

## ***FROM THE GRAPEVINE***

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July-August 2006

One of my favorite activities every other year is roaming the globe with Chef Daniel Drumlake and a group of culinary students from the Art Institute of California – Los Angeles. This year’s trip was called ‘Wineries and Cuisine of Iberia.’ From Barcelona, Spain, to Lisbon, Portugal, our group enjoyed spectacular food, drink and Iberian culture every step of the way.

We started up in northern Spain. We made a day trip from Barcelona to the nearby Penedes wine region. Our first visit was to the very large estate winery of **Miguel Torres**, where we toured the facilities and admired the lake that nestled near the beautiful Torres villa. Our group was shown a short film about the winery and the Torres family as well as an exceptional tour of the winery. In the elegant, if stark tasting room, we were given a Chardonnay to sample. Of more interest to me was their *Mas la Plana*, an elegant Cabernet Sauvignon that would pair nicely with roast meats and game given its particular strength.

Our other stop up in this part of the world was to the highland estate of **Milmanda**, which is home to a stunning 15th-century castle. This estate specializes in chardonnay, which we sampled. The house special demonstrated balanced acidity, the requisite ripe fruits, and a surprising touch of cinnamon.

We next explored south and south-west of Barcelona, winding up into the beautiful, rugged mountain region of Priorat. This area is Spain’s second DOC, and home of the winery **Mas Igneus**. Here we got a break from the Chardonnays. Instead, we tasted a *2003 Barron del Closos*, their white blend, which was medium bodied and full of honeyed fruit. I really liked their *2003 Red*, another blend made mostly from the Carignan grape. This bottle has ripe blueberries and blackberries on the nose, but strong minerals on the palate. Interestingly, Mas Igneus is aiming for a 100% organic growing style.

A couple of hundred feet up the hill we arrived at **Buil and Gine Winery**. This is a modern facility that features tasting and sales areas, and absolutely breathtaking scenery. We tasted their dry red wines, mostly blends of Grenache and Carignan varietals.

Moving down the hill, for lunch we proceeded to the famous wine-country restaurant, **Celler de l'Arpic**. Here, Marta Rovira of **Mas d'en Gil** – and an old friend from her previous visit to Los Angeles – brought some of her wines for us to taste before we left the area. All of the bottles were blends of the Grenache and Carignan grapes typical in this region. The complex *2003 Clos Fonta* was soft and supple, rich with tannins and dark plums. This should age well. The energetic *2001 Coma Vella Mas d'en Gill* was intense, bright, and rich in fruit. The grand dame of the bottles being sampled was the *1998 Gran Buig*. A general reserve bottle, this complex, balanced wine was made from grapes coming strictly from the winery's oldest vines. We very much appreciated Marta joining us and sharing her impressive product with us.

After the relative calm of the wineries, our trip hit high gear: a cooking class in San Sebastian, a visit to the Guggenheim Museum and Food Market in Bilbao, and a long road trip to Madrid. The next winery we were able to visit was **Bodegas Matarromera**, which resides in the *Ribera del Duero* region. This large-scale operation uses temperature control and stainless steel vats – not that common in Spain these days. Of their many reds, I particularly liked the Merlot. It had good characteristics and ample fruit. The Bodegas' Merlots are available in California, so keep your eye out particularly for a *gran reserva* or *reservas* bottle.

Another relatively new winery in the areas is **Abadia Refuerta**, which produces lines that range from budget to deluxe. I liked their *Seleccion Especial*, a blend with fruit forward, a nose of sweet herb, and some smoke around the edges. The *1999 Paga Megralada* showed the licorice tones and complex bouquet typical of the tempranillo grapes from which it is made. This wine shows good density, and frankly, flirts with excellence. It may be interesting to see how it ages from here. Last but not least, the Cabernet Sauvignon *Paga Valdebellon* shows dense nutty and toasty notes, a taut, tannic palate, with some lingering oak influences. This bottle comes from the luxury side of Abadia's offerings, and lives up to its price tag.

Our next stop was to the region of Saltillo de la Ribera and the winery **Bodega Ismael Arroyo**. Famous for caves that have cellared wine dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this was one tour the students couldn't miss. This bodega is very much a family affair, and over my visits I have now met the entire family: father-founder Ismael, brothers Miguel Angel and Ramon, and Miguel's wife Marissa. One of their premier offerings is their *ValSoltillo Crianza Gran Reserva*, which ages two years in oak and three years in the bottle before hitting the public. The *gran reserva* is only released on special years, and is hard to find.

We wrapped up our trip in Portugal, famous for that fortified wine named after it – Port. But the highlight for our group here was cultural, not alcoholic. We were staying in the capital of Porto when the Portuguese soccer team beat the U.K in the World Cup. The whole city went crazy, and we got to watch the impromptu celebrations spill out into the streets.

On that note, I'll wrap up and leave you with a simple thought that often gets forgotten in the sometimes fussy world of wine: Drink what you like and like what you drink.

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