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## TRADITIONAL CAVA DESERVES RESPECT

THERE has been an explosion in the variety of sparkling wines in Australia, driven by factors such as a strong Australian dollar that makes champagne nearly as cheap as home-grown fizz. This has coincided with the public's desire to learn more about wines from overseas, as well as Australian producers diversifying their offerings and producing prosecco and sparkling moscato. It has all resulted in a vibrant marketplace.

However, one style has not received the same recognition, and that is cava, the Spanish sparkling wine. Cava shares the same method of production as champagne, but seems to live in the shadows of the glitzy, luxury world inhabited by the people of Epernay. However, when you start to look closely at the product it has some exclusive and remarkable features and deserves our respect.

Take its location. The cava wines are unique as they don't necessarily belong to one region. Since Spain joined the EU,

into three zones: Coastal, the Penedes Depression and the Pre-Coastal Range. The soils vary in all three. On the coast it is not surprising to find gravel and calcareous soils. Further inland, on the flatter valley bottoms that form the depression, there are deep sand and clay-based soils. Finally, in the Pre-Coastal Range that stretch to towards the stunning Montserrat Mountains there are shallow clay and sandstone, with substrata of limestone and vines are planted to around 600m. All three soils are poor and the climate is dry; the 2012 vintage, for example, has seen yields down by 35 per cent. Each soil is matched to a grape, as in Champagne.

While chardonnay and pinot noir are permitted and have gained a strong foothold in cava, the industry was built on indigenous varieties, and some producers like Agusti Torello Mata refuse to use these French grapes. They use the classic white grapes of macabeo, parellada and xarel-lo with the indigenous red grape trepat for the production

herbaceous aromas and gives structure and body to the blend. It can dominate a cava wine and needs to be restricted as it is a high-yielding variety.

Parellada is the lightest of the three and performs best in the higher altitudes of the Pre-Coastal Range. It has large but loose bunches which resist rot and provides the acidity in the blend, together with some fresh tropical notes. The aromatics of all three grapes are subtle and, some would say, undistinguished, but that is not necessarily a bad thing with a sparkling wine base. To some Spanish producers, chardonnay and pinot grown in these Mediterranean climates can produce fat, alcoholic, heavy wines that make them unsuitable to cava production.

The Spanish have used champagne technology and adapted it so, not surprisingly, before the 1970s, the wine was known as 'champana'. The first sparkling wines were made in the mid-1870s by Jose Raventos for the company Codorniu after he had visited Champagne. Today, Codorniu and Freixenet are the dominant cava labels.

Cava producers use the same cool environment as Champagne to mature their wines. Cava is a Spanish word meaning 'cellar' - and the whole of northern Spain is a feast for cellar dwellers, with many excavations going back centuries. The wine has a very slow secondary fermentation in bottle. "Our wines ferment at a low 12C for three months, which produces very small, fine bubbles," explains Maria Torres Orriols.

Cava must spend a minimum of nine months on lees. When aged for 15 months it can be labelled as Reserva, and 30 months qualifies for a Gran Reserva title. Such wines bring the benefits of nearly three years of autolytic development. Take Augusti Torello Mata Gran Reserva from the 2008 vintage, for instance. You get lovely toasty, nutty, bready, yeast dough and brioche notes that you find in fine champagne. The palate is elegant, with good length and the wine has a fine mousse. All that without resorting to the 'classic' cocktail of French grapes. 

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cava can be produced in the large regions of Valencia, Navarra, Rioja and Aragon. But nearly all the production comes traditionally from Cataluna, and just like in Champagne it is centred around one town - Sant Sadurni d'Anoia or San Sadurni de Noya, depending on which dialect you choose.

Here in the Penedes region, south of Barcelona, the climate is hot and influenced by the Mediterranean Sea and totally at odds, compared to other sparkling wine regions, especially cold Champagne. The rule of thumb is that you cannot use hot climate grapes to make fine sparkling wine. So that is another reason why cava is different.

According to top-quality cava producer Agusti Torello Mata you can divide the region

of rosat or rosé. Garnacha and monastrell can also be used under Spanish wine laws.

Macabeo is grown in the poor soils of the Coastal region to restrict its tendency to be high-yielding. It has compact bunches and needs the coastal breeze to dry the berries and avoid rot problems. In Rioja it goes under the name viura and is common in southern France. Macabeo is the dominant grape and the most important one to Agusti Torello; "It provides the elegance in the blend and is important for the ageing process," says Maria Torres Orriols, communications manager at Torello. The wine is fairly neutral, with some pear and grapefruit nuances.

Xarel-lo is grown in the clay soils of the Penedes valley and provides the earthy,