

Priorat

The Next Generation

The wines from Spain's most-talked-about region are daring, delicious, and surprisingly affordable. Try them there, or track them down here—either way, you won't want to miss what's going on. **BY MELISSA CLARK**

Those of us who have been lucky enough to taste the cult—and cultishly expensive—inky black wines from Spain's Priorat region know that beauty comes at a price. The past few years, we've been seeing these bold red wines with extracted blackberry flavors and spicy aromas on finer wine lists here in the States. But here's the real story: These cult wines are starting to share the spotlight with a new generation of exciting—and affordable—wines from the region's hottest winemakers.

Although Priorat is widely known for these precious wines, premium winemaking is actually a relatively new development here. Twenty years ago, when a group of five pioneers set up a cooperative winery on the top of a sun-scorched hill in this corner of Catalonia, the only thing remotely hot about the region was the climate. But in an extremely short amount of time, these five (René Barbier of Clos Mogador, Daphne Glorian of Clos Erasmus, Carles Pastrana of Costers del Siurana, José Luis Pérez of Mas Martinet, and Álvaro Palacios of Finca Dofi) revolutionized the hitherto unremarkable wines of the region, transforming tannic, facile plonk made mostly from Grenache (or Garnacha in Spanish) and Cariñena into something fruit-forward, concentrated, and oak-scented. Ninety-plus ratings and prestigious awards followed.

These days, the dominant limited-production wines, with their hundred-dollar price tags, are starting to share the stage with less-expensive wines. Wineries have been rolling out rosters of highly quaffable “second labels,” many of which are available only locally.

“Our fathers came here for the soil,” says Sara Pérez, whose father, José Luis Pérez, was one of the region's pioneers in 1986. “The soil is very special...and gives the grapes concentration, minerality, and complexity.” Sara is married to René Barbier, the son of the original winemaking pioneer of the same name.

As part of the second generation of Priorat winemakers, both Pérez and Barbier are supremely talented, as evidenced by Barbier's spicy, brawny 2004 Clos Mogador (\$75) and Pérez's elegant, mineral, cassis-scented 2004 Clos Martinet (\$75) and ▶



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her second label, Martinet Bru (\$35), made from the fruit of younger vines. Pérez says the power and depth of these wines are the direct result of the soil that intrigued her father and Barbier's father back in the 1980s.

Costers del Siurana winery in the village of Gratallops was one of the first to put the Priorat on the map with its Clos de l'Obac in the late '80s, catching the attention of Robert Parker and others. Today winemaker Carles Pastrana and his enologist wife, Mariona Jarque, are also adding more reasonably priced wines to their repertoire and producing about half a dozen labels. Yes, you can still taste the ultra-premium, smoky, raspberry-scented 2002 Clos de l'Obac (\$45), but their affordable and fruity, red-currant-tinged 2004 Usatges Tinto (\$20) is a terrific bargain and beautifully crafted. These wines are a good example of both the versatility of the region and the couple's renegade spirit as winemakers.

Another of the founding five, Daphne Glorian, has also brought a second label into the fold. While her Clos Erasmus Tinto (\$140) continues to fetch top dollar and top reviews, the second label, Clos Erasmus Laurel (\$43), features some of the same fruit that goes into the Tinto, which is blended with fruit from younger vines. The result is an exceptional Grenache, Cabernet, and Syrah blend that's less than half the price of its big brother.

Though second-label wines tend to use younger fruit, those classic cult wines containing the highest percentage of old-vine Grenache command the most prestige, such as Álvaro Palacios's L'Ermita (\$400) and Capafons-Ossó's Mas de Masos (\$70), with its notes of white pepper and blackberry jam. Vall Llach, owned by Catalan singer and local legend Lluís Llach, is using 80-year-old Grenache to produce the formidable Iduus (\$55), while Llach's second label, Embruiix, uses younger fruit in a similar blend. The 2004 Embruiix features earthy spice, aromas of violets, and gorgeous dark-fruit flavors and comes with a \$34 price tag.

Also gaining favor with the new generation is old-vine Cariñena. An insipid, overly productive grape when grown in more

fertile ground, it blossoms in the harsh *terroir* of the Priorat, providing low-yielding vines with powerful, meaty fruit. At Cims de Porrera, winemaker Adria Pérez (Sara's brother and José Luis's son) uses about 90 percent Cariñena grapes in his "Classic" blend (\$84).

Cariñena-based wines tend to have more structure than their regional counterparts, and are thus excellent for aging, says the younger René Barbier. A Cariñena enthusiast, he uses it in his layered and leathery Clos Manyetes (\$88), and in Partida Bellvisos (\$77), a floral, stony wine with notes of almond paste and candied violet that he and Sara make together. Their daughter, Ariadna, writes her name on every cork.

And what about white wines? The modern La Conreria d'Scala Dei winery is breaking with tradition by making a white wine from 100-year-old Grenache Blanc vines (known as Garnacha Blanca in Spain). Look for their 2004 Les Bruguers (\$26) and other emerging premium white offerings. Because if history is any lesson, breaking the rules is what works best in this region of renegade winemaking. ■

New York-based writer Melissa Clark is the author of 18 cookbooks. Her latest book is The Skinny: How to Fit into Your Little Black Dress Forever.



An easy day trip from Barcelona, the Priorat is well worth a visit. In the village of Gratallops, **CAL LLOP** (shown above; cal-llop.com), a charming year-old boutique hotel complete with WiFi and a fine restaurant, is a delightfully convenient option. More luxurious but farther down the mountain is **MAS PASSAMANER** (maspassamaner.com), an über-designed, converted 1920s mansion with a spa and an exquisite restaurant. Or for something modest yet comfortable, **LA ICONA DEL PONT VELL** (laicona.com), a brand-new B&B and spa, is located in picturesque Porrera.

THE BOLD AND BEAUTIFULLY PRICED PRIORATS

3 Great Wines to Drink Here

- >> **Álvaro Palacios 2004 Les Terrasses** (\$30). Anise, dried strawberries, and red currants characterize this crowd-pleaser.
- >> **Capafons-Ossó 2002 Masos d'en Cubells** (\$55). A bright wine with black cherry, dried herbs, and saffras flavors.
- >> **Clos Mogador 2004** (\$75). A potent, dark-garnet wine with notes of tobacco, cinnamon, and black raspberries.

3 Great Wines to Drink There

(You won't find them here...)

- >> **Meritxell Pallejà 2004 Nita** (\$15). A round, soft wine with hints of dried oregano.
- >> **Capafons-Ossó 2005 Enllaç** (\$30). A golden, fragrant white made from Viognier and Garnacha Blanca, it shows white peach and floral notes.
- >> **Cims de Porrera 2002 La Giola** (\$46). If you can find it, try this limited-release wine that's loaded with tart red fruit and has a long finish.