

# Les Caves De Pyrene

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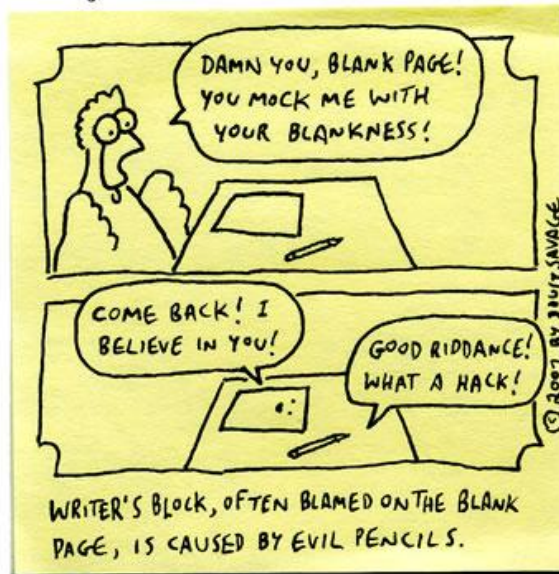
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**Write On**

*Savage Chickens*

by Doug Savage



www.savagechickens.com

I've just penned my third magazine article in a week. I've got to the stage where I feel I am explaining away the wines I like rather than stating my personal preferences – and bully for me. The other day I drank - more like gulped - a bottle of Jean-Francois Nicq's **Soif du Mal Blanc**. Yes, it did what it said on the label, literally destroying my thirst with its saline, crushed mineral and citric zing. I made a note to write the wine up (pace The Prisoner: "We want information, information, in-formation) and then thought: What does it mean to "write the wine up?" (Not to mention the clumsy hanging preposition). Is it to exalt the quality of the wine in language or simply to record the very pleasurable experience? Maybe a swift aide-memoire? Or a recommendation?

Whether it is summer and the living is easy but my responses to wine are becoming increasingly shallow and callow, almost atavistic in their simplicity. I am grunting my approval, or otherwise. Perhaps this is case of jaded palate, where months of being hyper-analytical have taken their toll and wine, in general, seems sere and tedious, or that having launched an e-armada of newsletters and articles making the case for naturally made wines I feel that I don't want have to defend my position constantly nor describe wine in tiddly detail. This is not me in *de haut en bas* mode, it's just that nitpicking numbs the pleasure one takes in drinking the wines. Sometimes a wine is just a wine and not a glamour-pussycat. Outbouncing in the ether one also ends up in ridiculously contrary positions, as if only the most resonant pronouncements will be heard. As usual more heat is generated than light shed. I may chide people for drinking the vinous equivalent of coca cola and they say I'm drinking horse piss. In reality, the intellectual positions should not be extreme or adamant whilst the wine itself should always be considered on its merits.

As I've said before blogging confers a kind of freedom without responsibility. You'll read all manner of undercooked perorations, sarcasm masquerading as satire and thudding homilies pretending to be scientific dissertation. In the end the blogosphere is largely a multitude of walls covered in low level graffiti. Wine snobbery hasn't disappeared; it has only migrated. A few writers, however, grasp the opportunity to develop arguments based on evidence or are open and honest in declaring their preferences and are just refreshingly enthusiastic.



## Vintage Cobblers

What is it about 2009 that makes people salivate? Dribble uncontrollably onto their shiny shoes? Something may have occurred in Bordeaux, a mythical land far, far away where the oracular declaration of vintages is keenly anticipated by wizened scribes who put quill to parchment to record their solemn lucubrations. Since every vintage is the vintage of the century (well, obviously) Bordeaux is verily a land of bounty, where self-preening lotos-eating natives swagger around their chateaux like abbots plumped

to the gills on hearty viands. When Bordeaux sneezes everyone examines the contents of their handkerchiefs. But I digress. Once people believe the hype of the ineffable brilliance of the year they seem to re-calibrate their taste-buds to make allowances for the wines. Even if it is clumsy, disjointed and tough as old cowboy boots why not suggest that it might snort awhile in the Seven Sleeper's Den or, if it a massive jam jamboree, do say that that every glass of this wine is a supernaculum.

So roll on 2010 and why not re-evaluate 2008 why we are at it. 2009 was a hot, hot year generally yielding wines of low acidity and rich, sweet fruit. A lover of Loire wines I find the Chenins (a grape that thrives on nervy acidity) lack verve, whilst the reds tend to flaunt fleshiness at the expense of bone structure. And don't get me started on residual sugar. 09 Beaujolais, meanwhile, triggered more critical froth than a chain of cappuccino outlets with flamboyant pronouncements about the "vintage of the century". T'was ever thus. Yes, Bojo had truly regained its mojo. I've tasted enough wines to question this assertion; in many cases I am more reminded of the tarry 05s or clunky 03s where the floral, lifted red-fruit tones were burnt away and replaced by jammy black fruit aromas and flavours. I am not dissing the vintage (we are all God's children etc. etc.) rather challenging the notion that one year can occupy so lofty a seat in the pantheon of human endeavour.

## Knock Off Wood



I can't hack it. Except with an axe. Too many wines entombed in wooden sarcophagi. Just as clothes maketh not the man, oak maketh not the wine. Oak is a strong inflection, a flavour additive, to be employed judiciously like seasoning. Over-egging the wood swamps the essential fruit and terroir flavours. Too much clutter ensues; you can't hear the voice of the wine for all the noise.

Some winemakers are addicted to oak. I once tasted a wine with 400% new oak (new barrels renewed every year for four years) with some colleagues. We joked that it should be 400 RP points with each barrel inscribed with the legend: 'Exegi aere monumentum perennius'. The wine was superbly monolithic, architectural and impersonal.

Are we to drink oak juice? Is the wine for sipping reverently, to be scooped (or carved) out of the bottle with a sharp spoon? Will it digest our food or clog our arteries? Is it meant to drunk at all or placed instead on a high altar in the heaviest bottle imaginable for us to admire as a Platonic idea of a luxury wine?

We do prefer vino that is never knowing under-wined.



Thierry Puzelat listens out for signs of too much wood in the wine

## Is Natural Wine Moral?

We have two kinds of morality side by side: one which we preach but do not practice and another which we practice but seldom preach - Bertrand Russell

My liberalism says live and let live. Do not court conflict, do not proselytise, but lay out your view point calmly and rationally.

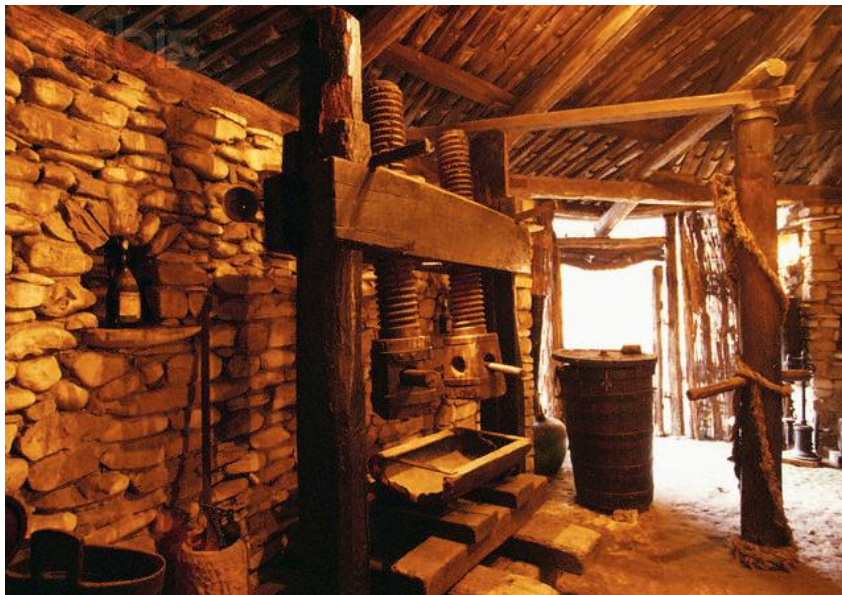
My radical side says that discussion uninformed by passion is toothless. If we love certain wines we should be assertive in our opinions. There is nothing wrong with arguing for terroir and purity of flavour, or being in favour of the small artisan farmer over the global corporation. The moral aspect of these stances becomes evident when one analyses the detrimental impact of industrial farming and contrasts it to the positive agenda of biodiversity promoted by small growers. Organics has become the *sine qua non* of farming in concept and practice – it is the sensible corrective to years of chemical exploitation of the land; biodynamics takes this a stage further with its holistic idea of farming, positing that the vineyard should be seen primarily as part of an eco-system. It is a prescient, proactive kind of agriculture underpinned by a strong ethos. "The goal of life is living in agreement with nature," wrote Zeno of Elea.

Working in harmony with nature, putting back in what you take out, conserving the landscape, the local flora and fauna, is the moral responsibility of all farmers. We are borrowing the land for ourselves and loaning it to future generations. "I have never asked myself the question nor had any hesitation (about whether to be organic), because it's unthinkable to work the vines and the land without love and respect," says Oliver Pithon. Intensive production damages the earth, chemicals weaken the vine and diminish the life in the soil; irrigation impacts on the rest of the environment and erosion destroys the eco-system. Using the land well means using the land intelligently, caring for the environment as we would care for a member of our family. It means finding natural solutions to natural problems. This nurturing regenerative mutuality of biodynamic farming is a creative statement and outlines the main differences between natural and industrial wine; one is to give to nature and accept what it gives you in return; the other is to set up systems that take as much as possible in response to the demands of the markets.

The aesthetic of the wine also matters and taps into whether we believe that wine is purely a lot of microbiology with some chemistry thrown in or whether it is the synthesis of nature and the winemaker's art. There are those who strive to make a wine that truly interprets the legacy of nature and the vintage and those whose manipulations are intended as a corrective to, or an improvement

upon, nature; these interventions materially alter the flavour and the tone of the wine. If we understand that wine is a living, evolving substance, made up of active yeasts, a form of life, responding to changes of temperature and atmosphere or exposure to oxygen, we embrace its mutability.

Natural wines depend on diversity, variety, pluralism. The French express abstract moral concepts rather well. They speak of "respect for grape, respect for terroir, respect for man and respect for the environment". Respect is seen as a form of love with humility leading to better understanding. Cultural patrimony & memory are worth preserving, from rediscovering autochthonous grape varieties to local farming methods and ways of making wines that date back centuries. To appreciate the present we need to understand the past better; dismissing the methodologies of hundreds of years is a bit like saying that our ancestors had no wisdom because they were not as up-to-date then as we are now in technological knowhow. No how. The vine, for example, used to be part of a polycultural environment; now it is largely a monoculture.



Autre temps, autres moeurs.

Rather than accept wine as a standardised product we may see winemaking as the judicious expression of the combined will of man and nature, and wine itself as something which may give pleasure and elicit wonderment (depending on the wine!). It has the binary function to be drunk for fun whilst spontaneously stimulating an aesthetic response - which philosophers over centuries have equated to having a moral purpose. Just as Shakespeare found "tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones" so many a good wine may act as a catalyst for conversation, communication, friendship, inspiration and art.

The truth of wine is its integrity and integrity has no need of rules. We seek wines which are not reflections of the grower's ego or which conform to the demands of the market-place, but which reveal the result of the desire to be true to yourself and the vineyard. Great painting is not made great by the amount of paint used on the canvas nor progress about how technology you can throw at a wine. Less can be more; less intervention allows the wine to express its naked beauty, and beauty has no need to remind you who its author is.

*Beauty can be this: The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.* (Stephen Dedalus – Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man)

## Evidence of terroir



Local bugs for local wine

## Natural South African Chenin

Met Craig Hawkins for lunch at Terroirs the other day. In my 'umble, Craig is the most exciting winemaker to hit the South African wine scene since I don't know when. As well as transforming Lammershoek he also has his own project under the Testalonga label and makes two wines (vintages permitting). Testalonga El Bandito and Testalonga El Bandito Cortez.

Craig is enthusiastic about natural wines and cites Puzelat, Dard & Ribo, Noella Morantin as influences. He is thoughtful and interested in pushing the boundaries, not for the sake of novelty, but to get close to the soul of the wine.

The results are fantastic.



He farms his own vines in order to produce his El Bandito wine on one hectare alongside making the Lammershoek wines for the Kretzel family since 2010. He also concurrently works (five and a half months a year) with Dorli Muhr and Dirk van Niepoort in the Carnuntum region of Austria, coming over from South Africa for the racking and bottling. (This is a small project of Blaufrankisch wines- made naturally and with no SO<sub>2</sub>, which is what Dirk requested that Craig do at their vineyard. Here Craig has been fine-tuning his work with skin contact white wines commenting that he is "very close to Slovenia/Friuli /Hungary and skin contact wines".

Craig's previous experience includes making wines for the Eben Sadie family vineyard. He also worked for Stéphane Ogier in Cote Rotie, Remy Pedreno of Roc d'Anglade in the Nimes and spent time visiting many top biodynamic or organic growers in the Etna region of Sicily (Cornelissen, Cos, Franchetti). Other experience away from South Africa includes working in the Douro region, where he has made an El Bandito Douro from local grape varieties.

As for the name Craig elaborates: "When I started in 2008 I liked the name El Bandito as these were white wines... counter to the generic style, pushing the boundaries of where white wine was going in South Africa... and as no one was doing extended skin maceration whites in the country, it just made sense to call it El Bandito". Craig makes two El Bandito wines, explaining the difference thus: "El Bandito "Cortez" is a separate wine; I use the suffix "Cortez" on the El Bandito wines that have no skin contact. They are only foot pressed in a basket and aged with no SO<sub>2</sub> at any stage even at bottling. Cortez is from old Chenin bush vines grown on poor granitic soil the grapes coming from the same soils (granite) but in the adjacent valley from a farm called The Observatory. The grapes were vinified, 100% "un de-stemmed" in 7- 10-yr-French oak barrels, fermented with wild yeasts and without temperature control. There is no filtration or fining and little sulphur "10ppm was added after six months, nothing at bottling. From 2010 onwards there is no SO<sub>2</sub> anywhere." "I did the pruning and composting of the vineyards last winter (09) to try and restore some life. And this wine will only be made when I can obtain the grapes. They were never sprayed and the old vines didn't yield very much but I managed to get a few tons to make a few barrels of very pure Chenin. In 2010 there was no vintage as the grapes were taken by mildew. However the 09 was pressed by foot in a basket press and then placed in old oak barrels, where it will remain until the end of 2010 where it will be

racked off its lees for the first time. So it will spend close to 24 months on its original lees. The wine is 12.5 % alcohol and has no sulphur added. With a clean ripe acid, which is the focus of my wines. Smells like the garrigue or surrounding natural vegetation. I love it.”

**A note on how a work with lees (briefly):**

Lees for me is the life of the wine. And I keep the wines for as long as possible on the original fermentation lees to retain the character of the vintage/grape/mood I was in. so far this has always been until I bottle the wines that I remove them from the original lees.

Every vintage I blend back a portion of the older years lees into the new vintage wine, to keep this “essence”, I bought back 2 litres of lees from the Douro El Bandito 08 in Portugal and blended it into the 2010 vintage.

In the 09 vintage there is some of the 2008 lees and then in the 2010 wines there is a mixture of both the 08 and 09 lees, it’s kind of a reverse solera system with the wines, from the inside out.

Something I love and something I will always do to retain my wines identity from vintage to vintage. Lees is the soul.”

Cortez has a bold mid-gold colour, aromas of heather honey, apricot, wild herbs and flint, with beautiful acid in the mouth with the richness and spiciness of the lees texture adding weight and complexity to the ensemble. Jasmine mingles with ripe citrus and crushed minerals, the mid-palate is silky and then the acid returns carrying the nuances of dry honey.

## **Cava Cava Chameleon – The changing face of Cava**

When someone asks me whether we list a cava it is usually a not so coded demand for something light, effervescent and cheap. Especially cheap.

The idea that cava could come from organically farmed vineyards and be crafted with the same care as champagne might surprise many people, even those defenders of Spanish wines who write cava off as a mediocre aberration. This is the story of Cava Recaredo, one of the few wines to buck the cava bargain bucket trend. It ain't cheap, but then it ain't your normal cava.

Andrew Jefford has some positive news. From World of Fine Wine

*At its best, it is a sparkling wine which is emphatically not structured by acidity – and hence doesn't need dosage (though many great Cavas do have some dosage). Its informing beauties are those of fragrance and aroma. It glides and floats rather than slices and incises. It is flowery and languid, yet at the same time complex and mouthfilling. It is a archetypical Mediterranean white, lifted and amplified by bubbles ("a bubble in the mouth is like an amplifier of all aromas," points out Agustí Torelló junior.) Not only is acidity relatively unimportant in its architecture, but fruit flavours, too, may be recessive by cool-climate standards: a hallmark of Mediterranean whites. Far from 'gaining nothing' by time spent on yeast or in post-disgorgement ageing, ambitious Cava gains almost everything from these processes, precisely because its intrinsic fruit notes -- in contrast to its primary aromatics -- are so muted. Time spent on yeast is what amplifies, layers and refracts its primary aromatic profile, and this complex aromatic weave laid gently on the downy, quiescent Catalan fruits is what lends the best Cava its magnificence and its grandeur. (In general, according to Xavier Gramona, "autolysis is more important than terroir for sparkling wine".)*

After that eloquent panegyric even I might give cava a whirl.

### **Homage to Catalonia**

In 1878, Recaredo Mata Figueres was born in the town of Sant Sadurní d'Anoia. In 1924, his son, Josep Mata Capellades, began to work in the world of cava and produce a few bottles for himself. Josep built cellars in his house, in the historic centre of Sant Sadurní d'Anoia. Some parts of the cellars are over 80 years old, and have been conserved retaining their original form. He forged Recaredo's identity, based on know-how, professionalism and hard work. He marked the way forward in his own style, pioneering totally dry cavas, the Cavas Brut Nature, and working with oak barrels and longer-aged cavas.

Cavas Recaredo is currently managed by Josep and Antoni Mata Casanovas, the sons of its founder.

The special work begins in the vineyard. Recaredo seek to ensure the natural balance of the vine, aiming to achieve the best expression of every individual vintage. Therefore, the viticulture is based on dry farming with grapes harvested by hand. They prioritise respect for biodiversity and the environment: cultivating vines without using herbicides or insecticides and only employing natural organic fertilisers. Neither chemical herbicides or insecticides are used.

When ripening begins, the grapes are analysed vine by vine, plot by plot, the goal being to harvest the grapes at their optimum point of ripening, to obtain the most balanced musts and the very finest wines. The entire harvesting process is carried out by hand, since it is only in this way that proper care for the grape until pressing can be guaranteed and premature oxidation (a characteristic of so

many cheap cavas) can be avoided. All these vines are close to the cellars and transportation of the grapes is carried out using small trailers.

The grape must is obtained by gently pressing the grapes, thereby obtaining the highest-quality part of the must. Debouillage follows and then the first fermentation where the yeasts transform the sugars to produce the base wine. Over the winter, the wine remains in contact with its finest lees, giving it volume and body and becomes naturally clarified. The grape juice from the oldest Xarel·lo vines ferment in oak barrels yielding structure and greater complexity for longer-aged cavas.

Some of the base wine is aged in oak barrels for some months. This wine will be used to add greater finesse and structure to the final blending.

The secondary fermentation occurs in the bottle, with the yeasts transforming the sugar to produce the cava's bubbles and foam. The subsequent interaction of the yeasts or the lees and the wine during the in-bottle ageing will give more complex flavours and aromas.

The riddling process, a gentle, precise daily movement, always carried out by hand in the classic, traditional racks, allows the lees to descend to the bottle's cork and prepares the bottle for the expulsion of the lees: the disgorging which consists in the expulsion of the lees accumulated during the ageing process. At Recaredo, this is carried out on an exclusively manual basis, at the cellars' natural temperature, without freezing the necks of the bottles..

**2006 Cava Brut Nature Gran Reserva** comes from dry-farmed organic vineyards in the Alt Penedes zone and is made from a blend of Xarel·lo (46%), Macabeu (36%) and Parellada (18%). The wine is a Brut Nature, completely dry. It has wonderful chalky minerality with notes of nutmeg and ginger. There is a wonderful fleshy texture redolent of poached pears.

**2003 "Brut de Brut" Brut Nature Gran Reserva** is made with grapes from the old vineyards on moderately deep loamy and loamy-clay calcareous soils, with the presence of some gravel, located around the villages of Sant Sadurní d'Anoia, Torrelavit and Subirats, in the Alt Penedès region. These vineyards yield high quality grapes giving wines of elegant expression and fine concentration. The blend is 36% Xarel·lo and 64% Macabeu and the wine is aged for a minimum of 67 months in the bottles. All the "Xarel·lo" grapes are fermented in oak barrels for added complexity.

Well-upholstered wine with green plum and apple aromas. The palate is deep, pure, structured, vinous, long and rich with resonant acidity.

In 1962, Josep Mata Capellades created the Reserva Particular de Recaredo Cava with the idea of being able to convey the delicateness and subtle complexity that a cava that has undergone a very long ageing can achieve. Faithful to this idea, it is a cava that represents the Mediterranean in its purest form, interprets the calcareous lands of the Alt Penedès and shows the character of the oldest vines.

**Reserva Particular de Recaredo 2001** is 60% Macabeu and 40% Xarel·lo. The Xarel·lo was fermented in small "oak casks" to imbue the final cava with more structure and elegance. It stays at least six years and six months in contact with its own "lees" until the final removal of the sediment, carried out manually without freezing the bottle neck. It is a completely dry Brut Nature, with no added sugar.

An extraordinary wine with aromas and flavours of the Mediterranean. Think hawthorn, almond-blossom, sweet hay, fennel, warm earth and green herbs. Amazing length.