

Producer profile

Clos des Papes

Instrumental in the establishment of the Châteauneuf-du-Pape appellation, this venerable estate adheres steadfastly to its time-honoured values, seeking balance and finesse in its singular red and white cuvées. Matt Walls pays a visit

LIKE A DUTIFUL son, I return to the ruins that sit at the top of the small town of Châteauneuf-du-Pape every year. There's not much left of the eponymous château these days, just two towering walls that lean against each other like exhausted old men. Dawn is the best time to visit; you can survey the blanket of vines stretching out below through the mist in the morning's blue light to the distant clanking of bells and barking of dogs. The cicadas don't start screeching until later in the day. You forget how big they are till you find a desiccated carcass among the vines; those gnarled arthritic hands that reach towards the sun through bleached round stones.

Clos des Papes is a 10-minute walk away, through steep alleyways that run down from the ruins like sandstone trenches, passing vineyards punctuated with the occasional exclamatory cypress. Behind ornate metal gates lie the tall stone buildings that house the winery and offices. It feels cool inside. There is no slickly designed interior; it has the homely, practical feel and smell of a family winery.

Current owner and winemaker Vincent Avril is remarkably down to earth, considering he owns one of the greatest estates in Châteauneuf. He may be an oak of a man, but his wines are remarkably elegant for a region that certainly has its fair share of overblown, unbalanced bottles.

Turning point

The Avril family has been making wine in Châteauneuf since 1600, but 1873 was a pivotal year. Vincent's great-grandfather, Paul-Eugène Avril, was born. And the entire

Châteauneuf vineyard was wiped out by the phylloxera louse. It took five years for a treatment to be found. By the time Paul-Eugène was 17, the vineyards had largely been re-established, and when he was 23 he was among the first to sell wine in bottle, starting with the 1896 vintage.

Paul-Eugène was a pioneer in many ways, being among the first to export his wine in the early 1900s, and he registered the Clos des Papes brand in 1902. The psychedelically decorative, almost Pythonesque label design used today hasn't changed in nearly 100 years. In 1911, he also chaired the first commission convened to look into the classification of the Châteauneuf-du-Pape vineyards – an initiative that led to the development of the French appellation d'origine laws that are replicated throughout Europe today.

The family line

Paul-Eugène's son Régis Avril was born in 1901, and he helped steer the estate through two world wars. He worked on improving quality, eventually supplying the Palais de l'Élysée during the presidencies of General de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou. In 1954, he also bottled the first vintage of Clos des Papes Blanc, which now amounts to around 10% of overall production – a relatively high proportion. Régis' son Paul Avril was born in 1937, and joined the estate in 1963. Paul's son, the current custodian Paul-Vincent Avril, was born two years later.

Vincent and his father worked together at the estate from 1987 until Paul's death in 2009. Vincent still misses him. 'It's impossible

Clos des Papes at a glance

Location Southern Rhône, France

Winemaker

Paul-Vincent Avril

Vineyard area 35ha

Number of plots 24

Average vine age

35 years old

Average yield

22hl/ha

Viticultural

approach certified organic (Ecocert)

Red varieties

65% Grenache, 20% Mourvèdre, 10% Syrah, 5% other

Whites varieties

Equal parts of Grenache Blanc, Roussanne, Clairette, Bourboulenc, Picpoul, Picardan

Average production

Rouge 80,000-100,000 bottles

Blanc 8,000-10,000;

Le Petit Vin d'Avril

Rouge 17,000 bottles

Blanc 3,000



'When people say we make the most Burgundian style of Châteauneuf, I'm happy with that' **Paul-Vincent Avril (left)**

to have a better team than me and my father,' he says. Paul made a number of improvements to the estate, notably in 1979 planting the Mourvèdre that is now so instrumental in the blend. But Paul was also responsible for establishing the defining qualities of Clos des Papes that often mark it out among its peers: elegance and finesse.

Paul studied in Burgundy, and even married a Burgundian. Vincent also has a great love of Burgundy, having studied in Beaune alongside his *chef de culture* Jean-Luc Lancelot. 'We don't want to make a Burgundy, but when people say we make the most Burgundian style of Châteauneuf, I'm happy with that,' he says.

After his studies, Vincent travelled to different wine regions around the world to work, including Bordeaux (Château Mouton Rothschild, Château de Gaillard), Provence (Domaines Ott) and Australia's Yarra Valley (Mount Mary). Other Châteauneuf producers praise his breadth of tasting experience, and the Clos des Papes cellars are also home to dozens of cases from other wineries around the world. It's helped him develop an objective viewpoint. 'The image of Châteauneuf-du-Pape is that of power. So what we try to do is bring balance.' Key to this is blending.

Crafting a blend

The Clos des Papes wines don't come from a single walled vineyard as the name suggests. The 'Clos' refers to one plot of old vines, the oldest part of the property, situated next to the ruins of the pope's old château in the town. But there are a further 23 plots scattered across the appellation, which amount to a total area of 35ha (hectares) under vine. The estate's range of Châteauneufs amounts to just two: a red and a white.

Châteauneuf is a big appellation: it spans a total of 3,200ha, or 32km². There is a ➤



Photograph: Jon Wyand

distance of 10km between Vincent's most northerly and southerly plots, and he can see a difference of 10 days in the ripening of grapes at either end. His vines are grown on all the different soils available, and they give different nuances to the finished wine; sand gives finesse, whereas clay produces wines with more power and structure.

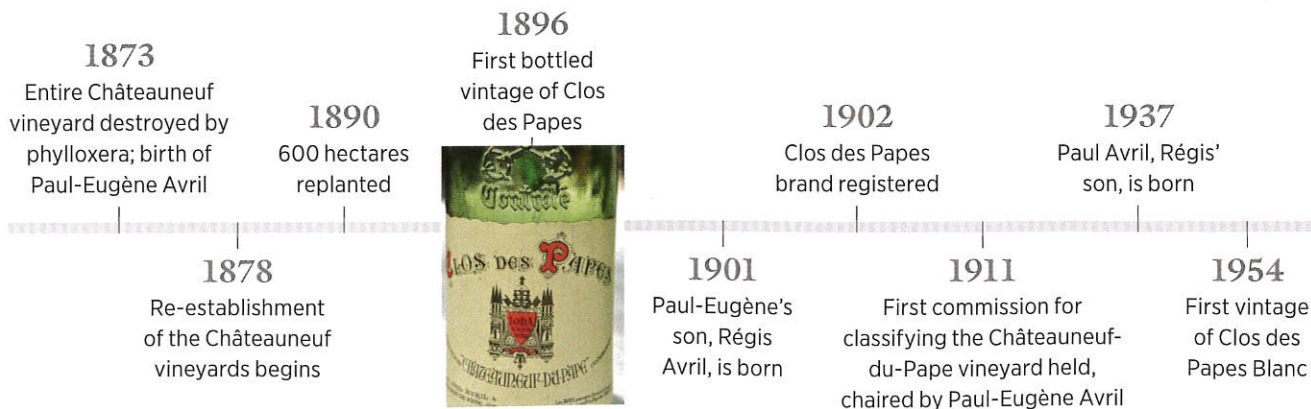
Vincent's reds are typically co-fermented blends of 65% Grenache, 20% Mourvèdre, 10% Syrah and 5% of co-planted Counoise, Vaccarèse, Muscardin, Terret Noir, Cinsault and Picpoul Noir; while his whites contain an equal percentage each of Grenache Blanc, Roussanne, Clairette, Bourboulenc, Picpoul and Picardan. 'The complexity of Châteauneuf comes from blending varieties and terroirs,' he believes. 'Take that away and it's no longer Châteauneuf-du-Pape.'

The work done in the vineyard is the key to quality for Vincent. 'I've never sold a single litre to a négociant,' he states with pride. 'All the work is done in the vineyard to make sure no tank is sub-standard.' He works his vines organically, and since taking control of the estate he has stopped filtering the wine, introducing full destemming and reducing yields to an average of 22hl/ha – even as low as 13hl/ha in 2013. 'It's not an economic choice, it's a quality choice,' he admits.

He's also introduced Le Petit Vin d'Avril, a red and a white Vin de France pair from small plots of vines just outside the Châteauneuf-du-Pape appellation boundaries. Each of these is produced with the same care as the grands vins, but the blends are different; the white is 90% Marsanne, 10% Chardonnay, while the red is made up of Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre, >

Above: the 'clos' of Clos des Papes is a plot of old vines that lies adjacent to the ruins of the papal château at Châteauneuf-du-Pape

Clos des Papes – a timeline



CLOS DES PAPES

Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Marselan and Caladoc. The white is unoaked, but one third of the red spends a year in oak foudres, which helps to season them ready to receive the red Clos des Papes for its maturation.

Beyond fashion

Grenache, though key to the Châteauneuf blend, does have its drawbacks. For Vincent, it can't produce fully mature grapes at less than 14.5% alcohol. Another benefit of using other grape varieties is that they can help reduce the overall alcohol level. He aims for 14%–14.5% alcohol. 'We make powerful wine, but not 17%.'

Use of oak has always been restrained at the estate. The red Châteauneuf is matured in large old oak barrels for 12–15 months, but only to soften the wine, not to add oak flavour. He doesn't use any new oak 'because you taste wood everywhere in the world and you get the same taste – that's why I don't use it'. The white Châteauneuf is fermented and matured only in stainless steel.

An emphasis on finesse and balance, restrained alcohol levels and reduced use of oak – these are current trends in wine regions around the world, but following fashion has never been the way at Clos des Papes. In the 1990s, when many Châteauneuf estates were producing ever more intense and concentrated special cuvées in the hunt for high ratings, Clos des Papes kept a respectful distance. 'First of all, winemakers must make wines that they like to drink. Our wines are to go with food, and it's for that reason we don't make special cuvées. We never have and we never will.'

Price is often a fairly reliable guide to quality in wine, but this is not the case in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The most expensive bottles are often over-extracted, overly alcoholic and heavy; they may show well in tastings and garner high points from some critics, but they lack drinkability and balance. Paradoxically, however, Clos des Papes can still



Above from left: Paul Avril with his sons Paul-Vincent and Claude-Paul

be found for under £50 a bottle in the UK. It's hard to think of many other ageworthy and collectable grands vins from top estates in classic regions, with a track record for quality, that can be bought for this price.

Vincent doesn't currently have children, but his sister has six girls and his brother Claude, the mayor of Châteauneuf, has two boys. In the meantime, Vincent plans to continue ploughing the furrow that has served them well until now. Not that this means resting on his laurels: 'You can always increase the quality,' he says.

If you're looking for a blockbuster Châteauneuf, Clos des Papes perhaps isn't for you. But in terms of drinking pleasure and finesse, it's a wine that could seduce even the most fervent Châteauneuf naysayer. **D**

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Clos des Papes – a timeline

