

I was the lucky recipient of the Freixenet Bursary, my prize being a five-day study trip to Spain. When I told friends and colleagues about the trip I was met with such comments as 'well, you'd better get used to drinking a lot of cava then!' and while the trip naturally started off with a visit to the Freixenet headquarters in Penedes, it then continued on to Priorat, Rioja and Ribera del Duero as we visited wineries under the group umbrella.

The trip brought to life notes read and written in preparation for my Diploma exams and it was quite exciting to see signs to Sant Sadurní d'Anoia, to walk through the vineyards and see the "three queens" – Macabeo, Parellada and Xarel-lo – for myself and of course to chat with the people that worked there. What left the greatest impression on me was the scale of the operations and the innovation and experimentation of the company, while at the same time holding strong to the Ferrer family values. It was interesting to compare the sheer colossus of the factory lines at Freixenet and Segura Viudas against the comparatively tiny operations at 'garagiste' Valdubon at Ribera del Duero and Solar Viejo in Rioja.

Penedes

Our trip kicked off in mid June, starting in Penedes and the heart of the Cava region. We arrived after what had been a particularly cold and wet winter, which had continued into spring. While it was still early days Toni Domenech, PR manager for Freixenet and our guide for the first two days, informed us it was really rather cool for the time of year and conditions weren't yet ideal for the year's harvest.

We started with a tour around **Segura Viudas** which is owned by Freixenet but is treated as a completely separate company, working independently with its own team. Each harvest Segura Viudas makes 8-10 million bottles, which goes some way to filling the winery's 25 million bottle capacity.

The Ferrer family owns just 300ha of vines in Penedes and buy in grapes from around 1,200 suppliers for both the Freixenet and Segura Viudas brands. This means an almost military efficiency is needed when it comes to testing the grapes' ripeness and deciding when the contract growers should pick. They are able to tell growers exactly when to stop all treatments in the vineyards to allow for grapes to be picked when they are not only at optimum ripeness, but also perfect health and without residues.

You get the impression that harvest time will be busier than at many other wineries around the country. Queues of trucks packed with grapes back up the driveway during the long days and nights, random checks are conducted as they arrive to measure, sugar, acidity and for any fungicides. 1,200,000 kilos of grapes will pass through the gates each day, between 60-70 million kilograms each harvest.

Apparently Freixenet is one of just two companies in the area that use their own – non commercial - yeast (the other being Torres), which they make up every month. And Segura Viudas has its own yeast which differs from those used in Freixenet wines. The group is also undertaking lengthy and costly experiments when it comes to pest control and sexual confusion.

Our tasting at Segura Viudas included: the Brut Vintage 2005 Gran Reserva (Disgorged the previous December), The Brut Reserva (their best seller), and the Brut Rose (with Trepal and some Grenache) and the elegant and delicious Reserva Heredad. The two wines from the tasting that I found most interesting were:

2005 Torre Galimany Brut Nature Gran Reserva, which is only found on the domestic market. Made from Xarel-lo, Macabeo and Parellada, the base wine is aged in oak and no dosage is added. This wine was disgorged in December 2009 and shows lovely ripe tropical melon fruit mixed in with savoury notes, vanilla and butter and biscuit yeastiness. Great structure and body, with complexity.

Creu de Lavit 2008. A still wine made from 100% Xarel-lo, and rather experimental – one third of the juice is kept in stainless steel, one third undergoes skin maceration (which brings out the body) and one third is oak fermented for 3-5 months, then they are all blended. Bright pale straw in colour, ripe tropical fruits on the nose and palate with orange blossom some vanilla from the new oak. Not a lot of acidity but still nicely balanced. Full bodied, with long length.

If the scale of the production and bottling line at Segura Viudas impressed, it was nothing compared to the sheer scale of the winery at **Freixenet HQ**. The slick premises with its cinema showing a video about Freixenet on arrival, the large, rather busy, gift shop (with an ATM machine outside it) and the fantastic themed cars in the driveway give way to an enormous, cavernous winery and cellar which you would not attempt to walk around. Luckily an army of motorised carts are waiting near the entrance.

The volume produced here is quite difficult to comprehend – there is capacity for 140 million bottles, with 80-100 million produced each year. The winery is more reliant on automated processes than any I had seen or heard of, from the riddling gyro-pallettes and robotic stacking to the vast bottling line. The investment that went on underground at this winery was enormous and the innovations have been necessary to keep up with demand and remain a leader in its sector – Freixenet remains the world's biggest exporter of Cava, to over 150 countries.

Just to give some idea of the activity at the winery - 17,000 bottles are disgorged each hour – making this the biggest disgorging line in the world. The winery bottles for six months of the year, making this the largest bottling line on the planet for sparkling wine.

Alongside this and on a much smaller scale we see traditional methods and equipment - very old chestnut barrels still being used, along with a solera system. The Reserva Real and DS wines are still handled manually. We also see more experimental wines alongside the Cordon Negro NV – the sweet, vintage Malvasia is unusual. However, only 1% of wine made here is vintage or special cuvee.

Among the wines tasted were the Cordon Negro, the Brut Vintage Reserve, the lovely Reserva Real and the experimental 2006 Trepas. Stand outs included the Cuvee DS 2004, which is only produced in the very best vintages in honour of Dolores Sals – the co-president of the company. This was just the 17th vintage made since 1969. The dosage wine was created from wine aged in the chestnut barrels. It showed lovely fresh fruit with complexities from age, great balance and a very long finish with lingering toastiness and fruit.

Another was the 2001 Malvasia DO, which was rather special and unlike anything traditional in Penedes. It is made of 100% Malvasia grown on poor stony soils. Grapes are picked manually. The dosage is made up of Malvasia grape juice blended with wine aged in chestnut

casks for 20 years. This brought out sherry-like characters which complemented the toffee sweetness and fruit preserves. The wine was unctuous and the finish very long.

The sheer scale and automation of the operation is contrasted nicely with what every staff member is given each year for Christmas – a hamper that harks back to harder times, consisting of such basics as a pound of butter and one-litre of olive oil but also includes enough wine and cava to see them through the festive season, a leg of ham and – most impressively – a live chicken. These days a local butcher is on hand to kill and pluck the birds, though some staff members still prefer to commute home with their live chicken tucked under their arm.

Priorat

The next day saw a stark change of pace as we visited the Freixenet-acquired boutique Morlanda winery (managed by Viticultors del Priorat) in Priorat.

This is a very small operation, with just two people on deck and a handful of helpers in the vineyard. The winemaker we met, Sandra Bravo, had recently returned from a couple of vintages in New Zealand.

Consisting of only 30ha, with the well reputed 'llicorella' clay and chalk soils, they operate under strict planning rules in order to retain the landscape of the area. Terraces are a maximum of 3m x 3m, so plantings per hectare remain low, in keeping with tradition. There is also much discussion about, and pride in, the 'coster' vineyards, which, to an untrained eye look simply like a small hill with a bit of scrub on it. But these are very old, traditionally tended vines in the region.

One gets the impression that Morlanda's owner is seen as a 'wealthy uncle' that supports it from a distance and lets it get on with making quality wine in very small quantities. Morlanda can continue to spend €30,000 on new barrels every year in relative fiscal security thanks to Freixenet. And in return, Freixenet enjoys a stake in the premium still wine sector with a brand 'strong in *terroir*' that is enjoying critical acclaim. The jewel in the crown of the Morlanda brand is the Prior Terrae, the barrels of this sitting quietly in the corner of the winery. In contrast to Freixenet, this winery consisted of two small rooms about the size of a tennis court in total, with a tasting and storage area upstairs.

Grenache, Carignan, Cabernet Sauvignon, Grenache Blanc and Viura are all planted here, and when we visited one of the slopes was in the process of being converted into vines.

The highlight of the very enjoyable tasting – which covered whites, rose and reds, was the Morlanda 2007: 50% Grenache and 50% Carignan. A selection of the best fruits from that year, the wine was rich, mouth filling with dark berries, and chocolate. It was delicious and beautifully balanced.

The landscape, scale and pace of the winery were more in keeping with the romanticised view of wine making.

Rioja

From Priorat we ventured west to Rioja Alavesa and to the Solar Viejo winery just outside Logrono, in La Guardia. Solar Viejo was acquired by the Ferrer family in 2004. The Freixenet sales department handles its distribution - mainly Northern Europe, France, the US

and Germany – centrally and there are just 15 people working at the winery. Jose Antonio, the winemaker and MD, has also made wine in NZ, the US and France.

Again, operations here are on a small scale, with the winery buying from 50 growers and having no vineyards of their own (common in Rioja). Hand harvesting is still the norm here.

One interesting innovation learned about during our visit – and not discussed during the diploma - is the use of carbonic maceration, which is becoming quite common in Joven Alavesa wines. Indeed, demand for carbonic maceration is apparently increasing in the area thanks to the fruit and colour it produces.

We tried the Cosecha 2009, 100% Tempranillo, which included a very small amount of carbonic macerated wine. It was bright purple in colour with pink tints. Very young on the nose, full of cherry and bright, ripe red fruits, with hints of boiled sweets and bubblegum. Very easy to drink and went very well with the Idiazabal - DOC cheese from Basque region – we tasted it with. This style is unusual for Rioja in that it sees no oak. It sells locally for about €3.50 and sells well in Northern Europe. Sights are set on Japan.

Also very interesting to learn about was the experimentation with ‘Autour’ wines, which Solar Viejo started three years ago. This wine is technically a Cosecha, but with a bit of oak. It’s referred to as a ‘high expression’ innovative wine, where the rules of the control board are not followed. The winemaker is free to decide the length of time it spends in oak – so it could be in there for, say, just 10 months. The control board has no say but the wine can still be called Rioja on the label - and can apparently be of very high quality.

Ribera del Duero

Finally we headed to Ribera del Duero and **Valdubon**, a winery founded in 1997 which Freixenet bought in 1999 and 100% owns. The winery has a 700,000 bottle capacity, so is comparatively small.

This is a winery of impressive innovation. It is equipped with a special ‘micro-vinification unit’, in which different fermentation methods are researched using two of the latest generation tanks. These ‘very expensive’ stainless steel vats are 6,000l and experiment with new techniques. One uses mechanical *pigeage*, or punching down, with a leg-like contraption that steps the high-quality old-vine grapes through the juice to achieve great extraction. The resulting juice is usually blended with other wines in the cellar to make ‘wines of a high expression’. Different techniques can be adopted to make slightly different wines and it can be computer programmed to change every 5-10 minutes if desired and can continue working through the night.

The second tank is called the Ganymede system. A small internal cone inside captures the CO₂ until it bubbles up through the cone, gently disturbing the cap. This increases maceration and results in a more full bodied wine. The process can be set to a specified level, and repeated as often as the winemaker desires.

This innovation is significant because the regulatory council is wary of any new techniques being introduced. It has started to allow flexibility in the fermentation process but wineries must keep aging times and varietal allowances at the specific levels. In short, these new tanks are the only thing a winery can really do to be different.

What was also very interesting is that, like in Rioja, Gran Reservas are becoming less popular in Ribera del Duero as people seek fruit and freshness. Wineries are preferring not to keep the wines for as long before releasing them (36 months in bottle and 24 in barrel for Gran Reservas is seen as a very long time to hold on to stock when it could be out on the market).

‘Autour’ wines are, as a result, rising in popularity here too. They are still able to be classified as Ribera del Duero and made largely from Tinto Fino, but the winemaker can choose how long to age their wine. Only 5,000 bottles of Autour wines are made each year at Valdubon.

While in Ribera del Duero we learn that of the 256 wineries many are now struggling financially. Like with Morlanda, Valdubon can enjoy the relative comfort of the Freixenet group to continue with its investments and innovative ways.

My five days with the Freixenet group brought to life four of Spain’s wine making regions. Along with the fantastic tours and tastings, delicious lunches and incredible hospitality, it was the innovation, experimentation and dramatically contrasting scales of operation that struck me most. Those that believe Freixenet is only about Cava are mistaken indeed.