

Cava: what's in a name?

The future of premium Spanish sparkling wine

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Abstract

Motivation

As I write this abstract, I happen to receive an email of one of the most renowned wine magazines with the suggestion to jointly promote premium Cava producers, since 'we all have some great wines to offer, and no brand association with some of the pricing practices in the past that has led to problems in selling Cava above a certain price point.' As if they knew this is exactly the subject that concerns me greatly.

As Export Manager for a premium Cava producer, I spend most of my days travelling around Europe. Promoting a premium product, of which I am very proud of, seems more challenging than expected. The quality is there, the proof is in the glass, but the biggest challenge is getting the Cava in that glass for people to taste. The negative connotation of the word Cava is so strong (cheap, high-volume sparkling wine), that many don't even bother to try to put aside their prejudices. Organizing blind tastings with different styles of sparkling wines proves to be the right method to address this unjustified bias. Without the word Cava linked to it, a premium Cava is definitely appreciated for its traits and qualities.

Amongst the professional international wine world it seems a very hot topic. Wherever I go I am being asked about the current situation. It made my interest for the topic grow even more. I wanted to find out the latest situation and get a well-informed view on the matter.

Problem objective

A dozen of wineries have left the DO Cava appellation. Most of them have turned to the Consejo Regulador Penedès to produce and commercialize their sparkling wines under DO Penedès Espumoso. The reasons for their decision to leave DO Cava are various: loss of prestige of the brand Cava, especially in the international market, the low prices, the fact that DO Cava does not identify with a unique terroir and the restrictions as to the use of grape varieties. With all the attention it has received over the last couple of years, one might think this is a recent issue. However this process had already started in 1997 with the leave of Colet.

What is for sure is that the future of Cava, now more than ever, preoccupies all stakeholders involved. There is a lot of uncertainty about what is going to happen in the next months. For example what steps will the Consejo Regulador del Cava undertake? That something has to change is what everyone agrees on and that it should happen soon as well. Image, quality and future are all at stake.

Methodology

The study starts with a literature investigation. Surprisingly there are not many books or articles available on Cava, explaining the history and development. On the recent developments some more has been published, though the information found is very fragmented and concise. Little documentation exists on the complete picture. Moreover, since this is such an actual topic with a lot of developments, not all information is made public yet. Different parties in the industry all have different interests. This made it very important to talk to different stakeholders to examine the problems and possible solutions from different angles. The Consejo Regulador, the Institut del Cava, the Confraría del Cava, several winemakers and opinion leaders have all been consulted through personal interviews and e-mail communication.

Content

This study firstly dives into the history of the Spanish sparkling wine industry. The developments over the last two decades help explain the many of the challenges Cava faces today, like the lack of origin and the low prices. Based on these challenges, some opportunities and recommendations for a positive future of premium sparkling wines are proposed.

Conclusion

The study has resulted in a clear picture of both the history and the current situation within the industry. However, while the intention was to focus the investigation on premium sparkling wine, in the end much time was dedicated to sparkling wine in general, or in other words, sparkling wine of all qualities. Simply because of the fact that the majority of Cava being sold is not on the premium end of the spectrum. Exactly this shows the core of the problem. There seems to be no place reserved for premium sparkling wine within the industry. Not only in terms of volume (as a percentage of the whole) but, more importantly, in terms of rules, regulations, qualifications and classifications.

So where do they fit in? Within an existing DO, a new to be created DO or DOC? At this moment it remains difficult to formulate an answer to these questions. With all the expected developments within the different DO's (Cava, Penedès and possibly a new one) in the next half year, this study deserves a continuation. These are times of great uncertainty and everyone is waiting what is going to happen next.

In the end, the future of Premium Spanish sparkling wine is dependent on so many factors, which are all linked together (price, reputation, promotion). Depending on the steps undertaken by the Consejo Regulador del Cava, the future may lie within or outside DO Cava. If there will be no fundamental changes in rules and regulations as to classification of land and producers, the future of Premium sparkling wine should be searched for in another denomination, whether existing or new to be created. Should the Consejo Regulador within a foreseeable time take all necessary steps to ensure quality Cava can be formally distinguished from low quality bulk Cava, the future will be within DO Cava. The reputation of this denomination might be damaged, but with a new classification, new promotion of Cava is certainly possible. Renewed attention to quality will lead to renewed attention press and media.