

## THURSDAY'S CULINARY SECTION

## FOOD AND WINE

by ANDREW VALENTE

SOME years ago, when the economic crisis was biting really hard (it still is) newspapers all over Europe had to slash costs as much as possible – while causing as little inconvenience as possible to the readers. I was doing two food pages and a wine page and had to drop one of them. I thought most readers would prefer two food pages per week instead of one food page and a wine page.

As I wasn't going to be writing about wine, I withdrew from the wine circuit and therefore wasn't fully in touch with what was happening on the Spanish scene.

However, on my occasional visits to La Vinoteca, Palma's biggest and best wine shop in Calle Bartolomé Pou 29, round about 2009 I heard of Codorniu's Ars Collecta cava project.

It was a most ambitious plan to produce cavas that would have the same length of bottle fermentation as the best French champagnes – and it would be just as good as those sparkling wines coming out of Champagne.

Codorniu is Spain's oldest family-run business with a wine-making pedigree that goes back to 1551. It has some of the finest vineyards in Europe.

Ars Collecta in this context is a play on the Latin words and both nuances can be applied to the Codorniu project. The Latin term can mean the 'art of collection' (that is, the harvest) or the 'collection of art'. The art of harvesting is applicable because of the amazing care that is taken with Codorniu's three different varieties of grapes, and the cavas they produce are a veritable collection of art. For Codorniu it's not just a case of three kinds grape varieties being used: it's three quite different soils, three distinct microclimates and three environments that are unique.

La Pleta is a small vineyard at an altitude of 286 metres where only chardonnay is grown. It has one of the best terroirs in

the Segría area. La Fideuera in Alto Penedès is where the xarel·lo grapes are grown on vines that are 25 years old and at their most productive. El Tres Nou finca is in one of the coldest areas where cavas are made. This is where they grow the pinot noir grape which gives a characteristic mineral touch to a coupage.

The cavas made from these three grapes will soon have a new classification: Cava de Paraje. It will apply to all cavas made from the grapes of a single vineyard.

But few winemakers will be doing cavas from such a small batch of fruit. These harvests produce only around 300 bottles and few winemakers will consider that to be economically viable.

The cavas that come from these three Codorniu fincas are sold at a recommended price of €80.

But the crowning glory of the Ars Collecta project is the the Gran Reserva Brut 456 cava, which is a coupage of the cavas from the three fincas. That number symbolises the Codorniu family's 456th harvest – from 1551 to 2007. Only 1,000 bottles were made and they sell at €175.

I tasted several of the Cava de Paraje sparkling wines including the already mythical 456 Gran Reserva Brut at a presentation luncheon at La Bodega restaurant at the start of Calle San Jaime.

What do these amazing cavas taste like? Well, amazing actually. There's complexity and delight everywhere: in the eyes, in the nose, on the palate. And enormous vitality. These cavas, even after more than eight years of bottle fermentation, are still bursting with life. However, they're an expensive sip. I've never bought a bottle of champagne at €80 and until now cava at that price didn't exist.

I've never paid more than €16 for a bottle of cava and I just wouldn't be able to fork out €80 even for a unique cava from one of these three Codorniu fincas. But I'd want to taste

## UNIQUE CAVA WITH A €175 PRICE TAG

one and the best way of doing it, I think, would be to get together with another seven wine-loving friends and have a little tasting of several wines with the Cava de Paraje being the highlight of the evening.

Eight people can get a good taste from one bottle as long as the pourer divides it out neatly. Even so, at €10 a go it will still be expensive.

And as you're in a spending mood and mode, have some thinly sliced Iberian cured ham with it. This is a one-off: you're not going to be doing it every weekend. Or even every Christmas.

Another way of sharing the cost of a bottle (and this applies to any top end of the market wine) is to have the Codorniu special as one of the wines in a festive meal.

But rather than drink it with one of the dishes, use it as an aperitif wine before you sit down to eat. Once again, have something festive and easy to nibble on. Iberian cured ham fits the bill nicely.

By serving the Cava de Paraje as an aperitif while standing around away from the dining table and talking about it, we are making it a very special part of the meal. And that's how it should be.

On the other hand, perhaps what I'm saying is of only academic interest, because you may not be able to find any of these wines. When the Codorniu people came to Palma for the presentation, they didn't have enough bottles to bring with them. Which isn't surprising because only 300 bottles are made of the three fincas cavas and 1,000 of the 456 Gran Reserva Brut. Juan Luis of La Vinoteca still had a few bottles and he was able to bring them along, so in the end there was enough for everyone to get a good taste.

The Ars Collecta project

is on-going and research will continue with longer fermentations in bottle until enologist Bruno Colomer and his team see what the limit is with these wines. To date they have made cavas with 100 months of bottle fermentation – which is longer than most champagnes.

Until the start of the Ars Collecta project, the two big differences between cava and champagne were the choice of grapes and the length of the second fermentation in bottle, the one that produces all those lovely bubbles.

In France the bottle fermentation lasts for between five and 11 years. For cavas there is an absolute legal minimum of nine months, although most wineries prolong this to 20-24 months.

This time difference in the second fermentation accounts for the biggest difference between cava and champagne: the size and vigour of the bubbles. The longer bottle fermentation leads to smaller, finer, more elegant bubbles. The cava bubbles are bigger, younger, brasher and, therefore, less elegant.

The longer second fermentation also accounts for the big difference in price. The champagne maker's capital (the still wine) is lying around in cellars for three times as long as the cava maker's capital – and that always means the consumers pay higher prices.

The quality of a cava or champagne depends very much on the still wine it is made from: the better the wine, the better the cava or champagne. So great care is taken in every process of making the still wines, including long before the grapes are ready for harvesting.

During the second fermentation the bottles in the best wineries are kept

in underground cellars where they are stacked in special racks at an angle so that the deposits thrown off will collect at the neck.

The bottles are given constant slight twists and the angle is changed until the bottle is in an almost vertical position. This allows the impurities to collect just above the cork for easier removal at a later stage in the process.

This turning, known in French as the remuage, was always done by hand although some wineries now use machines. But at venerated wineries such as Codorniu, where tradition is very important, the turning is still done by hand.

When buying cava, always have a good look at the label to find out how dry it is: the range is from extremely dry to semi-dry, which means rather sweet. Brut nature is as dry as cava comes and it is followed by extra brut, brut, extra seco, seco and semi-seco.

You should buy cava and champagne only when you intend to drink them: they gain nothing from being laid down for two or three years – or even one year. In fact they will deteriorate slightly. You should drink cava and champagnes within three or four months after buying them.

And while the bottles are waiting on the sidelines,

stand them upright instead of on their sides, which we always do with still wines to keep the cork damp. Some years ago research scientists discovered the pressure inside a cava or champagne bottle creates enough humidity to keep the cork from becoming dryish and allowing air to get in and damage the wine.

Although the Codorniu Cava de Paraje is expensive and then some, ordinary cava is still a relatively economical drink. You will find very good cavas in the €10-€15 range. It's a good idea to get your cava from La Vinoteca because Juan Luis has several makes worth trying that you won't find at your local supermarket. I'm especially fond of Llopart and so are a lot of other people – if you don't buy it sooner rather than later you'll find there's none left.

