



DRINKS

Montsant Rising

Red wines from the Montsant region are the next big thing from Spain (watch out, Priorat). So get drinking now, while the prices are still low and the quality just keeps getting better. **BY DOUG FROST**

THERE IS A SOAP OPERA PLAYING OUT in the Catalonian mountains of Spain. It's a case of sibling rivalry—a feud between the Priorat wine region, the crowned royalty of Spanish red wine, and its overlooked brother, Montsant. Priorat is one of only two regions in Spain with DOC (Denominación de Origen Calificada) classification, the country's highest honor. Montsant is a relatively new and unsung DO (Denominación de Origen) region, fighting for its due from the world's red wine drinkers. Priorat thinks its wines reign supreme. Montsant fans beg to differ. After all, Montsant shares climate, soil, grapes, and viticulture with Priorat, but little of its fame and fortune.

A star is born

Ten years ago, and for the previous century or two, the Rioja region was the king of Spanish reds. Things began to change in the late 1990s, when Priorat muscled its way into the ranks of the royals as its new vintners began making some of Spain's most powerful red wines. Guided by a small group of energetic 20-somethings, Priorat's wines were transformed from bulk, oxidized, fruitless stinkers into modern dandies. The young winemakers, sometimes even the children of the families who started the wineries, worked tirelessly to improve production methods, making small-batch, high-quality wines filled with rich, fresh fruit. The hand-tending of vines on the steep slopes of Priorat was back-breaking work, but it got the wines noticed.

In 2004, when Priorat was awarded its DOC status, it pushed fusty Rioja aside in an enological coup d'état. In a decade or so, Priorat earned what had taken Rioja nearly two centuries to achieve: acclaim as Spain's representative to the pantheon of the world's great red wines.

Priorat's ascension caused no end of jealous teeth-gnashing and hair-pulling in



other aspirational wine regions, like Ribera del Duero to the northwest. Priorat's closer neighbors were affected, too—nearby towns with political clout and proven winemaking skills managed to remain a part of the Priorat region, but other areas with lesser reputations or bulk wine operations were cleaved away and added to a new wine region called Montsant. This new region, established in 2001, gathered together the vineyards surrounding Priorat in a wide loop.

In the shadows

Today, Montsant remains in the shadow—literally and metaphorically—of the lofty Priorat vineyards. Montsant's insistence that its terroir is little different from Priorat's is dismissed by some, applauded by others. The fact of the matter is that while Montsant's vineyards might not be as starkly picturesque as Priorat's, Montsant has a lot of the same old, gnarled, wizened vines of Garnacha and Cariñena grapes that make for big, bold reds. It also has some newer transplants: Caber-

Illustration by Marta Antelo; photographs by Scott Phillips

net, Merlot, and Syrah, which make for very exciting, complex wines that rival Priorat's best offerings.

Kinder, gentler wines

Many of Montsant's vineyards consist of the same *llicorella* (slate) soils as Priorat's, but with some limestone, sand, and clay thrown in the mix. This soil gives the wines great flinty character and minerality. And Montsant's elevation—between 1,500 and 2,000 feet—means that its wines, while big and bold, are not as relentlessly powerful as Priorat's (which boasts elevations as high as 3,000 feet). But that's merely an issue of degree, or perhaps temperament. If Priorat is a marauding Godzilla, Montsant is more like King Kong gently holding Fay Wray.

Since Montsant's wines rarely evince the bombast and firepower of its DOC neighbor,

and often have lower alcohol levels, too, they are better suited for enjoying with food—when a little bombast goes a long way. Montsant wines function at the table the same way many Zinfandels do, but with a gentler demeanor and a typically tart finish that's very refreshing. This means that the wines complement a larger palette of foods, both bold and understated, like seafood, duck, steak, lamb, cheeses, and even pizza.

The next big thing

Slightly lower elevation is one reason Montsant wines cost less than those from Priorat—the land is a bit easier to work. Mixed soil is another reason, and DO status is yet another. But because Montsant is the next big thing in Spanish red wine, for now, prices are low and the quality is only getting better. Sure, the top wines of the area, such

as Celler Capçanes Cabrida (an intense yet well-balanced old-vine Garnacha), will set you back \$75, but many well-made bottles from the region cost less than \$30, and there are plenty for less than \$20.

Montsant is still 10 or 20 years behind Priorat in transforming and modernizing its wineries. But the terroir, the grapes, and the promise are there—given a few years and dedication from the local winemakers, there is a good chance that Montsant will join Priorat on the throne of DOC royals. Until then, Montsant continues to shine in the reflected glory of its famous big brother, Priorat, at more comfortable prices. Which is why, if you're looking for amazing value in the world of wine, you should look to Spain. And within Spain, look to Montsant.

Doug Frost is a wine consultant and writer based in Kansas City, Missouri.

Montsant: A Buyer's Guide

To fully discover what Montsant has to offer, consider trying reds that range from bright and fruity to dark and earthy.

RICH, FRUITY, AND BRIGHT

La Cova dels Vins Ombra 2007 (\$17) Take one-third each of Cariñena, Garnacha, and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes, and you end up with a very pretty, supple Montsant wine.

Celler de Capçanes Mas Donis 2007 (\$13) An incredible bargain from one of Montsant's top producers, this wine, made from old-vine Garnacha with a dollop of Syrah, bursts with tart fruit.

Acústic Montsant 2007 (\$16) Bright and full of juicy red berry flavors, this is a delicious wine made with old-vine Cariñena and Garnacha grapes.

Celler Laurona Montsant 2004 (\$35) Black cherries and spice feature in this very elegant blend of Garnacha, Merlot, Syrah, and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Can Blau 2007 (\$14) This wine showcases the rich, supple side of Montsant. A blend of Cariñena, Syrah, and Garnacha, it has the full complement of the region's traditional grapes and a little dose of modern Syrah, too.

DARK AND EARTHY

Agricola Falset-Maça Etim Selección 2006 (\$15) One of the hidden secrets of Montsant (and a great value to boot), this wine is made from half Garnacha and half a blend of Cariñena and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Masroig Les Sorts Vinyes Velles 2005 (\$35) Made from 50 percent Cariñena, 35 percent Garnacha, and 15 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, this is a chocolatey, earthy wine with raisin and smoky barrel notes.

Venus la Universal Dido 2007 (\$33) An intense, earthy wine made from Garnacha, Cabernet, and Merlot, from the brilliant winemaker Sara Perez, daughter of Josep Lluís Pérez, one of Priorat's star vintners during the 1990s.

