The world's best Grenache buys

Decanter's experts from around the world nominated the best Grenache or Garnacha in their respective regions. Oz Clarke tasted them all and selected his favourites

Oz Clarke is a multiple award-winning wine writer, broadcaster and author renowned for his tasting skills

THE MARCH OF the Mediterranean varieties is steadily gaining strength. Their numbers swell, their chorus grows. As climate change sinks its talons into region after region, as drought becomes a recurrent nightmare and vineyards annually gasp for water that is more and more difficult to find, these drought plants, these dry-land experts, these hardy old-timers are coming into their own.

In different parts of the world Carignan, Cinsault and Mourvedre are stirring and demanding attention. But the leader of the pack is Grenache, or Garnacha – until recently the most widely planted black grape variety in the world. And also until recently, largely ignored as a variety whose name might deserve any prominence on the label.

We should thank Châteauneuf du Pape and Priorat for kickstarting Grenache's current rise to popularity, if not yet eminence, and for prodding us into paying significant amounts for exceptional wines. Remember, areas need star producers to wake everybody up, and our tasting showed that Avril in Châteauneuf and Palacios in Priorat are worthy flag wavers. Acústic in Priorat's neighbour Montsant is also a passionate, focused producer, intent upon making wines that are not just baby Priorats but have their own lively personality.

These may be the big-money labels, but the wide availability of old Garnacha/Grenache vines across much of Spain and southern France means that grapes can be bought, or land can be leased, relatively affordably. This is massively important for the new wave of winemakers. Grapes that used to be carted off to the local co-op for barely more than production costs are now being properly valued and cherished.

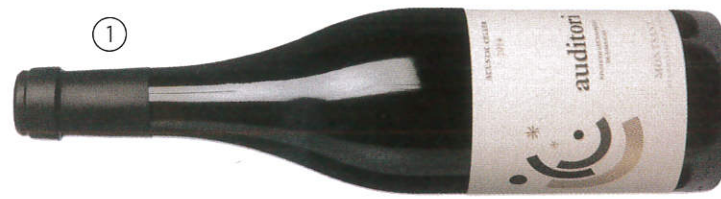
These are also areas where high alcohol makes sense. From our Spanish selection, Madrid was marginally more restrained at 14%, but the rest were 14.5% or 15%. Is that too high? That's where Priorat mostly sits; so does an awful lot of Châteauneuf. I wish it didn't. But it's a difficult balance; Grenache builds up alcohol very easily. It can also lose its balance easily and descend into a high pH, jammy mediocrity of questionable cleanness. (I had high hopes of the submissions from Sardinia, but too many lacked balance and style.)

And how much new oak should be used? Again, I don't think new oak works very well with high-strength Grenache unless it is very skillfully employed. Grenache can suck out wood tannins far too quickly, and its fruit is quite rich enough not to need help. And should it be blended? There's no doubt in my mind that Grenache appreciates a bit of help from some of the higher-acid varieties like good Carignan. When made as a 100% varietal, Grenache needs skill and commitment.

Not surprisingly we can find some decent Grenache in the New World – though we saw few top Australian examples here. I suspect there is a bit more lurking in South America (especially in Chile, where only 1ha seems to be recorded), but the potential here to explore the variety's flavours, textures and aromas without any traditional baggage is exciting. And in South Africa they're even checking out low-alcohol Grenache: our tasting proves that 12.5% or 13% can taste very good indeed.

'We should thank Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Priorat for kickstarting Grenache's current rise to popularity, if not yet eminence'

1 **Acústic Celler, Auditori, Montsant, Catalonia, Spain 2014** 96
£42.99-£44.95 **Cambridge Wine Merchants, Lea & Sandeman**
Wonderfully exhilarating Garnacha from the fringes of Priorat. Shimmering blackcurrant and apple fruit, mouthwatering acidity and the slap of herbs, and yet you can still taste the heat in the grapes. Delicious! **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alcohol** 15%



2 **Alvaro Palacios, L'Ermita, Priorat, Catalonia, Spain 2016** 96
POA **Berry Bros & Rudd, WoodWinters**
Priorat is finally making its wines more drinkable, rather than merely being the darlings of tasting panels. This is a fine example of the new style: delicious red cherry and raspberry fruit, a light blossom scent and just enough rasp of herbs to remind you of its seriousness. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

3 **Mas Amiel, Vers le Nord, Maury Sec, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2016** 96
£14.99 **Bancroft Wines, Georges Barbier**
Ripe, scented, stewed raspberries and loganberries pile out of the glass in friendly combat with herbs, peppercorns and lemon zest acidity. Quite a surprise for Maury, but a real pointer for the future. Excellent value. **Drink** 2018-2021 **Alc** 15%

4 **Clos des Papes, Paul Avril et Fils, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Rhône, France 2015** 95
£72 **A&B Vintners, Laithwaite's**
Grenache at its best manages to walk a tightrope between lovely raisiny richness and an unlikely but tempting red fruit perfume. The palate here is rich with luscious prunes and crystallised plums which blend irresistibly with bright warm red berries and a scratch of herbs. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 15%

5 **Coume del Mas, Schistes, Collioure, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2016** 95
£25-£29 **Bottle Apostle, Hedonism, Noel Young, Swig, Vinoteca**
A marvellous example of warm-blooded, sun-soaked Grenache, just holding the line between indulgence and corruption. A Mediterranean orange grove scent floats over deliciously stewy fruit and a savoury, meaty streak. This is a smashing glass of red! **Drink** 2018-2021 **Alc** 14.5%

6 **David and Nadia, Swartland, Western Cape, South Africa 2016** 95
£21.59-£34 **Handford, Justerini & Brooks, Noel Young, Vin Cognito, Vincisive**
Rich, ripe yet tart cranberry and redcurrant fruit, then raspberry strides in later. Marvellously dry, yet provocatively scented and intriguing. Those slight chewy tannins are simply the skins of the fruit you're enjoying so much. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 13%

7 **AA Badenhorst, Raaigras, Swartland, Western Cape, South Africa 2016** 94
£31-£40 **Handford, Harvey Nichols, Hedonism, Lay & Wheeler, Swig**
Fresh, breezy, bright strawberry and cherry fruit but, crucially, slightly underripe to give it freshness. Attractively grainy tannins and an appetising undertow of warm earth on the palate. The way forward for easy-drinking Grenache. **Drink** 2018-2023 **Alc** 12.5% ➢

THE ART OF WINE. DOWN TO EARTH.

Nestled between the Continental warmth and cool Northern currents, Austrian wines flourish in the heart of Europe. These ideal climatic conditions foster the growth of noble and elegant wines with EU-protected designation of origin. You can always spot them by the red-white-red capsule tops, and the official quality wine check number on the label.

austrianwine.com

AUSTRIAN WINE
The Art of Wine. *Down to Earth.*

WINEinMODERATION.eu
Art de Vivre

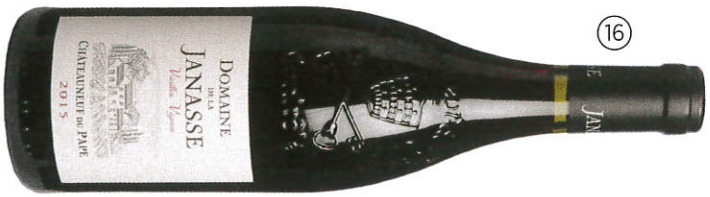
8 **Cazes, Ego, Côtes du Roussillon Villages, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2014** 94
£16.70-£19.99 **Banstead Vintners, Carruthers & Kent, Exel Wines, Liberty Wines**
Powerful, assertive wine – serious and still needs a bit of time to settle despite is age, but the fruit is rich and dense and the tannins and acidity are slowly integrating with the fruit. There is a hint of perfume, with more to come. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

10 **Borie de Maurel, Belle de Nuit, Minervois, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2015** 94
N/A UK **www.boriedemaurel.fr**
Minervois how it's supposed to be! It's a little warm in alcohol (what Minervois usually isn't nowadays), but the mouthwatering floral lift is there, combined with a refreshing stemmy, sappy note, enjoyable strawberry and cherry fruit and some dusty tannins. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 14.5%

12 **Scala Dei, Masdeu, Priorat, Catalonia, Spain 2013** 94
£60 **Codorniu UK**
This starts full of chocolate and orange peel notes but then the tannin slowly begins to assert itself. The fruit stays firm, the tannins wont budge either and the perfume, if anything, unbuttons a bit in the glass. All the elements will keep on jostling for a few years yet. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

14 **A Tribute to Grace, Shake Ridge Ranch, Amador County, Sierra Foothills, California, USA 2014** 93
£70 **Roberson Wine**
This is powerful stuff! Rich, dense, stemmy and sappy, packed with stewed red fruit but seasoned and lifted by refreshing eucalyptus and citrus peel notes. **Drink** 2018-2028 **Alc** 14.5% ➢

15 **Domaine Charvin, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Rhône, France 2015** 93
£35.95 **Corney & Barrow, Jeroboams, Vinetrail**
A reassuringly lighter, more alluring Grenache. Delightful scented, warm red cherry fruit and a dusty tannin undertow and just enough mouthwatering acidity to balance. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 14.5%



16 **Domaine de la Janasse, Vielles Vignes, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Rhône, France 2015** 93
£59.95-£73 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Carruthers & Kent, Enotria & Coe, Exel Wines, Great Western Wine, Wine Source**
A ripe, round style making the best of its 15% alcohol but also benefiting from a slight but attractive feral streak. There's some dusty tannins and a whiff of sweet red fruit and blossom notes too. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 15%

17 **Famille Perrin, Domaine du Clos des Tourelles, Gigondas, Rhône, France 2015** 93
£30.60-£44.17 **Farr Vintners, Laithwaite's, Millésima, Vinum Fine Wines**
Wild stuff, but in an exciting way. This has pushed fruit ripeness to the limit and the dense, textured palate is a mixture of raisins, dark cherry and mountainside scrub. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 15%

18 **Los Cardones, Tigerstone, Salta, Argentina 2015** 93
N/A UK **www.estancialoscardones.com**
Light, fresh and chewy palate that is packed with sappy red fruit and an uplifting floral scent. The structure is from fresh fruit-skin tannins and the rosehip scent lingers on and on. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 14%

19 **Moulin de la Gardette, La Cuvée Ventabren, Gigondas, Rhône, France 2015** 93
£32.50 (2014) **Gauntley's**
A delightful modern Gigondas. It's as ripe as you could wish for and has a positively plush texture, but it has also kept its sweet fresh red fruit flavours with an added intriguing orange perfume. **Drink** 2018-2023 **Alc** 14.5%

20 **Terroir al Límit, Les Manyes, Priorat, Catalonia, Spain 2015** 93
POA **Fine & Rare, Indigo Wine**
Scented, bright and exciting. Surprisingly fresh and lively for a wine that's spent two years in oak. The raspberry fruit is sternly cut with acidity and some chewy tannins, yet it is holding on to some floral scents and the bittersweet delight of orange zest on the finish. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 14%

21 **Ver Sacrum, Barrancas, Maipú, Mendoza, Argentina 2016** 93
N/A UK **grenachista@gmail.com**
Dark rosé in colour - but then Grenache is a pale grape. This is stemmy and sappy, full of cranberry, redcurrant and rosehip fruit and just a little shin-kick of tannin for structure. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 13.5% ➢