

The new PRIORAT

If your thoughts go instinctively to huge, chunky reds with heady extraction and alcohol, take another look and reassess the wines emerging on the new wave from Catalonia's premium DOQ region, as our in-situ expert explains

STORY FINTAN KERR

‘What is Priorat?
I think we’re only just
beginning to really
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Sara Pérez, Mas Martinet



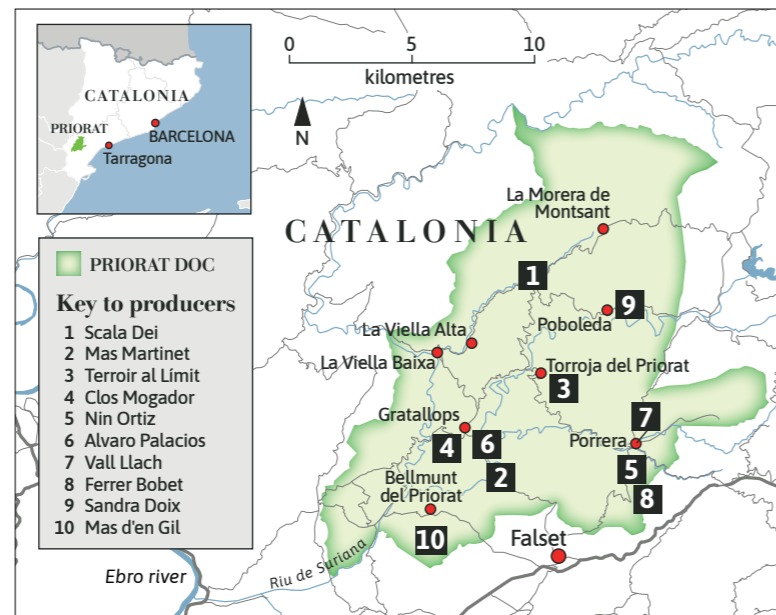
Wine rarely comes from ugly places, but few wine regions can compete with the beauty of Priorat, southwest of Barcelona. As you head inland from the coastal city of Tarragona – a particularly beautiful train journey that winds through the hills – the land starts to rise and the population becomes notably sparse. There are barely 2,200ha under vine here – a mere 30th of the size of Rioja, according to that region’s annual reporting.

Priorat’s vineyards are scattered across the rugged, rolling terrain, at varying aspects and elevations; there are no vast swathes of vineyards to announce your arrival here. Instead, the sheer harshness of the land is apparent, with layers of rocky schist and steep vineyard slopes that seem to defy the commercial realities of wine production. This is not a place for the faint-hearted.

A STAR IS BORN

Like much of Spain, Priorat can trace its winemaking roots back to ancient times, but the region’s modern winemaking history began later than in its famous Iberian counterparts. *Scala Dei* (*cellersdescaladei.com*) began making wine commercially in 1974, but its potential wasn’t really identified for another decade, when René Barbier III arrived in the region, along with a wave of like-minded winemaking friends. (Barbier, the founder in 1979 of respected producer Clos Mogador, trained and worked in Bordeaux and Burgundy, among others, but is from a long-established winemaking family based on the Catalan coast.)

The style of wine that most still associate with Priorat was created during the 10 years that followed. The old, low-yielding vineyards that were salvaged produced concentrated, powerful



wines – very much in vogue at the time – propelling the region to stardom. Critics, particularly from the US, were quick to praise the wines; high point-scores followed. The Priorat region grew rapidly with investment being made and new wineries opening, including from larger players such as Penedès-based Familia Torres.

POWERING DOWN

Grape (and wine) prices are naturally on the higher side here; due to the low planting density, vine age and dry conditions, grape production is about quality not quantity. For the 2023 harvest, selling prices for grapes started at around €1.60/kg but rose far higher for old vines and grapes such as Carinyena (Cariñena/Carignan), according to Clos Pachem head winemaker Josep Riba Comaposada. To compare to Spain’s best-known region, in a report on his website in October 2023, *Decanter* contributor Tim Atkin MW noted that: ‘Against the backdrop of a large and extremely difficult 2023 harvest... Rioja’s grape prices remain unsustainably low at between €0.50 and €1.20 per kilo.’ For Priorat, scarcity, fame and hype led to it becoming one of, if not the most expensive wine region in Spain.

By the mid-2000s, Priorat was at the height of its power – both commercially and in the glass. Expensive new oak was *de rigueur*, 15% alcohol in a wine was typical, and it was common to see international grape varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah blended with the native Garnatxa (Garnacha/Grenache) and Carinyena. The focus was very much on big, bold red wines; the few white wines being made were typically also big, powerful and oaky.

Yet for all the success of the region, some argued that this style of wine was becoming



somewhat one-dimensional and alienating critics who valued elegance and transparency. A quiet revolution got underway, as a new generation of winemakers came into the region and set about telling the story of a different Priorat.

LEADING THE CHARGE

‘Generational change is always hard,’ explains Sara Pérez, revolutionary winemaker and now owner of *Mas Martinet* (*masmartinet.com*), one of the original ‘Gang of Five’ wineries (together with Clos de l’Obac, Clos Dofi [subsequently Finca Dofi], Clos Erasmus and Barbier’s Clos Mogador) that established the region in the late 1980s. ‘A lot of people criticise my wines as being atypical, but what is Priorat? I think we’re only just beginning to really discover that.’

Pérez took over the winery from her father José Luis Pérez Ovejero in the late-1990s, but it wasn’t until the early 2000s that she started to put her own ideas into practice, looking at higher-elevation plantings and a fresher, lighter style of wine. ‘For me, Priorat is a place, not a defined style; it should have many different faces,’ she says. Her single-vineyard wines Camí Pesseroles and Els Escurçons are planted at elevations typically high for the region (300m-400m and 600m respectively; vines at Scala Dei range from

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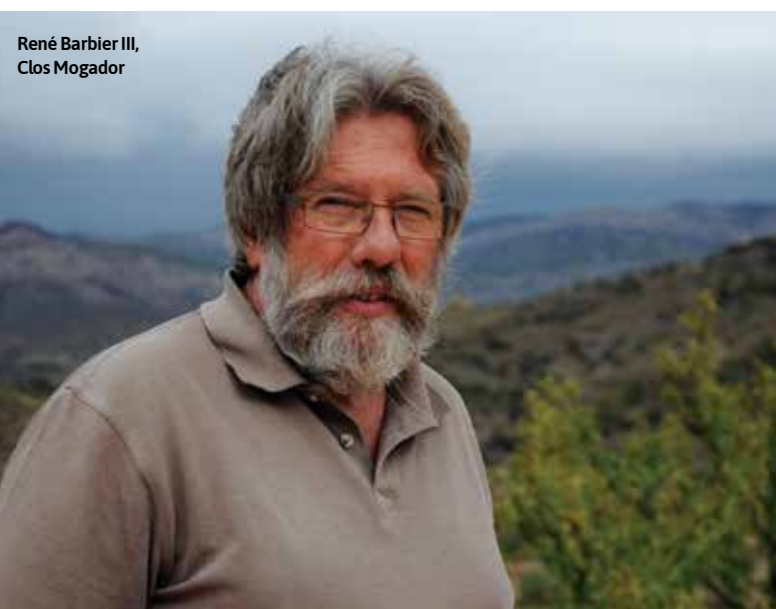
————— Dominik Huber (above with Tatjana Peceric), Terroir al Limit

400m to 800m, among the region’s highest). Els Escurçons was badly affected by a fire in 2015 and the few bottles made in that vintage proudly displayed a phoenix on the label. Pure-fruited, energetic and so light on their feet, these are remarkably different from how a ‘classic’ Priorat is still described in textbooks.

THE LIMITS AND BEYOND

‘For me, wine is about freshness and life,’ explains Dominik Huber, owner and winemaker at the celebrated *Terroir al Limit* (*terroir-al-limit.com*) in Torroja del Priorat. ‘I want a wine that I can come back to again and again, not one that I can only drink one glass of.’

Huber, originally from Bavaria in southern Germany, might be the most extreme of this next generation of Priorat winemakers. His team are often the first to begin the harvest, aiming for lower alcohol and higher natural acidity; ►





René Barbier IV,
Clos Mogador

vinification is almost exclusively in concrete tanks. *Al Límit* means ‘at the limit’ and it’s very fitting; many of its red wines sit at 13.5% alcohol, the lowest permitted by the region’s regulations. ‘It just shows that not everyone is on-board yet with the new direction,’ adds Huber. ‘In 2021, many wines from the region fell below this threshold due to the cooler, wetter weather. Often these were very good wines, but they weren’t acceptable according to the rules of DOQ Priorat, so were declassified.’

Huber’s wife Tatjana also makes superb wines in a similar style under the *Coreografía* label (Garnatxa-based, red and clarete-style rosé blends, and the *Pas de Deux Garnatxa-Carinyena* red) in Montsant, the DO region that forms an almost-complete ring effectively surrounding Priorat. ‘We eat a lot of lighter, fresher styles of food and so our wines are also a reflection of what we consume them with,’ comments Huber.

Pérez and Huber both learned their trade at Mas Martinet; Pérez as the next generation of the family to run the winery and Huber as a student of wine. It was at Mas Martinet that Huber first met South African winemaker Eben Sadie, with whom he first created *Terroir al Límit* in 2001, using fruit purchased from the Pérez family (Sadie has since moved back to Swartland to focus on his own project). It’s worth noting that both Mas Martinet and *Terroir al Límit* use an element of reductive winemaking for added tension in the wines. ‘Heavy reductive characters aren’t the goal,’ clarifies Huber, ‘but for me, a little just adds an edge that is very attractive.’ This little extra zip, along with the incredible detail of the wines, does feel very natural. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Terroir al Límit*’s flagship-

range wine *Les Manyes*, the most remarkable expression of Garnatxa Peluda (the rare, downy-leaved variant of the variety) that I have ever tasted – 100% varietal, grown at 800m, whole cluster-fermented then aged eight months in cement tanks.

EXPLORING DIVERSITY

A significant development in Priorat is an increase in white wine production. Despite the region’s warm and dry climate, the white wines have incredible aromatic precision and a naturally high level of acidity, courtesy of the stony schist soils and pronounced diurnal temperature range. Plantings are led by Garnatxa Blanca, Macabeo and Pedro Ximénez, and together account for less than 10% of total production in the region, though this is growing at a rapid rate.

René Barbier IV (*pictured, top*; born in 1973 in Nancy, France, where his mother Isabelle Meyer is originally from) is now at the wheel of **Clos Mogador** (closmogador.com), the winery – one of the most celebrated in the region – founded by his father (*see p12*). ‘Priorat has always been a red wine region,’ he explains, ‘but with the revival of brisat (skin contact) methods, earlier harvests and a better understanding of what makes Priorat unique, I can see our own production ending up at 50:50 between red and white wines.’ ▶

‘Scarcity, fame and hype led to Priorat becoming one of, if not the most expensive wine region in Spain’

Clos Mogador's Nelin has long been one of the most emblematic white wines of the region. A complex blend based on Garnatxa Blanca and Macabeo, it has taken on new life under Barbier Jr's leadership – it's fresher and more driven, yet retains its traditional punch and texture.

Another, widely supported change is the renewed focus on indigenous varieties. Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon were planted in the 1980s and '90s to appeal to the international market, but the high temperatures and lack of water proved less than ideal conditions for these varieties to thrive. Even Syrah needs certain microclimates to really grow well in Priorat, and few old vineyards of the variety exist.

EMBRACING CHANGE

Many winemakers have taken the opportunity to top-graft [onto existing rootstock] to indigenous varieties, often in fairly high-profile vineyards. 'Manyetes [the acclaimed single vineyard in Gratallops] used to be around 30% Cabernet Sauvignon,' explains Barbier Jr, 'but the rising temperatures cooked the grapes to a crisp. Only Carinyena can really survive in harsh conditions like this, so we have shifted over the years.'

Even commercial giants such as Alvaro Palacios have increased the portion of Garnatxa in their wines, increasing year by year and replacing international varieties. 'Carinyena and Garnatxa only really show themselves after 15-20 years in the vineyard,' explains Oriol Castells, the general manager of Alvaro Palacios in Priorat, 'so it is important to begin planting them now.'

Despite inevitable friction as styles and ideas change, the new direction for Priorat is clearly being met with enthusiasm. Out in the trade, sommeliers in major wine cities such as Tokyo,



The Nin-Ortiz winery at Finca Les Planetes, near Porrera

New York, London and Copenhagen have started to list the wines with more frequency, particularly those made in a more minimal-intervention style. More-sustainable viticultural methods, such as at the biodynamic Nin-Ortiz (familianinortiz.com), are attracting new buyers and drinkers who have previously avoided the weight and power of Priorat. The perception of the region in the market is evolving.

The true beauty of Priorat is its landscape. The old vineyards, the steep slopes, the dry river beds, shrubs, forests and mountains together create a special place in which to make wine – almost as if Portugal's Douro valley has a long-lost brother on the other side of the Iberian peninsula. The wines that reflect this unique sense of place are likely to thrive, and that is certainly the direction in which the best winemakers in Priorat are headed.



Priorat renewal: Kerr's pick of 10 from the DOQ's new wave

① Mas d'en Gil, Coma Calcari 2021 94 £32.99 (2020) Casa Martinez

The cooler, fresher year of 2021 has refined this to perhaps the best bottling I've tasted so far. A single-vineyard, varietal Garnacha Blanca, with one third spending six months in 500L barrels, it's so very vibrant. Fresh apricot, orchard fruits, camomile and lemon curd on the palate, brought to life by the most tantalising line of acidity. Mouthwatering and absolutely delicious. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2024-2032 **Alcohol** 14%

② Família Nin-Ortiz, Planetes Blanc 2021 93 £46.80 Sip Wines

US\$59-\$65 Chateau Cellars, Morrell Wine, MrD A beautiful wine, showcasing what many believe to be the future of white wine in Priorat: Carinyena Blanca. Waxy, lightly smoky, golden apples and pastry dough, all carried by an incredible wave of acidity. A serious wine, but one that's very hard to put down. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2024-2032 **Alc** 14%

③ Vall Llach, Horta-Colomer Vi de Paratge 2022 93

£44 Decántalo† Equal parts Carinyena Blanca and Gris, fermented in 600L clay containers then left to mature for a further three months. Subtle yet so bright and driven; white peach, a medley of apples, lemon peel and something delicately rocky. Bursting with energy; this is going to be a project to follow. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2034 **Alc** 13.5%

La Conreria d'Scala Dei, Primera Vinya Les Brugueres 2021 92

£35 Decántalo† US\$40 Perrine's Wine, Virginia Philip High-toned and so vibrant, this is the ►

PRIORAT

herbal, refreshing side of Garnacha Blanca, brought on by the relatively high elevation of 450m and above at which the grapes are grown. Bright green fruits, camomile, sappy herbs and wet stones. Driven, bright and lovely. **Drink** 2024-2028 **Alc** 14%

④ **Terroir al Limit, Les Manyes 2021** 99
£150-£189 (ib) Berry Bros & Rudd, Burnett & Herbert, Lay & Wheeler

As spectacular as it was when I first tasted it last year. Delicate smoky reduction notes with beautifully vivid flavours of wild strawberries, rose petals, wild herbs and crushed rocks. So detailed and finely etched, yet powered with incredible flavour and an endless finish. Pushing Priorat to the limit, indeed. **Drink** 2024-2032 **Alc** 13.5%

⑤ **Clos Mogador, Vinya Classificada Gratallops 2021** 98

£50-£55 (ib) Berry Bros & Rudd, Farr Vintners, Turville Valley Wines
US\$100-\$130 Via US importer Skurnik
Showcasing the extraordinary freshness of 2021, this is one of the best Clos Mogadors I've ever tasted. Ripe red fruits, blackberries, toast, smoke, spices, warm earth. So alive in the glass, changing and brightening as it opens up. This will age for a long time – but it's hard to keep your hands off it! Practising organic. **Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 14.5%

⑥ **Mas Martinet, Camí Pesseroles 2021** 96

£66.67 (ib) Justerini & Brooks
US\$113-\$135 Solano Cellars, Total Wine & More, W&J Wines, Wine.com
Carinyena from vines more than 80 years



Sandra Doix

old with younger-vine Garnacha, from high vineyards in Priorat. A savoury and detailed wine, fermented in open barrels of chestnut wood, matured in large acacia and chestnut barrels. Full of red fruits, white pepper, warm earth and touches of liquorice. A marvellous wine with a tiny production. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2032 **Alc** 14.5%

⑦ **Sandra Doix, MarLa Les Salanques 2020** 95

@sandra.doix
From a 2.5ha vineyard in the village of Poboleda, centenarian Carinyena vines aged about 120 years on average. Smoky, dark-fruited and very tight and mineral. Incredibly structured, but also fluid and elegant. Classic Priorat on the nose with a real sense of subtlety and restraint on the palate. **Drink** 2024-2040 **Alc** 14.5%

Alvaro Palacios, Vi de Vila Gratallops 2022 94

£33 (ib) Lay & Wheeler
US\$73 Zachys

This wine becomes softer and more elegant with every passing vintage. Floral, bright and a manageable 14% alcohol. Ripe red fruits, sappy herbs, violets and a touch of warm earth – lovely. Powdery and soft but not lacking drive. A very impressive Vi de Vila. Practising organic. **Drink** 2024-2034 **Alc** 14%

Ferrer Bobet, Selecció Especial Vinyes Velles 2019 94

£80 The Wine Treasury
US\$116 Saratoga Wine Exchange
A wine that's heading in a new direction: ripe and powerful, but far fresher and lighter on its feet than many of its contemporaries. 100% Carinyena from centenarian vineyards on llicorella soils, it's aged in a mix of differing, medium-toast French oak barrels for 18 months. Long, persistent and savoury. Practising organic. **Drink** 2024-2032 **Alc** 14.5% **D**

PHOTOGRAPHS MAS MARTINET, CLOS MOGADOR, LAS MUJERES DEL VINO, MAP, JPM&P GRAPHICS LTD

