

The Magic of Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape

By Hilarie Larson



Winding streets of Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape



The wine world has its share of eponymous regions; so famous, that just the mere murmur of their name evokes a sense of wonder. Chateauneuf-du-Pape is one of those regions.

The rich, bold and sensuous red wines that are created from this parcel of land in the south of France have been renowned for hundreds of years. For those of us who love wine Chateauneuf-du-Pape is practically a place of pilgrimage.

It doesn't matter from which direction you approach the village. Whether it's from the rocky plateaus to the north and the city of Orange, from the east and the medieval town of Courthezon, or from the flowing Rhone River to the west – the omnipresent ruins of the famed chateau acts as a beacon to the wine-lover.

Wine grapes are nothing new to the region. Vines have grown wild here for millennia and some, like Syrah, are now very familiar. The Greeks, who arrived around 600 BC, cultivated these vines and introduced varieties from their homeland.



Big Blend Radio: Hilarie Larson discusses Chateauneuf-du-Pape

The Romans were next, using the Rhone as a main transportation route, expanding the vineyards along its banks. By the 2nd c BC, the entire Rhone Valley was an important wine producing region and continued to be through the Middle Ages and beyond.

Most of the credit for Chateauneuf-du-Pape's fame, however, goes to the Catholic Church, who were the major vineyard owners and winemakers of their time. In the 14th century, the Papal seat was moved from Rome to the city of Avignon. The vineyards of Chateauneuf were close by and, the Papal court soon learned, made fabulous wines.

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Vineyards on the upper plateau of Chateauneuf-du-Pape

Chateauneuf-du-Pape Continued...

Pope Clement V extended the vineyards, and Pope John 12th was so taken with the town that he built his summer home overlooking the vineyards and river, giving the village its name "New Castle of the Pope". 'Vins du Pape' soon became all the rage and sustained this wine-creating village of 1000 inhabitants for centuries. Wines were shipped to Germany, Britain and America, their fame propelled by famous French authors such as Nobel Prize winner and Provençal hero Frederic Mistral, who wrote, "The wine from Chateauneuf brings courage, melody, love and joy."

The growers of Chateauneuf-du-Pape protected the quality and reputation of their wine by establishing a classification system, guaranteeing its authenticity. They were the first in France to do so and in 1935, they were instrumental in the development and implementation of the AOC system (the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée), which is still in place today and replicated throughout the wine world.

So what is it that makes "Chateauneuf", as the locals call it, such a special and unique setting for viticulture? Is it because it's the sunniest place in the Rhone Valley?

Perhaps it's the iconic Mont Ventoux or nearby Dentelles de Montmirail Mountains that shield the vineyards from the mighty Mistral winds? All these contribute to the unique 'terroir', but as you gaze upon the vineyards, the most distinctive feature is the soil.

The Rhone Valley was created during the last Ice Age when glaciers from the Alps began to travel south, grinding and pushing the terrain as they made their way to the Mediterranean. In the southern part of the Rhone, the valley widens, forming plains near the river, graduating to higher plateaus as you move inland.

It's on these plateaus, that you find what many consider the 'signature' of Chateauneuf-du-Pape's terrain: the Galet Roulés. These round, rolled rocks vary in size from small pebbles to well over a foot across. Composed of 'Silice' or Quartzite silica, a substance not local to the area, they were carried by those ancient glaciers, tumbled and rolled all the way from the Alps. Today, they dot the vineyards, ensuring moisture stays in the soil and radiating warmth to the vines.

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The diverse soils support the wide array of sanctioned grape varieties. There are 13 in all and, although Grenache is considered the 'signature' grape, each plays its part to bring balance and harmony, finesse and distinctive character. In Chateaufort-du-Pape, blending is everything.

The reds are brimming with red fruits, pepper, spice, and often, hints of licorice, while the scarce white blends (only 6% of production) are sensuous with stone fruits, and fragrant white blossoms with a balanced, refreshing finish.

While the reputation of the wines is huge, the village is small and approachable. There're a number of winery tasting rooms in town but many are dotted around the appellation and some are still 'by appointment only'. Keep in mind that Chateaufort is part of Provence and almost everyone keeps to the tradition of closing for lunch!

Here are a few suggestions:

Domaine de la Jannasse is located in the stunning medieval village of Courthézon. Isabelle Sabon and her brother Christophe craft wines in the cellar built by their father in 1973.

Delicious choices at Domaine de la Jannasse

All their fruit comes from the estate's 60 parcels producing an array of wines that have garnered great acclaim. Try their 'Vielles Vignes' or 'old vines'; average age 80-100 years. Grown on four different types of soil, "the mix of soils is a tool", according to Isabelle and one they employ with great results.

On the eastern side of town, you'll find the premises of *Roger Sabon*. The surname turns up quite a bit as the family has been in Chateaufort since 1540 and Roger Sabon is truly a family affair. With 16 acres of vineyards, including 'La Crau' on the plateau, winemaker Didier Negron creates wines of elegance and freshness sewn together with more than a touch of passion. Look for 'Les Olivets', 'Cuvée Prestige' (a blend of eight varieties), 'Le Secret des Sabon' and their wonderful white blend.

Domaine Moulin-Tacussel is in the midst of town and has a charming tasting room where you can sample their outstanding wines. They produce two whites, which is a bit unusual for the region, including 'Cuvée Annette', which is 100% Roussanne.

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Tasting room of Domaine Moulin-Tacussel

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One of the 'newer' ventures, *Domaine Durieu* was established in 1970. Brothers François and Paul are emblematic of the new generation of vigneron, creating wines from a variety of local vineyards in addition to Chateaneuf-du-Pape, in a clean, approachable style with a focus on terroir. And their tasting room is gorgeous!

Chateau la Nerthe, on the other hand, is one of the earliest producers and exporters in the region. The vineyards and estate are found southeast of the village and the drive up to the 18th century chateau is spectacular. The tasting room is modern and well worth a visit.



Bernard Castelain Chocolates

Domaine de Beaucastel is most likely one of, if not the most, famous of the wineries in Chateauneuf. Owned and operated by the 5th generation of the Perrin family, the chateau can be traced back to the 16th century. Visits are by appointment only.

If you're looking for a great selection of local wines and foods, stop by *Le Petit Serre Cave de Vignernons*. Here, you can sample a few wines, local olives and 'saucisson' with the delightful proprietors who are always eager to help you fill your picnic basket.

Pay a visit to artisan chocolatier *Bernard Castelain*, just south of the village. This factory store is a treasure trove of confection and they also offer wine and chocolate pairings. Chocolate purists will really enjoy the single origin bars.



Video: 60 Second Spotlight of Chateauneuf-du-Pape

Chateauneuf-du-Pape Continued...

The best way to enjoy the village is by foot. Start at the fountain in the heart of the village, head up Rue Joseph Ducros, past the church, then follow the signs to the steps leading to the ruins of the Pope's Chateau. There's not much left of the structure, but the views across the village, vineyards and out to the river are simply breathtaking. On your return, take any street that catches your fancy. It's hard to get lost as long you head downhill.

Eat & Drink:

Le Pistou (named after the fabulous Provençal version of Pesto) is small and cozy in size but huge in hospitality, service and the quality of its menu. Try whatever they have on special that day and ask 'Madame' for her wine pairing suggestions. You can't lose.

If you just can't make it up to the chateau without a glass of wine, pop in to *Le Verger des Papes*. The views from the terrace are some of the best in the area.

The main 'square', which revolves around the fountain and olive tree, is home to a number of cafés and is the best spot to watch the daily, village life go by. Try *La Part des Anges* for a 'verre du vin' or 'bière pression', grab a table by the street and soak it all in.

Hilarie Larson's passion for wine began in the 1970's while in the European hospitality industry. In 2003 she began her wine career in earnest in her native British Columbia, Canada, working at several Okanagan Valley wineries. Along the way, she acquired her certificate from the Court of Master Sommelier, worked for an international wine broker and as 'Resident Sommelier' for wineries in Washington State and California. Hilarie's greatest joy is spreading the gospel of wine, food and travel. In addition to her own blogs at www.NorthWindsWineConsulting.com, she contributes articles to a number of online publications. She was honored to be awarded the 2013 Emerging Writer Scholarship from the International Food, Wine and Travel Writers Association, for whom she is now the Administrative Director.