



[CATALAN WINES, FEATURES](#)

The wines of DO Costers del Segre 2023

by [Miquel Hudin](#) | 19-04-2023

I will readily admit to being a bit intimidated by [DO Costers del Segre](#). I realize of of course you might be immediately be saying, “Whatsers del what?” I assume this because, unless you live in Catalunya, this is more than likely a DO that you’ve never heard of as it’s the most interior one there is and more or less continental in climate, making for a sharp difference from the DOs like hug the Mediterranean coast.

As to why I find this intimidating, it’s because Costers del Segre is: a mishmash of different climates, nearly 30 grape varieties (13 red, 16 white), and winemaking approaches that vary as much as everything else put together.

Thus, I did what one does in such situations wherein you’re confronted by such an overwhelming knot of complexity: I put out a call for samples in order to taste as widely as possible and better understand this inland piece of Catalan wine. I ultimately ended up with 120 wines which made for a very holistic [Tasting Report](#) to accompany this Regional Report.

Numbers and pieces

DO Costers del Segre isn't large in terms of land, but not in terms of wineries. There are only 36 currently registered within the DO. I understand however that one or two might be leaving if they haven't left already and others only make one or two of their wines under the DO so in some ways, it's the legal body of the DO is a bit of a partial snapshot of the entire region as a whole.

There are nearly 4,100ha of registered vineyards which means that there are wineries with quite large holdings. I say this because the vineyard total in Costers del Segre is the same for DOQ Priorat **and** DO Montsant put together, but between these two DOs, they have about 180 wineries. As a weird sidenote, this gives Costers del Segre a raw winery to vineyard ratio about about 110ha/winery which is the same as Rioja.

And, as is often the case everywhere in Spain, the number of independent viticulturists has declined year after year, sitting at 2/3 of what it was 20 years ago. This is because as an older generation is retiring, they're selling to the larger holders instead of new individuals as few people want to work in agriculture these days.

What is however the hardest part of the DO to wrap your head around is that they have **seven** subzones: Artesa de Segre, Urgell, Garrigues, Pallars Jussà, Raimat, Segrià, and Valls del Riu Corb and they vary *wildly* from one another. In fact, there's a really strong argument that these should in fact be individual DOs all under the same managing council.

I can only hope for this to happen as, much like DO Tarragona, there seems to be little political will to make such changes. Keeping it as it is however isn't in their best interest as casual conversations have led me to believe that the undefined quality of the DO is why wineries end up leaving. They see themselves gaining little from being part of such a massive and varied area given that no one pays attention to subzones, especially as it's always the larger DO brand promoted at events, not these smaller creations.

The places of note

Despite all of these subzones, there are only two or three producing more noteworthy wines and those are: Pallars Jussà, Valls del Riu Corb, and to some extent Garrigues.

The others are a bit random and while some decent wines can be found, these subzones seem mostly formed out of a desire to wrap every winery in a subzone of some form. This point is really driven home by the Raimat subzone which holds one winery, Raimat...

In terms of Valls del Riu Corb and Garrigues, I don't know if it's because the qualities of the subzones make better wines as a whole or the fact that the producers are simply better. I say this as Garrigues has Tomàs Cusiné (which has been doing good work for some time) as well as Cérvoles and Mas Blanch i Jové (whose vineyard art installations I've attended in the past). But then there's Clos Pons as well as Matallonga which were fine, but not at the same level.

As for Valls del Riu Corb, I admittedly really like the region (I buy all my bread flour there at Farinera la Segarra in a village called Maldà) but it seems like there's something about it that makes for a better climate. The soils are poor, drain well and all these wineries sit in a series of small valleys (*valls*) which probably help to shield them from the very hot summer sun.

Some of the choice wineries here are l'Olivera who I've thought the world of for a long time both in terms of the quality of their wines as well as the social benefit of their project. Analec was an excellent surprise as I've passed it many times going for my flour pickups and as it turns out, not only are their still wines solid, but they produce the best sparkling wines in the entire DO which are much better than scads of Cava. Admittedly there are others that don't stack up there as well, but it's here in this subzone I find a lighter, more delicate character that really plays out well, especially for the white wines.

Way up there

So then we get to Pallars Jussà which, if any subzone of Costers del Segre needs its own DO, at a minimum it should be this.

The lead photo at the top is quite emblematic of this region. It's much higher altitude with vineyards at 800m and even more not uncommon. Torres planted a huge vineyard next to the village of Tremp at 1,000m as a manner to "future proof" their operation. Ironically, I've been told these grapes don't go into their "Purgatori" wine from Costers del Segre which is an estate based in les Garrigues.

Few regions are ever a guarantee of quality wine, but the best-scoring wines in the Tasting Report were almost all from Pallars Jussà.

Batlliu de Sort is a winery I was introduced to over a decade ago and it's come into its own as producing some seriously top-quality wine. The Riesling and the Pinot Noir wines were both very good and I say this despite my repeated statement that Pinot Noir shouldn't be planted south of the Pyrénées. This still holds true though as this winery is actually **in** the Pyrénées just north of the village Sort with vineyards at nearly 1,100m. Definitely some top wines to check out.

And then there is **Castell d'Encus**. The owner, Raül Bobet, is the winemaking madman tilting at viticultural windmills up on his perch just above Tremp. For a long time he's been a reference up there and not just because he's one of the owners in the renown Ferrer Bobet winery of DOQ Priorat, but because he's pulling off some really impressive wines at his other project. Again, like Batlliu de Sort, the Encus Riesling in the Essencia is top-rate and the Syrah in the Thalarn as well. Even the Saktih Petit Verdot was fantastic. He's had to make adjustments to the vineyards over the years however as he's found varieties like Albariño to simple be **too** acidic in these patches of land he's carved out and planted.

I went and did a new tasting with Bobet for this report and the only thing that mystifies me is why he's constantly using French measures to stack his wines against, trying to created a "Pétrus of the Pyrénées" in one case. Admittedly, he does love Pétrus, so one can understand, but at the same time, he has such an amazingly unique place (and he's pushing even further up by planting Grenache at 1,000m) that I feel like he's carved out his own identity long ago and doesn't need to look to other bars in order to measure his work.

As to why more people aren't banging down his door to get at his wines is again a testament to the bias against Spanish wines.

The variability of varieties

It's worth closing by taking a look at what grape varieties in DO Costers del Segre seem to be working, at least generally given that Riesling, Pinot Noir, Viognier, and even Sauvignon Blanc do well in Pallars Jussà, but elsewhere in DO, not so much which is an issue seen in DO Somontano as well.

There has been a good deal of concerted effort to get behind Macabeu as the "flagship" variety of the region. A number of wineries are doing better work than they have in the past with this white grape. L'Olivera is making some really excellent wines from it, but it's hard to tell if it's really The Grape for the region to collectively hang their hat on. Despite this being a grape variety originally from Catalunya, the best examples I've tasted in a monovarietal form are from Rioja where it's better known as "Viura".

The warm and rather extreme climate of all this region seems to favor Monastrell, Grenache, and Carignan when planted in the right locations. This shouldn't come as much of a surprise as these are pretty classic grapes in Eastern Spain. The reds from non-mountainous altitudes that showed well were all from these varieties, albeit often with a splash of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, or Tempranillo.

On the theme of these three varieties (as well as Merlot, Malbec, and a few others), there is a critical juncture being reached as it's now simply too hot in Spain (and often even France) to cultivate these grapes well. Wines mainly comprised of them showed in the mid-range at best and severely lacking in others. Syrah is getting problematic, but Cabernet Sauvignon is a downright disaster at this point.

This is something I saw in the [Mallorca report](#) as well in that grape varieties from further north in France that were planted in Spain, need to be replanted or regrafted if a winery is going to stay in business. The 2019 vintage was a serious wake-up call as to the issues in terms of heat and 2022 served as a stark reminder on this front. And, in case people are still in doubt, the massive lack of rain via our severe drought of 2023 so far is proving that if a grape variety needs water, it has no place in Spain these days. Even native son Tempranillo needs the wetter climes in upper Rioja where they see 800mm in an average a year, not the 300mm in Catalunya. There's a lot of hard thinking that needs to happen in regards to the #1 planted variety in Spain at the moment.

A different Catalunya

While I've been tasting from several wineries in Costers del Segre for years now, I've never taken on the region as a whole to understand it better and I'm happy to have finally had the chance.

That said, my takeaway is more or less how it was when I went in, in that there's a great deal of variance, but there are also some really excellent wines being made in the right spots including a number of new discoveries for me. You just need a handy region report and tasting guide to get you started.