



The Spanish revolution

Larry Lockshin

The largest production area in the world dedicated to grapes is in Spain. Dr Richard Smart has spoken often about the big changes taking place in Spain and how Australia can learn a few things about grapegrowing from the Spaniards.

I have never had the privilege to accompany Richard on his tours of Spanish vineyards and wineries, but I was lucky to be able to spend a week teaching in the town of Tarragona, near the new cult wine areas of Priorat and Montsant.

Tarragona, about 100 km west of Barcelona, is a unique city. It was the western capital of the Roman Empire from about 200 BC until its fall. The town housed more than 300,000 inhabitants during its heyday and it is full of Roman artefacts such as an amphitheatre, colosseum and surrounding walls and gate. Everywhere you dig you find ancient ruins. The Universitat Rovira i Virgili is one of the two top oenology and viticulture research universities in Spain. It hosts a European masters of wine business, like many similar schools in the continent. I was invited to teach a week-long executive course in wine marketing to the Masters students and a half dozen local winery managers. After the course I travelled for a weekend to Priorat and Montsant, about 45 minutes from this beautiful town along the Mediterranean Sea.

These two regions are side by side, with

the major difference between them being the soil types. Priorat has a special schist type of soft rock that allows vine roots to penetrate deep into the steep hillsides and survive without water. Grapes have been grown here since Roman times and it was an important region until the time of phylloxera at the end of the 19th century. After that time few vineyards were cared for and the region was mainly forgotten except for producing strongly coloured local wines and bulk wines for blending. In the 1980s some local producers began to replant the vineyards and re-invigorate some of the older vineyards still remaining. By the 1990s a few wines from this region received top scores from *Wine Spectator* and Robert Parker. The wines are traditionally made from Grenache and Carignan, but now Cabernet, Merlot and Syrah are also permitted.

The first of the famous new wines were produced by five different grower/winemakers sharing the same cellar. Now each of them have their own operations, but the spirit of cooperation and camaraderie reminded me much more of Australia than Europe. Spain seems much less troubled by disagreements regarding denominations of origin than France. We have all been reading in the press about new rules in France that allow the use of wooden staves, varietal labelling and other commercial techniques, but the wine cannot have an AOC designation. Spain does have designations and strict rules

about ageing in order to use specific words like *crianza* or *riserva*. However, the traditional grapes of Priorat and Montsant were quickly allowed to be blended with French cultivars such as Cabernet, Merlot and Syrah, with no technical or political fuss. It seems that the Spanish are much more open to supplementing their rules when wine quality can be improved. This is mainly true to allow the substitution of Cabernet and Syrah for Carignan.

The star of the region is old vine Grenache (Garancha) grown on steep hillsides and fermented in large upright oak casks. The feature of these wines is the smooth but stoney flavoured tannins and ripe fruit characters without being overripe. The alcohols are high, as in any ripe Grenache from a warm area, but the high elevations (350-600 metres) and very low yields produce lovely drinkable yet ageworthy wines with lots of natural acidity—again like some in Australia. I found there is much less use of new oak and quite simple packaging. Most of the wines are produced in small quantities and sell for very high prices, 25 to 400 plus euros a bottle. The producers have managed to create an aura around these wines and often travel together to promote them in Europe and North America.

Spain and Italy differ quite a bit from France in their approach to marketing and even packaging. We recently did some research on how people choose wine in a range of countries. Italians tend to read

back labels—like Australians, unlike the French. In Priorat and in Tuscany I found most bottles of wine had useful back labels that listed the varieties used and the amount of barrel ageing, which provides some indication of the style of the wine. The French tend not to read back labels, mainly because there aren't that many of them. I went into several wine shops in Tarragona, Priorat and, most recently, in Florence (where I am now teaching some PhD seminars in consumer behaviour methodology). The ones I visited focused very clearly on the local region(s) with very little from other regions in the same country. The owners and staff were very knowledgeable and could discuss the merits of most of the wines on display, even to recommend ones to go with the dinner planned for that evening.

On the other hand, wine tourism in Priorat and Monstant is very underdeveloped by Australian standards. There are a few very small good hotels and restaurants in the area, but finding wineries and arranging

visits takes local expertise. There are wine maps and pamphlets available, but we had to book our visits, especially on a weekend, to be assured someone would be there. We also needed a GPS to find the roads to the wineries.

Tuscany of course is a different story. There is a winery or restaurant or both around every curve of the local roads. There are few warning signs and unless you know what you are looking for you might stumble on something very good or not. We stopped at a recommended winery on a Sunday afternoon near Greve in Chianti. It had wines available for tasting (for a fee) and purchase back to the '80s. After tasting a few I understood why they still had so much inventory. However, the owner was quite enthusiastic and told how he and his father bought the winery about 10 years ago and added a restaurant and small hotel. He tried to make up in personality what his wines lacked in quality. It seems that in Italy most of the IGT wines (e.g. Super Tuscan) of a regional

designation with different grape varieties than the legal DOC) are grown by larger companies and investors. Many of the more than 7,000 small producers do not take advantage of these less restrictive rules and stick with the local grapes and traditional processing.

Italy is much more tourist focused in terms of services, but I found the quality of the wines had a much wider range than those in Priorat and Monstant. The exclusive nature of the wines from this small wine region is magnified by the relative undeveloped nature of the place. In a sense the branding of Priorat and Montsant wines is closely linked with the actual nature of the land and the people producing wine there. Perhaps some of our small regions could learn a thing about regional branding from the Spaniards.

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