Local shops with cellar ambitions

A cake shop in a provincial town in north-east Spain might sound like an unlikely food and wine emporium, but Casa Serra is no ordinary shop. Just two miles from the sea, Palafrugell is in the heart of the posh strip of the Costa Brava, which runs from Llafranc to Bagur (see map, right).

This is where rich Catalans have second homes and increasing numbers of northern Europeans own villas. Their epicurean appetites, combined with the business savvy of the Serra family, have resulted in a mini Fortnum's-sur-Med in a small town that is easily accessible from the UK via Ryanair (to Gerona), or from the French border, 50 miles away. For motorists holidaying in Catalonia or the Languedoc, Palafrugell would be well worth a trip – if only to fill the boot with Riojas at a fraction of their British price.

Over the years, Al Gore, Jose Carreras and even a Spanish infanta – Cristina – have wandered in off the main square, drawn to Casa Serra's kitsch window displays and the sugary scent of Spanish baking. More than 100 years old, and still entirely family-run, Serra is a local shop with big ambitions. Among the Chupa Chups lollypops and Bisbalenc cakes are products of an altogether more unusual sort. Homesick Brits can stock up on Tiptree jam, Scottish shortbread and Marmite; Spanish food lovers go there to buy Calasparra rice, Ortiz tuna and Joselito ham; flamboyant Russians stop by for vintage Krug and Beluga caviar.

Wine and whisky, though, are Casa Serra's real fortes. "We stock about 1,000 different Spanish wines, from every region, as well as several from France, Germany and the New World," says Enric Serra, the fourth generation of his family to work in the store. "We are particularly strong on foreign and Spanish dessert wines, because they go so well with our cakes and ice creams. I am also very proud of the fact that we have more than 120 different single-malt whiskies."

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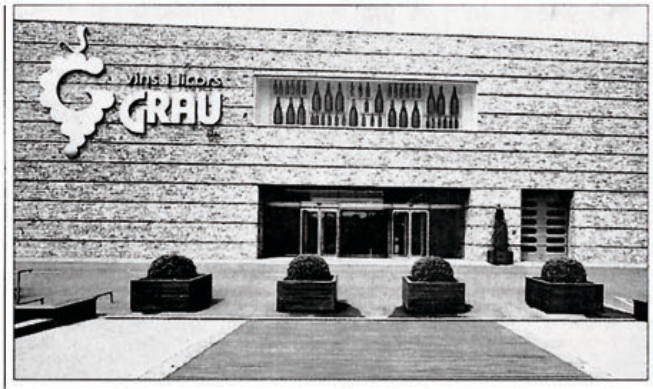

Robert and Joan Fergus, from Cumbernauld in Scotland, come to stock up with wine. "We have a holiday home nearby and have been customers here for over 25 years," says Robert. "Casa Serra's house red is delicious and amazing value at only £1.25 a bottle. We always take plenty back home if we come by car. And I'd say their malt-whisky selection is better, and cheaper, than anywhere in Glasgow." (A quick price comparison reveals that a 70cl bottle of Cutty Sark costs around £8 at Serra, compared with £13.95 at Berry Bros.)

PICTURES: ROGER TAYLOR

Extraordinary range: Grau wine and spirit warehouse (top); Jordi and Sergi Grau

Beneath the shop, in the old cake-making kitchen, lie vintages of Rioja stretching back to the 1920s. "Last month we had an English customer, who came three days running," says Serra. "He stayed for ages and even got locked in one night because we forgot he was there. He can't have been that upset – after we released him, he bought 50 cases for shipment back to Britain."

What makes Palafrugell even more of a wine lover's destination is Grau, a vast wine and spirit warehouse on the outskirts of the town. Owned and run by Jordi Grau, a former professional clarinettist and saxophonist, and his son Sergi, the shop is well-stocked and beautifully laid out. It has a bar, where you can drink cocktails with slices of manchego or *jamón ibérico*, and a crèche.

There are more than 8,000 different wines and spirits and the selection is far from parochial, with wines from France, Italy, Germany, New Zealand, Australia, Chile and Argentina, as well as all the 60 official wine regions of Spain. Prices are 30 to 50 per cent cheaper than in the UK, with the best savings if you trade up. A Marqués de Griñon 2001 Rioja is £2.90 (£5.99 at Sainsbury's); Campo Viejo Reserva 1998 is £6 (£7.99 at Sainsbury's); Marqués de Vargas Reserva 2000 is £10 (£17.95 at Berry Bros).

"We sell far, far more of our foreign wines than we expected," says Jordi Grau, who also supplies Ferran Adrià's El Bulli restaurant. "Our Spanish customers have surprised us by being really adventurous. The British, too, have wide-ranging tastes. The French tend to buy spirits, which are taxed much lower in Spain."

The range of bottles on show is extraordinary. As well as absurdly cheap everyday wines, there are first-growth clarets, iconic Italian and Californian boutique wines and prestige cuvée Champagnes such as Dom Pérignon and Roederer Cristal, held in a temperature-controlled inner sanctum.

There are also 500 different brands of whisky, including 20 from Ireland and 30 from America, as well as examples from Australia, Japan and even India. "A bit of a niche product, that," says Sergi Grau, laughing. Goodness knows how many Scotches there are. There are brandies from eight different regions in Spain, plus Greece and Germany, alongside the Cognacs and Armagnacs.

"My father used to own a bar and I always wanted my own wine shop," says Jordi Grau. Little did I realise that I would be selling more than 12 million bottles a year just 18 months after opening."

■ *Casa Serra: Plaça Nova 2, Palafrugell, Provincia Gerona, Spain (0034 972 30 0640; www.serracellar.com). Grau: Calle Torroella 163, Palafrugell, Provincia Gerona, Spain (0034 972 30 1835; www.vinsilicorsgrau.es).*

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