

SPAIN'S WINES FROM THE WIND

Once a producer of bulk wines, Empordà is using its windy advantage to produce quality wines. Miquel Hudin reports.

The modern day city of l'Escala is near the site where wine was first introduced to the Iberian Peninsula by the Greeks.

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Empordà, in the northeast of Catalonia, was once joined to Roussillon. It was some 350 years ago when Roussillon was the northern portion of a larger Catalonia. While Roussillon is now the last bastion of France before the Pyrenees become Spain, Catalan culture still manages to hang on, along with many of the same grapes as Empordà: Grenache and Carignan, and the same styles of reds, whites, rosés, and sweets, just like their southern brethren.

So while Roussillon today is better known as the French region that comes after the hyphen in Languedoc-Roussillon, the argument could be made that a better hyphenation would be Roussillon-Empordà. Regardless, Spain's Empordà appellation (or DO) comprising 2,000 ha along the Costa Brava is worth examining.

Decline and rise

Empordà, despite its small size, holds a special significance for Spanish wine. It was the first place on the Iberian Peninsula that wine was introduced - by the Greeks in the settlement of Emporion, located next to the modern-day coastal town of l'Escala. From Emporion, which literally means 'market', the Romans spread winemaking throughout the peninsula.

Empordà's wine history followed a similar trend as the rest of Spain in that, despite the rise of Roman winemaking, it wasn't until the arrival of the monks in the 10th and 11th centuries that winemaking became more of a craft. The years after the ejection of the monks by the Kingdom of Spain in the early 19th century were a boom

time for wine, as the French bought their wines while they replanted their own vines following phylloxera. From 1872 to 1878, wine exports from Empordà rose some 350%.

When phylloxera arrived in 1879, Empordà's winemaking fell into disarray. This is where the French-Spanish split between the historically linked regions north and south of the border took hold. On the peninsula of Cap de Creus, on the Spanish side, there are traces of long-abandoned old terraces. A few vineyards have been replanted here and there, but nowadays it's mostly old olive trees that cling to these weather-beaten slopes.

On the French side, the slopes come to life. Planted to supply the dry wines of Collioure and the sweets of Banyuls, the vineyards are verdant and continue as such through Perpignan and beyond. Why the vineyards of Empordà were left so barren is up for debate, but one of the main aspects is they didn't have a French pedigree, despite being the same style of wines as those produced in Roussillon (which was largely bulk, cooperative production as well). It didn't help that Catalonia was also hard hit, as it was the last battle front of the Spanish Civil War. Maintaining vines was a secondary affair to survival. EU vine-pulling schemes did damage as well, given that people accepted money to rip out what were the hardest vines to work, the old ones. Cooperatives made little if any difference in payments for grapes at the time, and for those who still existed on viticulture in the 1980s, the EU scheme offered a way out of a backbreaking and low-paying way of life. The coastal tourism boom that started in the 1960s also helped spur the inevitable decline of viticulture.

The result was that winemaking in DO Empordà was so basic in its goals, it was initially called DO Empordà-Costa Brava when established in 1975 in order to cash in on the much more famous beach region that runs all along the upper and lower counties. With the exception of the Castell de Peralada winery, which has been a regional stalwart for nearly 100 years, those who sought to do better were, by and large, starting from zero.

Given that the grapes from existing vineyards were largely being fed into the local cooperatives, the cellars that emerged in the late 1990s planted new vines, primarily on the Empordà Plain. There was also a heavy focus on French varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Chardonnay, and others, rather than on the local Grenache and Carignan. Local consultants pushed this, believing that not only would the vines be easier to cultivate, but the resulting wines would also be easier to sell due to the international name recognition of the grapes.

Modernisation

Espelt and La Vinyeta, the first modern wineries to forge a path for the region, largely used French grapes in their first wines, along with a smaller amount of Catalan grapes.

In 2006, Empordà dropped the 'Costa Brava' from the DO's name in favour of DO Empordà. There was a collective breath of relief from those who held out hope for the region and thought that the local grapes shouldn't be so disregarded. The vineyards of Vinyes d'Olivardots, while having a decent splash of French varieties, were

EMPORDÀ AT A GLANCE

- Area under vine: 1,786 ha
- Number of vine growers: 290
- Number of bodegas: 52
- Number of winemaking bodegas: 48
- Number of bottling bodegas: 49
- Total yield 2015: 62,041 hL
- DO protected area wine yield 2015: 57,941 hL
- Bottled wine sales 2015: 42,020 hL
- Bottled wine export sales 2015: 5,734 hL
- Source: DO Empordà

producing their top single-vineyard varietal wines from Grenache and Carignan from the foothills of the Aspres range. The winery of Martí Fabra, from a local family in Sant Climent Sescebes, was also notable for working with the local grapes.

Both the emphasis on local grapes and on not planting on the plains was a point made by Didier Soto and Núria Dalmau of Mas Estela. They bought a 10th-century estate with abandoned vines out in Cap de Creus in 1989 and planted vines on stony terraces surrounding a small valley. Working first organically and then biodynamically, Soto has been pushing to return to original varieties.

The same year the DO dropped the 'Costa Brava' name, it added a southern portion in Baix Empordà - which grew the territory by 50%, over a wide and incongruous area. Younger producers could see that local expansion coupled with global plantings of French varieties meant they had a clear choice: be just another of Spain's many DOs, or take the road to quality. Thankfully, most took the latter.

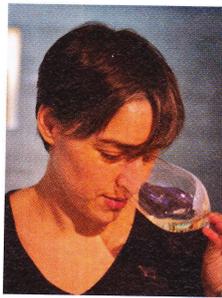
Espelt's 2007 purchase of the Rabós Cooperative brought a wonderful selection of old, classic vines into their possession. At the time, oldest daughter Anna Espelt was working as an oenologist in the winery, as the family had employed someone from the business world to run it, and was using wine consultants to decide their final blends. In 2012, Anna assumed full control of the winery. She listened to Didier, as well as other viticulturists, and saw that there was a bright future for the local grapes and the region. The winery now produces a number of varietal wines, including the underdog, Carignan. She has also been shifting over to organic production and re-grafting the French grapes to those from Catalonia.

La Vinyeta - now that they've arrived at a sustainable level of production - are making small-batch wines using local varieties. In addition to Vinyes d'Olivardots and Martí

Fabra, others in the foothills such as Vinyes dels Aspres, Arché Pagès, Roig Parals, and Terra Remota are now making varietal wines with less oak influence. Even some of the ageing cooperatives such as Empordàlia and Espolla have started producing varietal and/or single-vineyard wines.

It's in the wind

The recent movement towards expressing the territory has been massive, especially as representatives of the smaller cellars have been voted in to run the DO, replacing years of oversight from the cooperatives. The terroir is - much like its big brother Roussillon - heavily affected by the Tramuntana. This wind, which blows year-round, makes for strong hot air currents in the summer. In the winter, it creates a bone-chilling cold.



Anna Espelt, director and winemaker, Espelt

It's ideal for grape cultivation, as the air circulation makes

organic farming easier than in other regions to the south, where the climate gets markedly more humid. In the summer, the wind reduces overall temperatures and moderates ripening. On the downside, it can easily damage the vines, with gusts well over 120 kilometres per hour not unheard of.

Ultimately the wind gives a lift and at times a tang of sea saltiness, especially in the whites. In the hands of the most skilled producers, there's a nod to the wines made from similar grapes in Priorat and Montsant, but there's a delicate nature to them that makes them decidedly 'Empordà'. The region also produces the best dessert wines in all of Catalonia, especially from Grenache, just like they do in Banyuls.

A generation of oenologists have found their footing here in DO Empordà, and in doing so realised that expressing what is special about the region is to use their traditional grapes - and then simply let the wind blow as it may. ■

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