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The Best New Wines from Spain, Part 1

By Josh Reynolds

Following the 2004 and 2005 vintages, which generated a great deal of enthusiasm for wines from all across Spain, the fervor has been tempered by the trickier 2006 and 2007 vintages. Drinkers who measure a wine's greatness by its alcohol and glycerol levels will be skeptical of these years. But fans of graceful, balanced wines that are fresh and energetic rather than massive will find much to like from the more recent vintages. Still, no one should be blindly grabbing bottles of '06 and '07, as one could pretty much do with the '05s and '04s.

Besides, retail prices have also risen in the past two years thanks to the weaker dollar, and although producers and importers have been trying to hold the line, at a certain point money must come in rather than only go out. Those incredible \$8 to \$12 Spanish steals of a few years ago are now more likely to be \$12 to \$20, which still represents excellent value relative to most of the world's wines. I tasted plenty of fresh, balanced and easy-to-drink entry-level wines this year, but with prices higher, consumers must be choosier.

Yields in 2007 across Spain were generally low, especially in the northern regions. Rioja's harvest was off slightly due to spring hailstorms and mildew in the summer, which required work in the vines and strict sorting of the fruit at harvest time. The harvest extended from the first week of September into the first week of November, and generally took place at leisure under good conditions, so there was time for severe selection, at least for those producers who cared to do so. Acidity levels are higher than usual so expect plenty of bright, nervy wines from 2007. The 2006 Riojas, while generally lacking the depth and power of their 2005 and 2004 predecessors, were a pleasant surprise this year as the best of them were graceful and understated, with open-knit textures and good balance. This was, overall, a cool and often rainy year, and not suited to making wines of great richness or ripeness.

Of course, my coverage this year also features many Riojas from crianza to gran reserva level from the superb 2001, 2004 and 2005 vintages, many of them released in recent months.

Ribera del Duero had a rainy summer in 2007 and was hit by hail just before the harvest began in early September. A night of frost on September 24 caused many growers to bring in their fruit quickly and early, in some instances before the grapes had achieved optimal maturity. Some of these wines are likely to show an herbaceous character as a result. The region toiled under conditions similar to Rioja in 2006 and the wines generally lack the force of the

2005s and 2004s but are by no means dilute, despite a big jump in yields following the drought years 2005, 2004 and 2003. In fact, a number of the 2006s are quite charming and will be easier to enjoy than the more cellarworthy but demanding '05s and '04s. Don't write 2006 off so quickly, especially if you value more restrained Spanish wines.

Heavy rainfall during the 2007 harvest in Priorat caused limited problems with dilution, as the grapes were mostly mature by then, but this won't be a great year for the region. The 2006 growing season saw a continuation of the drought conditions that began in 2003, but the summer featured generally moderate temperatures and welcome rain just before harvest revived the vines. As with Rioja and Ribera del Duero, these are wines that showcase elegance and freshness rather than power. Fans of masculine, more powerful Priorat wines should be gathering up remaining 2005s and 2004s.

The extreme northwest Rías Baixas region was hit hard by mildew problems in the summer of 2007 so the crop level was down and strict selection was essential. Rueda, on the other hand, had a relatively smooth, problem-free season and the wines have turned out very well, with the aromatic complexity and vibrancy that most people look for from the region. These make very refreshing wines for warm-weather drinking and are often excellent value. My early glance at the 2008 whites from the northwest suggests that this will be a solid year, with plenty of fresh, aromatic wines that will be at their best soon after release, as is normally the case with these wines.

As was our practice last year, I will offer much more coverage of new releases from Spain in the next issue.

Cellers Melis By Josh Reynolds

2006 Cellers Melis Elix Priorat

90 _____

(\$45; 34% grenache, 24% cabernet sauvignon, 18% syrah, 15% carignane and 9% merlot; 15% alcohol) Inky purple color. Sexy aromas of cherry-vanilla, blackberry and oak spices, with a subtle mineral underpinning. Round and gently sweet in the mouth, offering brighter red berry character and repeating oak spices. Velvety tannins gain strength on the finish but don't distract from the lush fruit. Drink this fruit bomb in the near term.

2006 Cellers Melis Melis Priorat

91 _____

(\$85; 62% grenache, 19% carignane, 13% cabernet sauvignon and 6% syrah; 15.5% alcohol) Opaque purple. Darker fruits on the nose than the Elix, offering spicy boysenberry and cassis aromas, along with notes of sandalwood and potpourri. Open-knit, fleshy dark berry flavors are liqueur-like in density and provide excellent palate coverage. Clings impressively on the finish, which features mounting vanilla and oak spice elements. Very modern and drinkable now. (Wilson Daniels, St. Helena, CA)