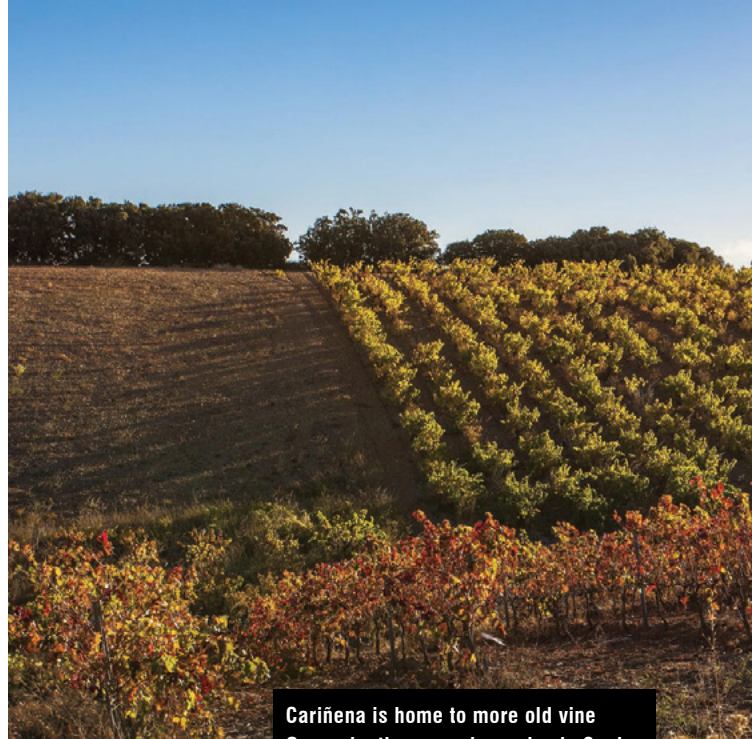


THE CASE FOR CARIÑENA

HOW ONE SPANISH REGION
RECLAIMED ITS QUALITY TRADITION

BY KRISTEN BIELER



Cariñena is home to more old vine
Garnacha than anywhere else in Spain.

There are wine regions known for their famously gnarled old vines. And many other places which are synonymous with unbeatable value. Cariñena, in northeast Spain, is the rare region able to offer both—in the same bottle.

Cariñena is the largest D.O. in Aragón, which is the birthplace of Garnacha. The variety thrives so well that its vines emerged unscathed from the phylloxera blight which devastated most European vineyards in the late 19th century. There are more old Garnacha vines here than anywhere else in Spain; sites are full of countless 30-, 40- and 50-year old plantings and many aged well over a century.

In spite of this, and the region's illustrious past (it was the second in Spain to attain Denominación de Origen status in 1932 and can trace its winemaking tradition back to the Romans), Cariñena has lingered in the peripheral vision of the wine world for decades because its wines were simply not that available.

Today there is a course correction underway in Cariñena. Led by three ambitious cooperatives in the region, and fueled by a new generation of young farmers returning and reclaiming abandoned vineyards, Cariñena is a comeback story still unfolding.

From Bulk To Branded Wine

Wine is the economy in Cariñena—the region is home to over 1,500 growers. Yet as recently as a decade ago, more than half of the production here was sold off as bulk wine to be bottled elsewhere. The economic prospects were dim, and many people left the region for opportunities elsewhere.

Today nearly 100% of the wine produced here is bottled as a branded wine at one of Cariñena's wineries. The shift from bulk to bottle has resulted in the price of grapes increasing nearly three-fold, making vineyard-farming a much more attractive business. Indeed, the newfound prom-

ise of prosperity has lured younger growers back to Cariñena and neglected vineyards are being painstakingly restored.

With the culture here shifting to a more thoughtful, quality-minded winemaking philosophy, innovation abounds. The region's cooperatives have poured millions into winemaking technology which has resulted in fresher, cleaner, more characterful wines. Growers are moving toward sustainable farming practices. Winemakers are employing a range of different oak barrels and even experimenting with amphorae and cement vats for aging.

Garnacha (aka Grenache) represents over half of all plantings and is without a doubt Cariñena's calling card. Producing old vine Garnacha for (mostly) under \$15 is something very few places can do. "Spain in general is famous for delivering terrific value," says Gary Itkin, of Botlerocket Wine & Spirit in NYC. "But while there is a lot of Tempranillo at this price point, there isn't much old-vine Garnacha and this is something really unique about the Cariñena region."

Wines With Soul & Value

At the Beverage Media headquarters in January, Itkin was joined by Tali Dalbaha, Corporate Wine Director for Buy-Rite Wine & Liquor in New Jersey, and Christy Canterbury, MW and journalist/



Gary Itkin

Christy Canterbury MW

Tali Dalbaha

critic, to taste through a range of Cariñena wines and weigh in on their merits and points of distinction.

“People definitely have negative stereotypes about cooperatives, yet this region is an example of cooperatives raising overall quality making really good wine,” Dalbaha commented. The group tasted wines from Bodegas Paniza, Bodegas San Valero and Grandes Vinos, the three cooperatives responsible for more than 85% of Cariñena’s wine.

The co-op model works especially well in this far-from-affluent region, believes Itkin, who has spent time in Cariñena, because small growers benefit from the equipment and expertise of the cooperative, while devoting their time to tending their vines. “Old vines need so much more time and care, and many of these high-altitude sites can only be manually farmed,” he added.

Extra attention in the vineyards has enabled the resurgence of the region’s

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namesake grape, Cariñena (aka Carignan). Though it only represents about 5% of plantings today, Cariñena—like Garnacha—can also trace its origins here. It’s a late-ripening variety notoriously difficult to grow, yet an increasing number of farmers are cultivating it today, coaxing out its plummy, spicy, earthy flavors to enhance blends as well as bottling it on its own with promising results.

The greatest challenge ahead is not in the vineyard but the marketplace as Cariñena struggles to define itself and remake its reputation. Without benefiting from the name recognition of other Spanish regions like Rioja or Ribera, Cariñena’s producers are trading on the quality and character they can deliver for very low prices.

On this point, the tasting panel concurred. “There is a need in the marketplace for accessible, crowdpleasing wines that offer real value yet also show a genuine sense of place, and these wines do that extremely well,” said Canterbury.

Dalbaha has witnessed first-hand their appeal: “I’ve carried wines from Cariñena in our stores, some that I could sell for as low as \$7 and still make good money. In some cases, I was moving 30 cases a week.” It’s not simply a matter of price, she added: “Spain is already renowned for value, so a wine needs more to stand out than just a low price. These wines work because they have a lot of character.” ■

CARIÑENA: TOP SELECTIONS

PARTICULAR GARNACHA OLD VINE 2015



High-altitude vineyard sites impart structure and bright acidity to this terrific Garnacha. “It’s got great fruit character, tannin and beautiful oak integration,” Canterbury described, and best of all, “true sense of place—it tastes classic Spain. I love wines that offer regional distinctiveness at such a value.” Dalbaha appreciated its spiciness and freshness for its age: “It’s really an ambitious wine.” SRP \$12

CORONA DE ARAGÓN OLD VINE GARNACHA 2017



This 100% Garnacha offers plenty of characteristic fresh, ripe berry charm, upheld by grainy, dry

tannins and spice. Notes of pepper and an earthiness make it more complex than most wines at this price. Sourcing from 45-year-old vines explains the added depth and soul, Itkin commented. \$13

CORONA DE ARAGÓN SPECIAL SELECTION 2015



A blend of Grenache and Cariñena from vines 40 years-plus, this sees mostly French and some American oak. Canterbury praised its “energy and structural drive,” declaring it her favorite wine in the line-up. “It’s beautifully balanced with attractive green notes,” she added. Itkin liked the baking spice and savory notes the Cariñena contributed—“I’d recommend this to someone looking for a sophisticated, very dry wine more about complexity and spice than upfront fruit,” he said. \$15

PARTICULAR CARIÑENA 2016



The region’s commitment to higher quality Cariñena is on display here. “This shows the pungent, herbal, iron-laden earthy notes and the high acidity the grape is known for,” said Canterbury. Dalbaha liked the subtle green notes and spiciness: “It’s a really good wine and could be very successful in the U.S. market.” \$15

BODEGAS PANIZA VINAS VIEJAS 2016



Made from 100-year old Garnacha vines at a high-altitude site, this wine was a group favorite and unanimously declared a stunning value. “It’s

ripe, floral and really well balanced with great minerality, licorice notes and sleek tannins,” Dalbaha said. “People will be really satisfied with this wine—especially at this price.” \$10

PANIZA TEMPRANILLO/ GARNACHA 2017



The world could use more unaged, ultra-fresh reds like this, the group concurred. An equal blend of Garnacha and Tempranillo, it’s full of “upfront grapey, red fruit refreshment—and would be great served slightly chilled like a Beaujolais,” said Itkin. Canterbury agreed: “This wine will make a lot of friends; it’s easy to drink, juicy and fresh with a nice kick of minerality.” \$7