



The abandoned buildings in Priorat have weathered intact. A grapevine secured in the unique Priorat terroir.

The Iberian Peninsula

ON SEPTEMBER 20, 2023, 19 of us left Chicago bound for Barcelona for a three-week trip, starting with a seven-day cruise on the Mediterranean. The highlight of the day was a lengthy mid-day tapas meal at what was recommended as the best tapas restaurant in Barcelona. This restaurant lived up to its hype and of great importance, the wine list had five different wines of Spain's hottest producer—Raul Perez—and we had all of them. Ironically, this was the only restaurant that had any of these wines over the course of two weeks on this trip.

Due to the great food and wines consumed at lunch, most of us did not eat dinner and retired to rest from the flight and for a long day following.

We left at 9 a.m. for a day excursion to the famous wine region South-Southwest of Barcelona—Priorat. This is a wine producing area which was severely decimated by phylloxera towards the end of the 19th century. Due to the extremely limited area where vineyard growth was possible, most of the people moved elsewhere and never returned. As a result, there are several abandoned villages and small towns looking as they did 100–150 years ago. Due to the very arid climate conditions, most of these buildings have

weathered well. The terroir for grape growing must be seen to be believed. Most of the region roughly resembles the moonscape. It consists of a unique terroir of reddish black slate and small particles of mica known as llicorella. This poor type of soil reflects and retains the sun's heat, boosting the sugar level in the grapes that produces fewer, but better-quality grapes.

We spent a long time at the very impressive small, family-owned estate of Pasanau. The infrastructure was not exceptional, but the wines and owner quite made the trip unforgettable. We had a wide range of wines, all of which were excellent. However, the La Planeta was over the top! It is largely Carignan and was one of my favorite wines ever. It is produced in miniscule quantities and is sold mainly on property. My wife Pat, who constantly implores me to buy “no more wine,” insisted that I buy a bottle of a very rare wine which is 100% Carignan. We were able to pair all these wines with local cheeses and breads and left the event in a very happy state of mind. This was truly one of the most memorable tastings of my life.

We drove through the unusual countryside, viewing the very poor soil conditions, finding unoccupied and abandoned villages until we arrived



Jim Bryant joins the Pasanau winery owner who features a bottle of the Pasanau Finca La Planeta 2016.

at our lunch destination, a winery and restaurant owned by Charlotte and Christopher Cannon-Clos Figueras.

We had a nice tour before our exceptional lunch with outstanding wines served at each course. What a treat! It was a silent trip back to Barcelona in the van.



The view from lunch in Sete.



A statue honoring Brigitte Bardot in Saint-Tropez.



Art seen in Gassin.



A World War I German biplane rests at Domaine du Bourrian in Gassin.



Art is prominent in Gassin.

The following day we boarded the Regent Seven Seas Navigator® for our Mediterranean cruise. The first port was the French city of Sete, which was an ideal spot for an extensive walking tour enjoyed by Greg Pearson and my wife and me. My fondest memories involved being escorted by an elderly resident several blocks out of his way to help us locate a great wine shop which we were having difficulty finding. After buying several bottles, we got directions from him to the best outside restaurant nearby and we left this fine gentleman and had a very memorable lunch of shellfish and bivalves by the river. My luncheon of mussels and fries was one of the epicurean highlights of my trip. We had the sommelier chill a rose from our recent purchase which completed this perfect afternoon experience.

Our next port was Saint-Tropez, France, made famous by many and most by Brigitte Bardot. We had a nice wine tasting at the Domaine du Bourrian in the nearby village of Gassin. The owner

had an impressive collection of old airplanes and tractors on-site. We sat outside under an open tent, tasted several impressive estate white and rose wines and were thoroughly entertained by our guide who regaled us with the history of the estate, the wines, and most memorably of a trans-Atlantic crossing from France to Brazil as the only female on a small sailboat many years ago. What a learning experience she had and shared with us. We finished the excursion with a walking tour of the charming village of Gassin with ample display of statues and artwork. The views from the village were striking and left us in a great mood after four days in Europe.

Next on our itinerary was the Spanish island of Minorca. This was the first time any of us had been here and it was a tranquil escape from the real world. The pastoral countryside was beautiful. We visited a charming farm and sampled wine and foodstuffs after touring several animal stations. We finished the tour with a very nice lunch with

ample wine at a local restaurant.

As was the case with each night on the ship, we dined and wine at a high level and retired to rest for the next day's events. We arrived at Alicante, Spain, and left for a city tour and a walking tour of the ancient Roman ruins, which were extensive and interesting. After several physical hours, we retired to a famous restaurant in a botanical setting for a great food and wine event. À Votre Santé. U



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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