

everything drink



Bubbly blondes

Words by Sarah Monaghan, pictures by the Spanish Institute for Foreign Trade (ICEX), Freixenet and Codorniu

Corks are guaranteed to be popping the world over this Christmas and New Year season. Festive, fizzy and frivolous, mine's a Cava...

Fernando Ramajo

It's bubbly, it's blonde and it is full of ebullient personality. Cava - crisp, fruity and well balanced - is undoubtedly one of the world's greatest sparkling wines. Having appeared in Britain less than 30 years ago, cava recently overtook French and Italian wines as the UK's top-selling style of sparkling wine - making Spain now the second-largest producer of sparkling wines in the world after France. Cava, then, has become sparkingly chic...

"But it's not champagne, is it?" you say, with perhaps a hint of effervescent snobbery? Well, no. Well, yes. In fact, whether it is or not, is not the question... Cavas should be judged on their own, very charismatic, merits.

Cava dates back to the 1870s and in fact used to be called champán or, in Catalan - xampán, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the French champagne-growers took umbrage at this. Despite their grouches, it wasn't until 1986, when Spain joined the EEC, that bureaucracy decreed that the name had to be dropped, and a new name, cava, (meaning underground cellar), was given.

The EEC proclaimed that only wines produced in a delimited geographical area could carry this now prestigious title. Most are produced in Catalonia, in the Penedés region. All cava is made, however, by the method that used to be universally known as the méthode champenoise, or, in Spanish, the método champañés. Perhaps rather tetchily, the French took noisy exception to this too, and it had to go... Now it has to be called the método tradicional.

What that means is that cava is made in exactly the same way as champagne - but in a different country with different grapes. Originally made using the classic champagne varietals, (Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier), wine-growers in Catalonia had to change tack after the vine louse, phylloxera, wiped out their rootstock in the late 19th Century. Since then, the local trio of grapes, Parellada, Macabeo and Xarel-lo, has held sway, although innovative growers are using other noble varieties. Chardonnay, particularly, is being increasingly grown and used for cava.

Today, over 90 per cent of cava comes from Catalonia but the Denominación de Origen (DO), covers other areas, including Rioja and Navarra. Fermented in the bottle, wine designated cava is of a superior quality and must adhere to strict production standards.

There are many independent bodegas producing superb cava but the two great rivals are Freixenet and Codorniu. Both produce complete ranges that rival each other for quality and value. Between them, they account for 80 per cent of sales.

Freixenet takes the prize in terms of sheer volume. It is the leading cava exporter and the largest sparkling wine-maker in the world. It grew out of an estate called La Freixenada (in Catalan, a plantation of ash trees). From the start it went in for imaginative advertising and a constellation of stars took part in its campaigns, including Gene Kelly, Plácido Domingo and Paul Newman.

Lately, Penélope Cruz has been fizzing away as front person.

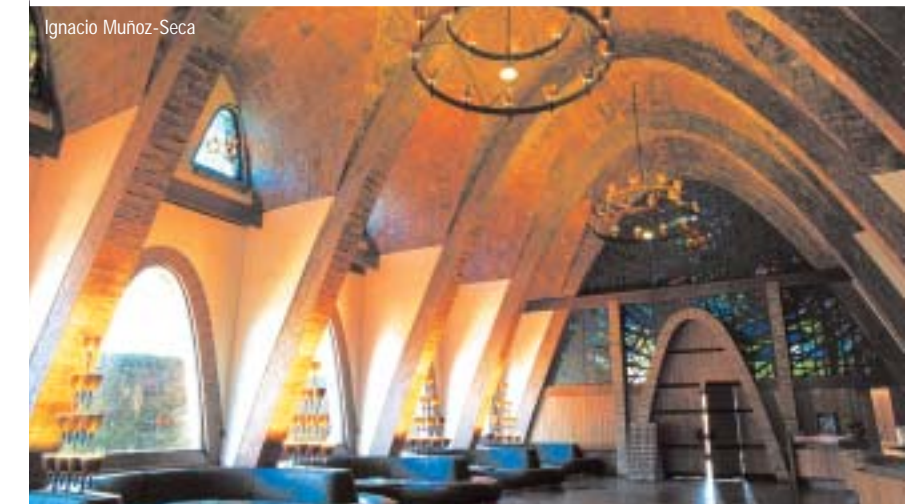
Freixenet's most popular wine is Cordon Negro, sold in black frosted-glass bottles, but if you are really splashing out, reach for the Freixenet Vintage Brut Reserva Real. Top of the range and made from Chardonnay, this is a queen of cavas.



Codorniu, on the other hand, takes the prize for just how long it has been blowing those intoxicating bubbles. Not forever, but it began making



Ignacio Muñoz-Seca



Ignacio Muñoz-Seca



Ignacio Muñoz-Seca

Bubbling up

Facing page: Cava, now sparkingly chic. This page: early advertisement by Catalan artist Ultrillo for Codorniu (left). From top: the fabulous Art Nouveau labelling room at Bodegas Codorniu; inside the labelling room; the impressive entrance to Bodegas Freixenet; swinging bottle cages used to turn the bottles for remuage



Carlos Navajas



Ignacio Muñoz-Seca

Spain's sparkling export

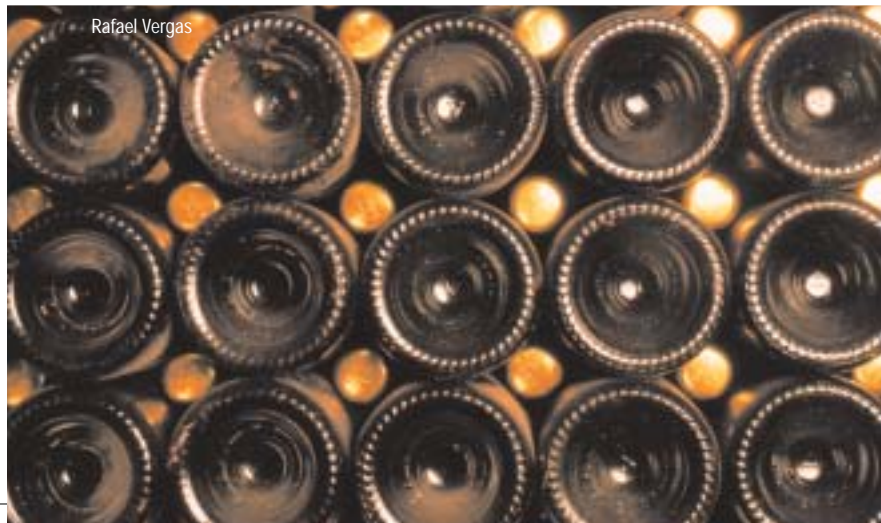
From top: Codorniu's underground cellars are said to be the largest in the world, stretching for 24 kilometres on five levels; entrance to the Codorniu Bodegas; cellars at Codorniu; bottles of Cava



Ignacio Muñoz-Seca



Rafael Vergas



wine in the 16th Century. It laid down the first wine in Spain on the model of champagne in 1872 after studying practices in Reims.

Euphoric with success, in 1898 the Codorníu family decided to build a new bodega and to have the great Catalan architect Antoni Gaudi design it. He was too busy so one of his rivals, Josep Maria Puig I Cadafalch, did it instead, producing a range of art nouveau buildings that are spectacular. The work took from 1895 to 1915, and is now a National Monument that has become as much a place of pilgrimage for students of architecture as for lovers of wine.

Today, Codorníu's underground cellars are believed to be the largest in the world. Their sheer size is enough to make anyone stagger... they stretch for 24 kilometres on five levels. It's a dizzying sight. The best wines are Gran Codorníu Brut and the fresh Anna de Codorníu, made from 90-per-cent Chardonnay.

There are scores of small independent bodegas producing superb cava, although sadly many of these only sell in Spain or end up supplying the unlabelled cava on sale in the supermarket giants such as Asda, Waitrose and Tesco. Says Bill Rolfe, international marketing director for United Wineries: "You can snap up a bottle from Asda for £3.99. Cava recently has had tremendous success but unlabelled cava is definitely making it more difficult for it to compete with champagne, which the French have cleverly managed to maintain as a luxury item."

Returning to the old argument, though, of which is superior, champagne or cava, is enough to have you foaming at the mouth. Julian Jeffs, author of *The Wines of Spain*, says: "Cava is not champagne and does not pretend to be. The wines should be judged on their own, very considerable merits." In other words, vive la différence!

But it's an endless debate and you could, in theory, argue until the bubbly has gone flat, but maybe not...

Researchers at the University of Surrey in Guildford have finally proved what every self-respecting wine drinker already knew: that sparkling wine gets you drunk more quickly.

According to a study carried out by *New Scientist*: "After five minutes, the fizzy drinkers had an average of 0.54 milligrammes of alcohol per millilitre of blood, while those drinking flat wine averaged just 0.39 milligrammes." One theory is that the bubbles speed the flow of alcohol into the digestive system.

Cheers - let's raise our glasses to cava and to a sparkling New Year! ●

Our choice

Freixenet Cordón Negro Brut

£7.49, Waitrose

This 11.5-per-cent sparkling wine pours with a pale straw/yellow colour and is very lively, producing a constant, prodigious stream of large bubbles. The nose presented is a yeasty, yellow-apple aroma with a light, lemon-custard smell and a hint of something floral. Easy-drinking.



Codorníu Cuvée Raventós

£7.99, Sainsburys

This full-bodied 11.5-per-cent Cava is likely to be appreciated by mature palates. It has a delicate toasted flavour and superbly fine bubbles, making it ideal for drinking at any time. A pale yellow colour, it is crisp with a touch of creaminess.



Marques de Monistrol Reserva Rosé,

Up to £6.99, Waitrose, Oddbins

Elegant strawberry fruit aromas with a hint of scented rose petal, a fine mousse and silky red fruit flavours combine to make this an ideal fizz to serve as an aperitif for any social occasion.

