

Visiting Codorníu, Spain's Biggest Cava Producer

By Christine Rudman CWM

(Abbreviated version of an unpublished article written for Classic Wine shortly before it shut down)

When you get asked if you'd like to visit Codorníu in the company of importer Stefano Gabba, CWM Jenny Ratcliffe-Wright, publisher of Wine-Style, and Miguel Chan, chief sommelier of the Tsogo Sun group's 100+ hotels, you say yes, of course. Who could resist getting an inside track to Cava production and the winery that leads it?

We were based in Barcelona and driven out to the winery, 50 km away. The industry is dominated by two companies, Codorníu the oldest and biggest, and its rival Freixenet, also family-owned. They are neighbors, lie within sight of each other, which must act as a daily incentive to perform better!

To put it into perspective, Spain's Cava production was 241 million bottles in 2013, of which 66% was exported. Champagne's production that same year was 349 million bottles.

Cava and Codorníu, a family story

This is a story of money and influence, plus family connections. Codorníu's winemaking history began in 1551 when vineyard and farm equipment owner Jaume Codorníu produced his first wine, but it was the marriage in 1659 of his daughter Anna to Miquel Raventós which was the turning point for the company. She was heir to the property of Can Codorníu, together with its land and vineyards and he was a member of an important winemaking family in the region, and owner of numerous vineyards and accredited wineries. And 18 generations later, the Raventós family still owns and runs Codorníu, the oldest winery in Catalonia and one of the oldest family-run wineries in the world.

The growth and specialisation would not have been possible without a few visionaries in the family. The first was Josep Raventós Fatjó who after years of experimentation, in 1872 produced his first bottles of Cava, bottle fermented sparkling wine based on the Champagne method, but using local grape varieties. However it was his son Manuel Raventós, inheriting Can Codorníu 1885, who had the greatest influence on the company's success.

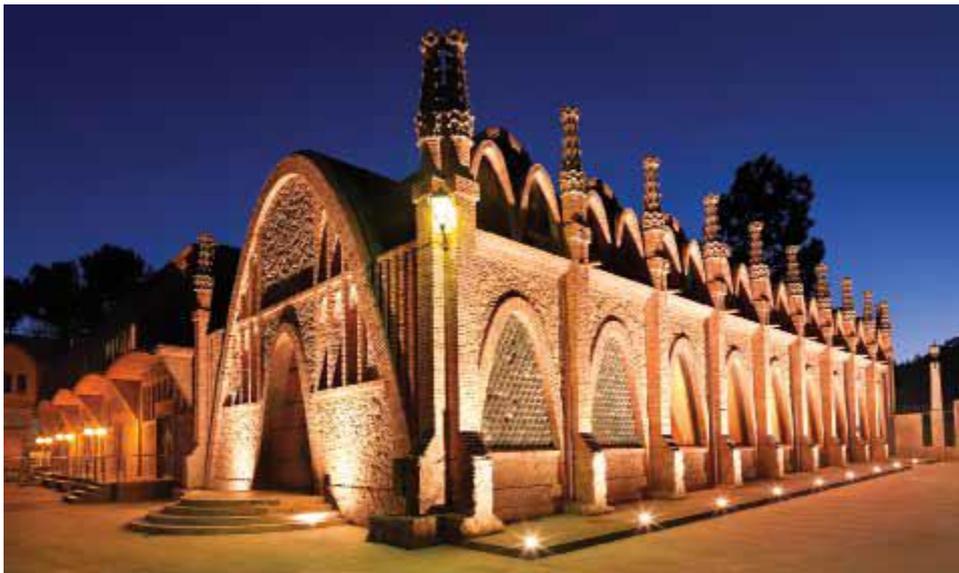
Manuel took over the family business at a difficult time, because phylloxera ravaged the vineyards and almost destroyed the Penedès region. All the vines had to be dug up and replanted on American rootstock. Manuel had travelled widely in his youth and was convinced that there was a great future for his family's sparkling wines on the international market. He suggested that Codorníu be dedicated exclusively to the production of 'Traditional Method' sparkling wines, and took prominent French wine producers to Penedés so that they could assess the wines. He also travelled to France to broaden his winemaking skills.



La Torre at Codorníu, previously the family residence, now used for functions

Manuel was clearly flamboyant as well as visionary, because when he decided to build a large winery in Sant Sadurní d'Anoia, it had to be more than just a production facility; it had to be 'a work of art, just like our wines'. Besides housing the future projection of significant sales, the buildings were to stand as a monument for future generations, reflecting Spanish culture and values and marking Cava as a stylish product.

Art Nouveau architect Josep Puig i Cadafalch, a pupil of Gaudi and someone who'd already made a name for himself as one of the leading architects of Catalan modernism, was chosen for the project. The work took twenty years, from 1895 to 1915. The main design is reflected in a series of cathedral-like naves, and over time the building came to be known as the Cathedral of Cava. The Codorníu winery's importance was confirmed in 1976, when King Juan Carlos I signed the decree granting it the status of National Monument of Historical and Artistic Interest.



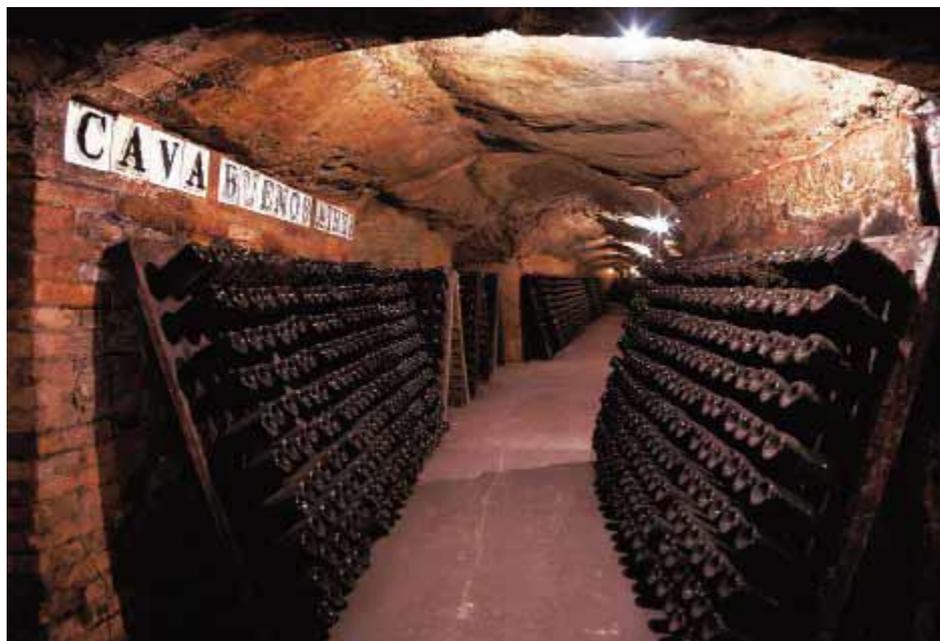
Original cellar buildings, designed by Josep Puig i Cadafalch, a pupil of Gaudi

Grape Varieties, Vineyards and Winemaking

While Cava's main original varieties are Macabeo, Xarel-lo and Parellada, after intensive lobbying, Codorníu convinced the authorities to allow the inclusion of Chardonnay (in 1986), and Pinot Noir (2000), to the horror of Freixenet who were at first vehemently opposed to the outside influence those varieties would bring to such a uniquely Catalan product, but later followed suit.

In order to supply the winery, Codorníu requires 6,000 hectares of vineyards, 30% of which is met by the company's own vineyards. The remaining 70% is purchased from Penedés growers who, through working agreements, are advised on technical matters and share in the advances and improvements generated by research programmes. Codorníu draws from vineyards in three different climatic zones within the Cava Designation of Origin: El Penedés, with a Mediterranean climate and limestone and clay soils, La Conca de Barbera, the slate soils of which give the grapes mineral tones, and the continental and higher-lying area of inland Catalonia, where the temperature contrasts of day and night yield aromatic grapes with higher acidity. This is where most of the Parellada is grown. The Chardonnay comes from Codorníu's inland vineyards in Costers del Segre, the Pinot Noir from Conca de Barberà, and the Xarel-lo varietal comes from the Penedés.

Each grape variety from each plot is fermented separately in stainless steel tanks. After the blending, Codorníu's own yeasts are used, the wine is bottled and moved to the cellars. The second fermentation in bottle lasts between 9 months and four years depending on the type of Cava, and takes place in five underground levels beneath the winery, making up a total of 30 km of cellar space. Remuage is done mechanically by gyro-palletes, now also used extensively in Champagne. Interestingly enough, they were invented in Spain, not France.



One of the five underground levels of tunnels

Planning for the future

Here's yet another example of how this company renews itself and remains visionary – without losing the history. In 2013, the Jaume Cellar was opened, a state-of-the-art experimental cellar housed in the very section on the Codorníu grounds where the first winery was built in 1551. Jaume's name is already commemorated in the company's top Cava, and the cellar, in addition to its R&D role, is where the company's premium Cavas are made. Besides Jaume de Codorníu, it includes the Gran Codorníu Gran Reservas as well as future launches being planned.



Entrance to Jaime Cellar



In the cellar

Codorníu's team of six winemakers, led by winemaking manager Bruno Colomer Martí, are involved in this new micro-winery. One of their most ambitious programmes started in 2006, was to analyse all the vineyards, enabling Codorníu to classify the qualities of each zone and vine plot using 30 different parameters. The Gran Codorníu Gran Reserva was born out of this project. The Cellar Jaime also has its own laboratory where the wines are analysed and monitored, although the most complex tests are carried out in the laboratory in the Casa vella de Codorníu.

Products

The range is extensive, with family members honoured throughout. The first Cava made with Chardonnay was named Anna de Codorníu in honour of her role in history, the oldest Cava is Non Plus Ultra Brut, and in 2000, Codorníu launched Spain's first Pinot Noir Rosé Cava.

The relationship with the Royal Family has been an important factor for the Codorníu Group. In 1897 Her Majesty Queen María Cristina appointed Codorníu "Purveyor to the Spanish Royal Family". Since then Codorníu has produced a unique special Reserva for the Zarzuela Palace.

Woolworths stocks two of the range, at R119.95 a bottle.

Visiting Codorníu

Our trip was sponsored by Codorníu and arranged by their SA importer GABBA International. We were hosted by Juan Castell, the Manager for Africa and Middle East. I can highly recommend a visit to the winery, in its beautiful setting amidst rolling hills. It is large and clearly professional yet has an old-world courtesy and sense of history that is totally charming. And yet, under all that is a keen sense of what the future holds, which is why the innovation doesn't stop. They are also extremely conscious of their environmental responsibility, and have extensive programmes in place to treat/recycle/reuse/reduce. Check them and the product range out at: www.codorniu.com