent each of the indigenous grapes of

Surmoll and Mandó (the 2007 is the first vintage to include these latter two grapes in the blend). The wood is a mix of French and Slavonian in origin. The bouquet is deep and very black fruity in personality, offering up scents of cassis, road tar, forest herbs, coffee grounds, a touch of tree bark and lead pencil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and very long, with a firm base of ripe tannins, good wood integration, very good balance and impressive length and grip on the focused finish. There is just something slightly heavy-handed about this wine- or perhaps the sojourn in new wood has sacrificed a bit of the wine's freshness through the more vigorous oxygen exchange through the fully open pores of the new barrels. It is a good wine still, but not up to the quality of the best wines in the Abadal lineup. 2016-2030+. **88+**.

2008 Abadal "3.9" Reserva

The "3.9" bottling from Abadal takes its name from the specific vineyard the grapes hail from- in this case plot 3 and parcel 9, which has the oldest plantations on the estate of both cabernet sauvignon and syrah. The wine is comprised of eighty-five percent cabernet and the balance syrah, with the entirety raised in new wood, of which seventy percent is French in origin and thirty percent American oak. The 2008 weighs in at fourteen percent alcohol and is a good, modern-styled wine that will need a few years to soften and start to show any secondary nuances. The nose is a blend of cassis, dark berries, cigar smoke and lead pencil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very pure, with a fine core, moderate tannins and very good length and grip on the still rather monolithic finish. This is a very well-made wine, but it seems to lack a bit of personality *vis à vis* many other of the Abadal wines in their portfolio. If it develops more complexity as it blossoms, then project this wine at the higher end of the range. 2015-2035. **89-92?**

2007 Abadal "3.9" Reserva

The 2007 Abadal 3.9 Reserva hails from a riper year than 2008, so that the alcohol is a tad higher at 14.5 percent. Nevertheless, it does not show any signs of heat on the palate and is quite nicely balanced. The emerging nose delivers a slightly more jammy blend of cassis, Provençal herbs, roasted game, coffee grounds, balsam boughs and a nicely-integrated base of lead pencil from the new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very well-balanced, with a good core of ripe fruit, round tannins and very good length and grip on the focused finish. Like the 2008, this is a very good bottle, but not the best in the Abadal lineup in terms of personality. 2012-2025. **90.**

Abadal "Vi Ranci"

Ramon Roqueta estimates that this cuvée is probably around fifty years of age and was made up of Garnaxta Blanca. This wine is absolutely superb, with a faint Sherry personality from the very extended barrel aging and the light flora, but it is lighter on its feet than many Sherries and is still essentially a dry white wine- albeit a very old one. The simply stunning nose offers up scents of dried peaches, gentle nutty tones, sea salts, hints of dried caramel and a lovely base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very, very complex, with great balance, bright, tangy acids and beautiful focus and balance on the endless and effortless finish. I have never tasted a wine along the lines of this fifty year-old Vi Ranci from Abadal, but I would be very happy to try this again anytime and anywhere! A great, great wine that probably will last a century more! 2012-2100? **97.**

Costers del Segre- Wineries Visited



The isolated, high altitude vineyards of Castell d'Encus in the spring in Costers del Segre.

Castell d'Encus (Costers del Segre)

Castell d'Encus is by far one of the most exciting new wine projects that I have come across in many years. The estate lies in the southern foothills of the Pyrenees, almost equidistant between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. This is the brain child of Raül Bobet, who for decades was one of the people most responsible for the high quality wines at Miguel Torres S.A. in Vilafranca. After retiring for the first time from Torres (Raül returned as C.E.O. for a couple of years to assist in the transition period when Miguel A. Torres assumed the reins of the company from his father), Señor Bobet created a very successful wine estate in Priorat, but he became very concerned about the effects of global warming on that region and began to look around for a potential vineyard area that could mitigate some of the climactic threats to fine winegrowing latent in global warming. In 2001, he discovered the mountainous regions of Costers del Segre, and purchased ninety-five hectares of land high up in the foothills of the Pyrenees looking down on the small city of Tremp. The land was primarily forest and scrubland when Raül purchased it, lying at an elevation of between 850 and 1000 meters above sea level, and twenty-three hectares has been cleared and planted to vineyards since the first vines went in the ground in 2003. However, this isolated area was once previously home to very serious winegrowing, settled as far back as the twelfth century, by the Knights Hospitaller- a contemporary heraldic order to the Knights Templar, who also got their start during the First Crusade and the relatively short-lived Frankish Kingdom of Jerusalem (or Outremer) as an order commissioned to protect European pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. The Knights Hospitaller eventually established a fort and monastery here in this high mountainous region

(probably around the time of the fall of the Frankish Kingdom in Jerusalem in 1187) and these warrior monks produced wine on this property for several centuries. In fact, the clearing of the land by Señor Bobet's team for vineyard plantations discovered that there remained extant on the property some Medieval crushing "vats" and fermenting bowls that had been cut out of the stone of the mountainside by the monks back then, as well as several portions of buildings from this period on the grounds at Castell d'Encus. But, more about these later.

Señor Bobet has planted Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot, Pinot Noir, Syrah, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, Riesling and Albariño on the property since his purchase here in 2001. The region is one of the hottest in all of Cataluña during the days of midsummer (it was well over 100 hundred degrees Fahrenheit on the day of our visit), but at these high elevations, the temperatures plunge at night and the springs and autumns are much cooler, which allows the grapes here to actually retain a very healthy acidity and avoid overripeness. Given the fact that the firm of Miguel Torres has begun its own Costers del Segre project on a neighboring ridge across the valley, it seems quite clear that this will be one of the future great wine-producing regions in Cataluña in the years to come. The soils here at Castell d'Encus are primarily thin and stony, with a very good concentration of limestone, which adds to the finesse of the wines. It is a breathtakingly beautiful region for producing wine, and obviously the monks of the Knights Hospitaller were well aware of its potential for quality grape growing and wine production (not to mention it was probably a pretty good defensive vantage point on the higher ground for any thoughts of suppression on the parts of the papacy or crowned heads of Europe (which of course happened on the French side of the Pyrenees in the Languedoc during the slaughter of the Cathars during the Albigensian Crusade at the outset of the thirteenth century and of the Knights Templar across most of Europe less than a hundred years later). At the time immediately preceding the brutality of the Albigensian Crusade (which commenced in 1209 and lasted forty years), the most civilized and enlightened regions of Europe were the Pyrenean areas of the Languedoc on the northern side of the mountains and the independent kingdoms of Aragón, León and Castille on the southern side of the mountains, and there was a very strong cultural affinity and much commerce between the peoples on both sides of the Pyrenees. In 1139, the King of Aragón had actually bequeathed one-third of his territorial kingdom to the Templars, demonstrating the strong influence that these heraldic orders had in the region. Along with Byzantium, this is where the surviving intellectual culture of Greek and Rome still survived and flourished within Europe, so it is not surprising that the Knights Hospitaller would take to and excel at grape cultivation and wine production during their times on the property that is now Castell d'Encus.

Today, the wines of Castell d'Encus are excellent, and it is my very strong opinion that what is being produced here currently is only the tip of the iceberg, as the vines here are still decidedly on the young side and the wines can only improve as the vineyards continue to mature. As Raül Bobet observed during our visit, "I figure that I have maybe twenty more vintages ahead of me here at Castell d'Encus to really try and make something special, and hopefully, as we better begin to understand our terroir, as our vineyards get older and we refine our techniques, we will get closer to that goal." Señor Bobet is not a typical winemaker in the wilds of Costers del Segre, as he struck me as a very intellectual and philosophical man who has found a perfect home in these Pyrenean foothills that once were home to one of the most cultured and civilized corners of Europe. He is very much interested in the history of the Knights Hospitaller that he

has unearthed at Castell d'Encus, and he has begun to use the fermentation vats cut out of the mountain stone here for some of his wines. As he noted, "we started with a couple of experiments once we found these Medieval stone vats, and were very happy to find that the wines were actually quite excellent that were crushed and then fermented in these stone vessels, and we have been slowly expanding our use of them in subsequent vintages." He continues, "by using three very different materials for the fermentations- stainless steel tanks, wooden vats and the stone 'cupas'- we get very different tones, shades and aromatic complexities in our wines." While the stone cups have only been used rather sparingly in the past vintages, with the one exception of the "Quest" bottling, which is now fermented one hundred percent in these stone vats, Raül Bobet seems intent on expanding the use of these unique vessels in future vintages, as the results have been simply outstanding.

The winery at Castell d'Encus is very much at one with its environment, with everything moved by gravity within the cellars, much of the energy used here generated by geo-thermal transfers and all of the viticulture done under organic precepts. Happily, it is also an estate where there is not a whole lot of new oak and the very cool summer nights and the early arrival of true autumn weather means that alcohol levels here are never going to get out of hand- even if one were inclined to go for that over the top style of wine, which Raül Bobet certainly is not. In fact, the one wine here that tipped the scales at fourteen percent alcohol- a 2008 bottling of Cabernet Franc- was never released by the winery! As Señor Bobet notes, "our autumn rains tend to arrive here with great punctuality around October 15th, so that one has to get all the grapes in by that time or lose them and we are generally harvesting every year between mid-September and the rains of mid-October." The resulting wines are truly superb, with lovely purity, complexity and precise focus, with lovely underlying acidity on the palate often giving lift and brightness to the expressions of fruit and soil.

2011 Taleia- Castell d'Encus

The 2011 vintage was a very ripe vintage here at Castell d'Encus, so this wine reached 12.9 percent alcohol! Taleia translates as "obsession" from Catalàn, and this bottling is a blend of eighty percent semillon and twenty percent sauvignon blanc. In this vintage, it was entirely fermented in the Medieval stone vats cut into the mountainsides and then raised in stainless steel. The bouquet is very bright and vibrant, offering up a classy mélange of fresh figs, white melon, lime peel, beeswax and a lovely base of *terres blanches* soil tones. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and very soil-driven, with fine focus and mid-palate depth, fine acids and a long, classy and still quite primary finish. This is a lovely wine that really needs a year or two of bottle age to fully blossom and start to show its secondary layers of complexity. I see no reason for it not to age well for ten to twelve years, as it really has lovely acidity and balance. 2013-2025. **91+**.

2011 Ekam- Castell d'Encus

The Ekam bottling is the name for Señor Bobet's riesling. The 2011 vintage, being warmer, saw no botrytis in the riesling vineyards here, so this wine was fermented in a fairly dry style. The nose is a complex and quite lovely mix of apple, white cherries, a touch of lime, chalky soil tones and a bit of lavender-like Catalàn spice tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright and pretty dry, with very good acidity, fine focus and impressive length and grip on the well-balanced finish. Who know such good riesling could be grown in the Pyrenean foothills of Costers del Segre! 2012-2020. **90**.



CASTELL D'ENCUS

PRISTINE MEDIEVAL GRAVITY ROCK WINE FERMENTERS



2010 Ekam “Essencia”- Castell d’Encus

In the 2010 vintage, the riesling vineyard here was hit by botrytis, saw the wine was made more in a Spätlese style and the label carries the “Essencia” designation to differentiate it from the drier version of Ekam typical in most vintages. This is a very nice bottle, but one can sense that the botrytis here was not as clean as would be ideal- which keeps its score down just a touch. The bouquet is a very pretty blend of peach, petrol, acacia blossoms, a touch of leesiness and a topnote of fresh almond. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and still quite youthful, with a good core and very fine length and grip on the slightly fruity finish. This is a young wine and could also do with a couple of years of bottle age to develop further complexity. There is a lack of just a bit of backend precision here that suggests the botrytis was not as clean as it might have been in a perfect world, but otherwise, this is a very well-made wine and a very strong indicator that this style of riesling can also do very well at Castell d’Encus. 2014-2025. **88.**

2010 Acusp- Castell d’Encus

Acusp is the ancient Catalàn name for the mountains in which the winery is now located, with this name dating back to the tenth and eleventh centuries when the Knights Hospitaller established their abode here. This is the name that Señor Bobet has selected for his pinot noir cuvée. Given the highly calcareous nature of the soils at Castell d’Encus and the high elevation that produces cool summer nights and autumns, one can only imagine that this wine is going to get better and better as the vines get older. Keep in mind that these were only seven year-old vines in the 2010 vintage. The Acusp bottling sees no new oak during its *elevage* and in 2010, ten percent of the blend was fermented in the stone vats. The bouquet is deep, fresh and quite black fruity in its mélange of black cherries, raw cocoa, *garrigue*, woodsmoke, a touch of tariness and just a hint of cedar from its older oak barrels. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and just a touch jammy in its fruit presentation on the attack, but with a very good core, moderate tannins, sound focus and balance and very good length and grip on the backend. This is a very good bottle of pinot noir that should start to really drink well with two or three years of bottle age and keep well for ten to fifteen years. As the vines get older here, this could turn into a very special wine for the estate. 2014-2030+. **89.**

2010 Thalarn- Castell d’Encus

The Thalarn bottling at Castell d’Encus is their one hundred percent syrah wine, which in the 2010 vintage came in at 12.9 percent alcohol and was raised in fifty percent new oak. Ten percent of the blend was fermented in *cupas*. This is really a beautiful bottle of low fat syrah, jumping from the glass in a very refined and pure nose of black raspberries, pepper, a touch of gamebird, stony soil tones and coffee bean. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish, pure and very intensely flavored, with superb complexity, lovely focus, modest tannins and a very long, poised and tangy finish. I really like the style and shape of this wine, which recalls the great old Côte-Rôties that I cut my teeth on from the decades of the 1970s and which have largely disappeared in the wake of Marcel Guigal’s success with a riper style. Again, one can only imagine how this wine will grow as the vines get older here! 2015-2030+. **92+.**

2010 Quest- Castell d’Encus

The 2010 Quest was fermented entirely in the Medieval stone vats on the mountainside and raised in sixty percent new oak- though Señor Bobet was very quick to point out that the stay in new wood was only for a few months, so as not to mark the wine too much by the barrels. The 2010 Quest is a blend of sixty percent cabernet sauvignon, twenty-five percent cabernet franc and fifteen percent petit verdot and it is outstanding. The deep and lovely nose offers up a

youthful mix of cassis, espresso, cigar ash, currant leaf, complex soil tones and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and properly structured, with a fine core of quite primary fruit, ripe tannins, excellent acidity (as is true of all the Castell d'Encus wines!) and absolutely superb grip and focus on the very long and chewy finish. This will need a few years to soften and probably a good decade to reach its zenith, but it will be well worth the wait! A superb wine that is far more interesting in its Bordeaux style than several of the *garagiste* wines emerging on both sides of the Gironde in their overtly manipulated and simpleton styles! 2015-2035+. **93.**

2008 Cabernet Franc- Castell d'Encus

Having heard about the wine that reached fourteen percent alcohol here and was not released for this reason, of course I asked if it would be possible to taste it! Given the fact that this wine is actually quite good, I was left even more impressed with the passion and commitment to a vision for Castell d'Encus that Raül Bobet has for his property, and this twenty-first century warrior monk certainly seems on the path to vinous enlightenment! The 2008 cabernet franc offers up a ripe and impressively complex nose of black cherries, dark berries, espresso, lovely soil tones and a bit of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, ripe and generous on the attack, but also complex and well-balanced, with a long, moderately tannic finish that shows the faintest touch of backend heat. In another context (as opposed to at the end of a tasting of such a fine range of cool and precise wines), I might not even have noticed any uncovered alcohol here on the finish! In any case, this really is a very well-made wine and I greatly admire Señor Bobet's decision not to release it, given that it does not fit into the stylistic paradigms of estate's wines. But, if you ever get a chance to visit Castell d'Encus, ask him if he has a bottle kicking around in the cellars to taste, as it is really not a bad drink at all! 2012-2020+. **89.**



Raül Bobet looking down from his vineyard perch at Castell d'Encus towards the valley that houses Tremp.

Costers del Segre- Other Wines Tasted

2010 Missenyora- L'Olivera Cooperativa (Costers del Segre)

The 2010 Missenyora from L'Olivera Cooperativa is a one hundred percent Macabeu bottling that comes in at a cool and bouncy twelve percent alcohol. The very pretty and fresh nose jumps from the glass in a blend of pear, jasmine, salty soil tones, dried flowers and just a touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is medium-full, fresh and complex, with very nice balance, good mid-palate depth and lovely length and grip on the focused finish. Good juice. 2012-2014. **89.**

Penedès- Wineries Visited

Huguet de Can Feixes (Penedès)

The estate of Huguet de Can Feixes is one of the oldest in Penedès, dating back to its founding in 1768 by Don Jaime Feixes. It was run for several generations by the Feixes family and bought by the Huguet family at the end of the nineteenth century. Today, the property is in the hands of the three Huguet brothers, Joan, Josep Maria and XXX Huguet, who are the third generation of their family to run the estate since its purchase by their ancestors in the late 1800s. The Huguet brothers are in charge of both the winemaking and viticulture at the property. The winery and its eighty hectares of vineyards are located at an elevation of four hundred meters above sea level, in the northwestern reaches of the Penedès region at the feet of the Montserrat mountains. This is one of the driest areas of the Penedès, as it is far removed from the influence of the Mediterranean Sea, with soils that are a very rocky blend of clay and limestone and it is the mitigating effect of the cooler evenings at altitude here that help keep the acidity up in the grapes from the estate. For Huguet de Can Feixes is a producer of both outstanding still wines and exceptional Cavas (they are one of the "Six Percent Club" who only produce Cava from their own vineyard production) and good acidities are a necessity here. In fact, the estate is well known for the superb quality of both their terroirs and the fine vineyard husbandry that they have practiced for generations, so that they not only produce a fine array of wines under their own label, but also are very important grape suppliers to other wineries in the region. The vineyards are now in the process to conversion to organic farming principals.

All of the Cavas produced at Huguet de Can Feixes are Gran Reservas, which means that they must see a minimum of thirty months aging on the lees prior to disgorgement and preparation for market. Interestingly, this is not Xarel-lo country, and the Huguet family vineyards do not contain any of this workhorse grape that is so prevalent in so many other of the top Cavas in the region. Instead, pinot noir takes its place amongst the other two primary Cava grapes (Parellada and Macabeu) in the Huguet de Can Feixes bottlings, and the grape seems to do very well in these higher altitude vineyards and the resulting Cavas are amongst the finest I have yet samples from Spain. There are two levels of bottlings of their Gran Reserva Cavas- a Brut Nature and a Brut Classic. The Brut Nature always has less than 1.2 grams per liter of dosage, but even their Brut Classic is done on a drier side and never sees more than 7 grams per liter of dosage. All the Cavas are fermented and raised in stainless steel prior to blending and aging in bottle on their lees. Huguet de Can Feixes is a great Cava producer and clearly one of the finest in all of Spain.

However, the sparkling wines here are only half of the equation and there are excellent still wines made from both the red and the white side of the ledger. Given that the Huguet family are such important grape suppliers to the market in Penedès, they have the freedom to only use the very finest grapes from their production each year for their own wines. The climactic conditions here at four hundred meters above sea level act as a natural brake on production levels in the vineyards, which are then further limited by the Huguet brothers to ensure that yields remain low and grape quality high. I was very impressed with both the white and the red wines here at the estate that I sampled, but probably one has to conclude that the crown jewel of the still wines at Huguet de Can Feixes is their extraordinary Negre Tradicio bottling of tempranillo, cabernet sauvignon, merlot and petit verdot- the 2007 vintage of this bottling was truly stunning! All the red wines at the winery are raised in a five year rotation of French oak barrels, meaning that no more than twenty percent new wood is used in any vintage. Needless to say, such an enlightened approach to the oak program here is right up my alley. Both the sparkling and the still wines produced at Huguet de Can Feixes are truly exceptional and this is clearly one of the top wineries in Catalunya and the Huguet brothers are very obviously at the top of their games.

2007 Gran Reserva Brut Nature- Huguet de Can Feixes

The 2007 Gran Reserva Brut Nature is made up of a blend of sixty percent Parellada and twenty percent each of Macabeu and Pinot Noir. It probably has about one gram per liter of *dosage* in this vintage. The nose is deep, complex and really vibrant, jumping out of the glass in a very refined blend of grapefruit, bread dough, lovely, salty minerality, lemon peel and a very gentle smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with great focus and balance, elegant *mousse* and superb length and grip on the still quite youthful finish. This wine will age beautifully. 2012-2022+. **93.**

2007 Gran Reserva Brut Classic- Huguet de Can Feixes

At seven grams per liter of *dosage*, this is still quite a dry example of Brut, but after the great purity of the Brut Nature bottling from this same vintage, it is hard to not find this very judicious *dosage* detracts ever so slightly from the precision of the wine. But, this is just splitting hairs, as the 2007 Brut Classic is also a dynamite bottle of Cava, offering up a complex nose of tart orange, grapefruit, stony minerality, bread dough and again, a bit of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with very refined *mousse* and a very long and classy finish. I did not ask, but assume that the Brut Classic is a similar blend to the Brut Nature from this year and is just finished with a different *dosage*. Fine juice. 2012-2020. **91.**

2005 Gran Reserva Brut Nature- Huguet de Can Feixes (served from magnum)

The 2005 Brut Nature was absolutely singing from magnum at the time of my visit in early July, offering up a blossoming bouquet of bread fruit, tart orange, very complex minerality, *fleur de sel*, citrus peel and plenty of bread dough. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and wide open, with outstanding mid-palate depth, crisp acids, pinpoint bubbles and lovely complexity on the suave and very, very classy finish. This is a beautiful bottle of Cava that argues very persuasively that a few years of bottle age for new releases of the Huguet de Can Feixes Brut Nature bottlings is highly rewarding! 2012-2025+. **93+.**

2011 Blanc Seleccio- Huguet de Can Feixes

The 2011 Blanc Seleccio from Huguet de Can Feixes is comprised of a very interesting blend of forty percent Parellada, thirty percent Macabeu, twenty percent Chardonnay and ten

percent Malvasia (of which the estate is quite unique in having planted in the Penedès). The wine is raised entirely in stainless steel and the 2011 is excellent. The bouquet is a lovely and quite floral blend (no doubt from the inclusion of the Malvasia) of melon, lime blossoms, tart orange, salty, stony minerality and citrus peel. On the palate the wine is medium-full, crisp and complex, with beautiful balance and focus, lovely framing acids and fine length and grip on the soil-driven finish. This is a very fine and quite unique blend of white wine grapes and the resulting wine is lovely. 2012-2016. **90.**

2007 Chardonnay- Huguet de Can Feixes

The 2007 Huguet de Can Feixes chardonnay is probably the most “internationally-styled” wine in their portfolio, as the wine is barrel-fermented, sees once a week *battonage* for much of its *elevage*, does not go through malolactic fermentation and is aged for eight months in one hundred percent new oak. It is very well done in its style, offering up a very buttery and leesy nose of mandarin orange, butter, honey, a whisper of soil tones and new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and well-balanced, with good acids and fine focus, fairly modest complexity (always one of the eventual victims of *battonage*) and a long, poised and well-done finish. This is a very professionally-crafted chardonnay, and it is quite tasty, but it could have been made anywhere in the world and I would love to see the *battonage* and new wood dialed back here a bit to see if more of the inimitable *terroir* of this section of the Penedès could be coaxed out of the wine. Good juice, but unequivocally the last bottle in the Huguet de Can Feixes lineup that I would reach for to pour a second glass at the table! 2012-2018. **88.**



Looking down at the winery of Huguet de Can Feixes from their vineyards, with the Montserrat in the background.

2010 Negre Jove Seleccio- Huguet de Can Feixes

The 2010 Negre Jove Seleccio bottling is a lovely blend of seventy percent tempranillo and thirty percent merlot and weighs in at a very civilized 13.5 percent alcohol. This is a fine Crianza bottling which is aged for six months in oak prior to bottling and offers up a superb nose of red and black cherries, lovely soil tones, a bit of Catalàn spice tones redolent of Provençal *garrigue* and just a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and tangy, with lovely purity and mid-palate intensity, moderate tannins and fine focus and grip on the long and youthful finish. This is tasty now and will be even better with a year or two in the cellar to blossom. A great value for a wine of true personality and breed! 2013-2025. **89+**.

2007 Negre Tradicio- Huguet de Can Feixes

The 2007 Negre Tradicio from Huguet de Can Feixes is another outstanding example from this stable of superb wines. The blend in the 2007 is comprised primarily of tempranillo, with smaller amounts of merlot, cabernet sauvignon and petit verdot (sorry I did not get notes on the precise percentages of each grape varietal in the *cépages*, but the magnum of the 2005 Brut Nature was already being uncorked as I was taking my notes on this wine and I was understandably distracted by thirst!) and is raised in twenty percent new wood for twelve months. This stunning wine jumps from the glass in an aromatic mélange of black cherries, pomegranate, a touch of eucalyptus, dark chocolate, cigar smoke, a simply superb base of soil tones and a bit of lead pencil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, young and superbly balanced, with impressive transparency down to the soil, a fine core, ripe, moderate tannins and a very long, tangy and nascently complex finish. This will be a great wine with a few years of bottle age, but there are no structural elements that need to be waited out prior to enjoying it now- I would just be inclined to wait a bit for secondary layers of complexity to emerge. Fine, fine juice. 2014-2035+. **93+**.

Juvé y Camps (Penedès)

Juvé y Camps is one of the oldest and most important Cava producers in all of Spain. They are spiritually part of the “Six Percent Club”, as they produce eighty percent of their production from their own vineyards, with the other twenty percent of their fruit coming in from long-term contracts with growers in the region with whom they have worked for decades. While this is one of the largest of the “small” Cava houses (keep in mind that approximately eighty percent of all the Cava produced in Spain is made by Freixenet, Codorniu and one or two other huge houses), the quality here is absolutely exceptional and this is one of the great estates to look out for on wine lists spread out across the globe. In fact, as the end of this trip, we were back in Barcelona for a day and had the pleasure to be able to order off the very small wine list at the local bar (where we had repaired to watch the European Championships between the national football teams of Spain and Italy) a bottle of the 2002 Juvé y Camps Reserva de la Família to go along with tapas and the game. The estate dates all the way back to 1796, when Joan Juvé Mir, a very respected grape grower in the region laid the foundation for what would eventually become Juvé y Camps. The family winery was not built until the early decades of the twentieth century, but in 1921, Joan Juvé Baqués and his wife, Teresa Camps Farré released the first wine to be sold under the family name which had been vinified and aged in the cellars under the family home. The Juvé family cellars in the center of San Sadurní d’Anoia were to turn out Cava for about twenty years, before the family built a new winery on the outskirts of the town in the 1940s. Joan and Teresa had been joined by their two sons, Josep and Joan at the start of the 1940s, and the new generation added technical expertise and important advances for the house,

which led to a burgeoning reputation both within the Spanish and the international wine markets for Juvé y Camps Cava.

The children of Joan and Josep Juvé joined the management team at Juvé y Camps in the late 1960s, with the cellars of the family winery greatly expanded to accommodate more bottles aging in the cellars to meet growing demand from clients. This eventually was not sufficient to support the volume the house needed and a brand new, state of the art winery was built by the family architect, Josep Juvé Raventós, in the early years of the new millennium, in the village of Espiells with a breathtaking view of the nearby Montserrat mountains. However, the deep aging cellars of the original winery in San Sadurní d'Anoia continue to be used for aging of the wines "sur lies" prior to disgorgement. As is befitting of a family that started out as farmers in the region more than two hundred years ago, the focus of Juvé Y Camps remains on its vines, and the family now owns 450 hectares of vineyards, as they have studiously added prime parcels as they have become available over the years (particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century) and now grow enough grapes to meet fully eighty percent of their production needs. As noted at the outset, Juvé Y Camps has never purchased wine to meet demand and has always relied on a network of long-term contracts with other quality-minded farmers to meet their fruit needs beyond what they produce from their own vineyards. The house's Cavas rely heavily on the classic "Big Three" grapes of Xarel-lo, Macabeu and Parellada, as well as a bit of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, and these are indeed amongst the finest Cavas produced in Spain. The family has also been producing still wines for several years now. Of the two examples that I tasted, I had a slight preference for the Ermita bottling, which is a dry white made from the "Big Three" white grapes of Cava- Xarel-lo, Macabeu and Parellada. The red wine that I tasted from the estate was a fifty-fifty blend of cabernet sauvignon and merlot, called Iohannes, which was well-made, but a bit too modern and slick in style for my palate and did not possess quite the same personality so evident in all the superb cuvées of Cava produced here. Maybe a bit less new wood for the red wine would allow more of its Penedès personality to emerge?

Juvé y Camps Brut Rosé NV

The non-vintage Juvé y Camps Brut Rose is made up entirely of pinot noir, and this is one of those pinot-based Cavas that I wonder whether or not it might be more interesting with an indigenous grape included in the blend, such as Trepát. In any event, this is a fairly dark colored rosé, offering up a slightly Lambrusco-like nose of cherries, orange peel, smoke and rye. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and a bit heavy-handed, with refined *mousse* and sound balance, but a rather short finish. This is okay, but it strikes me as the weakest link in the current lineup of Cavas from Juvé y Camps- could it be that the pinot noir for this bottling is planted in a section of the Penedès where it just gets too hot for the grape? 2012-2016. **83.**

Juvé y Camps "Sweet" Reserva NV

The Juvé y Camps "Sweet" Reserva non-vintage bottling is designed to be served with dessert or for folks who are new to Cava and really need a bit of residual sweetness in their wines. The bottling is comprised of one-third each of Xarel-lo, Macabeu and Parellada and is finished off with a *dosage* of 52 grams per liter! Nevertheless, the wine is really beautifully balanced and works splendidly at this sweetness level, offering up a bright and complex nose of pears, a touch of lavender, bread dough and a very nice base of almost salty minerality. On the palate the wine is fullish, bright and tangy, with an excellent girdle of acidity to balance the sweetness, lovely mineral drive, elegant *mousse* and a very long, refined finish. I am not usually

a fan of sweeter styled sparkling wines, as I often find that the residual sweetness clouds the focus of the wine on the palate, but this is emphatically not the case with this lovely wine! 2012-2018. **90.**

Juvé y Camps Cinta Púrpura Brut Reserva NV

Juvé y Camps' Cinta Púrpura Brut Reserva bottling is a lighter-styled Cava that is also excellent. The blend is comprised of one third each of the "Big Three" of Xarel-lo, Macabeu and Parellada and is aged for twenty-four months on the lees prior to disgorgement. As this is a Brut bottling, the *dosage* is just over eight grams per liter. The very pretty bouquet on the new release offers up a blend of fresh pear, mandarin orange, warm biscuits, lovely minerality and a topnote of lavender. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright and frothy, with lovely intensity of flavor, fine focus and a very long, well-balanced and dancing finish. This makes a lovely contrast to the more intense style of the Reserva de la Família bottling. 2012-2020. **90.**

2009 Gran Juvé y Camps "Blanc de Noirs" Brut Reserva

2008 was the first vintage where Blanc de Noirs was allowed officially for the DO of Cava, so this is only the second release of this fine bottling from Juvé y Camps. The color is very, very pale and shows almost no influence from the skins. The wine is made entirely from pinot noir, and my reservations about this grape in the Penedès vanish as I take the first sniff of the bouquet, as this wine is excellent! The dynamite nose jumps from the glass in a blaze of tart orange, apple, jasmine, bread dough, very complex, white soil tones and a gentle touch of smokiness in the upper register. On the palate the wine is fullish, pure and very tightly-knit, with superb complexity, a lovely core, very refined *mousse* and a long, dancing and extremely elegant finish. This is an absolutely beautiful wine that really could use a year or two in the cellar to unwind and really start to show all of its potential! 2014-2030+. **93+.**

2008 Juvé y Camps "Reserva de la Família" Brut Nature Gran Reserva

The Reserva de la Família bottling from Juvé y Camps is the flagship wine of the house and one of the best values in the world of Cava with which I am familiar. The wine is aged thirty to thirty-six months on the lees and is comprised in 2008 of a blend of forty percent Xarel-lo, thirty percent Parellada, twenty percent Macabeu and ten percent Chardonnay. The *dosage* here is just a smidgeon over two grams per liter. This is a deep, classic and very serious example of Cava, offering up an outstanding and impressively complex nose of tart orange, bread fruit, stony minerality, bread dough, sea salts and a touch of lavender in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and well-balanced, with a fine core of fruit, elegant *mousse*, crisp acids and superb length and grip on the focused finish. This is a quite powerful style of Cava that is more along the lines of Champagne than some of the more delicate and dancing styles of Cava in Catalunya, but it is a very elegant and satisfying drink in its more *Champenois* personality. This will age beautifully. Superb juice and relatively available, as the estate generally produces between two and two and half million bottles of this outstanding cuvée each year. 2012-2030. **92.**

2008 Gran Juvé y Camps Brut Gran Reserva

The Gran Juvé y Camps bottling is the top of the line Cava at this fine house and the 2008 vintage is simply stunning. The wine is comprised of a blend of twenty-five percent each of Xarel-lo, Macabeu, Parellada and Chardonnay and is aged on the lees for fully forty-two months prior to disgorgement. It is a Brut bottling with a *dosage* of 7.5 grams per liter and is made up of a selection of the very best cuvées in the cellar each year. The 2008 is outstanding, offering up a vibrant and complex and very refined bouquet of peach, bread dough, salty minerality, a touch of orange zest, and a nice topnote of Catalàn herb tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and extremely elegant, with a rock solid core, excellent focus, utterly refined *mousse*,

ripe acids and exceptional length and grip on the classy finish. A great bottle of Cava that should age well for decades. 2012-2030. **93+**.

2008 Juvé y Camps “Millesimé” Brut Reserva

The Juvé y Camps “Millesimé” Brut Reserva is made up entirely of chardonnay, and while it is a very well-made wine, at this early stage, the 2008 version does not seem to possess quite the same complexity on the palate as the other top Cava cuvées here, but perhaps it is just on the young side. The deep and intriguing nose offers up scents of pear, apple, lavender, chalky minerality, warm biscuits and lemon zest. On the palate the wine is deep, medium-full and light on its feet, with frothy *mousse*, good focus and balance, moderate complexity and very good length and grip on the finish. If more complexity will emerge on the palate with bottle age, then my score will seem unduly conservative- certainly the nose is already quite lovely. 2012-2020+. **89+**.

2005 Gran Juvé y Camps Brut Gran Reserva

This particular bottle of the 2005 Gran Juvé y Camps Brut Gran Reserva had just been disgorged- after seventy-six months aging on the lees! In this vintage the *cépage* is forty percent Xarel-lo, thirty percent Macabeu, twenty-five percent Parellada and five percent Chardonnay. This is another truly excellent bottle of Cava, jumping from the glass in a classy blend of warm bread, apples, tart orange, *fleur de sel*, gentle smokiness and a lovely base of Catalàn soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, very pure and light on its feet, with a great core, refined *mousse* and excellent focus and grip on the very long and well-balanced finish. High class juice. 2012-2025. **92**.

2011 Ermita- Juvé Y Camps (Penedès)

This is a blend of one-third each of Xarel-lo, Macabeu and Parellada, which sees five months of fairly frequent *battonage* during its *elevage*. The wine offers up a superb nose of lime peel, green apple, gentle leesy tones, ocean breeze and a lovely base of white stoniness. On the palate the wine is medium-full, fresh and complex, but perhaps not quite as finely delineated as it might have been with less *battonage*. The finish is long and classy, but I am not really sure what the *battonage* adds to the equation here, other than a bit of fogginess on the backend. Surely, based on the superb Cavas here based on these same three grapes, there is no shortage of mid-palate stuffing that needs to be compensated for by stirring the lees! 2012-2014+? **89**.

2007 Iohannes- Juvé Y Camps (Penedès)

The 2007 Iohannes bottling of cabernet sauvignon and merlot (a fifty-fifty blend) is a very well-meaning wine, but not up to the quality of the great Cavas produced here. The wine tips the scales at a ripe and generous 14.5 percent alcohol and is aged in a high percentage of new French barrels. The nose is a quite modern and well-made blend of cassis, black cherries, chocolate, woodsmoke and lead pencil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and well-balanced, with moderate tannins, a slick, modern veneer and a long, ripe finish. This is a perfectly well-made wine that could hail from anywhere, and while the new oak is perfectly well-integrated into the wine, I would dearly love to see more Catalàn soil tones in the wine and less wood is probably a good way to start to find those! Not bad in its style, but could you please pass back that bottle of 2005 Gran Juvé Cava, my glass seems to be empty (again)! 2014-2030. **88**.

Agustí Torelló Mata (Penedès)

The Cava specialist of Agustí Torelló Mata is a second generation bodega that has championed the reclamation of old vine parcels of indigenous grapes such as Macabeu, Xarel-lo and Parellada, from which they make the lion's share of their wines. This is probably the finest Cava producer in all of Spain, or at least their top of the line, "Kripta" bottling is widely recognized as the crème de la crème of Cava cuvées produced and is the only Spanish sparkling wine of which I am aware which is found on several Michelin Three-Starred French restaurants' wine lists. The house was founded by Agustí Torelló Mata in 1950 in the town of Sant Sadurní d'Anoia, after having spent some years previously managing some of the most prestigious Cava houses of this epoch. In addition to founding his own eponymous estate in 1950, Señor Torelló Mata also created the very first wine laboratory in Penedès in 1953 and organized the first trade association for Cava producers, the Confradia del Cava (Señor Torelló Mata remains the honorary president of the association to this day). The estate flourished under the direction of Señor Torelló Mata, and he continues to be actively involved in the running of the house to this day, though his children have been in charge of the direction of the property now for several years, with his oldest son, Agustí Torelló I Sibil in charge of the winemaking at the estate and who is one of the most decorated winemakers in all of Spain. Under his leadership the reputation of the estate has continued to climb and the wines sit at the very pinnacle of the Cava quality hierarchy.

The wines from Agustí Torelló Mata are absolutely superb and this family-run estate is currently the focal point for the indigenous grape variety movement in the world of Spanish Cava. The family has always championed the top, traditional white wine varieties for their various Cava bottlings (Xarel-lo, Macabeu and Parellada) and they have also been instrumental in reigniting interest among Cava producers in the indigenous red grape variety of Trepat, which was in serious eclipse to pinot noir prior to the Torelló family championing this grape. Today, the estate makes its superb Brut Rosé entirely from trepat. In addition to using classic varieties for their sparkling and still wines, the Torelló family has also been totally committed to only using grapes from old vines for their wines, so that the youngest vines used by the estate for any of its wines are thirty years of age and a great many vineyards are far, far older. All of the family's vineyards lie within Penedès, taking advantage of a variety of microclimates and terroirs. The cooling breezes which drift in from the Mediterranean Sea from the southeast and are trapped in the Penedès regions' multiple spines of mountains are very important to defining these various microclimates, with acidity levels often directly benefiting from the cooling effect of the ocean in certain areas. With more than sixty years of experience in viticulture in the Penedès, the Torelló family has established a perfect marriage of grape variety and microclimate to allow all of these fine indigenous varieties to excel. Additionally, the firm picks all of its fruit by hand and practices a strict selection process to ensure that only the highest quality grapes are used in the family's own wines. With 94 percent of the Cava market produced from purchased fruit or juice, needless to say, there is always an open market for fruit that is not deemed of sufficient quality to go into the Agustí Torelló Mata wines.

The house of Agustí Torelló Mata produces only Reserva and Gran Reserva bottlings of Cava, so the minimum aging on the lees here in the deep, cool cellars is two years, with most bottlings receiving three years or more. The house has just started producing a few non-sparkling wines as well in the last several vintages, but the estate of Agustí Torelló Mata remains

first and foremost a Cava house of the very top division. Agustí Torelló Mata produces a superb lineup of Brut and Extra Brut bottlings, with the lion's share raised in stainless steel tanks prior to final blending and bottling for their secondary fermentation in bottle. Their Reservas see a minimum of two years aging "sur lies", prior to disgorgement, the Gran Reservas a minimum of three years on the lees and their top of the line bottling, Kripta, spending fully five years on the lees prior to disgorgement and preparation for release into the market. By the way, the house always puts the date of disgorgement on the back label of their wines. While the entire portfolio that I sampled was outstanding, there is little doubt that the house is best known for its flagship bottling of Kripta, which was first created in the 1979 vintage by Agustí Torelló Mata, during his tenure at the head of the family Cava house. The bottle is utterly unique, as it is modeled on ancient amphora that have been found in Catalunya, and has a rounded off bottom and is far more at home in an ice bucket than it is trying to stand up on the table at dinner! It is truly a stunning wine, with a reproduction of an original painting by Rafael Bartolozzi now gracing the label, as the painter was inspired by the wine to produce a work of art to go with it. Kripta is a vintage-dated Gran Reserva Cava that is produced from the very oldest vines in the family's vineyards (which just happen to be the very oldest vines in all of Penedès), and which is then aged for a minimum of five years sur lies prior to disgorgement and preparation for market. Kripta is always produced as a Brut Nature. It is truly a world class bottle of sparkling wine and it is no surprise that it has been chosen to grace several French Three-Starred Michelin restaurants. Production for Kripta ranges from twenty to thirty thousand bottles per vintage, depending on the style and quality of the year. Kripta really demonstrates just how sublime the potential for high quality is for Cava amongst the "Six Percent Club" of producers who grow their own grapes, vinify their own wine and are committed to quality.

The estate also produces several non-sparkling wines, and I apologize to readers for not having notes on the three different bottlings that we tasted. The stop at Agustí Torelló Mata was the first of the trip, after a bit of historic visiting in Barcelona and a stop at the magical Sagrada Família of Antonio Gaudí, and a mind-numbing wave of jet lag hit during the start of our tasting at the winery. It was only the brilliant bubbly here that brought me back from the edge of a serious crash (it would have been mighty embarrassing to fall asleep sitting at the tasting table!) and my notes on the still wines are absolutely undecipherable and incoherent, as I scribbled them down while trying desperately not to nod off! I am sure the wines were excellent, but rather than try to interpret my notes in Sanskrit, I will look forward to when I have a chance to taste them and I am not on the edge of sleep-deprived delirium!

2009 Agustí Torelló Mata Rosat Trepas Brut

The 2009 Agustí Torelló Mata Rosat Trepas Brut is a superb bottle of sparkling Brut Rosé that really is at its best at the table. The wine is completely fermented in stainless steel tanks and aged two years on the lees, with a finishing *dosage* of six grams per liter. The deep and absolutely beautiful nose offers up a mélange of fresh apricot, wild strawberries, blood orange, dried roses, a lovely base of soil tones and a gentle topnote of cinnamon. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish, pure and very light on its feet, with elegant *mousse*, fine focus and complexity and a long, crisp and classy finish. The grip here is excellent and the wine closes with a very stylish note of cherry stone that really brings out its ability to match with a wide array of cuisine. This is very high class juice. 2012-2020+. **92.**

2008 Agustí Torelló Mata Brut Reserva

The 2008 Brut Reserva from Agustí Torelló Mata is pretty serious juice for a workhorse bottling of Cava. The wine is a blend of the three top white varieties in the region (Macabeu, Xarel-lo and Parellada) and is fermented entirely in stainless steel and aged two years *sur lies* prior to disgorgement. The 2008 offers up a lovely and quite elegant bouquet of green apple, bread dough, lemon peel, a nice base of soil and a gentle topnote of smokiness. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright and dancing on the palate, with a good core, very refined *mousse* and lovely length and grip on the focused and zesty finish. Lovely Cava. 2012-2018. **88+**.

2007 Agustí Torelló Mata Brut Nature Gran Reserva

The 2007 Agustí Torelló Mata Brut Nature Gran Reserva is a superb wine, with its three plus years of aging on the lees producing a wine of great harmony and very refined, pinpoint bubbles. This is again a blend of the “Big Three” of Macabeu, Xarel-lo and Parellada, and the wine sees no *dosage*. The superb nose jumps from the glass in a blend of apple, fresh pear, tart orange, wheat toast, stony minerality and just a whisper of Chablis-like straw notes in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very refined on the palate, with lovely mineral drive, excellent focus and balance and a very long, crisp and complex finish. I would love to see this bottling with some extended bottle age, as all the constituent components seem to be in place for this wine to evolve very positively with cellaring. Lovely juice. 2012-2020. **91+**.

2007 Agustí Torelló Mata “Barrica” Brut Nature Gran Reserva

The 2007 Barrica Brut Nature is made entirely from Macabeu, which the Torelló family feels is the white wine grape here that handles wood the best. Forty percent of the base wines are fermented in oak barrels for the Barrica bottling, with these wines spending six months in barrel prior to their being incorporated in the blend for the Barrica Brut Nature. The 2007 Barrica is a stunning bottle of Cava, offering up a deep and very bright nose of lemon, pear, straw, an impressively complex base of minerality, bread dough and the gentlest touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and zesty, with very elegant *mousse*, excellent focus and superb length and grip on the well-balanced and vibrant finish. This is just a superb bottle of Cava that shows only the faintest whisper of oak influence. Again, this seems emphatically like a wine that will age very, very well. 2012-2025. **93**.

2006 Kripta- Agustí Torelló Mata

The 2006 vintage of Kripta, which is the current release on the market, is an utterly stunning bottle of Cava that is every bit as unique and compelling as any *Tête de Cuvée* Champagne. The wine is always a blend of the “Big Three” white wine grapes of Cava, which are fermented entirely in stainless steel and aged *sur lies* for five years prior to disgorgement. The absolutely stunning nose of the 2006 soars from the glass in a magical mélange of tart apples, lemon, a touch of fresh almonds, brioche, a strong vein of minerality that carries a distinct whiff of sea salt, citrus peel and a smoky topnote. It is clearly the most Champagne-like in aromatic profile of any of the superb Cavas from Agustí Torelló Mata. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and flawlessly balanced, with a fine core, great mineral drive, utterly refined *mousse*, superb acidity and outstanding length and grip on the complex and laser-like finish. The Kripta bottling from Agustí Torelló Mata is truly one of Spain’s greatest wines. In a perfect world, I would be inclined to give the 2006 Kripta a couple of years in the cellar to fully blossom and develop its secondary layers of complexity. It is a great wine. 2014-2035. **95+**.



The winery of Agustí Torelló Mata seen on one of the cool, crisp evenings of Penedès.

Miguel Torres S.A. (Penedès)

The vast winery of Miguel Torres is one of the most modern in the world, and one cannot help but be impressed by the finely-honed nature of the “wine tourism” business that Torres has built up over the years. There are organized bus tours of the winery and vineyards (which lie just outside of the city of Vilafranca del Penedès) and which originate for tourists in Barcelona and the whole winery operation has a bit of a Disneyworld feel to it on a certain level, with a wine museum, little train tours of the facility, advanced media presentations and a huge retail outlet on the premises. However, happily, underneath the very elaborate tourism veneer are still to be found some of the absolutely finest wines in all of Spain. In fact, I was most impressed that a winery this large can still make such outstandingly complex and ageworthy wines at its top echelon of cuvées, with several of the bottlings geographically removed from the Torres’ home base of Penedès and hailing from vineyards the winery now owns in other regions of Catalunya, such as Priorat, Conca de Barberà and now up in the foothills of the Pyrenees outside of the city of Tremp. Beyond Catalunya, the winery of Torres also produces wines from Rioja and Ribera del Duero, so one can see that the reach of this huge and high quality operation is quite long. But, the heart and soul of the wines here remain Catalàn, and the quality today is every bit as superb as it was back in the late 1970s, when the winery burst onto the consciousness of wine lovers the world over after the success of their 1970 Black Label Cabernet Sauvignon at several comparative tastings.

The winery was founded in 1870 by the brothers Jaime and Miguel Torres in the small city of Vilafranca del Penedès, with the first winery constructed directly across from the railroad station in Vilafranca for ease of distribution. The Torres brothers were very successful businessmen in a number of fields, and when the older brother, Jaime passed away in 1905, with no immediate heirs, his other business interests were left to various brothers and nephews, but his share in the wine business was left exclusively to his brother Miguel. The winery began by producing wines to be sold in bulk, from production in the nearby vineyards of Penedès, and it

was not until 1942 that the first Torres wines were sold in bottle, with the release of the Coronas bottling from the estate in this vintage. A white wine, Viña de Sol, was to follow in 1947. Prior to this, the family winery had expanded its business to also begin producing brandies, which were first distilled in 1928, with the brandy side of the business was soon to be a very important part of the overall Torres empire. Miguel Torres passed away a year after his brother Jaime, in 1906, leaving the winery to his son, Juan Torres. It was during the tenure of Juan Torres that the firm first expanded into brandy production. He passed away at a fairly young age in 1932, leaving the winery to his son, Miguel Torres Carbó, who succeeded to the head of the family winery and brandy business at the tender age of twenty-three and only four years before Spain was to plunge into Civil War. The Torres winery was partially destroyed during the war, with a bombing in 1939 particularly damaging, and it was not until 1940 that the winery was fully rebuilt and operations were to return to normal.

The Miguel Torres estate has made much of its fame over the years with wines based primarily on French grapes such as chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon, but it was not until 1966 that the first French varieties were planted in the family's vineyards in Penedès, and during much of the twentieth century, the winery prospered with wines based on local grape varieties such as tempranillo, cariñena and garnaxta. However, the first release of a primarily cabernet sauvignon based wine, the 1970 Gran Coronas "Black Label" from the Mas La Plana vineyard in the heart of the Penedès, which was blended with a small percentage of tempranillo, was soon to make the wines of Miguel Torres famous on an international scale. In 1979, at a "Wine Olympiad" held in Paris and sponsored by the French wine and food publication, Gault-Millau, the 1970 Gran Coronas "Black Label" was to take first place (ahead of top vintages of both Châteaux Latour and Haut-Brion) and the wines from the family firm began to be highly sought after in many countries far beyond the borders of Spain. The family had already been making plans to move production to an international scale prior to the tasting, having purchased its first one hundred hectares of vineyard land in Chile prior to the Gault-Millau tasting, and this was to be followed by purchases of 22.5 hectares of vineyard land in Sonoma County in California and an additional one hundred and thirty hectares in Chile. The company also owns its own distribution companies in several countries and was one of the first western wineries to expand into China, opening a joint venture there in 1997 and following that effort with another joint venture in India in 2001. This is one large and very serious wine company.

Today, the Torres wine business is run by its fourth generation, with Miguel A. Torres having succeeded his father at the head of the family enterprise in 1991. Interestingly, despite its rather massive size, the quality of the Spanish wines produced and sold under the Miguel Torres label has remained amazingly high, with a consistency and price/quality rapport that has made this the most important winery in Spain. When I was preparing this report on the wines of Cataluña, I heard from a few people in the wine trade here in the states that the wines from Torres had once been outstanding, but they had slipped in quality rather dramatically in the last decade or so. However, I found that this was emphatically not the case and I tasted some truly exceptional new releases from Torres both here in New York and during my visit the winery in Vilafranca, and this remains to my mind one of the most exciting and dynamic wineries on the Iberian peninsula. I cannot comment on the Torres wines from either Chile or California, as I have not tasted them in quite some time and they did not fall under the purview of this report, but certainly their Spanish wines (both from within Cataluña and from regions outside such as

Ribera del Duero or Rioja) are truly exceptional wines and every bit as good as what I remember from my wine merchant days, when the wines of Miguel Torres were a staple of our sales. The one caveat I would mention in regards to the quality of the Torres wines is that here in the US, several of the lower level bottlings are now sold under screwcaps. As I had a chance to sample the 2010 Sangre de Toro sealed up under screwcap (which would never sell in the home market of Spain) and under natural cork, I can only say that at least in my experience the cork-sealed wine was far more interesting and I hope the day will come in the not too distant future when all of the Miguel Torres wines are bottled exclusively under natural cork. Having tasted several severely reduced Torres bottlings under screwcap here in the states, I have no doubt that the rumors of slippage in quality here is directly related to the winery deciding to accede to the wishes of its US importer and bottling several of the wines under screwcap, as they were uniformly stinky and affected to varying degrees by permanent reduction. But, other than the hiccup with the bottlings under screwcap for certain markets, this remains a winery at the absolute top of its game and producing some truly exceptional wines up and down its hierarchy of various cuvées.

Miguel Torres S.A. is indeed a massive operation, with fully 1,740 hectares of vineyards either owned outright or controlled with long-term leases by the company. While the heart and soul of the estate remains Catalàn, Torres has purchased several vineyards in other regions of Spain in recent years, including 160 hectares in Jumilla in 2003, 40 hectares in Toro in 2004 and just under 53 hectares in Rioja in 2007. The estate also purchased a small winery in Ribera del Duero to produce their new wines from this region in 2004, and has also built new cellars in Priorat for the production and élevage of their wines now produced there. There are also large vineyard and winery projects in Chile, as well as a fine estate in Sonoma in California that has been run under the auspices of Miramar Torres since the late 1980s and which produced its first vintage in 1991. With joint ventures now taking shape also in China and Peru, Miguel Torres S.A. is truly a massive global presence in the world of wine, and yet, unlike so many other large scale producers in the world of wine, the Torres wines remain truly exceptional in quality up and down their hierarchy and should not be discounted simply because this is one extremely large wine business!

While there are an awful lot of exciting wines now being produced under the Torres label that did not exist a couple of decades ago, the flagship wine of this estate remains their Mas La Plana, single vineyard cabernet sauvignon that is produced from the vineyard that surrounds the main winery in Vilafranca. This is the wine that first put the winery on the international wine map (it was already one of the biggest and most important wine producers in the domestic Spanish market), when the 1970 vintage of the Gran Coronas “Black Label” won an important tasting in Paris in 1979. The “Black Label” was comprised primarily of cabernet sauvignon from the Mas La Plana vineyard back in 1970, as cabernet vines had been planted here in 1966, and by the 1978 vintage, this bottling was being made entirely from the cabernet vines in Mas La Plana. The vineyard today is twenty-nine hectares, with the vast majority planted to cabernet sauvignon, with just a bit of merlot included. It is a warm terroir, but with the cooling influence in the evenings of the nearby Mediterranean assisting in keeping the grapes from baking during the summers. Up through the 1981 vintage, the Black Label cuvée was raised in a combination of American and French oak barrels, but from 1982 forwards, this was switched entirely to French wood. The percentage of new oak for this wine has always been quite high, but it has throughout

its history been impeccably balanced and never been in danger of carrying too much wood. For many years now the wine's label has carried its vineyard of origin, Mas La Plana, rather than the Gran Coronas designation, and the 2008 remains every bit as fine as the superb 1970, which by happy coincidence I was fortunate to cross paths with at a tasting here in New York last year-long before I contemplated writing this feature on Catalu a and Torres. While there are a handful of top, single vineyard bottlings now produced at Torres- all of which could justify the iconic status for the winery- the Mas La Plana remains the flagship wine for this superb estate.

As I noted in the introductory section of this article, one of the potentially most exciting projects at Torres is still in its infancy and will not bear fruit for several more years to come, and this is their vineyard planting project on the mountainous hillsides that surround the small city of Tremp on the western end of Catalu a in the region of Costers del Segre. The Torres winery has purchased a 184 hectare piece of land and has already planted 104 hectares of vines here, to a combination of merlot, chardonnay, cabernet franc, pinot noir and viognier, and with the very cold nights and autumns here in this area, this may well be one of the most exciting vineyard sources for Torres in the not too distant future. Certainly, if the pioneering work of Torres alumnus, Ra l Bobet at nearby Castell d'Encus is any indication of the enormous potential of this region (and I firmly believe this to be the case!), then the vineyards planted on the new Torres estate of Sant Miquel outside of Tremp may well produce the wines that the next generation of wine lovers will be talking about with the same fervor that the Gran Coronas "Black Label" generated back in the late 1970s and 1980s. So stay tuned, this is one wine giant that has no intention of resting on its laurels or falling into complacency that seems to plague so many large ventures the world over!

White Wines

2011 Sangre de Toro "Vi a Sol"- Miguel Torres (Pened s) Screwcap

Apparently the label has been changed for the Vi a Sol in 2011 (or at least that is the case in the US market), as this appears in small print on the front label and the Sangre de Toro is in much larger typeface. The wine has held up much better to its closure than the red 2011 Sangre de Toro- at least aromatically- as the bouquet offers up a pretty and vibrant nose of lime, green apple, crisp minerality, citrus peel and a gently floral topnote. On the palate the reduction is already setting in on the backend, as this medium-full wine is already getting a bit sharp and metallic on the finish and closes with a distinctly bitter note that will soon morph in the direction of cabbage and overcooked green beans. What a shame, as (like the 2011 Sangre de Toro red) there seems even better mid-palate depth here than in the 2010 and I am sure this is a tasty bottle in the markets where it is sold under natural cork. This will go downhill at lightning speed from the reduction, but for the present it is palatable. 2012-2013. **83.**

2010 Vi a Sol- Miguel Torres (Pened s) Natural Cork

The 2011 Vi a Sol is not a great wine, but rather a very pleasant, everyday wine that is made to provide good symmetry at the table with the plentiful seafood of Catalu a. This bottle was tasted right off of the plane in Barcelona with tapas and the wine was quite tasty, offering up scents of lemon, tart pear, spring flowers and pretty, sandy soil tones. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright and easy-going, with nice balance, modest complexity, but plenty of charm on the bright and reasonably long finish. A very good, solid bottle of white, that went particularly well with the octopus. 2012-2014. **87.**

2011 Gran Viña Sol- Miguel Torres (Penedès) Natural Cork

The 2011 Gran Viña Sol from Torres is comprised of a blend of eighty-five percent Chardonnay and fifteen percent Parellada and is raised two-thirds in stainless steel tanks and one-third in barrel for five months. The wine is really quite lovely, though decidedly ripe aromatically (despite only tipping the scales at 13.5 percent alcohol), offering up scents of pear, pineapple, a touch of chalky, sandy soil tones, citrus peel and a gentle base of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and a bit tropical in personality, with very good length, bouncy acidity, but not the precision one would expect from a Torres wine, as the ripeness adds a slightly blurry aspect to the palate. This is a very good bottle, but not one of the top Torres wines that I sampled for this report. 2012-2017. **87.**

2011 Gran Viña Sol- Miguel Torres (Penedès) Screwcap

The 2011 Gran Viña Sol under screwcap is decidedly less interesting than the natural cork version, with a short, pinched and slightly bitter finish indicative of a wine that is already succumbing to the first depredations of permanent reduction. The nose on the screwcapped version is still pretty clean, offering up the same notes of pineapple, citrus peel, sandy soils and a touch of vanillin oak, but the aromas seem somehow clipped and not as dynamic as in the cork-finished example (almost as if there is more depth and roundness to the aromas on the cork-finished bottle, if this makes any sense). On the palate the wine is full-bodied and solid on the attack (though again, it does not seem anywhere near as vibrant as on the above), but is really already starting to die on the finish, with the backend being squeezed by the first signs of reduction and leaving a lingering bitterness on the palate. This is still an okay wine in this condition, but, today, it most emphatically is not the same wines as the above, though I have no doubt that the two bottlings started out life identically. Drink very soon. 2012-2013. **82.**



The heart and soul of Miguel Torres S.A.- the Mas La Plana vineyard that produces the estate's top wine.

2011 Viña Esmeralda- Miguel Torres (Cataluña)

The Torres Viña Esmeralda is a very unique and succulent bottling from the winery, done in a German *Spätlese* style and comprised of a blend of eighty-five percent Muscat Alexandria and fifteen percent Gewürztraminer. The 2011 is excellent, offering up a very floral and perfumed nose of acacia blossoms, orange zest, lychee nuts, fresh peach and a lovely base of minerality. On the palate the wine is medium-full, fresh and bouncy, with lovely complexity, good acids and focus and fine grip on the long and vibrant finish. There is just a touch of residual sugar here which works beautifully with the style of the blend. Fine juice and an excellent value. 2012-2014. **89.**

2010 Riesling “Waltraud”- Miguel Torres (Cataluña)

The 2010 Waltraud tips the scales at a cool 12.5 percent alcohol and is really a very stylish glass of riesling. The pretty and bright nose offers up scents of apple, petrol, sea salts, lavender, lime peel and salty soil tones. On the palate the wine is medium-full, fresh and juicy, with moderate complexity, but nice bounce from its good acids and very pretty length and grip on the well-balanced and slightly fruity finish. This is more of a novelty wine for Torres, with almost all of it sold in the Spanish market, but it is quite well-made and impressively tasty. 2012-2020. **87.**

2010 Nerola- Miguel Torres (Cataluña)

Nerola is one of the more recent bottlings in the Torres lineup, as this is a wine that relies entirely on native varieties to Cataluña, being comprised of sixty percent Xarel-lo and forty percent Garnaxta Blanca. These vineyards are also all certified organic, which may well be the wave of the future for all of the Torres vineyards. The 2010 is excellent, offering up a deep, complex and very refined nose of lime, fresh pear, a touch of *crème patissière*, almond blossoms, salty soil tones and a gentle base of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, fresh and vibrant, with a fine core of fruit, excellent focus and grip and a very long and classy finish. I really like this bottling from Torres, which I had not crossed paths with previously. 2012-2016. **91.**

2010 Fransola- Miguel Torres (Penedès)

The Fransola bottling is the single vineyard, primarily Sauvignon Blanc-based wine produced from the domaine, with just a bit of Parellada blended in. The 25 hectare vineyard lies at the feet of the pre-coastal range in Penedès, with a strong vein of iron running through the clay and limestone. The 2010 is a very pretty wine, delivering a bright bouquet of green apple, grapefruit, cut grass, chalky soil tones and just a touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is medium-full, fresh and refined, with moderate complexity, nice framing acids and pretty good length and grip on the finish. I am not sure how old these vines are here, but perhaps they are a tad on the younger side and more flavor authority and complexity will emerge for this bottling in future vintages. But, not bad juice by any stretch of the imagination. 2012-2016. **88.**

2008 Milmanda- Miguel Torres (Conca de Barberà)

The Milmanda bottling from Torres is their top of the line chardonnay, which has adapted just perfectly to soils in their vineyards in Conca de Barberà and clearly produces one of the wine world's top examples of chardonnay. There is a lot of clay in this section of Conca de Barberà where the Torres chardonnay is planted, which lies at the base of Serra de Prades Mountains and stays cooler at night, allowing for a very good retention of acidity in the wine. The 2008 Milmanda is outstanding, offering up a complex and very elegant nose of apple, a touch of iodine, understated notes of pineapple, almonds, lime peel and a gentle base of buttery

oak. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and nicely transparent, with crisp acids, excellent focus and a long, vibrant and focused finish. Fine, fine juice. 2012-2025. **93+**.

2004 Milmanda- Miguel Torres (Conca de Barberà)

The nicely maturing 2004 Milmanda very clearly shows the aging potential for this chardonnay. The bouquet is a beautiful and nicely crystallized blend of lemon, lime, pineapple, butter, chalky soil tones, a nice touch of fresh herbs and a gently stylish base of new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and beautifully developed, with a lovely core of fruit, fine focus and balance and a very long, complex and still quite vibrant finish. This vintage of Milmanda chardonnay shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon. 2012-2020+. **92.**

Red Wines

2011 Sangre de Toro- Miguel Torres (Penedès) Screwcap

This vintage of Sangre de Toro was tasted here in New York in October, and sadly, it was already showing signs of permanent reduction. When first poured out of the bottle, the wine was quite stinky with sulfur-derived, off aromas of struck matches and overcooked asparagus, with the stewy vegetal characteristics from the reduction carrying through on the palate. Unpleasant, and I can only imagine that it is showings of wines like this under screwcap that is contributing to the ill-informed opinions in some circles in the states that Torres has slipped in quality! The wine is a blend of sixty-five percent garnaxta and thirty-five percent carinena, and I have to believe that the version under natural cork is really quite good. After half an hour in decanter, the nose cleaned up somewhat to show signs of cherries, *garrigue*, woodsmoke, but still some overt weedy tones from the reduction. On the palate the wine also improved a bit, with more generosity on the attack, but still the pinched sharpness (almost metallic in nature) and the bitter vegetal quality on the finish. Death by closure- and not a particularly pretty death! **????**

2011 Sangre de Toro Tempranillo- Miguel Torres (Catalunya) Screwcap

This bottling also was marred by reduction when I tasted it in October, with a stinky nose of cabbage and new catalytic converters. On the palate the wine was vegetal and pinched and sharp on the backend- not to mention totally unpleasant to drink. This did not clean up as well in decanter as the straight 2011 Sangre de Toro, but it did get at least a bit less mal-odorous on the nose, offering up tepid scents of red and black cherries, a bit of spice, tobacco smoke and soil. On the palate the wine was far less vegetal with a half hour in decanter, but just as pinched, bitter and harsh on the backend. Another death by closure victim. I simply would not drink this wine under screwcap, as it is flawed to the point of permanent unpleasantness! **???**

2010 Sangre de Toro- Miguel Torres (Catalunya) Screwcap

This version was tasted in New York prior to my departure for Cataluña at the end of June, and it was suffering under its closure from early signs of permanent reduction, with a metallic bitterness and the clenched elements of reduction starting to mar the finish of the wine. It is too bad, because underneath, one can see that this is a very good wine for its price point, with notes of black cherries, dark chocolate, herb tones, soil and a bit of white pepper informing the nose. On the palate the wine is deep and full, with a good core, but the reduction issues now destroying the finish. Interestingly, this wine is decidedly more black fruity than the version sealed under natural cork, which I tasted at the winery in Vilafranca. This wine is already suffering from reduction and will only get worse with further bottle age- I should note that I decanted this wine for several hours and this note was taken when the wine was at its most flattering. I cannot imagine that most American consumers of Sangre de Toro are going to be able to recognize the symptoms of permanent reduction (indeed, most wine journalists cannot do

so!) and think to give this wine an extended aeration to try and unlock the reduction. They are simply not going to buy this wine again! I have to think that some of the undercurrents that I heard about the overall quality of the Torres wines having slipped in the last decade are attributable to the use of screwcaps for many of their entry level bottlings. ????

2010 Sangre de Toro- Miguel Torres (Catalunya) Natural Cork

I found the 2010 Sangre de Toro sealed under natural cork much fresher and bouncier than the already slightly reduced version under screwcap. The nose on this bottle shows a pretty and red fruity mélange of cherries, raspberries, *garrigue* and a nice base of spicy soil tones. On the palate the wine is fullish, generous and well-balanced, with a touch of tannin, good focus and a long finish. This is a good everyday wine that will not overwhelm one with its grandeur or complexity, but which offers up plenty of depth and personality and does a very good job at the table. Time to loss the screw! I would have loved to have tasted the 2011 vintage of this wine under natural cork, as it seemed to have more stuffing than the 2010 under its ugly bruise of reduction. 2012-2017+. **87.**

2010 Atrium- Miguel Torres (Penedès)

The Atrium cuvée from Torres is a one hundred percent varietal bottling of merlot, with the 2010 weighing in at a very manageable fourteen percent alcohol. The wine is aged six months in barrels, of which some percentage are new, but I did not take note of what that percentage is for this particular vintage (I know, sloppy). In any event, the wine is absolutely superb, offering up a deep and very pure nose of black cherries, cassis, a touch of tobacco, a beautiful base of Catalàn spice tones, cedary new oak and a lovely base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and truly beautiful in its balance, with fine mid-palate depth, impressive breed and complexity, tangy acids and a very long, poised and modestly tannic finish. This was another cuvée that was completely new to me in the Torres lineup and I was very mightily impressed. 2014-2035. **92.**

2009 Coronas- Miguel Torres (Penedès)

The Coronas bottling was the first red wine ever released in bottle by the winery way back in 1942, and it continues to be one of the flagships for the estate. The 2009 Coronas is made up of a blend of eighty-five percent tempranillo and fifteen percent cabernet sauvignon and is raised in three to five year-old barrels (which are a combination of American and French oak). The wine offers up a very attractive bouquet of red and black cherries, *garrigue*, coffee, salty soil tones and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and tangy, with a good core, moderate tannins and very good length and grip on the focused and well-balanced finish. This is not the most complex red wine in the Torres lineup these days, but the Coronas remains a very well-made wine that offers up impressive quality for its price. 2012-2020+. **89.**

2009 Celeste Crianza- Selección de Torres (Ribera del Duero)

The 2009 Celeste from Torres is a bit on the safe, international side of the ledger, and does not really show a whole lot of Ribera character. The nose is perfectly acceptable in its almost anonymous mélange of red and black cherries, a hint of spice, chocolate and a bit of slightly resinous new wood. On the palate the wine is fullish, suave and velvety, with perfectly respectable depth, gentle tannins and a reasonably long, simple finish that shows just a touch of backend heat. This is just too safe to show any real character, though the wine is certainly drinkable. 2012-2020. **84.**

2009 Ibéricos- Soto de Torres (Rioja)

The 2009 Ibéricos from Soto de Torres is a good, old-school style of Rioja in terms of weight and extract, with plenty of red fruit and spice from its Tempranillo, but also with a few

signs of spicy French oak on the nose. The youthful and relatively classic nose offers up scents of cherries, baked strawberries, woodsmoke, nutty tones, spicy Rioja soil and a touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and silky on the attack, with a good core of fruit, fine focus and a bit of firm tannin perking the long finish. The wood on the backend is not perfectly integrated here yet, but a few more years of bottle age should take care of this. I would love to see this same wine raised entirely in older, American oak barrels, as it would take this wine up a notch or two in class and old-school charm. But, this is a very well-made wine that should age well. 2014-2030. **88+**.

2009 Salmos- Miguel Torres (Priorat)

The Salmos is the new Priorat bottling from Torres, which is made from purchased grapes and is not so bad as far as the wines from this region go, but a bit too heady at fifteen percent for my palate. The 2009 is a blend of forty percent each of Garnaxta and Cariñena and twenty percent Syrah, and was raised in a blend of new and old barrels for fifteen months prior to bottling. The nose is ripe and jammy, delivering scents of raspberries, coffee, grilled venison, olives, *garrigue* and cedar. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, fat and suave on the attack, with a good core, a tangy backend and a fair bit of ripe tannin on the jammy finish that shows off pretty good length and grip. This is not bad for such a high octane wine, only showing a bit of backend heat, but it would be far more interesting to my palate with a degree or more less alcohol. 2014-2025? **87**.

2009 Perpetual- Miguel Torres (Priorat)

The Perpetual bottling is Torres Priorat from their own vineyards in the region, and which is made up of a blend of only Garnaxta and Cariñena. This too is a full fifteen percent in octane, but seems to carry its alcohol a bit better than the Salmos and offers up a bit more precision on both the nose and palate than the easy-going and slightly blowsy Salmos. The deep and impressively pure nose wafts from the glass in a blend of black raspberries, coffee, dark soil tones, black cherries, spices and suave base of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and impressively refined for such a high octane wine, with a sappy core of fruit, moderate tannins and excellent length and grip on the well-balanced finish. This is good juice, and though I still would not trust it in my own cellar for more than near-term consumption (as I cannot think of a single fifteen percent alcohol dry red wine that has aged well in my experience), this is a pretty good drink for its genre. 2012-2025? **91**.

2008 Mas Borràs- Miguel Torres (Penedès)

The Mas Borràs single vineyard bottling is the Torres' winery's pinot noir, and while it is an okay, warm weather pinot, it strikes me that even in the cooler regions of Penedès, it just remains too hot to make truly exceptional pinot noir. The ten hectare vineyard is located at the feet of the pre-coastal mountain range in Penedès, where the evening cooling should be superb, but the 2008 (which I tasted on three occasions in preparation for this report) is still a bit too jammy to rank in the upper echelons of pinot noir. The nose is a ripe and jammy blend of red and black cherries, woodsmoke, a touch of tomato, herbs and a touch of new wood. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and gently structured, with the voluptuous texture of hot climate pinot noir, a bit of sharp acidity (from acidulation?) and a bit of backend heat on the jammy finish. This is okay- but, no better. 2012-2018. **83**.

2008 Gran Sangre de Toro- Miguel Torres (Penedès)

The 2008 Gran Sangre de Toro is an excellent wine, which is made up of a blend of Garnaxta, Cariñena and Syrah in this vintage. The wine is aged for twelve months in barrel, of which approximately half are new. The superb nose wafts from the glass in a complex mélange

of red and black cherries, woodsmoke, Catalàn spices, a beautiful base of complex soil tones and a stylish framing of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and very elegant, with fine focus and balance, modest tannins and impressive length and grip on the bright and tangy finish. This is a very classy bottle of wine. 2012-2025. **91.**

2008 Gran Coronas- Miguel Torres (Penedès)

The 2008 Gran Coronas is an excellent wine and every bit as superb as I remember this bottling being in the vintages of the late 1970s and 1980s. The wine is a blend of cabernet sauvignon and tempranillo and is aged for twelve months in a combination of American and French oak barrels. The 2008 is deep and complex on both the nose and palate, delivering a fine bouquet of black cherries, cassis, woodsmoke, a touch of espresso, lovely soil tones and a sound base of spicy oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and classy, with a sappy core of fruit, fine-grained tannins, tangy acids and lovely length and grip on the focused finish. This needs a few years to allow its tannins to more fully soften, but it should prove to be an outstanding bottle at its peak and age very well indeed. 2014-2035. **92.**

2008 Mas La Plana “Black Label”- Miguel Torres (Penedès)

I was surprised to see that the current release of the Mas La Plana “Black Label” (formerly the Gran Coronas Black Label) was a year younger than the Gran Coronas Reserva here in the market in New York. The wine is a touch higher in alcohol than the ’07 Gran Coronas Reserva (14.5 percent versus 14 percent), but has no difficulties with jamminess or heat. The deep, complex and very refined nose wafts from the glass in a mix of cassis, black cherries, woodsmoke, dark soil tones, espresso, a stylish base of spicy, French oak and a gentle topnote of violets. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very refined, with a lovely core, excellent, nascent complexity, with suave, moderate tannins and very fine length and grip on the focused and classy finish. This is good juice and every bit as good as the bottlings from the 1980s with which I am so familiar. 2015-2040. **94+.**

2007 Gran Sangre de Toro Reserva- Miguel Torres (Cataluña)

Like the straight Sangre de Toro, the Gran Sangre de Toro Reserva is comprised of a blend of Garnaxta and Cariñena, but this is aged for a period of time in new wood. The 2007 tips the scales at a full fourteen percent alcohol, which seemed just a touch too high for the wine to retain precision on both the nose and palate. The nose is quite ripe and youthful in its mélange of black cherries, dark chocolate, woodsmoke, a bit of eucalyptus, fresh herbs and spicy new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and focused, with a very primary profile, good mid-palate depth and just a touch of backend heat poking out on the moderately tannic and long finish. This is not bad, but a half degree less ripeness would probably produce a wine of more distinction. This needs a couple of years in the cellar to blossom, so perhaps I just caught it at an awkward adolescent stage and more personality will emerge with further bottle age. 2014-2030. **85-87+?**

2007 Gran Coronas Reserva- Miguel Torres (Penedès)

The 207 Gran Coronas Reserva is a blend of eighty-five percent cabernet sauvignon and fifteen percent tempranillo, which I guess one needs to call the classic mélange for this wine today, as the Torres family began producing Gran Coronas in this style fully forty years ago now. The 2007 is really a lovely wine, offering up a complex nose of black cherries, cassis, cigar smoke, lovely soil tones, fresh herbs and a nice framing of spicy new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, complex and ripe, with a fine core of fruit, very good focus and balance, a bit of ripe tannin still to resolve and very good length and grip on the complex and classy finish. The big difference here from the superb examples of Grand Coronas I drank often from the vintages

of the late 1970s and early 1980s is that the wine is now aged in French oak. But, in most other respects, this is still very much cut from the same cloth as those fine wines. 2012-2030. **90+**.

2007 Reserva Real- Miguel Torres (Penedès)

The single vineyard bottling of Reserva Real is produced from a small, two hectare vineyard in Penedès that is very high in slate and quartzite in its blend of clay. The vineyard, which is called Agulladolc and is in the Alt Penedès near the base of the Montserrat (where the Huguet de Can Feixes estate is located), is influenced by the cooler summer evenings at altitude (roughly four hundred meters), is clearly one of Torres' finest. The wine is a blend of sixty percent cabernet sauvignon and twenty percent each cabernet franc and merlot and the 2007 is truly exceptional. The deep, complex and very classy bouquet offers up scents of black raspberries, black cherries, a touch of Catalàn spicy soil tones (quite similar, but not quite identical to the *garrigue* of Provence), coffee and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very suave on the attack, with an excellent core of fruit, lovely soil inflection, moderate tannins and outstanding length and grip on the focused and very well-balanced finish. This is a dynamite wine that should age very well indeed. 2012-2030+. **94.**

2006 Gran Muralles- Miguel Torres (Conca de Barberà)

Along with the Mas La Plana flagship and the relatively new bottling of Reserva Real Reserva, the single vineyard Gran Muralles bottling from Conca de Barberà is one of my absolute favorites from Torres these days. The vineyard here is thirty-two hectares that were selected by the Torres viticultural team for their lack of vigor and their very stony vein of red slate running through the deeper clay and limestone soils found in the region of Conca de Barberà. The vineyard is planted to a blend of indigenous grapes of Catalunya, including Garnaxta, Cariñena, Monastrell, Garró and Samsó, and the two vintages of this wine that I tasted for this report were truly exceptional. The bouquet is deep, complex and impressive in its mix of crushed raspberries, cherries, a nice touch of *garrigue*, coffee, a fine base of soil and a deft framing of new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and velvety on the attack, with a fine core of fruit, still a bit of ripe tannin, good focus and fine complexity on the long, ripe, but beautifully balanced finish. This is a very fine example of Priorat that shows off the fine *terroir* of this region, coupled with ripe fruit, but without going over the top in terms of alcohol or overripe aromatics or flavors. Impressive juice. 2012-2025+. **91.**

1999 Gran Muralles- Miguel Torres (Conca de Barberà)

The 1999 Gran Muralles is now fully mature and outstanding, as it soars from the glass in a superb aromatic mix of raspberries, coffee, *garrigue*, stony soil tones, tobacco ash and spiced meats. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very suave on the attack, with a fine core, lovely balance, melting tannins and excellent complexity and focus on the very long finish. This is just a lovely bottle of wine that is now at its apogee, but shows the potential to continue cruising along at this very high level for many years to come. 2012-2030. **93.**

1970 Gran Coronas Reserva "Black Label"- Miguel Torres (Penedès)

The 1970 vintage of Torres Black Label is the wine that put the bodega on the international wine map, and at age forty-one, the wine continues to drink beautifully and shows no signs of imminent decline. The deep, complex and tertiary bouquet offers up a lovely blend of sweet cassis, cherries, tobacco smoke, a touch of mocha, Catalàn spice tones and a touch of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, pure and velvety, with lovely mid-palate depth, excellent focus and complexity and a fine sense of balance and harmony that is very claret-like and strongly suggests that this wine still has decades of fine drinking ahead of it. A beautiful bottle still at its peak. 2011-2030. **92.**

Vilarnau (Penedès)

Vilarnau started out in 1949 in the town of San Sadurní d'Anoia, where also Juvé Y Camps got their start and still maintain one of their primary cellars in one of their two wineries. Vilarnau also had their original winery and cellars in the center of San Sadurní d'Anoia, but like Juvé Y Camps, they have built a modern winery out in the vineyards, and since 2005 they have been located at the base of the Montserrat in the area of Espiells, which is some of the higher vineyard elevation (250 meters above sea level) in this area of the Penedès and lies six kilometers outside of the town center of San Sadurní d'Anoia. Today Vilarnau is owned by the fine Sherry house of Gonzales Byass, which purchased the Cava house in 1982, and this house is now the eight largest Cava producer in Spain. The estate owns twenty hectares of its own vineyards and contracts out on a long-term basis with local growers for an additional one hundred hectares. Most of the Cava produced at Vilarnau is Reserva and Gran Reserva, so long aging on the lees is one of the leitmotifs of the house and the good acidities of the higher elevation vineyards around Espiells are important in creating structured base wines for these long-lived Cavas. In this part of the Penedès, Xarel-lo is not as widely planted as in other areas further west, so that Macabeu (sixty hectares planted at 300 meters above sea level) and Parellada (forty hectares planted even higher at 700 meters at the feet of the Montserrat) are the two workhorse grapes from the Vilarnau Cava production. Interestingly, amongst the vineyards owned and controlled by Vilarnau, Chardonnay plays a bigger role than Xarel-lo, as the winery owns ten hectares of the former grape and only uses production from seven hectares of vines planted to the latter grape. There is also a few hectares of Pinot Noir also under vine at Vilarnau. Today the winemaker at Vilarnau is Damià Deas, who has been with the house since 1985, and who in recent years has created two new top of the line Cavas for the house- the "Aubert de Vilarnau" bottlings and the "Cava des Lletres".

2011 Xarel-lo- Vilarnau (Penedès)

Ironically, given that Xarel-lo plays such a minor role in the blends of the various Vilarnau Cavas, the first still wine we tasted from the winery was their 2011 Xarel-lo! This is a pretty everyday white that is quite bright and refreshing, with its 11.5 percent alcohol and no malolactic fermentation. The stylish nose offers up a nice blend of lemon, grapefruit zest, a touch of celery seed, salty, stony minerality and a bit of lemongrass in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, fresh and juicy, with fairly gentle acids (keeping my score down just a bit), but nice brightness and bounce on the backend. This is a very tasty bottle for near-term drinking. 2012-2013. **87.**

2011 Xarel-lo (Aged in Oak and Chestnut Barrels)- Vilarnau (Penedès)

The Xarel-lo aged in oak and chestnut barrels is an experimental wine from Vilarnau that showed quite well at the time of my visit and I hope that this wine will find its way into their regular portfolio over time. The nose is deep and impressively vibrant, offering up scents of pear, gentle notes of pineapple, a touch of bergamot and plenty of wood tones that are both complex and relatively discreet. On the palate the wine is fullish, crisp and well-balanced, with a good core, very good framing acids and fine length and grip on the focused finish. A little complexity of soil is sacrificed here to the wood regimen, but, much to my surprise, the wood is really not obtrusive and the overall balance here is quite good. 2012-2016. **88.**

2010 Vilarnau Brut Rosé

The 2010 Vilarnau Brut Rosé is a blend of ninety percent Trepat and ten percent Pinot Noir and does not undergo malolactic fermentation. The wine is a fairly deep salmon color and

offers up a very pretty nose of cherries, cranberries, grapefruit, zest, rye toast and stony minerality. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and frothy, with snappy acids, fine focus and a distinctive closing note of pink grapefruit on the long finish. This is quite good, but still on the young side and a year or two in the cellar should really let it blossom. 2013-2020. **87+**.

Vilarnau Brut NV

Though the label does not say so, the current release of the non-vintage Vilarnau Brut is all fruit from the 2010 vintage. This is a blend of the Big Three of Xarel-lo, Macabeo and Parellada, but with the Xarel-lo playing a supporting role in the *mélange*. The *dosage* is ten grams per liter. The nose is straightforward and perfectly pleasant, offering up scents of green apple, lime peel, dusty soil tones and a touch of dried flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, frothy and easy-going, with nicely buffered acids and good focus, but a pretty short finish. Not bad. 2012-2016. **85**.

2009 Vilarnau Brut Nature Reserva

The 2009 Vilarnau Brut Nature Reserva is a blend of Parellada, Macabeo and Chardonnay is finished with a *dosage* of three grams per liter- the upper limit allowed for a Brut Nature bottling in Cava. This is a very fresh and stony wine on both the nose and palate, offering up scents of green apple, lemon, stony minerality and orange peel in the upper register. On the palate the wine is fullish, crisp and complex, with refined *mousse*, a nice base of soil, but again, not quite the length and grip of the top examples of Cava. This is tasty in a more ethereal style, but it really could use a bit more backend length. 2012-2020. **87**.

2008 Vilarnau Brut Nature Gran Reserva

The 2008 Gran Reserva from Vilarnau has five percent Pinot Noir in its blend, to go along with the Chardonnay, Macabeo and Parellada found in the above *cuvée*. This is a very young wine still, but will be very good indeed when it has had a year or two more in the cellar and relaxes a bit structurally. The young and primary nose offers up scents of tart orange, pear, bread dough, Catalàn herb tones (think of a very gentle *garrigue*) and a lovely base of stony minerality. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with a youthful reticence, but very elegant *mousse*, snappy acids and lovely focus and pretty good length on the finish. Give this at least a year of cellaring to blossom. 2014-2020+. **89**.

2008 Vilarnau “Albert de Vilarnau” Brut Nature Gran Reserva

The 2008 Vilarnau “Albert de Vilarnau” Brut Nature Gran Reserva is a fifty-fifty blend of chardonnay and pinot noir and is really quite Champagne-like in its aromatic and flavor profiles. The wine is aged for thirty months on its lees prior to disgorgement and offers up a deep and classy nose of apple, pear, warm biscuits, chalky soil tones, a touch of Catalàn spice and a topnote of white flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and very well-balanced, with a lovely core, frothy *mousse* and very fine length and grip on the focused and classy finish. Fine juice. 2012-2017. **90+**.

2007 Cava des Lletres Brut Nature Gran Reserva

In contrast to the Albert de Vilarnau bottling, which relies on chardonnay and pinot noir, the Cave des Lletres bottling is comprised of the Big Three of Macabeu, Parellada and Xarel-lo. This is the finest wine that the house makes in my opinion, with a bit more classic Cava personality than the Albert de Vilarnau bottling. The 2007 is excellent, jumping from the glass in a fine and leesy blend of green apples, citrus, Catalàn spices, stony minerality, a touch of jasmine and a gentle dollop of bread dough from its extended aging on the lees. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and quite stony in personality, with a fine core, very elegant *mousse*, bright acids and outstanding length and grip on the complex finish. Fine, fine juice. 2012-2025. **93**.

2007 Vilarnau “Albert de Vilarnau” Barrica Brut Nature Gran Reserva

The Barrica version of the Albert de Vilarnau is fifty percent barrel fermented (probably in pretty new barrels, based on the profile of the wine) and is made up of a blend of Macabeo, Parellada and Chardonnay. The wine is deep and complex on both the nose and palate, but also quite marked by its wood. The bouquet is a blend of apple, pear, toast, good minerality, a touch of smokiness and the aforementioned oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, crisp and well-balanced on the attack, with good length and grip, fine complexity, lovely *mousse*, but a bit of woodiness on the finish that seems completely out of place in a high quality Cava. Not an experiment I would continue if it were up to me. 2012-2016. **86.**

Penedès- Other Wines Tasted

2010 Mas Candi “QX” (Quatre Xarel-los)

Mas Candi is a relatively new winery, started in 2006 by four young enologists who did some of their training in Burgundy. Their QX bottling refers to the four distinct vineyards from which they source their Xarel-lo for this bottling, with some of the vines reaching upwards of fifty-five years of age. The wine is aged in four different types of barrels (keeping with the theme) of French and American oak, chestnut and acacia wood for eight months, with once a week lees stirring. The 2010 is a nice enough wine, but rather dominated by its four woods, as it offers up a bouquet of delicate green fruit, lime zest, ocean breeze and plenty of vanilla from the barrels. On the palate the wine is medium-bodied and quite soft in acidity, with solid mid-palate depth and a bit of sawdusty wood tannins poking out from the wood on the simple finish. This is okay, but it seems more about technique and cutesy marketing ideas than about *terroir* and varietal character. 2012-2014. **86.**

2010 Terroja- Castellroig (Penedès)

The Terroja bottling from Castellroig is a one hundred percent Xarel-lo bottling produced from ninety-five year-old vines from the Terroja vineyard in Penedès. The wine is raised in stainless steel to protect the superb expression of *terroir* that these venerable old vines deliver in spades. The 2010 Terroja is an outstanding wine, jumping from the glass in a complex blaze of tart apple, lemon zest, stony minerality, a touch of green olive and a topnote of lemongrass. On the palate the wine is medium-full, transparent and intensely-flavored, with beautiful focus and balance, crisp acids, lovely complexity and outstanding length and grip. This was the finest still example of Xarel-lo that I tasted during my two weeks in Catalunya and I cannot wait to explore more of the wines and Cavas from Castellroig! 2012-2018. **94.**

2009 Sumoll “Collita Roja”- Pardas (Penedès)

Sumoll is not a grape I had ever encountered before (here it is blended with ten percent of Marselan) and I very much liked its complexity and transparency down to the soil. However, the 2009 Collita Roja from Pardas also sees a fair bit French oak during its *elevage*, with the wine spending twelve months in barrels. While only fifteen percent of the barrels are new- the remainder being second and third wine barrels, clearly the Sumoll grape seems quick to take up the wood tannins in the barrels and the origin of the wood here seems likely to be a *tonnelier* such as Taransaud, given how spicy the wood are the wood markings in the finished wine. Under the wood is a nice wine that carries its fourteen percent alcohol effortlessly, offering up scents of cherries, *garrigue*, woodsmoke and a lovely base of soil. On the palate the wine is medium-full, tangy and transparent on the attack, with a good core and focus, but a bit of uncovered wood tannins sticking out on the finish. Perhaps if this was raised entirely in older barrels the Sumoll would carry its oak better? As it is, the wine is not bad, but there is really a great wine here under

the wood and I would love to see this varietal front and center and see what it is really like. 2012-2016+? 87.



Garnaxta grapes ready for picking in Montsant.

Montsant Wineries Visited

Agricola Cooperativa Falset Marça (Montsant)

The Agrícola Cooperativa Falset Marça is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2012, though in its current guise, it only dates back to 1999, when the two farmers' cooperatives in the villages of Falset and Marça were merged into a single entity. The cooperative produces a very good lineup of wines at very fair prices and an outstanding range of olive oils. The current commercial director of the cooperative is Pere Gomés. Montsant lies next door to its more famous neighbor of Priorat, with many of the same old vines of garnaxta and cariñena found here as in Priorat, though not on the same steep-pitched slate soils. Several of the cooperatives members have vines in excess of one hundred years of age, so the cooperative has some fine raw materials to work with. Several of the wines here are very good for their price points- good, solid and very honest wines that probably reflect very well the farmers who nurture the grapes and belong to the organization, but like many co-ops, one has to pick and choose a bit and not every bottling is at the same level of quality. But, there are some really good things to be found here!

2011 Etim Blanc- Cooperativa Falset Marça

The Etim Blanc bottling is made up entirely of garnaxta blanca and is aged for four months in a percentage of new oak. The 2011, which is fourteen percent in alcohol, offers up a lovely nose of white peach, almonds, stony, sandy soil tones and just a touch of vanillin oak. On

the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely balanced, with a good core, crisp acids and fine length and grip on the succulent finish. This is good juice. 2012-2015. **88.**

2008 Castell de Falset Blanc- Cooperativa Falset Marça

The Castell de Falset bottling is also one hundred percent garnaxta blanca, but here the cuvée is raised entirely in new oak barrels and is over-oaked to my palate. The flat and oaky nose offers up scents of buttered pineapple, a whisper of the memory of the soil and plenty of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, flat and four-square, and while it still retains a modicum of freshness, the wine suffers under its lumber. 2012-2013. **80.**

2011 Etim Rosat- Cooperativa Falset Marça

The Etim Rosat from the Cooperativa Falset Marça is made up of a blend of garnaxta and syrah, and while it is not a bad wine, it is a bit candied for my tastes and also shows a touch of acetone on the nose. The bouquet under the whiff of acetone is a mix of candied cherries, nice soil tones and rose petals. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, ripe and easy-going, with a modicum of complexity, low acids, but solid length and grip. 2012-2013. **83.**

2007 Etim Garnaxta- Cooperativa Falset Marça

Though this wine is labeled as Garnaxta, it does contain a small percentage of cabernet sauvignon as well in the blend. This is a bit rustic and not one of the strongest reds in the Cooperativa's lineup, as it offers up notes of cassis, roasted game, a bit of barnyard, *garrigue* and tree bark. On the palate the wine is full-bodied and a bit coarse, with a chunky personality and a bit of backend heat on the modestly tannic finish. 2012-2020. **81.**

2005 Etim "L'Esparver"- Cooperativa Falset Marça (Montsant)

The L'Esparver cuvée is comprised of a blend of garnaxta, cariñena and cabernet sauvignon and aged in thirty percent new wood. The 2005 vintage crossed the finish line with fourteen percent alcohol and offers up a very good and complex bouquet of cassis, dark berries, coffee grounds, woodsmoke and a gentle touch of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, round and well-balanced, with a good core, modest tannins and quite good length and grip. This is not the most complex wine, but I like very much its generous personality and would be happy to drink it anytime! 2012-2020. **88.**

2005 Castell de Falset Negre- Cooperativa Falset Marça

The 2005 Castell de Falset Negre is made up of a blend of garnaxta, cariñena and cabernet sauvignon and aged in seventy-five percent new oak for a period of twelve months. The 2005 tips the scales at 14.5 percent alcohol, but shows no signs of either heat or overripeness and is an excellent wine. The deep, complex and *à point* nose jumps from the glass in a classy blend of cassis, espresso, charred wood, lovely soil tones, a bit of Catalàn herb tones and a judicious base of spicy oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with excellent mid-palate depth, ripe tannins and very good balance and grip on the long and focused finish. This is the *crème de la crème* of the lineup of red wines from the Cooperativa and it is a fine value! 2012-2025. **91.**

2009 Etim Late Harvest Blanc- Cooperativa Falset Marça

The Etim Late Harvest Blanc is made up entirely of garnaxta blanca that is raised in four and five year-old barrels. This is an excellent wine, offering up a complex and quite pretty bouquet of pear, coriander, Catalàn spice tones, white flowers and a nice touch of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and really well-balanced, with a fine core, a nice framing of acidity and very good length and grip on the poised and moderately sweet finish. There is nothing cloying about this dessert wine, which stays light on its feet and is very well-made. 2012-2016. **92.**

2009 Etim Late Harvest Negre “Verema Tardana”- Cooperativa Falset Marça

This is a late harvest bottling of garnaxta that is very well done and a very interesting dessert wine that recalls a bit Banyuls. The bouquet is fresh, reasonably complex and impressively discreet in its mélange of cherries, a touch of raspberry, lovely Catalàn spice tones, dried roses and woodsmoke. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and light on its feet, with very good focus and grip, a fine core, good acidity and lovely length and grip on the gently sweet finish. This is not the most overly complex wine on the palate (which keeps its score down a bit), but it is very well-done in its style. 2012-2015. **88.**

Other Montsant Wines Tasted

2008 Montsant Vi Negre- Herestat Navas (Montsant)

Montsant is the mountainous region that surrounds Priorat and shares many of the same grapes with its better known neighbor. There is very good potential here, but it is a hot region and there is, of course, still more incentive these days to fashion wines of power that might capture the attention of Priorat fanciers looking for a bit better value in this neighboring region, rather than try to harness the ripeness here and look for a Montsant version of elegance. This 2008 from Herestat Navas is one of the more restrained examples I have tasted from Montsant-which admittedly is a very small sampling. The 2008 Montsant Tinto from Herestat Navas is comprised of a blend of forty percent Garnacha, twenty percent Cariñena (Carignan), twenty percent Cabernet Sauvignon and twenty percent Syrah. It is a deep, ripe and classy wine on the nose, offering up scents of cassis, *garrigue*-like spice tones, baked black cherries, a bit of tariness and a nice base of new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and rock solid at the core, with good focus and a bit of uncovered wood tannin currently poking out on the complex backend. There is enough stuffing here to eventually carry its new wood and the wine is not particularly out of balance, but this is a wine that would have been dramatically better with a bit less oak. But, not bad. 2012-2020. **87+.**

Priorat Wineries Visited

Celler Vall Llach (Priorat)

Celler Vall Llach was founded in the early 1990s and was one of the original estates to put the region of the Priorat back on the international wine map. The estate was created by the well-known Catalàn singer, Lluís Llach (often referred to as the Bob Dylan of Spain) and Enric Costa. Its home base is the small town of Porrera, and the wine is based on some lovely old vineyards planted to Garnaxta and Cariñena that range from sixty to one hundred years of age. The estate has added newer plantings of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah to augment these old vines. The current head winemaker and general manager at the property is Salustia Álvarez, ably assisted by Albert Costa Mirabell, who generously met us at the property on a late Saturday afternoon to show us the beautiful, terraced vineyards and open up some bottles for us. Albert is a very warm and friendly guy- as well as a staunch advocate for an independent Catalàn state- and I would have been very happy to like his wines more, but these are typical over the top, alcoholic Priorat wines designed to tickle the fancy of wine writers other than myself. There is lots of new French oak- aggressively spicy in character- and very, very ripe grapes that produce alcohol ranges routinely between fifteen and sixteen percent. Not exactly the stuff that my vinous dreams are made of!

2010 Aigua de Llum- Vall Llach

This is a one hundred percent viognier bottling from Vall Llach that I believe is relatively new at the estate, as the earliest vintage I can find reference to is the 2008. The wine tips the scales at a full 15.5 percent alcohol and is far from my ideal of viognier. The heady, *eaux de vie* nose offers up scents of pear infusion, coriander and lavender- it is almost grappa-like in the level of heat radiating up on the nose. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, flabby and completely unfocused, with a soft, hot and extremely short finish. I cannot ever imagine drinking this wine. ??? **60.**

2009 T-41- Vall Llach

This was a new wine added to the Vall Llach lineup in the 2007 vintage and is made from the younger vines on the estate and aged in one-wine barrels. It is made up of all five varietals now planted in the Vall Llach vineyards- garnaxta, cariñena, cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah. The 2009 is quite ripe on the nose (like all of the Vall Llach wines), offering up scents of black raspberries, dark chocolate, balsamic tones, coffee grounds and a touch of pruniness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and slightly dulled from its alcohol, with little focus or grip, but a touch of acidity and sneaky length on the simple and four-square finish. This is drinkable, but hardly memorable. 2012-2017. **81.**



The vaulted cellars at Vall Llach- actually upstairs in their building, rather than below ground.

2009 Embrouix de Vall Llach

The 2009 Embrouix from Vall Llach is a blend of all five grapes grown on the estate and is a high octane and jammy wine. The nose retains some focus in its very ripe blend of black cherries, black raspberries, coffee grounds, a touch of fennel and spicy new oak. On the palate

the wine is deep, full-bodied and velvety on the attack, with plenty of heady ripeness, suave tannins and a long, formless finish. This wine holds its alcohol pretty well (it was well north of fifteen percent), but I could never finish a glass of it! 2012-2020. **86.**

2008 Idus de Vall Llach

The Idus bottling is made from purchased grapes, rather than from estate-grown fruit. It again is a blend of garnaxta, carifèna, merlot, cabernet sauvignon and syrah and is plenty heady. The ripe nose is a blend of dark berries, coffee grounds, woodsmoke and cedary new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and four-square, with a fat core, again, pretty good balance for its octane, modest tannins and a long, simple and heady finish. Wine for tourists. 2012-2020. **85.**

2007 Vall Llach

This is the flagship bottling from the estate and is a blend of garnaxta, carifèna and cabernet sauvignon. The 2007 is a very, very ripe wine that has too much heat on the palate for my tastes and plenty of borderline overripe aromatics and flavors. The bouquet is a mix of black cherries, coffee grounds, balsam boughs, *garrigue* and spicy new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and sappy, with ripe tannins, still a bit of structure lurking under the waves of jammy fruit and also a bit of uncovered alcohol poking out on the finish. Not too bad as far as these kinds of wines go, but not something I would actually drink. 2016-2025+? **87.**

2006 Vall Llach

2006 was a cooler year in the Priorat and the last grapes for the '06 Vall Llach were not brought in until November 22nd in this vintage! This is lower in alcohol by at least a half percent than all these other Vall Llach bottlings, and is much better for it. This is by far the most refined and focused nose of the small vertical of Vall Llach bottlings that I tasted, offering up scents of black raspberries, black cherries, *garrigue*, balsamic tones, slate and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with a bit of tangy acidity (most welcome and rather singular in this lineup!), fine focus and very good length and grip on the ripely tannic and chewy finish. This is good juice, without the overt signs of backend heat that plague every other vintage of this wine in the lineup. 2016-2030+. **90.**

2005 Vall Llach

The 2005 Vall Llach is again a blend of the three grapes typical of this bottling- garnaxta, carifèna and cabernet sauvignon. In this vintage, for the first time the differently maturing plots of carifèna were vinified on their own and then blended back at the time of the final *cépage* was settled upon. This is of course quite ripe on the nose, but more intriguing, as it offers up notes of backed black cherries, coffee grounds, hung game, chocolate, balsam boughs and new wood. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, fat and jammy, with plenty of depth, but not overt heat. However, the wine is also devoid of focus and structure, though there are some chewy tannins on the finish. 2012-2020. **85.**

2004 Vall Llach

2004 was the last vintage when all of the plots of carifèna were fermented together for the Vall Llach cuvée, as now the estate likes to make several passes through the vineyard and vinify each parcel separately and blend a bit later. This was harvested in the middle of November of 2004, making it very heady juice indeed. The nose is a blend of black cherry syrup, balsamic tones, stony soil and new oak. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very corpulent, with a rock solid core of fruit, firm tannins and some serious backend coarseness on the slightly astringent and hot finish. This needs some time for the tannins to soften a bit, but I am not wild

about the balance here for long-term keeping, as the wine may just crash and burn. Not for me. 2015-2030? **83.**

Other Priorat Wines Tasted

2004 Mas Doix Salanques

The 2004 Salanques bottling from Mas Doix is a blend of sixty-five percent garnaxta, twenty percent cariñena and fifteen percent syrah and tips the scales at a hefty fifteen percent alcohol. The nose is a typically jammy affair of raspberries, hung game, stony soil tones, *garrigue* and cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and four-square, with ripe, slightly coarse tannins and a touch of uncovered alcohol on the backend. This is okay, but no better and certainly not worth the price of admission. 2012-2018. **84.**

Terra Alta

2009 Edetària Blanco (Terra Alta)

The white wine from Edetària is a blend of eighty-five percent White Garnaxta and fifteen percent Macabeu, with both varieties hailing from sixty-year old vines. The wines are barrel fermented in French *demi-muids* and aged for eight months prior to bottling. The bouquet on the 2009 Blanco is outstanding, offering up a deep and very classy mélange of fresh pineapple, pear, lovely, almost salty soil tones, white flowers and a discreet base of vanillin oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and beautifully balanced, with a fine girdle of acidity for focus and lift on the backend, a solid core and excellent grip on the very long and refined finish. This is a really lovely bottle and the only wine I tasted from this fine estate in Terra Alta, as the wine was sampled during a luncheon at El Celler de Can Roca, but I would love to taste the entire range here! 2012-2018+. **92.**

THE 2011 BEAUJOLAIS ANOTHER EXCELLENT VINTAGE SEES THE REGION STILL ON A ROLL



Vineyards on the Côte de Brouilly on a verdant summer day.

The 2011 vintage in Beaujolais is absolutely outstanding, and at this early date looks likely to eclipse the best of 2009 and vie with the 2005 vintage as the finest in recent memory for this beautiful region. However, the 2011s are generally a very sturdy lot for young Beaujolais, with a tannic backbone that will demand a few years of bottle age for virtually all of the very top examples- certainly for the best crus from traditionally sturdier villages such as Morgon, Côte de Brouilly and Moulin-à-Vent. Even Crus such as Fleurie and Brouilly, where one usually is accustomed to most top bottlings offering up early accessibility and aging more customarily on their girdles of acidity (rather than tannins) are packing a bit of a tannic punch in the 2011 vintage, so this is not going to really be a vintage for early drinking beyond the levels of straight Beaujolais or Beaujolais-Villages. In fact, the structural style of these beautiful young wines is quite different from virtually anything that I can recall from the region, as the wines generally show quite concentrated and pure fruit tones and really lovely, almost dense mid-palates, but coupled to fairly low acidity and plenty of ripe tannin. The timing of the aging curve for many of these wines will be rather long I would guess, as there will be a surprising amount of tannin to wait out in many of the very best 2011s, but the lower acids than is customary in this region may mean that the wines will never grumpily shut down behind the usual girdle of acidity found in young Beaujolais.

The 2011 vintage in Beaujolais got off to an early start, with unusually warm weather during the outset of the growing season in April and May leading to a precocious and full flowering that began on May 17th- nearly two weeks earlier than usual. In fact, according to Gregory Barbet of Domaine des Billards in St. Amour, “April and May of 2011 were the driest and sunniest since 1959.” The month of June and very early July were just lovely, but then it turned rainy for much of the rest of the month of July, dampening excitement momentarily. However, a bit of hydric stress during mid-summer in some of the vineyards was quickly washed away by the rains in late July and when the sun returned in earnest at the start of the next month, the vines were poised to get started ripening their bunches quickly and the beautiful weather of August and September allowed the vintage to come to a close under absolutely ideal conditions. In fact, the month of September was sunny, but on the cool side, which allowed the grapes to ripen progressively without fears of overripeness (which has plagued a percentage of the 2009s) and *vignerons* were pretty much free to pick their grapes under ideal conditions as parcels came to optimum maturity. Most domaines got started harvesting at the very end of August (due to the very early flowering) and had completed the collection of their grapes by the middle of September. The berries that came in this year were quite concentrated, with a skin to juice ratio that favored deep colors and ripe tannins, so many of the top 2011s have a stuffing that is really quite surprising for young Beaujolais. The yields were not particularly low in 2011, but as was the case in 1999 in the Côte d’Or, the berries were beautiful and had a great skin to juice ratio- which accounts for the concentration in the young 2011s.

In comparison to other recent outstanding vintages in the region- and here I would place 2005 and 2009 as the most relevant for comparison’s sake to the 2011s, the style of the vintage is dramatically different than either of its highly-acclaimed predecessors. There is an inner core strength and vitality to the 2011s that is not found in either of the previous two vintages cited, but also decidedly lower acidity than in ‘05, which gives the wines of 2011 a sense of density in the mouth that is quite exciting. There is great purity to the 2011 vintage in Beaujolais that augurs very, very well for the evolution of these wines in bottle, but the combination of firm tannins and lower acidity is also going to make these wines relatively unique stylistically, and at least in my experience, I am hard-pressed to think of any preceding vintage of Beaujolais that resembled the 2011s at a similar early stage of development. Certainly, both the 2009 and 2005 vintages did not possess the same mid-palate fleshiness that is common in 2011, but neither did either vintage have the same backbone of tannin. The ‘09s were generally more opulent wines out of the blocks than these 2011s, with lower acids even than the 2011s and with riper and sometimes borderline overripe fruit tones defining many of the wines. Not so for the 2011 vintage, which shows far more perfect pitch in terms of ripeness levels, so that fruit is pure and concentrated, but not particularly voluptuous at this early stage. The young 2005s were generally much more tightly-knit than the corresponding 2011 (this is certainly the case at the higher level of the Crus), as the much more typical, tangier acidity of the ‘05 vintage is a cornerstone of these wines’ structures, but is not to be found in many of the 2011s.

It is not that the 2011s lack for vitality or purity- two elements that are generally accentuated by higher acidity- but they are wines that are going to age on their tannins, rather than their acids, and consequently they are going to have a decidedly different evolutionary curve than many recent, highly successful vintages in the region. But, there is little doubt that

this is a very high quality vintage and one that has stylistically definitely caught the imaginations of the top Beaujolais producers themselves. Pierre-Marie Chermette of Domaine du Vissoux commented that “2011 is simply the greatest vintage of my career,” while Gregory Barbet commented “that this is a vintage that we have put a lot of wine in the cellar- some to release later as reserve wines, and more for our own pleasure in the future.” He continued, “it is the kind of year where you can keep the Crus for ten years and they will still retain the fruitiness and vibrancy of a young wine, and where you can keep them twenty or thirty more years if you like the style of an older wine.” There is no doubt that the 2011 Beaujolais are a scintillating group of wines across the board and at the top levels and it will be very fascinating to watch how these lovely wines blossom with cellaring- which almost all of them will most emphatically demand before they really begin to deliver on their very considerable promise.

As I am writing my annual Beaujolais report a bit earlier than I have in the last couple of years, a number of the 2011s have not yet found their way into the market here in New York and I did not find time this year to spend any time in the region, so many of my traditional favorites have not made an appearance in this article. I should also note that the growing popularity of many of the top Cru bottlings- which is long, long overdue and most welcome to see- has curtailed the willingness of some importers to send samples of some of their more popular cuvées in the last year or two. I suppose that they rationalize that sending a sample will only increase their headaches in trying to keep customers happy with the shorter allocations necessary as market pressures build up for the top producers and bottlings. In any event, I plan to taste a great many more 2011s over the next few months and will get down to the region for at least a day or two during my trip to the Côte d’Or in November, so I will issue a follow-up piece on Beaujolais in the spring, to cover some of the later-arriving cuvées and the wines I taste on this coming trip. However, one of the happy events of writing this report a bit on the early side is that a large number of fine 2010s are still in the market and I have been able to revisit a significant number of wines from this vintage. I have been really struck by how dramatically shut down a great many of the top 2010 Crus are today and I am very happy to have had a second in-depth look at this fine Beaujolais vintage, as the wines have changed rather markedly since I reported on them last February and I hope it will prove to be very useful to have current notes on many of these wines.

I was truly surprised by how briskly and adamantly the 2010 Crus have shut down over the last several months, and this is a vintage that is now surprisingly grumpy and adolescent in general. The shutdown phase of the 2010s is most dramatically felt in the more structured Crus such as Morgon and Moulin-à-Vent, but it is pretty strongly in evidence across the board with all of the Crus at the present time, and this is now a vintage above the levels of straight Beaujolais and Beaujolais-Villages that needs to sleep unmolested in the cellar for a few more years. The wines remain very promising indeed, as their purity, transparency and bouncy palate presences are still very much in evidence, but with the more typical high acidity of young Beaujolais now getting the upper hand and slamming the door closed, many of the 2010s that I sampled for this report are in a very cantankerous stage of evolution and not particularly forthcoming on either the nose or the palate at the present time. As the pure and succulent fruit of the vintage has been subsumed under the structural elements of so many of the wines, one is left with a youthful pepperiness and lots of nice soil and leafy, herbal aromatics and flavors at the present time, which will be much more interesting and savory when the fruit elements again return to the

equation in the glass after their period of hibernation. The 2010 vintage in Beaujolais does not possess the same mid-palate density of fruit as either of the two vintages that flank it, so there is not a lot of puppy fat now in evidence to buffer the structure of the vintage and this is a very good time to let the vintage rest comfortably in the cellar.

I also revisited a handful of 2009s for this report and the wines continue to drink well in their more buxom and overtly fruity style. They have not shut down for the most part, along the lines of the 2010s, and they are a very nice set of wines that seem slightly short on soil signatures when viewed in the context of the 2010s and 2011s. A small percentage are a bit too ripe (or borderline overripe) for my personal tastes, but others are sumptuous, velvety and plush on the palate and are really quite delicious right now. I would certainly be reaching for them in the cellar over all but the most forward 2010 at this point in time, but there is of course, no rush to drink them now, as they are just starting out on their journeys. As has been my custom for the last several years, I have listed the tasting notes on the wines geographically amongst the Crus (from north to south), with the Beaujolais and Beaujolais-Villages bottlings listed first. Amongst each subsection, one will find the wines grouped by vintage, with the 2011s first, and within each vintage, listed alphabetically by producer.

Beaujolais and Beaujolais-Villages

2011 Beaujolais- Michel Guignier

The 2011 Beaujolais from Michel Guignier is a very lovely example of the vintage. The deep and vibrant nose jumps from the glass in a classy blend of black cherries, sweet cranberries, woodsmoke, violets and a very stylish base of soil. On the palate the wine is pure, fullish and beautifully balanced, with a superb core of fruit (particularly for its appellation), excellent focus and balance and just a touch of tannin on the very long and still fairly primary finish. This is delicious today, but it will be even better with a year or two in the cellar to allow secondary layers of complexity to emerge. A superb bottle of Beaujolais! 2012-2022+. **90+**.

2011 Beaujolais “Cuvée l’Ancien”- Domaine Terre d’Orée (Jean-Paul Brun)

The 2011 Cuvée l’Ancien from Jean-Paul Brun has graduated to a heavier bottle that has heretofore been reserved for the Crus here, which may add a bit of gravitas to this wine (as if it really needed any more, given its consistent excellence for years!) in the marketplace, but does not fit as well into the bins in my cellar. However, the wine is so superb that I will have no issues in finding a new storage location for a dozen of these heavier gauge bottles! The deep and very pure nose shows off the intensity of the low yields in this vintage, offering up a fairly tight and primary blend of cherries, cranberries, vinesmoke, a marvelously complex base of soil, fresh herbs and already the first stirrings of autumnal and nutty notes that will build in intensity over the coming years. On the palate the wine is medium-full, pure and wonderfully sappy at the core, with a tightly-knit personality, ripe, tangy acids, outstanding focus and grip and a very long, youthful and nascently complex finish. The balance here is so lovely that there is no problems drinking this excellent wine today, but it is still very early days for the 2011 Cuvée l’Ancien and I will not be opening any bottles out of my cellar for at least another three to four years. 2012-2030. **91+**.

2011 Beaujolais “Cuvée Traditionelle- Domaine du Vissoux (Pierre-Marie Chermette)

The 2011 Cuvée Traditionelle from Domaine du Vissoux is another lovely and utterly classic example of the vintage- tightly-knit and rock solid at the core and only waiting for a bit of bottle age to help it burst out of its youthful confines and delight. The very deep, pure and

nascently complex nose offers up scents of cherries, cranberries, woodsmoke, a beautiful base of soil, blood orange and a topnote of fresh herbs. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish, vibrant and intensely flavored, with lovely mineral drive, a fine core, tangy acids and a long, youthful and impressively driven finish. Give this a year to really blossom- though it is already very tasty with a bit of aeration! 2012-2025. **91.**

2011 Beaujolais “Coeur de Vendanges”- Domaine du Vissoux (Pierre-Marie Chermette)

The one hundred year-old vines that go into Monsieur Chermette’s Coeur de Vendanges bottling have really produced a beautiful bottle in 2011. The bouquet is deep, nascently complex and very pure, as it wafts from the glass in a mélange of red and black cherries, pomegranate, complex soil tones, a touch of raw cocoa, woodsmoke, fresh thyme and a bit of violet in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and very intensely flavored, with a sappy core of fruit, beautiful focus and structure, a bit of chewy tannin and outstanding length and grip on the focused and still very youthful finish. Whereas the 2011 Cuvée Traditionnelle is really a lovely drink already with a bit of aeration, it strikes me that it is borderline criminal to be drinking the Coeur de Vendanges 2011 right now and this superb wine should really be tucked away in the cellar for at least a couple of years to allow its secondary layers to emerge and the tannins to more fully fall away. A beautiful bottle of Beaujolais. 2014-2025+. **92+.**

2010 Beaujolais-Villages- Maison Joseph Drouhin

Happily, the 2010 Drouhin Beaujolais-Villages has not shut down (as has been the case for so many of the crus in this vintage) and is still a deep and lovely example of its appellation. The complex and classic nose offers up scents of cherries, sweet cranberries, a touch of pepper, fresh herbs, a touch of woodsmoke and a lovely base of soil. On the palate the wine is medium-full, tangy and complex, with a low fat personality, lovely transparency and fine length and grip on the focused and bouncy finish. This is old school Beaujolais, with fine intensity of flavor, only moderate meat on the bones and lovely backend intensity. Fine juice. 2012-2018. **87.**

2010 Beaujolais “Vieilles Vignes”- Domaine Cédric Vincent

I had absolutely loved Cédric Vincent 2010 old vine bottling of Beaujolais at the start of the year and the wine has blossomed beautifully over the course of the year and is every bit as superb today as it was in January, with a fair bit of its tannin having fallen away and the wine now wide open on the attack. The outstanding bouquet is deep, bright and beautifully classic in its aromatic mélange of black cherries, woodsmoke, a touch of dark berry, really lovely, dark soil tones, blossoming notes of nutskin, pepper and a lovely topnote of fresh thyme. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright and sappy at the core, with beautiful transparency and soil signature, modest tannins, tangy acids and truly exceptional length and grip on the complex and palate staining finish. This is very serious Beaujolais that is drinking very well today, but is just beginning to show the first vestiges of its autumnal layer of secondary complexity and will continue to improve for many years to come. Lovely wine. 2012-2025+. **91.**

2009 Beaujolais- Depeuble Père et Fils

The 2009 Beaujolais from Depeuble Père et Fils continues to drink beautifully, as this is one wine where the ripeness of the vintage has produced succulent fleshiness with no signs of potential overripeness in evidence. The deep and sappy nose jumps from the glass in a mélange of black cherries, pomegranate, citrus peel, woodsmoke and a lovely base of soil. On the palate the wine is medium-full, deep and sappy at the core, with tangy acids, lovely focus and most impressive length and grip on the complex and bouncy finish. This is a lovely example of the

vintage that should have no difficulties drinking at a very high level for many more years to come. 2012-2020. **90.**

1993 Beaujolais-Villages- Maison Louis Jadot

The 1993 Beaujolais-Villages from Louis Jadot is still drinking very well indeed, and while it is now getting towards the end of its apogee and fades after about thirty minutes in the glass, the wine is deep, pure and quite complex on both the nose and palate. The nose remains vibrant in its aromatic mélange of red and black cherries, lovely, autumnal soil tones, a touch of dark chocolate, oak leaves and a nice note of fresh thyme in the upper register. On the palate the wine is medium-full, deep and quite pure down to the core, with lovely focus and balance, sound acids and surprising length and grip on the relatively complex finish. It is time to drink this wine up, but at age nineteen, it underscores just how much more ageworthy Beaujolais can be than is generally acknowledged. 2012-2015. **87.**

Saint-Amour

2009 Saint-Amour- Domaine des Billards (Héritiers Loron)

I had not tasted the Barbet family's fine Saint-Amour property's 2009 since July of 2011 and was very happy to cross paths with a bottle of this wine in preparation for this report. The excellent nose is deep, sappy and still quite primary, offering up scents of black cherries, a bit of plumminess, woodsmoke, fresh thyme, a bit of gamebird, cherry skins and a superb base of dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a fine core of fruit, excellent focus and balance, just a bit of tannin and a long, velvety and still quite primary finish. This seems a bit more heavy-handed stylistically (from the style of the vintage) that it did the last time I tasted it, but its quality is still excellent. 2012-2030+. **92+.**

Chiroubles

2011 Chiroubles- Daniel Bouland

Daniel Bouland is based in the commune of Villié Morgon, where he owns a bit under four hectares of old vines, but he also produces a lovely example of Chiroubles as well. His 2011 Chiroubles is excellent, offering up a deep and expressive nose of cherries, strawberries, violets, a touch of raw cocoa, vinesmoke and a lovely topnote of fresh herbs. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and tangy, with a superb core of fruit, tangy acids and outstanding focus and grip on the well-balanced, complex and gently tannic finish. This is a very serious example of Chiroubles. 2012-2022. **91.**

2005 Chiroubles "Cuvée des Anges"- Domaine du Crêt de Ruyère (Jean-Luc Gauthier)

As readers may recall from last year's report, this wine was denied the appellation of Chiroubles by the INAO in 2005, as it was judged to lack *typicité* and Chiroubles does not appear anywhere on the front label. What the INAO had issue with in this beautiful wine is beyond me, but I there is way too much Charles Dickens in me to really understand those folks in any case! I had not tasted this wine since last year and it continues to drink beautifully, offering up a deep and fully mature nose of cherries, woodsmoke, spit-roasted gamebirds (with which I would not hesitate to serve this wine!), beautifully complex herb tones, a lovely base of soil, a touch of dried eucalyptus and gentle autumnal notes of a Cru Beaujolais at peak maturity. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and tertiary, with a lovely core of fruit, little remaining tannin, fine focus and balance and outstanding length and grip on the very complex and autumnal finish. Just a beautiful bottle of mature wine. 2012-2020. **92.**

Moulin-à-Vent

2011 Moulin-à-Vent- Château des Jacques

The 2011 Moulin-à-Vent from Château des Jacques is the first release from this excellent vintage from this superb domaine. The wine is excellent, delivering a deep and youthful bouquet of cassis, dark berries, woodsmoke, dark soil tones, a touch of espresso, fresh thyme, incipient notes of gamebird and cedar. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, focused and very pure, with superb soil signature, very good acidity for the vintage, lovely mid-palate depth and fine focus and grip on the moderately tannic finish. This is not quite as dense at the core as some of the 2011 Crus I have tasted, but perhaps the bit of new oak barrels used here has helped this wine blossom a bit more out of the blocks. A lovely example of the vintage. 2015-2040. **92.**

2011 Moulin-à-Vent “les Trois Roches”- Domaine du Vissoux (Pierre-Marie Chermette)

The 2011 Moulin-à-Vent “les Trois Roches” from Domaine du Vissoux is outstanding and destined to be an absolutely classic expression of this great commune with a bit of bottle age. The utterly refined and complex nose jumps from the glass in a blend of cassis, espresso, granite, a touch of *garrigue*, woodsmoke, curry-like spice tones and a gentle framing of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very long and racy, with a superb core of fruit, just a touch of ripe tannin, vibrant acidity and stunning focus and grip on the very, very long and dancing finish. I absolutely love the elegance of this bottling in 2011! This is an utterly classic bottle of Moulin-à-Vent in the making. 2014-2025+. **94.**

2010 Moulin-à-Vent “Cuvée Vieilles Vignes”- Domaine Diochon

The 2010 Moulin-à-Vent “Cuvée Vieilles Vignes” from Domaine Diochon has not shut down anywhere near as much as several of the 2010 Morgons I tried for this report, but it is still a wine that is showing more of its structure than it did a year ago and now seems best to be tucked away in the cellar for a few more years of evolution. The bouquet remains exceptional, offering up a deep, black fruity and still quite primary blend of black cherries, dark berries, woodsmoke, fresh thyme, a beautiful base of dark soil tones, crushed violets and a faint touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very pure, with a fine core of fruit (now a bit more hunkered down than was the case a year ago), great focus and intensity of flavor, a bit of firm tannin now starting to get the upper hand on the backend and outstanding length and grip on the perfectly balanced finish. If you bought this great wine a year ago and did not drink it up before it started to shut down, give it now a handful of years in the cellar to soften up, as its quality remains absolutely outstanding! Simply a superb vintage at Domaine Diochon. 2015-2035+. **94.**

2010 Moulin-à-Vent- Maison Joseph Drouhin

It has been about fifteen months since I last saw a bottle of the 2010 Moulin-à-Vent from Maison Joseph Drouhin and the wine has hunkered down for a bit of hibernation. This is the only 2010 Cru from the Drouhins that I have found has shut down significantly- which may just mean it has the finest potential for the long haul! The nose is deep, black fruity and now a bit closed in on itself, but still offering up scents of cassis, dark berries, a bit of gamebird, espresso, mustard seed, thyme and dark soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly reticent, with a fine core of black fruit, lovely soil inflection, moderate, ripe tannins and lovely length and grip on the primary, but palate-staining finish. Fine promise, but give this a few years more in the cellar. 2015-2035. **93.**

2009 Moulin-à-Vent- Domaine Grand Moulin (Xavier et Nicolas Barbet)

The 2009 Moulin-à-Vent from Domaine Grand Moulin is a very deep-pitched, black fruity example of the vintage. The bouquet is ripe and complex, offering up scents of cassis, dark berries, a touch of coffee grounds, dark soil tones, woodsmoke, a bit of venison and a nice touch of fresh thyme in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a plump core of fruit, fine focus, lovely soil drive and a bit of chewy tannins on the very long and black fruity finish. This is a fine bottle of 2009 Moulin-à-Vent in the making, with no signs of overripeness and fine promise on both the nose and palate. Given its bit of chewy tannin, I would give this bottle a couple of years in the cellar to start to develop its secondary layers of complexity and soften up a bit, but it is far from shut down today and in a pinch, it makes a lovely dining companion to grilled steaks. 2014-2030+. **90.**

2010 Moulin-à-Vent “Clos du Grand Carquelin”- Château des Jacques

The 2010 Clos du Grand Carquelin from Château des Jacques is a touch more generous at this early stage than the Clos de Rocheigrès, as the layer of sand and clay soils over the base rock here have given just a slight impression of more puppy fat, but this too is a very young bottle of Moulin-à-Vent and I would be strongly inclined to let it develop in the cellar for a few years. The deep and classy bouquet offers up scents of cassis, dark berries, a touch of bonfire, incipient notes of *sous bois*, coffee bean, fresh herb tones and a touch of cedary oak. Interestingly, the 2010 Moulin-à-Vent bottlings here were raised once again in one hundred percent new oak (as opposed to eighty percent for the 2009s), and yet the perception of new wood is lower here than in the 2009 a year ago. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very soil-driven, with the initial generosity of black fruit on the attack quickly giving way to tangy and solid structural elements on the backend of the palate. The core is excellent here, the wine is focused and beautifully balanced, and once the tannins start to fall away a bit, this is going to be a superb wine. 2016-2035+. **92+.**

2010 Moulin-à-Vent “Clos de Rocheigrès”- Château des Jacques

The 2010 Clos de Rocheigrès from Château des Jacques is a superb and youthful bottle of Moulin-à-Vent, offering up great purity on both the nose and palate and a proper, 2010 structure that should reward long aging. The superb nose wafts from the glass in a classic mélange of dark berries, black cherries, granite, woodsmoke, a touch of dark chocolate, fresh thyme and a discreet base of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully balanced, with excellent, nascent complexity, fine mid-palate depth, moderate tannins and a long, tangy and quite youthful finish. This will need four or five years to really reach its apogee and should have no problem continuing to evolve for another twenty years or more. It is a finer and more precise bottle than the Clos du Grand Carquelin, which has a bit more inherent opulence built into it and which will eventually come to the fore when the wine blossoms. Which one you will prefer is a matter of personal preference, as they will both be beautiful and classic examples of Moulin-à-Vent. 2016-2035+. **92+.**

Fleurie**2011 Fleurie “Les Moriers”- Domaine Cédric Chignard**

Somehow, I missed tasting both the 2009 and 2010 Les Moriers bottling from Cédric Chignard, but the newly released 2011 version is a fine bottle that nicely synthesizes the structure and sappiness of this vintage. The wine is still fairly youthful on the palate, but offers up a very fine (if still primary) bouquet of black cherries, dark berries, woodsmoke, a touch of gamebird, dark soil tones and a bit of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and

pretty tannic for a young Fleurie, with a sappy core of fruit, lovely soil signature and an impressively long, intense and youthful finish of excellent focus and balance. This is a wine of very good potential, but I would give it a year or two in the cellar to allow it to more fully emerge from behind its tannic backbone. The tannins here are ripe and well-integrated, but they are fairly substantial. Fine juice in the making. 2014-2025. **90.**

2011 Fleurie “Cuvée Christal”- Domaine Coudert

As fans of the Coudert family’s Clos de la Roilette may already recall, the Cuvée Christal bottling of Fleurie here hails primarily from two hectares of vines in the center of the appellation, rather than from the vineyards that lie closer to the domaine’s cellars on the Moulin-à-Vent-Fleurie border. The first vintage of this bottling was produced in the 1998 vintage, with the goal of making a more immediately accessible example of Fleurie that would allow enthusiasts to give the Clos de la Roilette bottlings sufficient bottle age in their cellars and still not run out of Coudert wines to drink in the interim. The 2011 Cuvée Christal is a deep and ripe wine that jumps from the glass in a sappy mélange of black cherries, dark berries, coffee bean, fresh thyme, lovely soil tones, a bit of bonfire and the first hints of the fallen leaves to come with bottle age. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and quite primary, with fine focus and balance, a sappy core of black fruit, a bit of firm tannin and excellent length and grip on the young and palate-staining finish. This is a very serious bottle of Fleurie that will truly benefit from a bit of bottle age, and I would plan on tucking this away in the cellar until mid-2013 to really let its secondary layers emerge. A fine, fine bottle in the making! 2013-2023. **90+.**

2011 Fleurie- Clos de la Roilette (Alain Coudert)

The 2011 Clos de la Roilette is a glorious bottle in the making, offering up a deep and sappy nose of red and black cherries, pomegranate, a touch of cocoa, lovely herb tones, dark soil nuances and a hint of cedar in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, very pure and full-bodied, with a quite formidable spine of tannin for this bottling, a sappy core of fruit, moderate acids and stunning length and grip on the still very primary finish. Like most of the top 2011s, this vintage of Clos de la Roilette will demand at least a few years in the cellar to really start to blossom, but should prove to be very long-lived and an outstanding wine once it softens up a bit. Impressive juice. 2015-2035. **93.**

2011 Fleurie “Cuvée Tardive”- Clos de la Roilette (Alain Coudert)

As superb as the regular bottling of Clos de la Roilette is in 2011, the Cuvée Tardive is a notable step up in quality. This is not something that I always find to be the case, as in some vintages the Cuvée Tardive is a more structured version that will certainly live longer, but is not always significantly above the beautiful regular bottling. But, in 2011 this is a very special wine indeed. The deep, primary and almost bottomless nose offers up a very pure and gorgeous blend of black cherries, plums, raw cocoa, beautiful, dark soil tones, a touch of lavender, woodsmoke and a fine topnote of fresh herbs. On the palate the wine is very pure and full-bodied, with a rock solid core of fruit, plenty of firm, ripe tannins, great focus and grip and a very, very long, reserved and youthful finish. This will need several years in the cellar to blossom, but it is an extremely promising wine of great potential. At this early stage, it is hard to say if this will equal or surpass the great 2009 and 2005 versions, but it certainly belongs in the same company. 2016-2040. **95.**

2011 Fleurie “Poncié”- Domaine du Vissoux (Pierre-Marie Chermette)

Pierre-Marie Chermette’s 2011 Fleurie “Poncié” is a beautiful wine in the making, with a synthesis of the vintage’s intensity of flavor and great transparency coupled to a vibrant sappiness that is quite impressive. The very pure and expressive nose wafts from the glass in a

blend of cherries, red plums, blood orange, a touch of cocoa, a lovely base of soil, fresh herbs and dried violets in the upper register. On the palate the wine is fullish, pure and loaded with almost sweet fruit at the core, with excellent focus and balance, impressive, nascent complexity and stunning length and grip on the very tangy and vibrant finish. This is one 2011 Fleurie that does not seem to need cellaring to start to seduce and should be a superb drink right from the start. Lovely juice. 2012-2022+. 94.

2011 Fleurie “Les Garants”- Domaine du Vissoux (Pierre-Marie Chermette)

Pierre-Marie Chermette’s Fleurie “les Garants” is a stunning young example of the 2011 vintage, with an almost “meaty” character to the fleshy and bottomless fruit here that is truly exceptional. This is a classic 2011 Cru, with its concentration of fruit utterly transparent at the same time, rather than driven by ripeness that takes center stage over the base of soil tones. The Les Garants *lieu à dit* is a southwesterly-facing vineyard on pink granite flecked with both mica and quartz, and this superb base is the focal point of this lovely bottle, which was raised in ten percent new oak barrels and the rest in *foudre*. The stunning nose is very pure and sappy, but also classic and soil-driven in its aromatic mélange of pomegranate, red plums, complex soil tones, fresh herbs (mostly redolent of mustard seed and lavender), raw cocoa, incipient notes of gamebird, a bit of youthful pepperiness and a whisper of cedar in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and stunning in its purity, with a rock solid core of fruit, ripe, moderate tannins, laser-like focus and absolutely stunning length and grip on the primary and very, very promising finish. This will be a great wine, and while it is a superb drink already (I finished the sample bottle in no time flat!) it would be an absolute crime to drink this wine before it has had at least a couple of years in the cellar to allow its secondary layers of complexity to emerge. This is brilliant Fleurie in the making! 2014-2035. 95+.

2011 Fleurie “Clos de la Grand Cour”- Domaine de la Cour (Jean-Louis Dutraive)

As readers may remember from last year’s Beaujolais report, Jean-Louis Dutraive is a young grower who has only recently begun producing wines from his eight hectare monopole vineyard of the Clos de la Grand Coeur in Fleurie. Amongst his *stages* prior to starting out in Fleurie was a season with Christophe Roumier in Chambolle-Musigny. Christophe still supplies the older Burgundy barrels that Jean-Louis uses for the *elevage* of much of his wine. The 2011 Fleurie is a lovely and very exotic wine, which I assume was also raised in two-thirds old Roumier barrels and one-third in old *foudres*- as was the case with the lovely 2010 version of this wine. The 2011 Clos de la Grand Cour is a deep and very serious wine on the nose, offering up scents of ripe cherries, pomegranate, woodsmoke, a touch of gamebird, fresh thyme, a lovely base of soil, dried violets and a bit of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite youthful, with a sappy core of fruit, superb soil signature, plenty of the ripe tannins of the vintage, nascent complexity and outstanding length and grip on the chewy and still quite youthful finish. There is a touch of volatile acidity here when the wine is first opened, but that blows off with a couple of minutes air. This is a very young and intense bottle of Fleurie, with far more stuffing and potential for longevity than the fine 2010 version, but this wine will demand a few years in the cellar before it really becomes approachable, as the finish is really quite tannic for a young bottle of Fleurie, with a bit of wood tannin joining the sturdy tannins of the vintage. Give this wine four or five years in the cellar- after which it should be excellent. 2016-2035. 92+.

2011 Fleurie- Domaine Julien Sunier

Julien Sunier’s 2011 Fleurie is an absolutely superb example of this top-notch vintage. I assume that this wine is raised along the lines of his fine Morgon- not de-stemmed, fermented in

cement tanks and aged in old Burgundy barrels for just under a year prior to bottling. The 2011 Fleurie offers up a deep and very classy, red fruity bouquet of cherries, sweet cranberries, lovely soil tones, a gentle smokiness, fresh herbs redolent of *garrigue*, roses and just a faint whisper of cedar in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and tightly-knit, with a fine core of pure red fruit, excellent transparency, fairly firm tannins and excellent length and grip on the nascently complex, soil-driven and still chewy finish. This is a serious Fleurie that will demand a bit of time in the cellar to unwind, but should prove to be an outstanding example of the vintage in the fullness of time. 2014-2030+. **92+**.

2010 Fleurie “Cuvée Griffé du Marquis”- Clos de la Roilette (Alain Coudert)

Like many of the top Crus from 2010, the Cuvée Griffé du Marquis from this vintage seems to be in the process of shutting down for a bit of sleep right now and this is a wine that is going to want a bit of time alone in a dark corner of the cellar before it starts to really blossom. Of course, the Coudert family keeps this wine back an additional year prior to release, so this is the new vintage out on the market right now, and it does indeed show outstanding promise on both the nose and palate. The bouquet is a deep and fairly primary blend of pomegranate, black cherries, a touch of blueberry, fresh herb tones, a hint of the gamebirds to come, beautiful, dark soil tones, woodsmoke and a deft touch of cedary wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and impeccably balanced, with a superb core of pure fruit, lovely soil inflection, moderate tannins, tangy acids and a long, tangy and closed finish that is currently a bit youthfully peppery. This will be lovely, but it will demand some bottle age. 2016-2035+. **93+**.

2010 Fleurie- Maison Joseph Drouhin

The 2010 Fleurie from Maison Drouhin has not shut down at all over the course of the last fifteen months (since I last crossed paths with a bottle) and the wine is drinking beautifully today, with a very pretty core of fleshy fruit now quite accessible and seductive on the palate. The classy nose offers up a fine blend of red and black cherries, a touch of nuttiness, fresh herb tones, a bit of bonfire, a lovely signature of autumnal soil tones and a whisper of pepper in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and very intensely flavored, with tangy acids, a fine core of fruit, just a touch of tannin and outstanding focus and grip on the long and bouncy finish. A classic bottle of Fleurie that is drinking well now, but has the structural integrity to age gracefully for another eight to ten years. 2012-2020+. **91**.

2010 Fleurie- Château de Fleurie

Readers may recall that the Château de Fleurie is owned by the Barbet family, who are proprietors of St. Amour’s greatest estate, Domaine des Billards. The 2010 Château de Fleurie is a beautifully elegant and vibrant example of this classic vintage, jumping from the glass in mélange of red and black cherries, woodsmoke, fresh thyme, dark soil tones and just a touch of youthful black pepper. On the palate the wine is medium-full, bright and sappy, with classic depth, just a touch of tannin, fine focus and complexity and a long, modestly tannic and palate-staining finish. This does not have the same mid-palate stuffing as the top 2011s from this village, but I really like its intensity of flavor and its fine structural elements. Like the 2009 Château de Fleurie, the 2010 has a nice sense of reserve that augurs well for tucking it away for a year or two in the cellar and allowing it to fully come into its own. Lovely wine. 2013-2025+. **89+**.

2010 Fleurie “La Madone”- Domaine de Prion

The *lieu à dit* of La Madone lies right up at the very peak of the sweeping hillside vineyards of Fleurie (right below the sacred monument of the Madonna from which it takes its

name) and from the top of this vineyard one has one of the most spectacular views in all of northern Beaujolais. Domaine de Prion's vines here are between fifty and sixty years of age and their 2010 is a lovely bottle of Fleurie, jumping from the glass in a red fruity mélange of cherries, red plums, lovely soil tones, a touch of celery seed and a topnote of woodsmoke. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish, complex and tangy, with fine intensity of flavor, bright acids and fine focus and grip on the low fat and gently tannic finish. This is a lovely bottle that should really blossom with a year or two in the cellar. 2013-2025. **89.**

2010 Fleurie “Cuvée Vieilles Vignes”- Domaine de Prion

Domaine de Prion, which is owned by the Chanudet brothers- Sylvain and Christian- produces their old vine bottling from a selection of seventy to eighty year-old vines and which they then raise in two year-old Burgundy barrels purchased from Domaine Ramonet in Chassagne. The 2010 Vieilles Vignes is a stunning bottle of Fleurie, offering up a vibrant bouquet of red and black cherries, exotic spice tones, a lovely base of complex soil nuances, woodsmoke and dried flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and very pure, with excellent intensity of flavor, a sappy core, lovely focus and grip and a very long, softly tannic and perfectly balanced finish. While this is drinkable today, I would be strongly inclined to tuck this lovely wine away in the cellar for a year or two and really let its secondary layers blossom. Fine juice. 2013-2025+. **92.**

2010 Fleurie- Domaine des Terres Dorées (Jean-Paul Brun)

Jean-Paul Brun's 2010 Fleurie has shut down quite a bit since I last tasted it in the fall of 2011, and now seems like it should be cellared for another year or two longer than I initially projected. The nose is closed, but deep, complex and classy, as it offers up scents of pomegranate, cherries, a bit of white pepper, a touch of orange peel, violets, woodsmoke and lovely soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and tangy, with a good core, fine balance, with very good mid-palate depth, tangy acids, a bit of moderate tannin and very good length and grip on the soil-driven and shut down finish. Give this a few more years in the cellar to really blossom. 2014-2025+. **91.**

2009 Fleurie- Château de Fleurie

It had been more than a year since I last tasted the 2009 Château de Fleurie, and the wine was showing very well indeed. My impression of the wine a year ago was that it was a very “cool” expression of this vintage, but viewed in the context of a couple of months of tasting 2011s and 2010s, this wine certainly shows a “roasted” aspect to the fruit (not to be confused with overripeness) that is very much in keeping with the style of the vintage. The bouquet is deep, generous and flashy, as it jumps from the glass in a mélange of baked black cherries, plums, dried thyme, a hint of the meatiness that will come with a bit more bottle age, dark soil tones and a topnote of crushed violets. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite voluptuous on the attack for young Fleurie, with a good core of fruit, low acids, lovely focus and a complex, modestly tannic finish. As the acids are low here, the perception of the tannins is a bit more chewy than it might be in a more typical vintage, but the wine is so tasty today that I am inclined to enjoy this now and over the coming decade, while waiting for the hibernating 2010s to stir from slumber. Good juice, but this may get a bit heavy-handed if left alone for a decade or more, so I would plan to drink it relatively early. 2012-2020+? **91.**

2009 Fleurie “Cuvée Vieilles Vignes”- Domaine de Prion

The 2009 Fleurie “Cuvée Vieilles Vignes” from Domaine de Prion is a full degree higher in alcohol than its 2010 counterpart (fourteen percent versus thirteen percent) and is a much fleshier and riper example of Fleurie as a result. The ripe and roasted nose jumps from the glass

in a blaze of black cherries, cassis, hung game, chocolate and woodsmoke. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, fat and sappy, with an almost confectionary core of fruit, a wide open personality and quite good length and grip on the velvety and opulent finish. This wine seems like it will have to be drunk up fairly quickly, as it is very easy to imagine these aromatics and flavors getting oxidative with a bit of bottle age, but for near-term drinking, there is a lot to like here in this generally unstructured, but plush and lascivious Fleurie. 2012-2017. **88**.



Régnié

2010 Régnié- Domaine Guy Breton

The 2010 Régnié from Guy Breton has lovely stuffing and complexity, but my particular bottle was marred by a bit of volatile acidity on both the nose and palate. Some time in decanter certainly helped, but did not ameliorate the issue completely. Underneath the touch of acetic acid is really a very lovely wine, offering up notes of quince, cranberries, woodsmoke, a touch of game, fresh herb tones and soil. On the palate the wine is medium-full, complex and focused, with a good core, moderate tannins, tangy acids and good length and grip. For those who do not mind a little VA in their wines, this is a very satisfying glass of Régnié, but there is a fair bit of acetic acid present here on both the nose and palate and the wine will certainly not be for everyone. 2012-2017+? **83-88** (The higher score is only applicable if a fair bit of VA does not bother you.)

Morgon

2011 Morgon “Corcelette” Vieilles Vignes- Daniel Bouland

Daniel Bouland’s small parcel in the *lieu à dit* of Corcelette was planted almost entirely in 1925, making these venerable vines eighty-six years of age in the 2011 vintage. The old vines have done an admirable job in this classic vintage, offering up a deep, complex and nicely reserved nose of cassis, black cherries, stony soil tones, woodsmoke, a touch of espresso and lovely topnotes of fresh thyme and sage. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully focused, with a rock solid core of pure black fruit, bright acids, excellent focus and balance and a very, very long, tangy and modestly tannic finish. This is one of those bottlings of Morgon that will go on forever and ever- based on its truly exceptional balance, more than on its overtly tannic structure, as it is one of the more politely-structured Morgons of the vintage. A complete classic. 2014-2050. **94.**

2011 Morgon “Delys”- Daniel Bouland

Though Daniel Bouland only has four hectares of vines in Morgon, he has some of the choicest plots and plenty of old vines. His parcel in the *lieu à dit* of Delys was planted in 1926, making these vines one year younger than his vines in Corcelette, but here, the soils produce a much more red fruity example of Morgon than is the case in his parcel of Corcelette. This is another absolutely beautiful and classic young bottle of Morgon in the making, offering up a deep and very, very pure nose of cherries, pomegranate, raw cocoa, beautifully complex, granitic soil tones, incipient notes of nutskin, roses, fresh herb tones, a hint of coffee and perhaps a bit of cedar in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and flawlessly balanced, with a rock solid core of fruit, stunning soil inflection, a fair bit of ripe tannin and stunning nascent complexity on the very, very long and still very primary finish. I did not taste these two stunning Morgons from Monsieur Bouland side by side, so I have no idea which one I have a preference for at this point in time. Needless to say, they both have enormous potential, but give them a few years in the cellar to allow their secondary layers to emerge. 2015-2050. **94.**

2011 Morgon- Georges Descombes

The 2011 Morgon from Georges Descombes is absolutely exceptional, offering up outstanding depth and vibrancy on both the nose and palate. The deep, very pure and youthful nose offers up a sappy blend of black cherries, a touch of plum, dark chocolate, granite soil tones, a touch of vinesmoke and a topnote of fresh herbs. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and impressively reserved, with a rock solid core of fruit, outstanding transparency, firm, ripe tannins and a very long, soil-driven and still quite primary finish. There is a sappiness at the core that augurs very well for the evolution of this wine, but this is a classic 2011 Morgon and it will need some time for the tannins to resolve and the wine to really blossom. It will be stunning with sufficient bottle age, but this is not a wine to go opening upon release, unless one likes to chew through their glass of Morgon. Great potential. 2015-2035+. **93.**

2011 Morgon “Vieilles Vignes”- Domaine Michel Guignier

The old vine bottling of Morgon from Michel Guignier hails from sixty-one year-old vines in the vineyards of La Roche Pilée and Les Grands Cras. The 2011 Vieilles Vignes offers up a deep, red fruity and very pure nose of cherries, sweet cranberries, woodsmoke, beautiful herb tones, a complex base of soil, a touch of orange peel, incipient notes of gamebird and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully delineated, with a fine core of fruit, superb transparency, very good acids and fairly moderate tannins for the vintage and simply stunning length and grip on the vibrant and youthful finish. This is a

dynamite and absolutely classic bottle of Morgon in the making! It is far less forbidding structurally than the 2011 Bio-Vitis bottling from the domaine. 2014-2035+. **93.**

2011 Morgon “Bio-Vitis”- Domaine Michel Guignier

The Morgon “Bio-Vitis” bottling from Michel Guignier also hails from sixty-one year-old vines, from a section of the La Roche Pilée vineyard at the foot of the Côte du Py that were first converted over to organic viticulture and this section is now certified organic- hence the separate bottling from the “regular” Vieilles Vignes. The 2011 Bio-Vitis is a very deep and sappy example of the vintage, jumping from the glass in a primary blend of black cherries, pomegranate, a beautiful base of stony soil tones, fresh herb tones, woodsmoke and a nice touch of violet in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and sappy at the core, but also firmly structured and very youthful. The wine is very long, focused and well-balanced, but with plenty of 2011’s tannins in evidence and this vintage of Morgon “Bio-Vitis” is going to need to be tucked away in the cellar for a minimum of three years before it really starts to soften and blossom. The potential here is excellent, but give it time! 2016-2035+. **92+.**

2011 Morgon- Domaine Julien Sunier

As readers may recall, Julien Sunier’s Morgon hails from two parcels in the appellation, one being the well-known la Corcelette. The wine is not de-stemmed, is fermented in cement tanks and aged in old Burgundy barrels for eleven months prior to bottling. The 2011 offers up a very deep and vibrant nose that fully shows off the intensity inherent in this vintage as it wafts from the glass in a blend of sappy cherries, sweet cranberries, a touch of pomegranate, a beautiful base of soil, gentle notes of woodsmoke, beautiful, exotic spice tones redolent of cardamom and Ceylon cinnamon, peonies and just a touch of wood from the older Burgundy barrels. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very suave and classy, with lovely soil signature, fine mid-palate depth, ripe, but fairly substantial tannins and outstanding length and grip on the superbly focused and palate-staining finish. This is a glorious bottle of Morgon in the making, but it is still quite primary and is going to need some time in the cellar to fully blossom. 2015-2035+. **94.**

2010 Morgon “la Voute Saint Vincent”- Domaine Louis & Claude Desvignes

The 2010 Morgon “la Voute Saint Vincent” from Domaine Louis & Claude Desvignes has evolved beautifully in the bottle since I last saw it during my visit to the domaine in the summer of 2011, but this is still a wine on its way up and another year or two in the cellar would certainly not be a mistake with this lovely wine. The deep, pure and quite transparent nose offers up a fine mélange of cherries, quince, vinesmoke, lovely floral tones, fresh thyme and a fine base of soil that is just starting to transition from straight stoniness to a mix of mineral and incipient notes of *sous bois*. On the palate the wine is fullish, bright and bouncy, with fine complexity, very good mid-palate depth, still a bit of tannin and impressive length and grip on the intensely flavored finish. This does not have the sappiness at the core I anticipate the 2011 will have, but I very much like its purity, complexity and tangy intensity on the backend. Fine juice that is still on its way up! 2012-2025. **90+.**

2010 Morgon “Côte du Py”- Domaine Louis-Claude Desvignes

It had been a little over a year since I last tasted the 2010 Morgon “Côte du Py” from Domaine Louis-Claude Desvignes and I was very happy to see that the wine is still showing outstanding potential on both the nose and palate, but it remains a classic bottle of structured young Morgon and still a few years away from primetime drinking. The bouquet is deep and very promising, offering up a nascently complex nose of red and black cherries, vinesmoke,

fresh herbs, granitic soil tones, an incipient touch of meatiness and a bit of violet in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and tightly-knit, with a fine core, a fair bit of firm tannin, some youthful peppery tones, good acids and fine length and grip on the young and moderately tannic finish. This is not as tannic as many of the 2011 Morgons I tasted, but with its higher acids, it seems every bit as shut down today. I would still give this excellent wine another three years in the cellar to soften up and blossom- it should keep well for a couple of decades at the very least. 2015-2040. **92.**

2010 Morgon “Javernières”- Domaine Louis-Claude Desvignes

The 2010 Morgon “Javernières” from Domaine Louis-Claude Desvignes is also quite hunkered down and is in need of some extended cellaring to really blossom, but it remains chock full of potential. The nose is just a touch deeper and sappier than the 2010 Côte de Puy bottling, offering up a complex and youthful blend of cherries, sweet cranberries, pomegranate, woodsmoke, fresh herbs, a fine base of stony soil and a touch of coffee bean. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and really primary at the present time, with a fine core of fruit, firm tannins, fine focus and balance and a long, chewy and very soil-driven finish. This has excellent potential, but it has shut down pretty dramatically since I last saw it in July of 2011 and needs some time alone in the cellar before it is ready to deliver up on its serious promise. Like the 2010 Côte de Puy bottling from the Desvignes family, this wine is reticent at the present time and shows a bit of *herbacité* when first opened, but this should just be a passing phase during the wines’ adolescence. Fine potential here. 2015-2040+. **92+.**

2010 Morgon “Vieilles Vignes”- Château Grange Cochard

Château Grange Cochard, owned by the couple of Sarah and James Wilding since 2008, is a superb estate that has the benefit of tons of old vines, with its Morgon vineyards ranging from fifty to one hundred years of age. The old vine cuvée is comprised of their fifty year-old parcels and is absolutely lovely in 2010, offering up a superb and sappy nose of red and black cherries, roses, a touch of game, sweet cranberries, woodsmoke and a lovely base of granite-like soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, broad and sappy, with lovely mid-palate depth, a nice spine of ripe tannin, tangy acids and excellent length and grip on the focused finish that closes with a youthful note of white pepper. This is a lovely bottle of Morgon for drinking right out of the blocks, but with the structure to easily cruise along for ten to fifteen more years. 2012-2025+. **90.**

2010 Morgon “Côte du Py”- Château Grange Cochard

The Côte du Py bottling from Château Grange Cochard hails from the oldest vines on the estate- one hundred years of age and planted at the very summit of this famous vineyard. The nose on the 2010 version is deep, pure and very precise in its mélange of sweet cranberries, cherries, curry-like spice tones, a beautiful, stony soil signature, woodsmoke, pepper and a floral topnote of rose petals. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and tangy, with a rock solid core of fruit, a tightly-knit structure, great intensity of flavor and exceptional length and grip on the moderately tannic finish. I would give this superb bottle of Morgon a few years in the cellar to blossom from behind its structure and then drink it with great pleasure over the ensuing couple of decades. 2014-2030+. **93.**

2010 Morgon- Georges Descombes

I am sure that I received this sample as a reward for swinging and missing on the wine in last year’s report, as my sample a year ago showed a bit of aggressive volatile acidity. This bottle on the other hand, is deep, pure and shows no signs of VA. The wine is in the process of closing down, as are so many of the serious 2010 Crus, but its quality is readily evident and I would be

delighted to have this superb wine in my cellar to pull out in three or four years' time. The deep and very precise nose wafts from the glass in a classic blend of red cherries, blood orange, complex herb tones (if I had glaucoma, this is the wine I would be drinking, if you catch my drift...), a beautiful base of soil, vinesmoke, a bit of citrus peel and a topnote of peonies. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and beautifully transparent, with very good mid-palate depth, bright acids, a fair bit of ripe tannin and great focus and balance on the very long and still very primary finish. A fine, low fat example of Morgon that should be absolutely superb with a few years of bottle age. 2014-2035. **92.**

2010 Morgon "Côte du Py"- Château des Jacques

This was my first look at the 2010 Morgon "Côte du Py" from Château des Jacques and the wine is an outstanding example of the vintage. The deep, pure and still very expressive nose offers up scents of black cherries, cassis, woodsmoke, a beautiful base of stony soil, a touch of French roast, incipient notes of meatiness, marjoram and a deft touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, nascently complex and beginning to show the first signs of shutting down (as have so many 2010 Morgons!), with a fine core of fruit, chewy tannins, tangy acids and lovely focus and balance on the long and slightly white peppery finish. I love the delineation and nascent complexity here, but this wine is soon to go into deep hibernation and really should be tucked away in the cellar for another four or five years. It should prove to be a very long-lived and outstanding wine if a little patience is exercised! 2016-2040+. **92.**

2010 Morgon- Maison Joseph Drouhin

The 2010 Morgon from Joseph Drouhin is a tad more shut down than it was a year ago, but compared to some of the Morgons from this vintage that are now absolutely hermetically sealed, this is still fairly accessible and really quite a tasty drink. The deep, complex and still very vibrant nose offers up scents of cherries, pomegranate, vinesmoke, mustard seed, lovely soil tones and a touch of orange rind in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and tangy, with a good core currently a bit bound up in its girdle of acidity, moderate tannins and a long, focused and youthful finish. Given that this wine was fairly tight out of the blocks a year ago, it is progressing nicely and, while it is still a year or two away, it is showing no signs of shutting down for a protracted period of hibernation and may even start to drink a bit sooner than I initially projected. Fine juice. 2014-2035. **91+.**

2010 Morgon- Domaine de la Roche Pilée (Florence Delorme)

Florence Delorme and her husband recently took over this beautifully-situated, petite domaine in Morgon, and I was very, very impressed with the quality of her 2010 Morgon. Their parcels are very well placed, with plots in two of the top *lieux à dits* in Morgon, Corcelette and Douby, and the average age of the vines here is fifty years of age, with some plots now over eighty years old. There are two bottlings produced, a Morgon *classique* and a Morgon *Fût de Chêne* bottling raised for one year in Burgundy barrels. The wines do not see any carbonic maceration and the 2010 straight Morgon is a beautiful example of the vintage, jumping from the glass in a classy aromatic blend of red and black cherries, woodsmoke, a touch of pepper, a beautifully pure base of soil tones, orange peel and a gently floral topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full-bodied, with beautiful transparency, a sappy core, bright acids and just a touch of tannin perking up the very long and superbly focused finish. This is not a powerful style of Morgon, but rather one of superb intensity of flavor and outstanding complexity. Great juice! 2012-2025+. **93.**

2010 Morgon- Domaine des Terres Dorées (Jean-Paul Brun)

The 2010 Morgon from Monsieur Brun is another 2010 Cru Beaujolais that has really hunkered down for hibernation since I last tasted it around this time last year, and my initial impression that the wine would be starting to drink around 2014 may have been a bit optimistic. The bouquet is more reticent than it was a year ago, but every bit as promising, as it offers up scents of cherries, pomegranate, herb tones, roses, lovely stony soil tones and a gentle topnote of woodsmoke. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and tight, with a sappy core of pure fruit, excellent transparency, firm tannins, bright acids and excellent focus and grip on the well-balanced and still very primary finish. This wine will be excellent in the fullness of time, but it is still probably three years away from starting to stir and blossom. 2015-2040. **92+**.

2007 Morgon “les Vernes”- Domaine du Crêt de Ruyère (Jean-Luc Gauthier)

It has been a year since I last crossed paths with the 2007 Morgon “les Vernes” from Jean-Luc Gauthier and the wine continues to drink beautifully and I cannot think of anything finer than to walk into a New York restaurant and be able to order a complex and mature bottle of Morgon such as this off of the wine list. The deep and very complex nose has gotten more red fruity in the last twelve months and offers up a lovely mélange of cherries, a touch of strawberry, a bit of cocoa, gamebirds, beautifully complex herb tones, incipient notes of *sous bois* and other autumnal nuances such as acorns and gentle notes of bonfire. On the palate the wine is medium-full, plush and velvety, with a lovely core of fruit, little remaining tannin, tangy acids and lovely focus and grip on the long and complex finish. There was just a touch of volatile acidity in my sample bottle of the '07 les Vernes, which quickly dissipated with decanting, so I would be inclined to decant this wine before serving. Fine juice. 2012-2019. **91**.

2006 Morgon “Tradition”- Domaine du Crêt de Ruyère (Jean-Luc Gauthier)

Man, I love mature Beaujolais! These 2006 Morgon bottlings from Jean-Luc Gauthier are new releases from this maverick producer based in Villié-Morgon, who chooses to hold back his wines until they have had sufficient bottle age to start to really drink well. The 2006 Morgon “Tradition” is an excellent wine, offering up a deep and fully mature nose of cherries, woodsmoke, forest floor, a hint of cinnamon stick, beautiful soil tones, a touch of turmeric, gamebirds and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, refined and beautifully complex, with secondary layers of development, a fine core, melting tannins, lovely focus and balance and a long, nobly rustic finish that is the epitome of Morgon. Just a beautiful bottle of wine for drinking over the next decade! 2012-2022+. **91**.

Brouilly

2011 Brouilly- Domaine Georges Descombes

The 2011 Brouilly from Georges Descombes is a deep and quite youthful example of the vintage that shows off the inherent concentration of low yields and the great purity that are the hallmarks of this vintage. The very pure and sappy nose offers up scents of black cherries, sweet cranberries, a touch of bonfire, incipient notes of nutskin, lovely fresh herb tones that are almost *garrigue*-like in nature and a serious base of soil. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite structured for a young Brouilly, with the sappy kernel of fruit at the core fenced in by ripe tannins and bright acids. The focus and balance here are quite fine and all this long and serious wine will need is a bit of time in the cellar to emerge from behind its structural elements. Today, it is approachable, but still pretty primary and at least a few years of cellaring time will be richly rewarded. 2014-2027+. **90+**.

2011 Brouilly “Pierreux”- Domaine du Vissoux (Pierre-Marie Chermette)

The 2011 Brouilly “Pierreux” from Pierre-Marie Chermette is absolutely stunning and impressively expressive right out of the blocks, jumping from the glass in a blaze of cherries, dark berries, bitter chocolate, lovely soil tones, fresh herbs and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and very vibrant, with a sappy core of fruit, lovely focus and purity, tangy acids and a very long, svelte and perfectly balanced finish. Like so many of these 2011s, the Brouilly “Pierreux” from Domaine du Vissoux will drink very well from the outset, but will improve noticeably if given at least a year or two in the cellar to really allow it to blossom. 2012-2022. 91+.



2010 Brouilly- Maison Joseph Drouhin

Joseph Drouhin’s 2010 Brouilly has shut down a bit since I last tasted it in the autumn of 2011, with its lovely and very sappy core of fruit now a bit buttoned down behind its girdle of acidity, but the wine has lost none of its promise and should be a lovely drink with another year or two of bottle age. This was one of my favorite crus in the Drouhin Beaujolais lineup last year, and the wine continues to offer a lovely and classic nose of pomegranate, cherries, fresh herb tones, a complex base of soil (that is just beginning to show a bit of evolution, adding a touch of fallen oak leaves to its profile), a bit of bonfire and a gentle touch of violets in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and tangy, with lovely depth, moderate tannins and outstanding length and grip on the focused and now quite closed down finish. There is a bit of backend pepperness poking out now that was not evident when the puppy fat of fruit had the

upper hand here a year ago, so I would let this fine bottle sleep another couple of years in the cellar before really having at it in earnest. 2014-2025+. **91.**

Côte de Brouilly

2011 Côte de Brouilly “Cuvée les Ambassades”- Domaine du Pavillon de Chavannes

This was the first time I had tasted an example of Côte de Brouilly “Cuvée les Ambassades” from Domaine du Pavillon de Chavannes, which caught my eye for its very colorfully painted label that recalls a bit that of Château Thivin. The 2011 Cuvée les Ambassades is a lovely wine that offers up a bright and beautifully complex nose of pomegranate, cherries, fresh thyme, a fine base of minerality, woodsmoke and just a whisper of cedar. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, beautifully transparent and impressively sappy at the core, with tangy acids, excellent focus and bounce, a bit of ripe tannin and outstanding length and grip on the primary and intensely flavored finish. Just a superb wine that really cries out for a few years in the cellar to allow its secondary layers to emerge- though for those who are insistent about opening it now, it is indeed an awfully good drink with twenty minutes in a decanter. Very impressive juice in 2011! 2014-2035. **92.**

2011 Côte de Brouilly- Daniel Bouland

I am very quickly coming around to the thinking that Daniel Bouland is one of the very finest producers in all of Beaujolais, and I am delighted to see that he is producing a bottling of Côte de Brouilly, as this is one of my very favorite Crus (the only previous vintage I have tasted of Monsieur Bouland’s wine from this village was his 2009 Cuvée Melanie). His 2011 Côte de Brouilly is a stunning wine, offering up a deep, sappy and very transparent bouquet of black cherries, pomegranate, a striking base of stony soil tones, a touch of blood orange, fresh thyme, incipient notes of nutskin, mustard seed and a nice touch of peonies in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very pure and transparent, with a sappy core of red and blue fruit, great soil drive, superb focus and balance, ripe, fairly substantial tannins and stunning length and grip on the poised and utterly classic finish. Just an outstanding example of Côte de Brouilly! 2015-2035. **94.**

2011 Côte de Brouilly “les Septes Vignes”- Château Thivin

What is there to say about Claude Geoffray’s beautiful wines from Château Thivin? The man has never missed in my experience and each year the Thivin wines are exemplars of the vintage’s inherent potential of excellence. His 2011 Septes Vignes bottling (this designation does not appear in the US market, where the wine is simply labeled as “Côte de Brouilly”, but does so everywhere else in the world) is a young and classy wine that shows outstanding potential. The very pure, complex and laser-like nose jumps from the glass in a youthful mélange of pomegranate, sweet cranberry, woodsmoke, fresh thyme, lovely soil tones and a gentle topnote of peonies. On the palate the wine is deep, pure and full-bodied, with a seamless palate impression, a sappy core of fruit, ripe, moderate tannins and a very long, primary and palate-staining finish. Unlike the more powerful 2009 Septes Vignes bottling, which had to tip the scales at fourteen percent alcohol, the 2011 is a cool thirteen percent and utterly classic in profile. This is a deeper and sturdier wine than the lovely 2010 bottling, and it will be interesting how it fares over the coming decades in the rarefied air with the 2009 and 2005 versions. This is a very young, great and classic example of Côte de Brouilly! 2015-2040+. **94.**

2010 Côte de Brouilly- Domaine de la Voute Croze (Nicole Chanrion)

I have drunk more than a case of the 2010 Côte de Brouilly from Nicole Chanrion since I last wrote about the Beaujolais region last February, as I find this wine absolutely delicious. This

is one Cru from 2010 that has not shut down one iota and offers up a deep and very vibrant nose of red and black cherries, fresh herbs, a beautifully complex base of soil tones, a touch of blood orange, incipient notes of the *sous bois* and a gently smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and intensely flavored, with a lovely lightness of step, a sappy core, beautiful transparency and a long, wide open and tangy finish. This is a classic example of this superb bottling that still has plenty of life ahead of it, but I am working through my pile in the cellar at an alarming rate! 2012-2022+. **93.**

2006 Côte de Brouilly- Domaine de la Voute Croze (Nicole Chanrion)

I had long ago finished off my case of the 2006 Côte de Brouilly from Nicole Chanrion, but my father found a bottle from his two cases still in the cellar that he had forgotten about, so I quickly suggested we see how this lovely vintage had progressed since we last drank it with regularity. The nose on the 2006 has developed a lovely secondary layer of complexity, without losing any vibrancy, and now offers up a superb aromatic mélange of black cherries, plums, deep and complex soil tones that are only beginning to hint at autumnal shadings, a touch of gamebird, herb tones, vinesmoke and a gentle touch of nuttiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and suave, with lovely mid-palate depth, fine focus and balance, just a trace of tannin and a long, tangy and black fruity and soil-driven finish. This is a beautiful wine that has now reached its apogee, but shows no signs of slowing down any time soon. 2012-2020. **92.**

2005 Côte de Brouilly “les Septes Vignes”- Château Thivin

This is the “regular” bottling from Château Thivin, which is sold in the states without the “les Septes Vignes” designation on the label. This particular bottle was the second I have opened out of my case of the ’05 (the first having been opened two years ago while the wine was still hermetically sealed behind its structural elements) and I was very pleased to find the wine starting to stir and showing signs of ending its prolonged hibernation. The deep, pure and blossoming nose jumps from the glass in a mélange of cherries, pomegranate, woodsmoke, a touch of pepper, fresh bay leaf, juniper berries, incipient notes of violets and a beautifully complex base of soil. On the palate the wine is very pure, full-bodied and deep at the core, with beautiful balance and delineation, tangy acids, still a touch of ripe tannin and simply superb length and grip on the complex and very soil-driven finish. This is a classic vintage in the making at Château Thivin and the 2009 will have to go some distance to eventually outpace this beautiful 2005! While this wine is beginning to drink quite nicely (the great relief of my eighty-one year-old father who also owns a case!), I would be inclined to pick at the wine slowly, as there are still decades more development to come in this perfectly balanced and very pure wine. 2012-2035. **94.**

2005 Côte de Brouilly- Domaine de la Voute Croze (Nicole Chanrion)

Madame Chanrion’s 2005 Côte de Brouilly is drinking beautifully at age seven and offers up an exuberant and complex aromatic mélange of black cherries, a nice touch of plumminess, fresh thyme, a bit of meatiness, incipient notes of nutskin and a fine topnote of woodsmoke. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and currently wearing its heart on its sleeve, with a wide-open personality, fine complexity and a very long, velvety and tangy finish. I have little doubt that this vintage of Nicole Chanrion’s lovely Côte de Brouilly will continue to cruise along for many years to come, but it is so good to drink right now that I have a hard time anticipating keeping that many bottles around in my cellar to see how they evolve with further bottle age! 2012-2025. **93.**

ROBERT MONDAVI'S SUPERB RUN OF CABERNET SAUVIGNON



Robert Mondavi was one of the great innovators and visionaries of the early years of modern California wine production, though unlike many of his contemporaries who also played a huge role in creating the world of California wine as we know it today- people like Joe Heitz, André Tchelistcheff, Bob Travers and Paul Draper- he was not primarily a winemaker. He was the marketing force in the Mondavi family in their early years in the wine trade, when the family expanded their wine business from the Central Valley bulk wine trade (which at the time was then the dominant engine of California wine business) up into Napa Valley, first purchasing the Sunny St. Helena Winery soon after Robert had graduated from Stanford (to source a better level of grapes for their jug wines than what was available in the sun-baked San Joaquin Valley) and then the iconic Napa property of Charles Krug in 1943. Robert's father, Cesare Mondavi was a very conservative businessman and his initial reaction was not positive to the Krug purchase when it was proposed to him by his son Robert, but with a little convincing from his wife Rosa, the family finally decided to take the plunge on high-level wine production. The Krug estate was pretty rundown at the time the Mondavis purchased it, but the family quickly regenerated the property and during the next few decades it was once again amongst the elite producers of fine wines in California. When the Mondavis arrived at Charles Krug in '43, Robert had full rein at the winery, as his brother Peter was still completing his stint in the Army, but the eventual division of labor for the estate was envisioned for younger brother, Peter, once he had completed his military service, remaining at the winery in Napa and in charge of winemaking and

viticulture, while the older brother, Robert, hit the road building up the US market for Charles Krug wines.

Over time, this division of labor between the Mondavi boys led to plenty of friction between the two brothers and eventually fisticuffs and a serious family rift between Robert on one side and Peter, his sister Mary and his mother Rosa Mondavi on the other side (Cesare had passed away a few years earlier). Robert was eventually dismissed from his position as General Manager for Charles Krug (after a forced leave of absence) and banned from the decision making process at the property by his mother and brother. Robert responded by putting together investors for his own project and ground was broken on the Robert Mondavi Winery in July of 1966. It was a very feverish period at the new winery that year, rushing to get a semblance of winemaking facilities in place at the not yet completed Oakville winery in time for the harvest of 1966 (there was no roof over the fermentation room for that first vintage!), but everything was pieced together in the cellars just in time for the arrival of the grapes and the inaugural vintage at Robert Mondavi Winery was to prove to be a great success and a harbinger of things to come. Eventually, the Mondavi family ended up in court over the Charles Krug estate and a final settlement was reached in 1976, with Robert coming out on top. As the years went by, the relative positions of the new Robert Mondavi Winery and the Charles Krug Winery went in opposite directions, with the once Napa Valley flagship wines of Charles Krug losing a bit of luster and market position over the ensuing years (no doubt hampered a bit financially by the hefty settlement that had to be paid out to Robert, who had owned a significant percentage of Charles Krug at the time of his dismissal), while the Robert Mondavi wines became some of the leading wines in the golden age of California wine that was just dawning as the decade of the 1970s unfolded.

At the time of the opening of the Robert Mondavi Winery in 1966, Robert's very young winemaking team included a very young Warren Winiarski (soon to make his mark at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars) as well as an intern from the University of California at Davis, Ric Foreman, who oversaw the first crush and vinification in the jury-rigged new facilities. In fact, Ric Foreman, who was a bit ahead in his winemaking skills than Warren was most likely the primary winemaker for that first vintage at the new winery, and Robert Mondavi offered to give the young winemaker a permanent position at the estate once he had completed his degree at Davis. However, Ric Foreman, realizing that his upward career potential at the family-owned winery would always be limited by Robert's two sons, Michael and Tim Mondavi, who were around his own age, declined the offer and went off after his graduation with English businessman Peter Newton to found Sterling Vineyards. At startup, the Robert Mondavi Winery only owned a small parcel of vineyard land on the Valley floor, but right beside the well-regarded To Kolan Vineyard that was then owned by the Charles Krug Winery, and the new winery relied on contracts for purchased fruit to make the lion's share of their first few vintages. Eventually, Robert Mondavi would own a significant percentage of the To Kolan Vineyard himself and it would become the backbone for many of the cabernet bottlings the winery would produce throughout its golden era of the 1970s and 1980s. While the new winery was soon to earn high marks for its superb cabernet sauvignons, the first wine with which the estate caught the imaginations of California wine lovers was their Fumé Blanc, which was released in 1967. The term "Fumé Blanc" was actually created by Robert Mondavi, who wanted to distinguish his sauvignon blanc bottling from most of the others being produced in the state at that time from

this grape variety, as the trend in the mid-1960s was for most sauvignon blanc bottlings to be finished with a fair bit of residual sugar. Mondavi wished to emphasize that their sauvignon blanc was modeled on the great dry wines of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé, rather than on the sweeter version being crafted at other California wineries at the time, and hence the name of Fumé Blanc.

The first vintage of the Robert Mondavi cabernet sauvignon, the 1966, was released in 1968 to great acclaim, and the iconic wine of the Robert Mondavi Winery was off and running. Throughout its heyday, while the domaine produced superb wines from chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and cabernet sauvignon (amongst a welter of other varietal offerings), I have always felt that the winery had its greatest long-term success with its superb cabernets, and there is not one top vintage from even the earliest years that has not aged gracefully and continues to drink well to this day. Robert Mondavi, while still in charge of the marketing side of the family business at Charles Krug, had visited Burgundy for the first time in 1962, and the inherent elegance of these top French wines left a very strong impression on him. For many years prior, Robert had been well-known for comparing his own Charles Krug wines to top Bordeaux or Burgundies at blind tastings that he organized throughout the US market, and when he eventually launched the Robert Mondavi Winery in 1966, the elegance and ageworthiness of the very best French wines was very much his stylistic paradigm for his own wines. This was a slightly different vision than many of his top California cabernet contemporaries in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as many of the very best cabernet bottlings at this time, from wineries such as Mayacamas Vineyards, Heitz Wine Cellar, Ridge Vineyards and the like were producing more powerfully-styled wines, but the superb quality of the Robert Mondavi cabernets from this era were more tightly-knit and less powerful examples of Napa cabernet. In fact, the Mondavi wines of this period spoke very eloquently of the room for more than one stylistic vision of cabernet in the fertile soils of Napa Valley and have continued to do so over the forty-odd years of their positive evolution in bottle.

From the outset, the Mondavi winery had produced two cabernet bottlings, with one produced from a prime selection of barrels designated for a bit longer barrel aging and was eventually bottled on its own and released as the “Unfined” Cabernet Sauvignon, with the label discreetly claiming this with the “Unfined” version printed across the upper right corner of the front label. This would eventually culminate in the first “Reserve” cabernet from the winery, which it officially became in the 1971 vintage, after going through a one vintage iteration as “Unfined, Unfiltered” in 1970. From its outset, this cuvée was always a cellar selection of the best or most concentrated barrels in the cellar, rather than a vineyard selection, as the winery was still to be dependent for many years on purchased fruit for most of their varietal bottlings, and as the winery grew, the vineyard sources from which the grapes were purchased changed to feed the volume needs of the winery. Over the first decade of the winery’s existence, most of the cabernet bottlings were aged in a combination of French and American oak barrels, but this was eventually phased into one hundred percent French wood for the cabernets, as one of the chief things that had struck Robert Mondavi during his eye-opening visit to France in 1962 was how the quality of the cooperage at the best estates in France dramatically added to the polish of their wines. Happily though, it was not for many years that the percentage of new oak would reach one hundred percent for the Mondavi Reserve cabernet sauvignon, and for much of its first few decades, this bottling was one of the more gently new oaky versions to be found in Napa Valley.

I remember very well, that during the decade of the 1980s, it was quite fashionable in some critical circles to criticize the Robert Mondavi cabernets as “overly stylized” and lacking the power and volume that other top producers’ cabernets demonstrated at this time. While the Mondavi style of cabernet was already well established by this decade, with a fine track record for aging long and positively in the cellar, the style of the wines here began to undergo a cautious and subtle change in the latter half of the 1980s. Probably the culminating moment of this shift was seen with the release of the 1987 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, which marked Robert Mondavi’s fiftieth harvest in the California wine trade (dating all the way back to his first vintage of 1938 in the Central Valley). The ’87 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon was given a special label to commemorate this landmark vintage and the wine was decidedly more powerful and new oaky in style than any of the previous Mondavi Reserve cabernets had been up until this point. Upon release, it received rave reviews across the board in the wine press of the time and was probably the launching pad for the continued evolution in style of this bottling at the winery over the course of the coming years. I should observe, that while I do not mind the style of the heavily-toasted oak of the 1987 (which shares a very smoky new oak profile with the vintages of Opus One from this era), the winery did not take too many more vintages to wander over into the camp of overtly “over the top” cabernets, and the wines that are produced from cabernet sauvignon these days at the estate are to my palate simply a caricature of the great wines produced here during the first twenty-odd years of their existence. Today, I would much prefer to drink a beer with my steak than a bottle of a recent release of Mondavi Reserve cabernet, but this should not detract from the very, very fine run of vintages of cabernet that were crafted at the winery between 1966 and 1986, not to mention the still very good cabernets produced here in the next few vintages from 1987 forwards. I am not sure precisely in what vintage the style of the Mondavi Reserve cabernet sauvignon really went all out for the “over the top”, alcoholic and heady style so sadly prevalent still to this day in the realm of Napa cabernet, but there is no question that this has sadly been the style of this bottling now for well more than a decade.

I attended a small vertical tasting of the Mondavi wines here in New York in 2008, which highlighted a few of the older vintages of the Reserve cabernet, alongside some more recent vintages and a handful of additional varietal bottlings. In the notes that follow below, comments on the 2005, 2004, 2001, 1999 and 1996 vintages of Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve were culled from that tasting. I was so disappointed by the new and heady style of these wines that I did not contact the winery to see if it would be possible to taste other relatively current releases and round out the roster of tasting notes for this article, as I really did not find these new wines cut from the stylistic cloth that I really like from Napa wines and preferred to keep the focus of this piece on the truly superb wines that were crafted here out of this grape in earlier times. In April of this year, I attended a Mondavi Reserve Cabernet vertical tasting here in New York organized by one of the city’s well-known collectors and wine professionals, Brad Kane. We tasted through several of the top vintages of the decades of the 1970s and 1980s at this tasting, and it is primarily on this tasting that the following report is based. I have augmented the article with other notes I have on older vintages of the Mondavi “regular” cabernet sauvignon (which lost a bit of luster in terms of absolute quality in my opinion a bit earlier than the Reserve bottling, becoming a bit “commercially-oriented” in style early in the decade of the 1980s- or at least this is how I remember those bottlings from my wine merchant days), as well as notes on any other Reserve bottlings that I have crossed paths with in the last few years and which were not represented at our vertical in April. As has been my custom with other vertical reports, I have

included here notes on a few vintages of Mondavi cabernet that have appeared in previous articles on the “Golden Age” of California wine, reasoning that a bit of duplication of tasting notes in the database is preferable to not having all the Mondavi cabernet notes in one place for folks using this article for reference down the road.

Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon

The “regular” bottlings of Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon were also very ageworthy in style during the first fifteen years or so of the winery’s existence and I have had some absolutely splendid examples of this cuvée in recent times that hailed from the decade of the 1970s. In fact, the difference in quality between the regular and the Reserve bottlings during the 1970s is really quite small and today I do not hesitate to buy up older vintages of the regular bottling if I see them at auction at the right price from this era. As the Mondavi winery grew in the decade of the 1980s, I felt that the quality of the regular bottling fell off perceptibly as production numbers for this cuvée increased, and I was never a very big fan of this wine in the vintages of the 1980s. However, that said, I have not seen any of the 1980s vintages of the regular Mondavi cabernet in recent years to see how the wines have aged, so it is certainly not beyond the realm of possibility that these wines have also aged quite well. But, to my mind, the real interest with this cuvée lies back in the early years of the winery’s history, when this was a superb bottling that was built to age like a top bottling of claret and which have evolved beautifully with bottle age. Though the Mondavi cabernets from the ‘60s and ‘70s were all completely de-stemmed, the regular cabernet often shows a gentle “weediness” and cigar smoke aspect on both the nose and palate today that is very much claret-like in style, and the wines from most of the top vintages of this era continue to cruise along beautifully and show no signs of imminent decline.

1976 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon

The 1976 Mondavi cabernet sauvignon is a truly lovely example of this drought vintage, delivering excellent purity and elegance on both the nose and palate. The very classy nose shows almost none of the “roasted” tones that I frequently find in ’76 cabernets, wafting from the glass in a very classy mélange of red cherries, a touch of eucalyptus, woodsmoke, lovely soil tones, a whisper of chipotle pepper and a nice touch of fresh herbs in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite velvety on the attack, with a fine core of fruit, impressive complexity and still a bit of tannin perking up the long and focused finish. The acidity here is really quite lovely, giving the wine bounce and vibrancy and there are still decades of life ahead for this excellent 1976 cabernet. 2012-2035. **91.**

1974 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon

It had been four years since I last crossed paths with a bottle of 1974 Mondavi cabernet, and the wine continues to drink just beautifully. The nose is deep, impressively complex and quite lovely in its aromatic mélange of black cherries, cassis, a touch of petroleum jelly, Rutherford dust, chipotle peppers, fresh herb tones, cigar smoke and soil nuances. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and quite light on its feet, with fine complexity of flavor, just a touch of remaining tannins, good acids and a very long, complex and classy finish. One of my favorite vintages for the “regular” bottling of cabernet at Robert Mondavi. 2011-2030. **92.**

1973 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon

The 1973 Mondavi cabernet is fully mature and drinking very well at age thirty-six, and shows all the signs of still having at least another decade or so of life still ahead of it. The

bouquet is deep, complex and slightly bell peppery in the Mondavi house style of this era, as it offers up scents of black cherries, bell pepper, cigar ash, herb tones, chipotle peppers, a bit of Rutherford soil tones and a topnote of tobacco smoke. On the palate the wine is medium-full, round and complex, with a good core of fruit, melting tannins and sneaky length and grip on the poised and intensely flavored finish. A very good bottle still at its peak. 2009-2020. **89.**

1970 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon “Unfiltered”

This was the only vintage of the Mondavi cabernet sauvignon where the regular bottling carried the designation of “Unfiltered” (which had been used for the Reserve bottling in 1966), as the Reserve in this vintage was labeled as “Unfined, Unfiltered”. This is a great, classic vintage for Napa Valley cabernets, with the Mondavi “Unfiltered” weighing in at a very classic 12.2 percent in alcohol (ah, those were indeed the days!) and having been raised in only a modicum of new oak. The wine continues to drink beautifully, offering up a deep and complex bouquet of black cherries, cigar wrapper, leather, a touch of chipotle pepper, lovely soil tones and a smoky topnote. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and still quite tangy, with a fine core of fruit, excellent focus and balance and still a bit of tannin remaining on the very long and classy finish. Fine, fine juice still with plenty of life in it! 2012-2025. **91.**

1969 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon

It had been a few years since I last tasted a bottle of the 1969 Mondavi cabernet sauvignon, and this most recent bottle was decidedly fresher and more vibrant than the last bottle I tasted back in 2009. The nose is deep and really lovely, wafting up from the glass in a complex mix of cherries, a touch of eucalyptus, woodsmoke, soil tones, fresh herbs, summer truffles and a lovely topnote of Napa valley spices redolent of cinnamon and allspice. On the palate the wine is medium-full, long and still quite intensely flavored, with perfect resolution, no remaining tannins, but still excellent structural integrity on the long, velvety and quite elegant finish. Just a lovely bottle of fully mature Napa cabernet. 2011-2020. **90.**

Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

The Mondavi Reserve cabernet sauvignon was first labeled as such in the 1971 vintage. Initially, the wine had been labeled as “Unfined” to distinguish it from the regular cabernet bottling, and was aged longer in barrel in the cellars prior to release than the standard bottling. The “Unfined” rubric was only used for the first vintage of 1966, and by the time the winery produced their reserve bottling in the 1970 vintage, the designation had been changed to “Unfined, Unfiltered”. I am not sure if the vintages between 1966 and 1970 did not produce a reserve bottling, or if the designation remained “Unfined” for this bottling during the vintages of 1967 to 1969, but given my lack of satisfaction with the style of the Mondavi cabernets today, it seemed more politic not to contact the winery for this information. For many years, most of the grapes for this bottling have been sourced from the famed To Kalon Vineyard in Oakville that lies in the heart of the Rutherford Bench section of the Napa Valley. However, the “reserve” cuvée has from its inception been a selection of the very finest lots of cabernet in the cellars since its very early days- rather than a wine that finds its expression as a vineyard designate. The very first “Unfined” bottling hailed from the inaugural vintage of 1966 and included ten percent cabernet franc in the blend, which was a bit unprecedented at this time, as the top wineries in California in this era were intent on producing primarily single varietal bottlings for their top wines. Over the early years of this cuvée, the duration of barrel aging in the cellars was extended, with the 1966 only spending eighteen to nineteen months in barrel prior to bottling (probably due to the need to get the wine into the market for the fledgling winery), whereas by

the 1971 vintage this had already been extended to thirty months, but this would be adjusted to the style of each vintage in future years and would generally range around twenty-four months throughout the remainder of the decade of the 1970s and the 1980s. As the notes below will attest, the style here really began to change with the 1987 Reserve, which was still a very good wine (albeit really marked by its smoky, toasty new oak), but by the middle of the decade of the 1990s this bottling was slavishly starting to follow current fashions and ramping up in alcohol, overripe fruit flavors and new wood. By 1999, the wine is effectively dead as a fine wine bottling and the three vintages I have tasted from the early 2000s were really disappointing to my palate and a sad endnote to the great wines that had preceded it throughout much of the first two and a half decades of the history of the Robert Mondavi Winery. But, despite the very modern renditions of Napa cabernet that currently are being sold under the Reserve label here, the early wines have to be recognized for their superlative quality and are noteworthy for just how excellent they remain to this day and how gracefully they have stood the test of time. In fact, the Robert Mondavi Reserve cabernets from the decade of the 1970s and the early 1980s often pop up at auction today at very attractive prices and one could argue that they are some of the truly greatest mature red wine bargains to be found in the overheated world of auction pricing.

2005 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

2005 was a cool vintage characterized by heavy rains in May. Nevertheless, the Mondavi team managed through green harvesting and leaf pulling to bring in overripe grapes that allowed this wine to tip the scales at a cartoonish 15.1 percent alcohol! The 2005 Mondavi cabernet reserve is clearly amongst the most disappointing high end wines that I have ever tasted from the winery. The nose is overripe and decidedly unattractive, as it offers up notes of prunes, black cherries, chocolate, cigar ash and a boatload of raw new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, jammy and impressively dull, with wood tannins and prune flavors conspiring to make a less than impressive mélange of the finish. I cannot see this wine really ever righting the ship, but it may over the course of time approach a point where it can deliver very modest enjoyment. At least it is not overtly hot and alcoholic, but it is a far cry from the old Mondavi level of quality. 2015-2030? **79-83?**

2004 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

The 2004 Mondavi Reserve cabernet is another borderline overripe and uninteresting wine. If one needed any evidence (beyond the very uninteresting wine in the glass!) that the old Mondavi Reserve was fully dead by 2004, the full fifteen percent alcohol level is a very clear sign. The nose on the '04 offers up a typically concocted modern nose of boysenberries, chocolate, violets and plenty of new oak. On the palate is full-bodied, fat and gushing with simplicity, with a sappy, syrupy core of fruit, little shape or focus and a ton of raw, uncovered new oak tannins sticking out and drying the finish. The wine is at an extremely awkward stage right now, and it may eventually pull itself together somewhat and offer a bit better balanced palate impression. But this is Mondavi cabernet reserve “dumbed down” to an alarmingly pedestrian level. 2015-2030? **80-86?**

2001 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

Of all the Mondavi Reserves that I have tasted from the vintages of the last couple of decades, the 2001 seems to show the best potential of any wine since the 1987. This was a very long growing season, as an early and warm spring got flowering going early and harvest was initially started in Napa Valley on August 8th! However, the weather immediately turned cooler and the Mondavi team decided to allow the grapes to hang out until physiological ripeness to

mount, along of course with sugars and potential alcohol. The wine weighs in excess of a hefty fourteen and a half percent alcohol, but surprisingly, manages to stay fairly cool on the finish and does not stray as dramatically into overripe flavors as the 2005 for example. The bouquet is fairly closed at this stage, but offers up scents of marinated cherries, chocolate, tobacco and plenty of expensive new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and fairly reticent on the attack, with a rock solid core of fruit, good length and grip, and for a change, very well-integrated oak on the backend, so that the wine does not close with uncovered wood tannins. Despite its slightly marinated fruit component from the high alcohol, this wine may well age gracefully and shows more potential than most of these other recent offerings. 2015-2040? **88-91?**



1999 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

The 1999 growing season was one of the coolest of the decade, as a *La Niña* weather pattern produced late budbreak and a generally cool growing season, which was topped off by torrid temperatures late in the season that sent sugars soaring and wineries scrambling to bring in grapes. The wine went through malo in new barrels and tips the scales at a hefty fourteen percent alcohol. It is a decidedly modern style for this wine, marking the death of the former elegance that once defined the Mondavi reserve cabernet bottlings. In fact, the 1999 Mondavi Reserve cabernet seems to have gotten into some former baseball slugger's steroid closet, as the wine delivers a "pumped up" nose of black cherries, boysenberry syrup, a touch of lead pencil,

tobacco and a new oak component impressively redolent of pencil shavings. On the palate the wine is full, deep and vibrantly fruit-driven on the attack, with a fat core, and typically uncovered, raw wood tannins on the finish. Today this is a remarkably charmless wine- will it ever develop any interest, or has it been engineered into a permanent mediocrity? 2015-2030? **82-86+?**

1996 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

The 1996 Mondavi Reserve cabernet looks to be one of those transition wines, as there remains a hint of the former style of the winery laced through the ripe and manufactured aspects of the wine on the nose and palate. This vintage saw the wine undergo malolactic fermentation in new, small oak barrels, which may account for its departure in style from the '91 and earlier vintages. The wine tips the scales at 13.5 percent alcohol. The bouquet offers up notes of blueberries, black cherries, chocolate, cigar ash, herb tones and a fair bit of toasty new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and powerfully built, with a still quite fiery and tannic personality, good length and grip and a quite primary finish. This seems a bit forced stylistically, but it looks pretty good in comparison to the vintage that came along later, and may one day be a decent bottle of cabernet. 2014-2035? **87-89.**

1991 Robert Mondavi Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

The bottle of 1991 Mondavi Reserve cabernet that we had in our horizontal lineup (of '91 cabernets) was quite consistent with the last bottle I tasted a year or so ago, with a rather "safe" personality and perhaps just a touch more new wood than it really needed, but still made pretty much in the same style as the Mondavi Reserves from the decade of the late 1980s, rather than the more overtly jammy wines produced here today. The wine is a blend of eighty-seven percent cabernet sauvignon, ten percent merlot and three percent cabernet franc, and weighed in at 13.4 percent alcohol. Seventy percent of the blend hailed from the To Kalon vineyard in this vintage, which happened to be the twenty-fifth anniversary of the winery. The nose on the '91 Mondavi Reserve offers up a complex and sculpted blend of cassis, bell pepper, woodsmoke, herb tones, a touch of tar and a bit of toasty new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and fairly soft on the attack, with decent mid-palate depth, but not a lot of shape or delineation on the fairly long, slightly chunky finish. This is not a bad wine, but in comparison to the absolutely brilliant bottle of the '77 Mondavi Reserve cabernet that I tasted a few days previously, one really has to be a tad disappointed by this rather chaste effort. 2010-2030. **88.**

1990 Robert Mondavi Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

Already by the 1990 vintage, the future shape of this bottling was beginning to be felt, as the wine weighs in at 13.5 percent and shows still at age twenty-two, some wood tannins on the backend from its coating of heavily-toasted new wood. The wine is still not a bad effort, from what is not a top vintage in Napa, but it is decidedly not in the league of the wines that came from the first half of the 1980s and earlier. The nose offers up a deep and slightly weedy blend of black cherries, cigar ash, herb tones, Rutherford dust and plenty of Opus One-like, smoky new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and complex, with good, but not great depth at the core, fine focus and perfectly respectable length and grip on the slightly chewy finish. This is a pretty good bottle of cabernet, but it is a bit troubling to see the new wood tannins not fully integrated in the body of the wine this far down the line! 2012-2040. **88.**

1987 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

The 1987 Mondavi Reserve cabernet was a watershed vintage for the winery, as this represented Robert Mondavi's fiftieth overall harvest in the wine business (dating all the way back to the days of the family winery in the Central Valley) and the winery trotted out a new

label design for the Reserve cabernet in this vintage to mark the occasion. If memory serves me correctly, this was also the first vintage to really gain the approval of Robert Parker, who had been a bit lukewarm about the Mondavi Reserve cabernets in the previous several vintages for being a bit too ethereal in style to really hit the sweet spots of power, new oakiness and alcohol that he was most fond of in California cabernets. At our vertical in April, it was very clear that this was the vintage of departure in style between the past Mondavi Reserves and the wines that would come, as it is decidedly more new oaky and particularly marked by its smoky, toasty new oak, which was already a staple of the Opus One style for several vintages. The wine is still a very good wine, but served alongside of the 1986 Reserve at our vertical in April, it was very easy for me to have a much stronger affinity to the older style of the 1986. In any event, the 1987 Mondavi Reserve cabernet has aged quite well and is drinking at its peak, offering up scents of red and black cherries, fresh herb tones, smoke, a good base of valley soil tones and plenty of toasty new wood. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite plush on the attack, with very good complexity, good, but not great depth at the core (mirroring the evolution of the 1990 Reserve) and a bit of wood tannin still poking out on the long and focused finish. It has been many years since I last tasted the 1987 Reserve, which was one of the most powerful young vintages of this bottling ever released, and I would have expected the wine to have retained a bit better mid-palate depth as it aged. This is still a very good bottle of cabernet with plenty of life ahead of it, but if our bottle was pristine (there were no outward signs of poor handling, I was just expecting more based on my considerable experience tasting this wine in its relative youth!), then this wine is not in the league with the vintages that came before it. I hope there are better bottles out there! 2012-2025+? 87+?

1986 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

I had reported on the '86 Mondavi Reserve a few years back, based on a bottle that was supplied by the winery for a small vertical tasting of the cuvée held here in New York in 2008, and which the notes above on the vintages from the 2000s of the Mondavi Reserve were also taken. Happily, our vertical tasting this past April included a far more vigorous bottle of the '86 Reserve, which was truly outstanding on both the nose and palate and showed a lot more potential longevity than the bottle that hailed from the winery at the '08 tasting. The nose on this lovely wine is decidedly old school in its mélange of red and black cherries, Rutherford dust, cigar wrapper, fresh herb tones, a touch of graphite and a lovely base of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and completely *à point*, with an excellent core of fruit, a fine signature of soil, modest remaining tannins and superb length and grip on the complex and beautifully focused finish. Here there are no issues with uncovered wood tannins on the backend and this very fine wine still has plenty of life ahead of it. High class juice that my last note simply did not do justice! 2012-2035+. 93.

1985 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

The 1985 Mondavi cabernet reserve bottling contained twelve percent cabernet franc and six percent merlot in this vintage, and was aged in one hundred percent new oak. It weighs in at 13.1 percent alcohol, making it still a very classic vintage of this wine in terms of ripeness. I tasted two bottles of this wine for this article, with the first shipped to New York by the winery for a retrospective tasting, and which showed impressive complexity, but with slightly disjointed acidity on the backend that suggests less than fully successful acidulation in this era of “sculpted wines”. The second bottle, which had been in a good friend’s cellar since its release was very polished and classy, and decidedly more interesting than the bottle flown in from Oakville. The bouquet is a complex and classy blend of black cherries, dark berries, a touch of chipotle,

tobacco leaf, coffee, gentle bass notes of Rutherford dust and a deft framing of new oak. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, complex and possesses nicely “cool” fruit tones, with very good mid-palate depth, modest tannins and good length and grip on the classy finish. The more “rested” bottle showed beautiful refinement and continued to blossom and add different facets of spice tones as it developed in the glass over the several hours that we followed the wine. A delightful 1985 cabernet. 2009-2025+. **92.**

1978 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

The 1978 Mondavi Reserve has always been one of my favorite examples of this bottling, which has been drinking beautifully since the latter half of the 1980s and continues to show exceptional complexity and breed. The utterly refined bouquet wafts from the glass in a classy blend of red and black cherries, menthol, Rutherford dust, woodsmoke, lovely spice tones and a stylish base of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and silky, with a sweet core of fruit, beautiful focus and balance, melting tannins and a very, very long, complex and stylish finish. One of the great vintages of Mondavi Reserve! 2012-2030. **94.**

1977 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

1977 was the second severe drought vintage in a row in Napa Valley, but the Mondavi team at the time managed to produce a truly lovely bottle of cabernet. I have had the pleasure of tasting this wine on a handful of occasions in the last few years and have always loved the wine. This most recent bottle at our vertical tasting in April was very good, but I have had even better bottles (perhaps this was a bit shaken from its travels around New York city by taxi?). The nose on this wine is deep and lovely, offering up scents of red and black cherries, petroleum jelly, a touch of chipotle pepper, lovely soil tones and a deft touch of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, fullish and intensely flavored, with lovely focus and complexity, just a bit of drought vintage character in evidence in a very slightly coarse texture, but lovely length and grip on the focused and softly tannic finish. This is a lovely bottle that is worth ten times that of the most recent releases I have tasted of this bottling, and yet sells at auction at much less than a new vintage of Reserve cabernet! Lovely juice with plenty of life ahead of it. 2012-2035. **92.**

1976 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

The '76 Mondavi Reserve cabernet was raised in eighty percent new oak and was made from one hundred percent cabernet sauvignon in this vintage, as the cabernet franc and merlot did not do as well in this drought vintage. The drought produced a bit higher alcohol in this bottling, having eventually landed at 13.3 percent. While '76 is not my favorite vintage from this superb decade, the '76 Mondavi Reserve has evolved nicely and is a very good drink today. The complex and slightly roasted nose offers up scents of dried cherries, fresh herb tones, saddle leather, woodsmoke, a touch of chipotle pepper and a distinct note of lead pencil in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep and full-bodied, with that telltale elegance of this bottling, lovely vibrancy for a drought year, impressive complexity, melting tannins and very good length and grip on the focused finish. I have had the pleasure to drink this wine on a few occasions in the last couple of years, and while it is a bit leathery from the vintage characteristics, it is a very tasty bottle that has plenty of life ahead of it. 2010-2030. **91.**

1975 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

The 1975 vintage was a late-arriving harvest, with the grapes for the Mondavi cabernets arriving at the winery between mid-October and early November- not something one would see today in vineyards on the valley floor! The '75 Mondavi Reserve is a superb example of this great vintage, and is the first year for this cuvée to cross the thirteen percent alcohol threshold, coming in at 13.1 percent. The wine was aged in twenty-four percent new wood (this was the

first vintage for this bottling aged entirely in French wood- though happily less than one quarter was new) and the *cépage* included ten percent cabernet franc and five percent merlot. The wine was absolutely singing at the time of our April vertical, showing more refinement and soil flavor than the last few bottles I have tasted of the more highly praised 1974 Reserve. The bouquet is a deep and superb mélange of red and black cherries, Rutherford dust, petroleum jelly, cigar smoke, a touch of chipotle pepper, fresh herbs and a very refined base of cedar. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, pure and complex, with lovely focus and mid-palate depth, melting tannins, fine acidity and outstanding length and grip on the very classy finish. This is a very refined example of the '75 vintage (which can still be a bit muscular at other top cabernet addresses from this era) and is one of the very finest vintages of Mondavi Reserve I have had the pleasure to taste. The wine has decades of life still ahead of it. 2012-2040. **94.**

1974 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

The 1974 Cabernet Reserve from Robert Mondavi has always been one of the winery's most famous bottlings and this most recent example was excellent. Interestingly, this vintage of the wine was aged in seventy-five percent French oak and twenty-five percent American wood and tipped the scales (in this very ripe vintage!) at a very civilized 12.6 percent alcohol. The deep and beautifully complex nose offers up scents of cassis, cherries, a touch of mint, "weedy" cabernet overtones, tobacco leaf, a lovely base of Rutherford soil tones and still just a whisper of stemminess in the upper register. There is also a faint whiff of horsiness, which I assume is from a bit of *brettanomyces* here, but it is far from off-putting (at least to me). On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and very refined in style, with lovely focus and balance, impressive complexity and fine length and grip on the modestly tannic finish. This still has decades of life in it. The 1974 vintage is not my favorite from the Mondavis in this decade, as it is not quite as elegant as years such as '75 or '78 here, but the wine is certainly very, very well-made and will continue to drink well for many years to come. 2008-2035+. **92.**

1971 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

The very first vintage of cabernet sauvignon to be designated officially as Mondavi "Reserve", the '71 is also noteworthy in having contained a whopping forty percent cabernet franc in the blend, to go along with sixty percent cabernet sauvignon. The varietal labeling laws that require a wine labeled as "cabernet sauvignon" to contain at least seventy-five percent cabernet had not yet been established in 1971. The vintage of 1971 was a cool growing season that initially was not thought to hold great promise, but many of the wines from '71 have aged quite well and the Mondavi Reserve was drinking very well at our vertical in April. The bouquet is a beautiful, *à point* blend of red and black cherries, pomegranate, cigar ash, gentle notes of petroleum jelly, a lovely base of dark soil tones, cedar and a bit of violets in the upper register. On the palate the wine is fullish, broad and complex, with good, but not great remaining depth, lovely focus and a long, classy and silky finish. This still has plenty of life in it, but the wine has clearly been fully mature for several decades already. A very suave and fully mature bottle of cabernet. 2012-2025. **92.**