

WINERY VISIT

Cava Cava

On a visit to Catalonia in Spain, **Vikram Achanta** takes a train to Cordoníu winery, the world's oldest and second-largest producer of bottle-fermented sparkling wine

As I roll through the Catalan countryside by train with the Pyrenees in the far distance, the town of Sant Sadurní d'Anoia announces itself via grape-laden vineyards. As the train slides into the station, I can't help but notice Freixenet, a major cava producer's facilities on one side of the platform. But it is to Codorníu that I am heading for my induction into the world of Cava, which is two kilometres from the station. I arrive a good 90 minutes before my 10am tour. So I have enough time for a croissant and a coffee in a café in the sleepy city centre with a mournful looking dog outside and a startlingly pretty waitress. Today is also one of the biggest days in Christianity, Easter Sunday, marking the end of Lent, a period in which Christians fast or give up a popular food or vice.

With still time to kill I decide to walk to Codorníu guided by Google maps. Cava

producers dot every corner of the town, inviting you in for a tasting, which is not surprising, given that cava, is one of the most popular types of sparkling wine in the world, along with prosecco from Italy. Soon enough, I'm crossing a busy highway to head down Avenida Jaume de Codorníu, a pretty country lane, with vineyards on both sides named Raventós, a name I was soon to become familiar with. The lane leads to an impressive gate bearing the name of Codorníu and across the road is the Raventós winery.

Codorníu lays claim to being the oldest family-owned business in Spain and one of the oldest in the world with a good 450 plus years of history behind it. Entering the gate I sense history envelop me, starting with Sala Puig "the Cathedral of Cava", which is the visitor reception centre, a lovely high-ceilinged room where we are greeted. A beautifully set bar is at one end of the room, lined with bottles, which are a promise of the pleasures to come. Miraia is our guide and she takes our group



Above: Impressive Codorníu Wine Cellars designed by Gaudi's contemporary, Josep Puig i Cadafalch. Below, left: Riddling racks filled with cava bottles; right, Sala De Puig, the Cathedral of Cava



of 20 drawn from all over the world, into another room for an audio-visual presentation on cava and Codorníu's heritage.

I expect *Sommelier India* readers know their sparkling wines, but a little background is never amiss. Cava is a Spanish sparkling wine made with techniques similar to that used for champagne. As in the case of champagne, so

also in cava, the secondary fermentation takes place in the bottle.

This is a process involving the addition of selected yeasts and sugar to still wine, which leads to a natural effervescence. The bulk of cava made in Spain is from the region of Catalonia. As per law, only sparkling wine produced from select regions in Spain can

be called cava. The major grapes used to make cava are traditional varieties like xarel-lo, macabeo and parellada, although classic grapes like pinot noir and chardonnay are also used. Codorníu grows a fair amount of their own grapes, and the rest are sourced from contract farmers.

It also came as a surprise to learn that although the Codorníu family began making wine in 1551, it wasn't until 1872 that the first bottle of cava was produced. Back in 1659, Anna Codorníu married a wine grower named Miquel Raventós (now the name rings a bell!) which resulted in a change in the family name. In 1872 with the phylloxera pest sweeping the land and destroying vineyards, Josep Raventós i Fatjó, visited the Champagne region. He then hit upon the idea of making a sparkling wine similar to that of Champagne and gave it a name which paid tribute to the vast subterranean caverns in which the wine lies maturing. And if it was Josep who played a pioneering role in creating the first cava, it was his son Manuel Raventós Montserrat



Gran Cordoniu Pino Noir; Below: Art nouveau mansion by Josep Puig i Cadafalch; below, right: a Ramon Casas illustration for Cordoniu



Fatjó, who inherited the family business and played a stellar role in popularizing cava. So although the name on the winery outside is Codorníu, the group itself is called the Codorníu Raventós group.

Cut to modern times and there's an interesting twist to the tale. Josep Maria Raventós i Blanc decided to sell his share of Cordoníu in 1986, retaining select vineyards for the newly created Raventós i Blanc estate. In 2012, this branch of the family, represented now by Pepe Raventós, decided to leave the Cava DO appellation to create a new, terroir driven appellation, Conca del Riu Anoia. They believed they could create a higher quality of wine this way, with one of the main characteristics being the sole use of indigenous grape varieties like xarel-lo, parellada, macabeo and monastrell. I wish I had known this on my visit to Codorníu, as a visit to Raventos would have made an interesting side trip.

Art aficionados familiar with the works of Antoni Gaudi, will know his importance in shaping the architecture of Barcelona. Gaudi was one of the foremost proponents of the art nouveau movement in which art and architecture drew inspiration from the world of nature. It was a movement that reached its peak between 1880 and the First World War. A short span of time, no doubt, but still a period which produced remarkable works. Codorníu was not immune to its influence either, for Manuel Raventós (who was responsible for putting cava on the map,) hired architect,



Josep Puig i Cadafalch, a contemporary of Gaudi, to design the new winery.

After the film we are spirited away in a mini-train that chugs its way across the large estate. From here we take in the sweep of the beautiful winery buildings set against the backdrop of vineyards and mountains. Our first stop is at the Celler Gran museum and winery, where ancient winemaking equipment has been immaculately preserved. A healthy respect for one's heritage is a good argument for businesses to stay in the same family for long periods of time. The old mix with the new, as we are invited to an aroma table to guess each major grape's aroma wafting up from a narrow tube. The tour so far has been fascinating, and it comes as no surprise that Codorníu has been the winner of several wine tourism awards and played host to over 80,000 visitors in 2016.

The highpoint of the tour is the tasting. We descend into the cellars which stretch for many miles underground. This is where cava undergoes its second fermentation and is matured. Although the cellars go back to a distant past, they are in an immaculate state of preservation like everything else we've seen, with rows and rows of bottles of wine ageing.

Miraia, sensing that the group's thirst is mounting, escorts us into another part of the cellar, where glasses of cava have been poured. One is a Gran Codorníu Vintage Pinot Noir, which is a lovely, rosé brut, and the other if my memory serves me right was the Gran Codorníu Chardonnay. Rosé cava, first launched in 2002 is another of the company's innovations.

Codorníu now produces a large number of different types of cava, organized in multiple ranges. There's the Anna de Codorníu range, named after the Codorníu dynasty heiress, notable for chardonnay as part of the blend for the first time, along with three traditional Spanish grapes. And then there is a rosé cava featuring pinot noir. There's also an Anna



Above: Visitors enjoying sparkling wine at the Cava bar; below, Cava Anna de Codorniu Blanc de Blancs Reserva

Blanc de Noirs, a white cava made from 100% pinot noir.

At the top end, Codorníu has Finca La Fideuera, a limited production (300 bottles only) cava that has been aged for 90 months, Finca El Tros Nou, from a vineyard located in one of the coldest zones in the cava appellation and Finca La Pleta, also a limited production cava. The range is filled out by several more cavas, including the Gran Codorníu range, which has a separate chardonnay and pinot noir expression.

A glass of each of the Gran Codorníu range was on offer, with a few extra on the tray. I took the opportunity to have another glass of the rosé which was so good that I decided to buy a bottle from the shop on the way out.

I walked back with my purchase to the train station to catch the ride back to Barcelona, a journey that took me under an hour. And, all in all, I could think of no better way to raise a toast to the resurrection of Jesus Christ this Easter Sunday than with a Gran Codorníu. ♦

