

IT'S TIME TO RETHINK CAVA

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What comes to mind when I say Cava? Perhaps your initial thoughts are inexpensive and great for mimosas or other sparkling cocktails. Cava has suffered a bit of an identity crisis. Though sales are strong, consumers are often buying it as a base for a sparkling mixer, selecting the first Cava on the shelf or the one with the prettiest bottle. However, Cava is a diverse sparkling wine often crafted in the highest quality; therefore, it is time to give Cava a second look.

Cava can be produced anywhere in Spain; however, the Penedès region, located in

Catalonia about an hour from Barcelona, is the birth place of Cava and produces the highest volume of Cava. Cava is produced using the same Methode Traditional as Champagne. In its early days Cava was produced using French grapes in order to rival Champagne. However, after the phylloxera epidemic hit Spain in 1887, most of the French grapes were destroyed, which led to a decision to replant grapes indigenous to the region. This was an important step in distinguishing Cava from Champagne and allowing it to have its own unique journey. Today the three main grapes used to craft Cava are Xarel-lo, Macabeo, and Parellada. Chardonnay is still used by some as a blending grape, and Pinot Noir, along with Garnacha, Trepat, are often used to craft Rosé Cava.

Although Cava has set itself apart from Champagne, it has maintained its use of Methode Traditional to insure it is crafted using the highest quality process. The grapes are first fermented into a still wine, followed by a second fermentation taking place in the bottle that creates the bubbles. The process birthed the name Cava, which means cave, because the minimum aging for Cava is 9 months, with some aging 30 months or more. Furthermore, most Cava is vintage, meaning each bottle is crafted only of grapes from a specific year; therefore, producers use miles of caves under the wineries so the wine can ferment in the bottle in a cool, dark, still environment.

In the Penedès region there is a bounty of producers crafting high quality Cava in a variety of forms. Juvé y Camps crafts Cava with an artisanal spirit. The 2013 Reserva de la Familia (\$20) is a classic Cava, the workhorse of the winery, floral and fruity, bright on the palate, no dosage so it is crisp, dry, and refreshing. However, the 2012 Gran Juvé y Camps (\$49) and 2006 La Capella Gran Reserva Brut demonstrate that additional time on the less, 42 months and ten years respectively, result in luxurious Cava with tremendous depth and elegance.

Segura Viudas, owned by Freixenet, is a well-known and trusted Cava producer for good reason. The **Brut Reserva (\$9)** and **Gran Cuvee Reserva (\$14)**, both with 15 months on the lees, are classic Cavas widely enjoyed. However, the **Segura Viudas Reserva Heredad (\$25)**, with 30 months on the lees, illustrates the possibility of bready notes, rich texture, and persistent bubbles of a well-crafted, aged Cava at an affordable price.

Gramona elevates aged Cava to its own level. This fifth generation winemaking family seeks to craft Cavas that are “among the world’s greatest sparkling wines.” They utilize 100% biodynamic practices as well as age the Cava on the lees from 24 to 168 months. The **2012 La Cuvee Gran Reserva (\$21)** and the **2011 Imperial (\$30)** are classic representations of Cava, while the **2009 Ill Llustros (\$49; 96 months)**, **2006 Celler Batlle (\$85; 120 months)**, and **2001 Enoteca Brut Nature (\$234; 168 months)** demonstrate the glorious possibilities of well-aged Cava and how it migrates from fresh and crisp to sultry, bready, rich, and luxurious.

If Gramona represents out of the box Cava production, then Parés Baltà has broken the box. They practice organic and biodynamic farming techniques in the vineyard, while using ancient amphoras and other vessels to experiment with winemaking. Their **2010 Blanca Cusine Gran Reserva (\$40)** spent 60 months on lees, offering bright notes of almonds, marmalade, and flowers. If you can imagine a sexy Cava, this is it.

Finally, Roger Goulart understands Cava production through time. They prolong the aging process as much as is necessary to achieve the highest level of quality. The **2014 Brut Reserva (\$19)** spent 18 months on the lees, leading to a classic Cava with a kiss of sweetness in a balanced and easy to drink sparkling wine. The **2005 Gran Reserva (\$78)**, with 10 years on the lees, takes Cava to a higher level; elegantly bright and fresh, yet rich depth and texture creates an enduring and sophisticated mouth-feel.

The next time you are buying sparkling wine seek out one of these high quality Cavas and leave the orange juice behind.