

# Name Dropper: Châteauneuf -du-Pape

FANCY, EXPENSIVE BOTTLES ALWAYS IMPRESS PEOPLE, YOU KNOW THE ONES THAT EITHER WEIGH ENOUGH THAT THEY NEED A TEAM OF MULES TO BRING A DOZEN IN FROM THE FRONT DOOR, OR EVEN BETTER ARE THE ONES WITH REGAL LOOKING RAISED KNOBBLY BITS ON THE NECK. THE BEST OF THESE HAVE TO BE BOTTLES FROM CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE IN FRANCE, WHICH CARRY THE PAPAL SEAL RAISED IN GLASS ON THE NECK, CROSSED KEYS OF SAINT PETER AND ALL.

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Châteauneuf-du-Pape is usually translated as the 'New Castle of the Pope' and refers to the period in history when the politics of Pope Clement V saw the seat of Papacy move from Rome to Avignon in 1309. It was during this time when foundations of a real wine industry with regional character began in the area of the Rhône in south-east France. This part of France was to be somewhat in the shadow of its cousins in Bordeaux and Burgundy for some time. However, wine production flourished and for hundreds of years the red wines of the Rhône were often used to 'save' a poor vintage further north by some judicious blending.

Although the growing of vines in the Rhône can be traced back to the days of Roman occupation, it wasn't until the early 1800s that the name Châteauneuf-du-Pape began to appear in wine literature. The famous wine writer of the time, Andre Jullien, mentions the wine by name in his 1816 treatise on wine, but from the description it would seem a much lighter wine than the full-bodied reds we know today. Some say that the Templers originally planted vines in Châteauneuf-du-Pape during the 12th century, but I think I'll leave that to a best-selling paperback that has a secret cellar of wine and a Papal conspiracy!



The title of Châteauneuf-du-Pape on a label is an 'AOC' for wine made near the village of Châteauneuf-du-Pape in the Rhône wine region. AOC stands for 'Appellation d'origine contrôlée', which translates as 'controlled term of origin'. This concept of having wines, cheeses and even butter named after their region or 'hometown' is at the heart of understanding the mystery of much European wine, not least those of France.

Châteauneuf-du-Pape and the neighbouring villages of Sorgues Bédarrides and Courthézon are between Avignon and Orange in the southern part of the Rhône Valley. The vineyards cover slightly more than 3,200 hectares. Over a million cases of wine a year are produced here, which is more than the entire northern Rhône region produces; so there is plenty for us and any Papal requirements!

A characteristic terroir of Châteauneuf-du-Pape has a layer of stones called 'galets' or pebbles. These are sometimes in such abundance that no soil is to be seen and these are the vineyards beloved as evidence that vines will grow in any conditions given an occasional drink of water. The rocks are remnants of Alpine glaciers that have been smoothed over millennia by the Rhône River. The stones retain heat during the day and release it at night, which can have an effect of hastening the ripening of grapes. The stones can also serve as a protective layer to help retain moisture in the soil during the dry summer months. Some of the most prestigious vineyards in the area, like Château Rayas, have more traditional looking vineyards without the galets. These are most often vineyards located on south-facing slopes where the night-time radiated heat from the stones would be detrimental to the vines and cause over ripening of the grapes.

#### THE AUSTRALIAN FRENCH CONNECTION

It's the factor of heat and its effects in the vineyards that are of such interest to Australian drinkers and winemakers alike. This area of France, with its heat, dryness and lean soil, is one that has close parallels to many of the traditional Australian grape growing regions including the Barossa, McLaren Vale and North Central Victoria. So when the early settlers looked to Europe for ideas as to what varieties might work in this new country, many of the Rhône and thus Châteauneuf-du-Pape grapes seemed an obvious choice.

For reds, 13 different grape varieties are allowed under terms of the AOC. Of the red varieties, Grenache, Syrah (or Shiraz as we like to call it here), Mourvèdre, and Cinsaut are the most common, with Grenache the dominant and most sought after. There are also some lesser known reds that go into the 13, such as Cunoise, Terret Noir, Muscardin and Vaccarèse. And if you're thinking these names look strange, just remember that there are thousands of grape varieties in the world, it's only historical accident that we have mainly the French, German and Italian varieties. If we'd been settled by the Greeks in 1788 it could be a very different series of names on the average Aussie wine label.

There are some whites grown in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, although they account for less than 10 per cent of total production, with the varieties of Clairette, Roussanne, Picpoul, Picardan and Bourboulenc, as well as a white form of Grenache, known as Grenache Blanc.

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But it's red wine that dominates both in popularity and in the flavour stakes. The red of Châteauneuf is a really full-bodied creature and again the Australian richness that we see in a lot of our wines resonates here. The Grenache grown in this stony hot county is probably the best in the world. It's high in fruit sugar and has an earthy concentrated flavour with ripe red berry and dark cherries coming through. The Mourvèdre used in the blend is said to give the wine its tannic backbone, which is needed to not only balance the fruit 'sweetness' of the Grenache, but to allow the wines to age.

One of the great Châteauneuf-du-Papes is Clos des Papes, where Paul Avril has headed the Domaine for several decades but is currently in the process of handing full responsibilities to his son Paul-Vincent. Domaine du Vieux Télégraphe, Domaine du Pegau and Château de Beaucastel are also rightly sought after.

It should be no surprise that Châteauneuf-du-Papes are brawny wines, historically high in alcohol. In fact, the appellation requires the highest minimum level of alcohol, 12.5 per cent, of any appellation in France. Yet they wear their strength well. This relatively high alcohol level for France has been part of the controls placed over Châteauneuf-du-Pape since the early 20th century. In the years before and after WWI Châteauneuf-du-Pape was plagued by wine fraud, mainly substitution and flavoring of wines with fruits certainly not of the vine. So rules for the production of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, drawn up by Baron Pierre le Roy and promulgated in 1923, were the first AOC rules in France, and provided the prototype for subsequent AOC rules.

#### THE CHATEAUNEUF-DU-AUSSIE

If you want to see some of the Châteauneuf styles emulated here go no further than the Barossa. There you'll find Grenache and Grenache blends that owe much to the wines of the Rhône, and often at much higher alcohols than 12.5 per cent. One of the best is Charlie Melton's 'Nine Popes', which is Grenache with a backbone of Shiraz in the blend. Now you may be thinking that it should be 'New' Popes if it's like a Châteauneuf, but there's the translation trap for you. When young Charlie wanted to make a wine and pay homage to the reds from that pretty town in southern France he went down to the pub and asked a few learned mates what the Froggy word 'Neuf' meant, knowing what 'Pape' meant. "Nine, you mug!" came the reply from the crew in the front bar; so the wine was christened 'Nine Popes'. By the time someone pointed the error out to Charlie the wine was well on the way to becoming an Aussie classic, and what's a Pope or two between friends anyway. ■