

Spanish (and Catalan) wine has never been more exciting, yet remains largely unknown. This series of articles aims to highlight some of what's going on and bring these stories to a wider audience. Please copy and distribute freely. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/ahalliwell> - <https://twitter.com/ADHalliwell> - ahalliwell@iee.org

Vinyes dels Aspres (Cantallops, Empordà DO, Catalunya) - 18th April 2016 v1.0

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Empordà - A quiet revolution?

The Empordà is a region in the far north east of Catalunya and it's really a fabulous place to visit. There are stunning cliffs, hidden coves, long sandy beaches, high mountains, rice fields and numerous cute villages. There's also a heavy tourism industry, helped by the area's proximity to France. On a clear day you can actually see France from much of the Empordà, as the snowy sentinel of the eastern Pyrenees, Pic du Canigou, maintains its stoical watch along both sides of the border. Not that there necessarily is a border. The Empordà is about as Catalan as you can get and for some people round here, Roussillon still forms a part of that identity.

It's interesting to compare winemaking on both sides of the Pyrenees. Certainly the grapes are largely the same, with Carignan "Carinyena" and Grenache "Garnatxa" playing significant roles in both regions. What has often surprised me about the Empordà wines has been their high alcohols and sometimes overripe, porty notes. Wrongly thinking that north equalled cool, it turns out that the summers here are long and hot. For the French it's pretty much Africa and the wine styles there, such as the heady Banyuls, reflect that. But (Catalan-independence issues aside), this is northern Spain, so what's going on?

The reason for the hot summers is two-fold. Firstly the Mediterranean Sea warms right up in the summer, whereas the North Atlantic stays chilly. The difference is dramatic. At the same latitude in the west of Spain we'd be in the verdant Rías Baixas, home to delicate whites, not chunky reds. Secondly many of the vineyards in the Empordà are located at low altitudes, less than 100m in many cases. This actually makes them warmer than some of Catalunya's more southerly wine areas, such as Penedès, where vines can be found at up to 800m above sea-level.



Typical Empordà vineyard, near Vilamaniscle

Warm sunny summers are usually viewed as a good thing for winemaking: it's easy to get the grapes ripe and you tend to have fewer problems with disease. Certainly it's something that has served the broader area well in the past, with the typical Mediterranean diet of wine, seafood and olive oil practically making itself. But times changed and domestic consumption started to collapse, so the region needed to react. At first "international" vines, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah were thought to be the answer. They do well here, but are still work in progress and besides, everybody else has planted them. A useful ace to have up your sleeve, but not the answer.

Now suddenly the Empordà is back, and a growing number of local wine-fashionistas are even suggesting that it might be the next big thing (along with Terra Alta). But it's a funny revolution; no big Parker scores or unique grapes to exploit, no Álvaro Palacios on the front cover of every wine magazine. In fact no big noise at all. Rather the rise of Empordà has been like dozing on the beach on a Sunday afternoon: not a care in the world, then you suddenly wake up to find your toes in the water and your shoes floating away. How has this happened? Basically through what the Catalans do best: good business sense.

In Spain the Catalans are often dismissed as "tight-fisted" but a more apt generalisation might be "canny". Rather than blow all their cash on eye-catching wineries and 200% new oak, in the Empordà investments have been made only where necessary. The existing vineyards are pretty good, the climate's potentially excellent, there's solid local demand. So there has been a quiet revolution with a new focus on quality over quantity. Of course there has also been some investment in wine cellars, but this has generally been round the back where it counts, rather than on needless vanity projects. A little cash has gone a long way and now the region offers a good range of solid, authentic, fruity wines at fair prices. Something for everyone and something that won't break the bank. A recipe that is looking increasingly smart in this post-crisis world. One of the projects that has quietly come up through the ranks is Vinyes dels Aspres.

Vinyes dels Aspres

Thankfully it was a warm, sunny morning as I drove up to Vinyes dels Aspres in Cantallops, on the edge of the Pyrenees. I say thankfully, as I'd been having Little Red Riding Hood nightmares for much of the previous night. "Cantallops" could be translated as "Singing wolves" and my previous night's dreams had been full of abandoned villages under a full moon and a suspicious-looking host. But today it was glorious and I was pleased to leave the charmless border town of La Jonquera and head for the hills. After ten minutes winding through cork forests, I'd arrived at Cantallops. Prosperous and pleasant-looking rather than American Werewolf in London, I was immediately drawn to the place.

Finding the winery at the back of the village, the first thing I noticed was the glass flagons. Loads of them! Large and bulbous and stacked on the roof, in full glare of the rising sun. I was dimly aware of this type of *rancio*-provoking winemaking on the French side of the hills but it was a surprise to find it here too. I guess I shouldn't have been. It's all Catalunya and Banyuls is less than 20km away. But this type of wine wasn't the main reason I was here, in fact I'd really come to find out more about a decent, honest red wine I'd been enjoying back in Barcelona. At my favourite wine bar "Zim" (too hard to find, don't bother looking) they offer an unpretentious fruity red called "Oriol" from the Empordà. At 3€ a glass it had soon become my go-to red. When I found out that this was the junior of the range from Vinyes del Aspres and furthermore that famous English wine critic Jancis Robinson had recommended their white, I knew that something must be stirring in the hills.

Friendly winemaker-boss David Molas arrived with a smile, apologising profusely for being a couple of minutes late. We sat on the sunny terrace, ignoring the stiff breeze, and he told me a little of the family history. The winery is based around the historic *Can Batlle* property, which traces its roots to the 17th century. The area has long been known for cork, olive oil and wine production and Can Batlle incorporated a large working cellar. Wine was produced in this cellar until the 1930s but then marriage intervened. The two daughters of the property (three generations above David) married well, pairing up with a doctor and the famous composer and musician Eduard Toldrà. These husbands were busy in their respective fields and nobody had time for winemaking when ownership passed to the sisters, so wine production stopped and the vineyards were rented out.

It was David's father who decided to give things another go, moving up here in the late 70s and taking back control of the family vineyards. Vines were re-planted and the grapes were sold to the local cooperative. But it wasn't a great business and things were barely viable. This was not the Empordà's finest hour, cooperatives cared more about volume than quality and there was more money to be had in other industries. But the family persevered and it was David's uncle Xavier Albertí who took up the challenge and decided that to make things work they had to make their own wines on site. David had recently qualified in agricultural engineering and was an integral part of the plan.

The cellars were renovated beginning in 1999 and the first bottle of Vinyes dels Aspres was produced in 2002. That first batch was just 4,000 bottles across three wines. This has steadily grown to today's figure of around 60,000 bottles across nine labels. There's also a small amount of olive oil produced and David tells me that they will be completing the return to their roots, or rather trunks, by starting with estate-grown cork production in 2016.



Demijohns of sweet Garnatxa wine age in the sun at Vinyes dels Aspres, on the edge of Cantallops

Vineyards

Although a little higher than much of the Empordà, the vineyards are still not really high up. The mountain location is deceptive and vineyard altitude barely reaches 200m (660ft). Vinyes dels Aspres has around 32ha (79 acres) in production, with a further 5 planted. Doing a quick calculation I realise that they are only getting about 2 tonnes of grapes per hectare. Seems a bit low from mainly 30 year-old vines in an area with good annual rainfall and warm sunny summers...“It’s because of the *tramuntana*”, David explains, blaming northern Catalunya’s famous wind. “If it blows early in the season the vines can get damaged. If it blows during flowering, we get much reduced fruit set. When it’s strong the vines can suffer damage no matter what the season.” It seemed fairly strong today but David dismissed it with a flick of the hand, “Pah, nothing, last year we hit 156km/h.”

“Yet at the same time the tramuntana has advantages. We might get only half the yield of more sheltered spots but the tramuntana dries the air and blows pests away. It’s easy to grow healthy grapes here and so we accept it. What else can we do, the tramuntana blows around 100 days a year? All we can really ask for is the *right amount* of tramuntana.”

“Another difference here is the soils. As you can see we’re right on the edge of the mountains. Our vines tend to be planted in granite and slate, which naturally limit yields. We don’t irrigate here, so the vines are forced to put down deep roots. A little further south and the soil becomes more fertile and the vines don’t have to try as hard. In fact our biggest problem here is wild boar. They live in the forests and love eating grapes. They can cause a lot of damage in the run up to harvest time. This year we’re going to try putting up a fence, but I don’t know...it might not work, or it will just end up passing the problem on to somebody else.”



David Molas in one of their vineyards on the edge of Cantallops

“Garnatxa (Grenache) is really our star grape and here we have three kinds: Blanca, Roja and Negra. They’re all mutations of the same vine (Roja is also known elsewhere as ‘Grenache Gris’). The other local varieties which we have would be Carinyena and Monastrell (reds) and Picapoll (whites). At the end of the 90s we planted some well-known foreign varietals, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot. At the time it seemed like a good idea. Whilst they have little history here, we do like the results. They bring an extra dimension to the local grapes. But our focus should be local and so to push the balance back that way the 5ha we recently planted are all Garnatxa.”

As we stroll around some of the property David shows me an old stone table, hidden in the midst of the woods. Apparently when the composer Eduard Toldrà lived on site he used to come here every day for inspiration. David likes the notion and has plans to improve access to the area to create a space to enjoy the wines whilst on the property. In fact the more I talk to David, the more it becomes obvious that he is alive with ideas. Some bosses seem to shun the PR aspect of their companies but David seems to thrive on it, telling me that he goes to all the wine fairs he can within a 100km radius and is always up here, looking after visitors and thinking about improvements. He admits that he loves the contact with the land, something that all genuine wine people seem to share.

I ask about harvest dates and my impression that some of the Empordà wines I’d tried were a little stewy. “We tend to harvest around the end of September. We could pick at the middle of the month but then we’d only get around 13% alcohol. I prefer to wait. In this region I think you get good phenolic ripeness by waiting until around 15% potential alcohol. The wines have richer aromas but they’re still balanced, they’re still healthy. Every region has it’s characteristics and it makes sense to play to our strengths. Here we like to get things ripe.”

Winemaking

Back at the winery we have a quick look around. It a fairly simple place but they have some decent equipment. There’s an array of clean-looking stainless steel tanks, a pneumatic press and a number of barrels. There’s also one very smart 2000L Seguin Moreau wooden vat. Down below Vinyes dels Aspres has adapted what was the former wine cellar into an attractive barrel cellar. The conditions for wine storage seem to be perfect but although it looks a picture, I can imagine that the array of small rooms and tight stairways must make it a bit tricky to work. “You’re right”, David nods, “and it’s more than that. We can only really work with 225L barrels at the moment but we’d really like to move to 500L for a lower oak impact. We’re actually planning a new storage area now, so hopefully we can move in that direction in the near future.”

I ask David about winemaking. “It’s pretty simple really. We do a selection in the vineyard, looking for grapes which are both healthy and ripe. We then put these over a sorting table before bringing them into the building. For our top white, we take a mixture of Garnatxa grapes from our *Les Corts* vineyard. Once crushed and pressed, around 50% of the juice is run off into 225L French oak barrels, of which around 25% are new. Here the juice undergoes a barrel fermentation, then typically remains around 6 months in oak, with regular bâtonnage (lees stirring). Normally the wine doesn’t undergo malolactic fermentation in barrel, although one year it did. We then blend this barrel-fermented wine with the the rest of the wine, which was fermented in stainless. In this way we get a lovely textural component to our white, but there’s still a freshness and the oak doesn’t dominate.”

“For the reds, we harvest and ferment each variety separately. We ferment at around 24°C and I tend to keep the wines on skins for quite a while, maybe 25 days or so before we press them off. The wine then goes into oak, where it will stay for around 12-16 months. For our top reds a bit of bottle age really helps and I like to keep them here for another year or two before we release them onto the market. In all of our wines we use cultured yeasts. Our grapes are pretty ripe and I can’t afford to take any chances.” I ask about the expensive-looking oak vat, “We’re still learning how to make the best wines here and I like to run trials each year. We ferment in the vat and it’s small enough that we can punch down the cap. The idea is to see if we can get some of the benefits of a barrel fermentation, but with less work and less oak.”

“As for the sweet wines, they only represent around 4% of our production, but it’s something that I like. We make two different styles but in both cases they start with ripe Garnatxa grapes. Once we pick these grapes we leave them in trays in an open warehouse to dry. They might stay there for around 2 months, a bit less if there’s a good tramuntana blowing. This concentrates the grapes, including their sugars. In 2015 we picked 5087kg of grapes but after drying for 59 days just 2538kg remained! We then press these grapes and ferment in stainless steel. Of course this takes months and at some stage the fermentation stops, leaving unfermented sugars behind. We don’t need to add any alcohol, the yeast die when they’ve had enough. For our ‘Vi de panses’ wine that’s all there is to it and we bottle it to preserve the freshness. Our ‘Bac de les Ginesteres’ wine goes into the 20L demijohns you saw earlier and we leave them in the sun for 4 or 5 years. As far as I know it’s the only example in the world of a non-fortified wine aged in this way.”

4 or 5 years in the sun? I’m intrigued, this wasn’t what they’d taught me when I’d studied winemaking at Adelaide. “The process brings a richness, a completely different flavour profile, with caramelised walnuts, almonds and nougat showing through in the finished wine”, David explains. I ask about spoilage and inconsistencies from vintage to vintage and demijohn to demijohn. “Different years can bring different amount of sugar, though we will typically end up with around 170g/L. In the past we have released some wine as a non-vintage product, allowing us to blend sweeter and drier years together for a more uniform product. With the individual demijohns, some may go different ways but they’re all usable, they just bring different nuances to the final blend.”



Vinyes dels Aspres vineyard in dramatic mountain location



Inside the simple winery

Balancing success with growth

As we wandered around the cellar, David explained what was happening with the business, “Our top white ‘Blanc dels Aspres’ has won some important prizes and is doing really well. The 2013 won ‘Best barrel-fermented white in Catalunya’. It’s a food-friendly style and there are a lot of good restaurants round here, so this caught their attention. The 2013 sold out very quickly, but what do we do? We can’t just make more! Even if we pull next year’s out of barrel early, that doesn’t really solve the problem and besides, releasing a wine too young would also be a risk.”

“We’ve planted more white varieties, but of course that takes years. The thing is that if you run out too quickly, people lose interest and move on to something else. Then when the next year’s wine is ready, it might be too late, you’ve missed your chance. Of course the really good restaurants understand that, but not everybody gets it. Maybe we should have put the price up to manage demand...I don’t know...it’s a problem, but it’s still a better problem to have than sitting on unsold wine in the cellar. One thing that I find really strange relates to our young red ‘Oriol’ (my Barcelona wine bar favourite). As soon as the 2015 was bottled, everybody wanted it and we risked being stuck with the 2014. That’s crazy as far as I’m concerned, the extra year suits the wine and rounds out the up-front fruit. It’s not like we’re making Beaujolais Nouveau!”



Old stone table in the forest



The simple barrel cellar



Demijohns ageing wine outside

“The fact that we’re the only DO in Girona province helps us. People here care about food and there is a local demand for wine to go with it. This helps Empordà wine and means that we don’t need to rely on exports as much as other regions in Catalunya. In fact we only export around 25%. That said, things could still be better. It’s surprising but I’d say that we’re still lacking a proper wine culture here. At all the wine fairs I go to, I tend to recognise the same faces, the aficionados. There’s still a lot of work to be done to convince normal people that it costs a little more to produce good wine but it’s a price worth paying. But we keep plugging away and I love attending wine fairs, wine pairings and hosting visitors, just trying to get our message across.”

“At Vines dels Aspres we’re now producing around 60,000 bottles a year, which is just about enough to make a go of things. Not good enough to ‘launch rockets’ but ok. In Catalunya I think there are around 860 wineries and I don’t know of anyone today who’s made themselves rich through wine production. Going back, of course people like Torres and the large Cava producers have made money but today 80% of the wineries are new and it’s hard to make a great business. But there are other compensations. I love being up here in the fresh air. I enjoy trying to work out how to make the wines better each year and the annual puzzle of winery ‘Tetris’ as we try and get everything to fit, no matter what the year throws at us. I like it when we get visitors and they tell me a story about one of our wines and that’s what’s led them up here to seek us out and buy a couple of bottles to take home.”

“In the Empordà as a whole, I’m optimistic. Wine production in the region is the lowest it has ever been, yet there are more brands than ever. For me there’s no doubt that Empordà wines have never been better and I think as a region we’ve turned a corner. In terms of planted area, we’ve stopped shrinking and some of us are even planting again. These days everybody is trying to make honest, reliable wines. Everyone’s working hard to get the best out of the land.”

The wines

As we went to taste the wines, David proudly showed me the Vinyes dels Aspres wines written up in a catalogue from (venerable British wine merchant) *Berry Bros. & Rudd*. I was impressed, pretty much everyone else in there from Catalunya and Spain was an established big name. The wine equivalent of playing for a pub team then getting scouted for the premiership. Perhaps this isn’t so surprising. Today’s welcome reality is that good, interesting wine can come from almost anywhere, if you have a decent piece of land and the right person at the helm. The likeable David Molas is the right kind of person and seems to be going about things the right way. He doesn’t claim to have all the answers but is working diligently with what he’s got and as such is becoming a quiet ambassador for the Empordà as a whole. This stunning region seems to have almost everything going for it, how long before it becomes better known?

2015 Blanc dels Aspres (60% Garnatxa Blanca, 40% Garnatxa Roja) - Pale gold colour, with a nice and creamy but fairly neutral vanilla nose, perhaps with just a hint of lime showing through. The palate is fresh and round but very tight still, opening up to reveal stone fruits such as apricots and more vanilla cream. Young and very promising.

2015 Oriol dels Aspres Rosat (96% Garnatxa Roja, 4% Syrah) - These Garnatxa grapes come from the 39 year old *Vallena* vineyard. After a 2 day maceration, unusually the juice is fermented in barrels. But you don’t notice the oak. What you get is a round but light rosé, which defies the usual Garnatxa-gravity. A Sugar Plum Fairy of a wine which expertly dances across the tastebuds in a sprinkling of fresh-herbs, citrus and icing sugar notes.

2015 Oriol dels Aspres Negre (Garnatxa Negra, Carignan, Merlot, Syrah, Cab. Sauv) - A very fruity red, showing ample amounts of strawberries and black plums. Good depth but not tannic.

2014 Xot dels Aspres (52% Garnatxa Negra, 38% Cab. Sauv, 10% Syrah) - Paleish red colour. Very fruity nose of mulberries and blackcurrants, yet soft and with a gentle hint of spice. The palate shows fresh, clean blackcurranty-fruit, destined to open up further in six months or so.

2012 Negre dels Aspres (37% Cab. Sauv, 27% Merlot, Carignan, Garnatxa, Syrah) - Deep colour, showing slight age at the rim. The nose is more evolved than the above, showing soft blackcurrants but also a mintiness and perhaps a hint of medicinal complexity. The palate is still tight, with crunchy Bordeaux-style blackcurrant fruit to the fore.

Vi de panses (Garnatxa Roja naturally dried) - Orange colour. The wine comes across as a landslide of sweetness and honey with raisins and nuts offset with a certain sharpness, finishing figgy and complex.

Bac de les Ginesteres (100% Garnatxa Roja naturally dried, wine aged under the sun) - Deep gold / brown. The nose has a burnt, chocolatey presence, along with subtle almond notes. The palate is all rich raisiny depth, yet still fresh and with some bite. Complex, delicious, and a little unusual.