

WINE PRODUCER PROFILE - CODORNÍU, CAVA

Codorníu is a major producer of Cava, second only to Freixenet in production volume. The origins of Codorníu date back to the 16th Century and it was one of the first companies to produce Cava commercially. The company remains under family ownership. Cava is Codorníu's main focus, but the company also produces a range of still wines and owns an 88% share of Bodegas Bilbaínas in DOC Rioja. Codorníu's production plant is located in Sant Sadurní d'Anoia in Catalonia and the company operates approximately 3,410 hectares of vineyards in Spain (Euromonitor, April 2012). Approximately 50% of the company's production is sold domestically, and 50% is exported. Within their Cava range alone, Codorníu produce both white and rosé wines, in a variety of quality levels and using both traditional and international grape varieties.

An interview with Carolyn d'Aguilar, Brand Manager for Codorniu in the UK

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

All Codorníu wines are made with grapes that we control and process. No Codorníu wines are made from purchased bulk wines. Around a third of the grapes are grown in our own vineyards; the rest come from growers with whom we have had long standing relationships, in some cases for several generations.

2. What are the benefits of using both sources?

With grapes from our own vineyards, we can control every aspect of our grapes' development - this is why all of our premium wines (recommended retail price £9.99 and above) are made from grapes from our own estate. With grapes from our growers we also have very exacting standards in terms of quality and we work with them closely every vintage to specify our requirements.

3. From which regions are your Cava grapes sourced?

Within DO Cava, Codorníu sources grapes from several different climatic regions. Our family owned vineyards in DO Costers del Segre and DO Conca de Barbera provide grapes for our best wines made from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. The continental climate of these regions provides cooler nights which helps to retain acidity and also leads to slower ripening in these early ripening varieties. Macabeo, Xarel·lo and Parellada ripen much later than Chardonnay and Pinot Noir and are therefore better suited to Penedès with its Mediterranean climate.

4. What proportion of each grape variety is used in your wines?

The breakdown is:

Wines above £9.99 RRP: Chardonnay 65%, Pinot Noir 45%, and Macabeo, Xarel·lo & Parellada 10%.

Wines below £9.99 RRP: Macabeo 40%, Xarel·lo 30%, Parellada 20% and the rest Chardonnay.

5. How does each of these varieties influence the final wine?

For sparkling above £9.99, we look for wines with a very tight acid structure. Acid structure is the skeleton of good Cava and sparkling wine. It is important to have acidity so that a wine can age for many years.

Below £9.99, wines are typically aged for 9 months – here we look for generosity of mid palate with less emphasis on acid structure.

6. Is it true to state that Codorníu pioneered international grape varieties such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in Cava?

It is true that Codorníu pioneered Chardonnay and Pinot Noir and pushed for the inclusion of these varieties in DO Cava.

Part of Codorníu's company DNA is its commitment to continuous innovation and learning. We saw that Chardonnay and Pinot Noir performed better in our continental vineyards and were better suited to longer-ageing. However, there are other producers in DO Cava who make wonderful wines that age well and are made with grapes from the Mediterranean region. In understanding Cava one should not generalise too much. Cava continues to evolve and is now at a very exciting stage of development, with very diverse styles being made from different blends.

7. How do these international varieties influence the final wine?

Although there are some fruit flavour differences, the main influence is in the structure. As stated before, structure in sparkling wine is everything.

8. Were there any issues introducing these varieties to the DO Cava in terms of climate? Do you need to treat these grapes differently in the vineyard?

Yes, there were issues. Introducing change in any field generates debate. In terms of growing the different varieties, there is a constant learning process about how varieties perform in particular vineyards. A new variety in an old vineyard offers different challenges to an old variety in an old vineyard.

9. Are there any legislative restrictions that need to be followed while growing Cava grapes?

The main limitation is a maximum yield set at 12,000 kg per hectare. Also, the vineyard has to be certified within the boundaries of DO Cava.

10. Has the selection of clones or rootstocks been important?

Rootstock selection is always important to determine the best rootstock for your soil, your climate and your style of wine growing. Clonal selection is a constant learning process.

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

Definitely. The maximum alcohol allowed in DO Cava is 11.5% abv in the base wine because more than 1% is gained during secondary fermentation. Selecting the grapes at their optimum maturity is the key to achieving the right acid structure and fruit flavour in the final wine.

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

We use both methods. Machine harvesting allows us to gather a lot of grapes quickly but has obvious challenges. The quality of today's harvesting machines has improved significantly from 10 years ago. The machines today can deliver 80% whole berries intact and undamaged. Our key challenge is to minimise the time between harvesting and pressing and to keep the temperature of the grapes as low as possible, which is why we harvest by night.

We use hand harvesting for our very best wines using 10 kg crates. These are transported to the press and the bunch is pressed whole.

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

We use pneumatic presses because they give a very good juice structure. They offer a lot of control and flexibility.

14. Do you de-stem the grapes?

Yes. Intact stems can break when we pump the must adding an undesirable phenolic character. All of our processes are designed to minimise phenolics. For our best wines we use whole bunch pressing in small batches which means that the stems do not break.

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

We have conducted trials with stainless steel and cement fermentation tanks. When the temperature is kept constant, we cannot detect a difference. The difference between vessels is the thermodynamic characteristics. We use a stainless steel for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, cement for Macabeo, Xarel·lo and Parellada.

16. What yeast do you use and why?

We use various yeasts, but fundamentally we seek a neutral yeast for the primary fermentation. We want our base wine to be as free as possible from post-fermentation characteristics. Our aim is to achieve pure fruit characteristics only - secondary characteristics come in the bottle.

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

Not really. Yeast contact in the bottle is more important.

18. Do the base wines undergo malolactic fermentation?

Some wines do, some wines don't. Anna de Codornú, for example, does, but our best wines often do not. The right acid structure is essential for our best wines that are often aged for long periods of time. Malic acid keeps the wines very tight. These wines need a long contact time with the lees in order to

open up slowly. This is why we are moving Jaume Codorníu to five years' ageing and the Gran Codorníu Gran Reserva to 10 years' ageing.

19. How long do you leave the wines to age on the lees?

All of our various styles of wine in every range must have balance. Entry level Codorníu wines (Macabeo, Xarel·lo and Parellada blends) have lower acid levels and do not need too much time in contact with lees to give a rich mid-palate wine.

Our best wines do not undergo malolactic fermentation. They are Chardonnay and Pinot Noir wines and need a lot more time to soften and come into balance. But when they do, they are at an entirely different quality level which is why they cost more money. In the end you get what you pay for.

20. Is riddling by hand or gyropalette? Why?

Riddling by hand was stopped in the 1980s due to repetitive strain injury. From this point Codorníu started to use gyropalletes, speeding up the riddling process considerably. An agglomerating yeast was also introduced, reducing the time taken for the yeast lees to settle.

21. Are there any new techniques which you are exploring currently?

During the last few years we have been studying and experimenting with some old techniques and have incorporated some of these methods into our production processes. For example, we have introduced the technique of "capes" which was used before the winery had refrigeration. It involves filling the fermentation tank to only a quarter full of the volume the first day, then adding another quarter on the second day, another quarter on the third day and on the fourth day, the last quarter. This process allows the temperature to be kept lower naturally and works extremely well with Macabeo, Xarel·lo and Parellada.

22. Have there been any trends in the Cava industry recently?

The major change in my personal view is that in the last 5 years there has been a massive improvement in Cava quality from the majority of the producers. Also, we are now seeing the different houses and brands defining their house style more clearly. This is a very important new development for DO Cava. Consumers now have to determine which style they prefer.

Company website: www.codorniu.com

