

2004 Priorats

MATTHEW CONWAY, ASA

A NEW YORK PANEL EVALUATES A STAR-STUDED LINEUP OF SPANISH REDS.



At our last New York City tasting panel, I asked the group what they wanted to evaluate next. Steven Olson (aka Wine Geek, co-creator of the Beverage Alcohol Resource) didn't hesitate: Priorat! Olson assured me he would gather a collection of that region's rarest, most impressive, and highly sought-after wines, and he did not disappoint. His passion for this Spanish appellation was evident from that first e-mail all the way through the tasting. About half of the wines were donated from his personal cellar; the rest came through friendships with producers and importers, including Aurelio Cabastrero, Christopher Canaan, Folio Fine Wine Partners, Sara Pérez, and Eric Solomon.

Despite the effects of Hurricane Irene, nine panelists made their way to the tasting, with wine director Hristo Zisovski serving as host at chef Michael White's Ai Fiori. Joining Olson and Zisovski were Christy Canterbury, MW, a consultant for Vitis.com and educator at the Astor Center; Michel Couvreur, chef sommelier at Per Se; Fred Dexheimer, MS, owner of Juiceman Consulting and a member of the *Sommelier Journal* Editorial Advisory Board; Alexander LaPratt, beverage director at DB Bistro Moderne and the 2011 Best Sommelier in America; Emilie Perrier, chef sommelier at Ai Fiori; Kristie Petrullo, chef sommelier at Jean-Georges; and John Ragan, newly promoted from beverage director at Eleven Madison Park to corporate beverage director for Danny Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group.

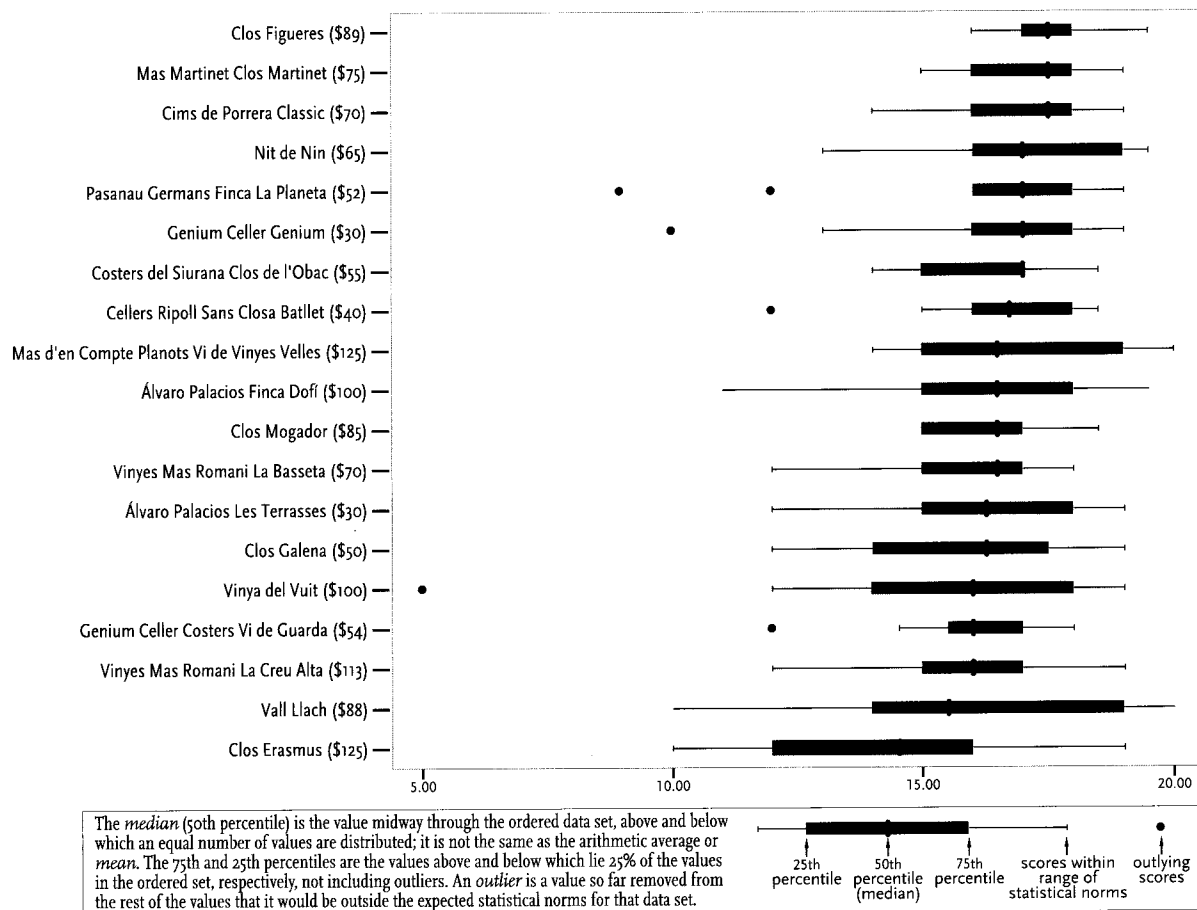
Although Priorat is one of two Denominación de Origen Calificada regions in Spain, it is often overlooked in favor of the other DOCa, Rioja, and better-known appellations such as Ribera del Duero. That's a shame, as demonstrated by this group of wines, one of the most terroir-driv-

en collections I have ever tasted. These Priorats reeked of minerality, highlighting the black slate (*llicorella*) that dominates the variegated local soils. The workhorse grape varieties are Garnacha Tinta and Cariñena—known in France as Grenache and Carignan, respectively, but native to this area. The vines, usually bush trained and planted on terraced slopes from 325 to 2,300 feet above sea level, are commonly at least 60 years old, some older than 100. Days are hot during the growing season, but nights are quite cool. That temperature fluctuation is important as a means of retaining impressive acidity levels in wines that are naturally high in alcohol.

We chose to evaluate the 2004 vintage, which had been highly rated by the press. Since these wines are still fairly accessible, we thought the reviews from a panel of New York sommeliers might be helpful if you're looking to add a top-flight Priorat to your list. As usual, our tasters were told that their comments were more important than their scores. The 19 wines were randomly split into two flights and tasted blind prior to the group discussion. For a bottle to be rejected, any flaws had to be agreed upon by the entire panel.

Dexheimer called this "an eye-opening tasting—90% of these wines delivered the goods. One or two had volatile-acidity problems, but it was an extremely intriguing flight." "All of these wines had ripeness of fruit balanced with minerality and acidity," Couvreur added. "These Priorats are a style of wine that are showing terroir and belong on our wine lists." Canterbury was impressed that "for seven years out of vintage, they had a massive youthfulness to them; they are just starting to evolve. I would love to taste them again in another 10 years."

SNAPSHOT



Snapshot “box and whiskers” graphs used by *Sommelier Journal* are designed to portray the Tasting Panel consensus while also representing the diversity of opinion. In general, the shorter the box, the more agreement among the group. A wider box, longer whiskers (the thin lines extending outward), and numerous outliers indicate more disagreement. Visit www.sommelierjournal.com/about-us/snapshot for a detailed discussion of how the boxplot graph works. Prices are current estimated retail.

The panelists agreed that all the wines were enjoyable, whether they leaned toward a more modern or a more traditional style. “The fruit was very giving across the board, and they were all very approachable,” said Petruzzo. “These were all well-made wines, but all of them were very different, very exciting.” Perrier echoed those comments: “The wines had very intense flavor profiles, yet they were still unique and very diverse.” Ragan, who told us he had never tasted this many Priorats at one sitting, called it “a great experience. You forget how much minerality is in these wines, how good they can be.” Zisovski found the wines “mind-boggling! You get the earth, but you get the ripeness, too. Usually when wines are this ripe, you lose the earthiness.” As Olson summarized, “The wines that showed best had the oldest vines in them. Those old vines display great texture and tell you about the *llicorella*. They are Priorat, and they be-

long alongside some of the great wines of place that we love.”

The following comments are listed in order of the wines’ ranking in the “snapshot” graph.

CLOS FIGUERES

This wine, mostly Garnacha and Cariñena from 30-to-60-year-old vineyards, was considered exceptionally well made, though the tasters generally agreed that it needed more time.

Perrier: Crisp, clean, a lot of terroir and structure. Smooth in the palate, and a little easier than some of the other wines.

Dexheimer: Very interesting terroir, with some savory notes. This wine will last a long time.

Ragan: It really had some energy. You could drink a lot of this, but you’d be happier if you came back later.

Zisovski: This wine needs time—too tight. It’s kind of like driving with your parking brakes on.

Matthew Conway has been general manager and sommelier at Michelin-starred Marc Forgione in New York City since March 2008. He worked alongside chef Gray Kunz as beverage director of Café Gray for three years, and he spent the summer of 2010 training in the sommelier department at Taillevent in Paris.

MAS MARTINET CLOS MARTINET

By contrast, the Clos Martinet, based on old-vine Cariñena, seemed ready to drink, wowing the panelists with its complexity.

Canterbury: Cigar wrapper, leather, mushroom—finessed, with lovely acidity and a nice finish. Drinking nicely now.

Petrullo: Terroir is definitely there, but this wine has a sluttiness to it. It has a little bit of everything and is holding nothing back.

LaPratt: It is amazing how much this wine is showing at this stage in its life compared to the rest. It makes me wonder how many years it has left.

CIMS DE PORRERA CLASSIC

Cims means “summits” in Catalan; this wine is made from 90% old-vine Cariñena and 10% Garnacha grown in hilltop vineyards. Most of the panel thought it evoked French claret more than Spanish varieties.

Olson: Bordeaux-like. I love this wine, but I’m not sure it’s the best representation of Priorat in this tasting.

Ragan: You might not know you’re drinking Priorat, but you’ll have another glass—really delicious!

Couvreux: A lot of wood tannins create a lack of balance in this wine.

Dexheimer: This baby can please a lot of people. It has a broad audience: Foo Fighters, “There Goes My Hero.”

NIT DE NIN

Ester Nin, who also serves as vineyard manager at Clos Erasmus, makes tiny quantities of this blockbuster from Cariñena and Garnacha grapes.

Perrier: Really big, high alcohol, extracted, aromatic, very intense on the nose. A little too much.

Olson: Rocking richness without going over the line. My notes say, “Oh my!”

Canterbury: Very modern, very balanced, but it’s so big it might be hard to finish this bottle even with food.

Couvreux: Very long finish, great balance. A lot of black fruit, high acidity, and a lot of terroir.

Petrullo: This wine is like a construction zone—lots of sawdust—with cherry cola, even NutraSweet.

PASANAU GERMANS FINCA LA PLANETA

The single-vineyard La Planeta is mainly Cabernet Sauvignon, which most of the panelists detected immediately.

Ragan: Has a Cabernet-like feel, a Bordeaux personality.

Couvreux: Very high alcohol, too extracted, overripe.

Perrier: It has an herbal quality. I think it’s well made, but tightly wound.

Zisovski: Closed, with a lot of tannin, and a bit grapey, but I feel it just needs some time.

GENIUM CELLER GENIUM

Genium’s basic Priorat, mostly Garnacha blended with Cariñena, Syrah, and Merlot, impressed with its length, but drew conflicting opinions on its style.

Olson: A very, very long finish. Really great wine.

Zisovski: Chemically mineral, rocky, stemmy; very Old World and spicy.

Petrullo: This has a lot of terroir, but a New World style.

Couvreux: This would please a lot of customers—very easy to drink.

COSTERS DEL SIURANA CLOS DE L’OBAC

Made from old-vine Cariñena and Garnacha with small amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, and Merlot, this classic Priorat seemed to be all about structure at the moment.

Dexheimer: This wine is purely punk rock.

Ragan: A little dry and tart, and the finish was very quick.

Perrier: Elegant and structured—beautiful wine.

Canterbury: Refreshing, because it doesn’t have all that VA.

Petrullo: I agree with everything said, but personally I can’t get past the oak.

CELLERS RIPOLL SANS CLOSA BATLLET

The Closa Batllet, based on Cariñena from vines as old as 90, earned a variety of comments reflecting its complexity.

LaPratt: Funky, meaty, sweaty, with pink peppercorn, fennel, anise, and savory meats, reminding me of pastrami.

Canterbury: I appreciated the elegance on the palate—pretty.

Couvreux: Even though it has a lot going on, it comes up a little short for me.

MAS D’EN COMPTE PLANOTS VI DE VINYES VELLES

Most of the panel enjoyed this wine—50% Garnacha and 50% Cariñena from century-old vineyards—for its earthy components.

Zisovski: Intense, intense. Leathery, schisty, peppery, savory notes—the most balanced wine of the day.

Olson: Candied cherries; so powerful and so big. Very sexy, quintessential Priorat.

Dexheimer: There is something I didn’t really like about it, but it’s still rockin’!

Petrullo: This wine is a little dirty, no way around it.

ÁLVARO PALACIOS FINCA DOFÍ

Terroir, terroir, terroir. Some found it a bit much, but everyone agreed this wine had a sense of place. Finca Dofí, Palacios’s original Priorat vineyard, is planted to 60% Cariñena, with the remainder Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, and Merlot.

Olson: Very Old World, even though it has new oak. The acid is good, tannins are soft; it’s terroir driven.

Petrullo: One of my favorites because it shows where it’s from. A lot of tobacco, licorice, cigar box, and cherry.

LaPratt: Definitely a wine you need to think about. Anise, black licorice, black pepper—a very serious wine.

Perrier: Very aromatic, but it lacked a little structure.

CLOS MOGADOR

René Barbier’s classic Priorat contains 40% Garnacha from 80-year-old vines, 35% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Syrah, and the rest Pinot Noir, Mourvèdre, and Merlot. Leading

off the tasting, this wine dazzled the panel with its striking acidity and vibrant minerality, despite its high alcohol.

Zisovski: Reductive fruit, spice, jam; chunky tannins and a lot of texture. The wine is a little hot, with some VA, but balanced overall. The refreshing acidity is very cleansing.

Canterbury: VA jumped out of the glass, and the wine is a little too extracted.

LaPratt: I enjoyed its balance and concentration; it leaves your mouth feeling clean. Nice mineral notes of smoke and graphite, jammy fruit.

Dexheimer: This wine is like an aging siren: Stevie Nicks, “Edge of Seventeen.” It has a raspy voice, but a lot of volume.

VINYES MAS ROMANI LA BASSETA

The panel was sharply divided on this wine, made primarily from old-vine Garnacha and Cariñena.

Petrullo: Sweet strawberry with licorice and tobacco; voluptuous fruit and smooth tannins.

Dexheimer: It has a lot of sweet fruit, but also a leafy autumn feel. Very juicy and giving.

Zisovski: *Crème de framboise*, vanilla frosting, and a lot of earth, but simply far too hot!

Couvreux: It has some gentle aspects, but I can’t get past the dry finish.

ÁLVARO PALACIOS LES TERRASSES

From old, steep vineyards (60% Cariñena, 30% Garnacha, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah), this wine seemed reminiscent of the Rhône Valley, with some tasters questioning how much Syrah was in the blend.

Couvreux: Redcurrant, spices, and black olive—a Rhône-style wine—but it has good terroir and acidity.

Olson: I get the Syrah flavors, and it has that Rhône-like meatiness as well.

Dexheimer: Two words for you: smoke and ash. Everything is in the right place.

CLOS GALENA

Many panelists were pleased with this wine, made from 40% Garnacha, 20% Cariñena, 20% Syrah, and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon; others felt the fruit was too ripe and candied.

Couvreux: Good balance of fruit, acidity, and texture.

Canterbury: Baked cherries with a vanilla-bean topping. Over-the-top fruit, but indicative of the region.

Olson: Most balanced of the flight; even if it is a fruit bomb, the terroir is still impressive.

VINYA DEL VUIT

Produced by a partnership of eight prominent industry figures, led by Barbier and Pérez, this Cariñena-based wine came off a little too alcoholic and oaky.

Perrier: Very hard to get past the wood, and very hot.

Olson: A lot of rocks in here—a different type of minerality. Lots of sweet fruit, but very clean.

Petrullo: At first it had a reductive quality, with cherry fruit, red raspberries, and surprisingly bright acidity.

Canterbury: Coconut tanning oil; makes me think of Maker’s Mark Bourbon, but it’s pleasant on the palate.

Dexheimer: This wine doesn’t have the texture to hold its other components.

GENIUM CELLER COSTERS VI DI GUARDA

From steep slopes (*costers*) planted to 50% Cariñena, 30% Garnacha, 10% Merlot, and 10% Syrah, this Genium Priorat had panelists wondering whether they had an off bottle.

Dexheimer: Very muscular and oaky. I am getting a lot of exotic Asian flavors.

Couvreux: The first thing I get is VA, then ripe fruit, high acid, and a sharp finish.

Canterbury: Lots of VA here; it still has a lot going on, but I’m not sure if it is meshing brilliantly.

Zisovski: Schist, dust, brett, bitter chocolate, mountain air on the nose. On the palate, it has a bubble-gum quality.

VINYES MAS ROMANI LA CREU ALTA

Many tasters felt this wine was a stellar example of Priorat. Several identified it as old-vine Garnacha, which is true of 40% of the blend; the rest is actually from 70-year-old Cariñena vines.

Couvreux: Ripe and juicy, this wine is balanced. The tannins are silky, and the wine leans a bit New World in style.

Ragan: This wine is hot and ripe, but it is speaking more Garnacha to me than Priorat.

Olson: Absolutely *llicorella* and Priorat from very old vines, clean and good winemaking.

Canterbury: Massively mineral, high alcohol, very Priorat.

VALL LLACH

Some couldn’t get past the volatile acidity in this wine, 65% Cariñena from 60-to-90-year-old vines, but a few panelists loved it.

Ragan: Really volatile, which makes the fruit seem more dried out than it really is.

Zisovski: Old World style—I liked it a lot. A really big yet elegant character, and it had everything you wanted.

Olson: Walks the line of being too prune-y without going over the line. Old vines, immense terroir, and the longest finish of any wine in this flight.

Canterbury: Greatness! I think it’s amazing. Very mineral-driven, beautifully fine-grained tannins, correctly supporting acidity, and seamlessly integrated oak.

CLOS ERASMUS

Surprisingly, Daphne Glorian’s iconic Priorat—mostly old-vine Garnacha with some Syrah—was the panel’s least-favorite wine of the tasting.

Petrullo: Oxidized, with cherry, licorice, vanilla cream, chocolate pudding, coffee, and brown sugar.

Zisovski: The nose reminds me of being 21, drinking Myers and Coke.

Olson: I believe this bottle may have been off. ☹