

WINE PRODUCER PROFILE – FREIXENET, CAVA

Along with Codorníu, Freixenet is one of the two major players in Cava. It is most famous for Cordon Negro with its recognisable black bottle but produces a range of Cavas to meet different price points and occasions. Freixenet Cavas have always placed a strong emphasis on the traditional Spanish varieties however now some international varieties have been allowed in their *Elyssia* range.

An interview with Sr. Josep Buján, Technical Director and Chief Oenologist, and Sr. Sebastià Raventós, Head of Viticulture at Freixenet

1. What proportion of your grapes is grown on estate owned vineyards compared to those bought in from growers?

Less than 1% of the grapes we require come from our own vineyards. All other grapes are bought in from over 1,200 long term contracted growers. We oversee their production, monitoring it throughout the year, and specify the day that we wish them to pick, which will differ according to the grape variety. The benefit of this system is that we have a long term security of supply, and we are able to obtain grapes from a variety of vineyards throughout the permitted Cava region giving us greater flexibility of base wine styles when it comes to blending.

2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Cava DOC climate for growing sparkling wine grapes?

The strengths are the myriad microclimates, which influence the indigenous varieties in different ways, giving us a vast array of styles and complexities, vital to our base wine blending needs. Also, production is relatively predictable in terms of volumes and quality, because of the regularity of the climate. A perceived weakness is the heat of the region, which creates base wines of relatively low acidity. However, this could also be perceived as one of Cava's strengths, producing an easy drinking quality sparkling wine when young.

3. How does each of the indigenous grape varieties influence the final wine?

Parellada offers delicate floral and Mediterranean fruits, with (relatively) low acidity. Macabeo is the backbone, giving green apple and pear fruits, and balanced acidity. Xarel.lo delivers grassy and greengage notes, with crisp acidity.

It is important to remember that the Macabeo and Xarel.lo harvests each last up to 3 weeks, Macabeo starting in late August, and Xarel.lo in mid-September. In each case, the earlier picked fruit will offer a totally different profile to the finished wine thus providing the winemaker with a range of options for base wine blending.

For rosado Cava, Trepat offers fine redcurrant, raspberry and a hint of sloe, and is not prone to oxidation. Garnacha offers summer strawberry fruit, and being thin skinned is rather delicate. Classic Cava grapes still make up well in excess of 95% of our production. Freixenet solely focused on indigenous Spanish grape varieties, as other producers began to explore the use of international varieties. After much research into the right rootstocks, clonal selection and vineyard site selection, a limited amount of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir were planted to add some variety to the Group's portfolio. However, care needs to be taken as these grape varieties require different treatment when producing Cava base wine as compared to wine destined to still wine production.

4. Do you harvest all of your grape varieties relatively early (compared to still wines)?

Yes. The base wine for cava should have a higher acidity than a still wine, as well as lower potential alcohol, as the alcohol will be increased as a result of the secondary fermentation.

5. Do you use machine or hand harvesting? What are the benefits of your chosen method?

Virtually all of the grapes are hand harvested, ensuring that they arrive at the winery as intact bunches. Pressing is then done as lightly as possible to give a juice of the highest possible quality.

6. What type of press do you use and why?

Pneumatic presses. They are the most gentle on the grape bunches and berries, and can work at the lowest pressure of all types of press.

7. In what vessels does the primary fermentation take place and why?

Primary fermentation is done in temperature controlled stainless steel tanks, which are the cleanest of all fermentation vessels. The fermentation temperature is 14-16°C. When it is complete, the wine is stored at between 10 – 12°C, under a blanket of inert nitrogen to preserve the primary aromas and flavours.

8. What yeast do you use and why?

Freixenet yeasts are specific to our winery, and are indigenous to the Cava region. We have over 20 different strains available for primary and secondary fermentation, allowing us to personalise the finished Cava.

9. Do you age your base wine before second fermentation?

It depends on the finished product required. It must be remembered that at Freixenet we are bottling almost all year round, so there is always some base wine in “storage” at any given time.

10. Do the base wines undergo malolactic fermentation?

In general base wines do not undergo malolactic fermentation, because the total acidity of the base wines is often relatively low. Thus, the malolactic fermentation process would create rather bland wines.

11. How long do you age your wines on the lees and how does this influence the final style of the wine?

The ageing of the Cavas depends on the profile required in the finished product. The base wine must have appropriate characteristics for the length of time the wine will be aged for. Autolysis, the decomposition of the yeast cells, releases additional compounds into the wine, such as amino-acids, higher alcohols etc. which bring different characteristics to the finished product.

12. Is riddling by hand or gyropalette? Why?

Riddling is done by the “Freixenet Method”, which has removed the turning element, to improve the process, and only Freixenet’s indigenous secondary fermentation yeasts can do this.

13. Details of any production techniques / wine styles / regions in which Freixenet has had a pioneering role?

Freixenet is a pioneer in practically all the locations where it makes wine, both in Spain and in other winemaking areas worldwide. However its principal commercial activity is making Cava, and it is the world’s biggest producer. In recent years Freixenet has focused on exploring and improving their yeast strains to gain a deeper understanding of the fermentation process and to create a portfolio of Cava

wines in different styles.