

The Riches and Richness of Châteauneuf-du-Pape

BY JOSH RAYNOLDS | DECEMBER 19, 2019

Châteauneuf-du-Pape fans will find plenty to like from 2017, a vintage marked by consistently warm to hot weather that yielded distinctly rich, fleshy, fruit-driven wines. The growing season presented its share of challenges, and yet the best wines are compelling. Even so, readers need to be selective, as the style of the year is quite particular, and some wines are overdone.



Large, oval wooden foudres have long been the vessel of choice for raising Grenache in Châteauneuf-du-Pape

2017 Brings The Power

As was the case across western Europe, the 2017 growing season started early, on the heels of an abnormally warm winter. That's hard on growers, especially those who work with Grenache, which flowers on the early side and thus is highly vulnerable to spring frosts. Flowering was erratic across the appellation, which set the stage for a smaller-than-normal crop. Shifting weather patterns into April, from warm to cold, tested growers' nerves. Still, the fruit that made it through looked plenty good. But then, in early May, heavy rains and cold weather attacked the vineyards, causing a mass outbreak of *coulure* (grape clusters not forming, also known as "shatter") and crop losses of around 50% across the region. Warm, extremely dry weather arrived in late May and there was no rainfall to speak of until November, which put stress on the vines but also meant that the fruit – what there was of it – was clean, healthy, ripe and of very high quality.

Grenache was, predictably, especially hard-hit by that cold, wet May weather. As a result, many 2017s have a higher percentage of the other permitted varieties in their final blend, especially late-flowering, late-ripening Mourvèdre and Syrah. One might logically presume that the wines would show this in their style, and that is indeed the case. Most of the '17s possess darker fruit character than usual, especially at addresses where Grenache is usually the star of the show. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it does mean that fans of the elegant, red berry and floral style of Châteauneuf are going to have a harder time than usual finding such wines.

Generally speaking, 2017 is shaping up to be a hypothetical blend of the two vintages that preceded it. The wines show lots of the richness of the 2016s along with some of the structure that marks the 2015s. It is unquestionably a high-quality year for the region, and a number of wines that I've tasted can compete with the same producers' 2016s and '15s, if in a somewhat darker guise.



Nighttime at the 14th-century Palais des Papes in Avignon, the de-facto capital of the southern Rhône

2016 And The Pleasure Factor

Over the last year, the 2016s have been putting on weight, believe it or not, and a number of them are actually showing nicely right now, even if their fruit is still leaning heavily to the primary side. As I noted last year, there is less structure to these wines than there is to the 2015s, and while I'd be in no rush to start frantically popping corks on the '16s, I doubt they will enjoy as drawn-out an aging curve as the '15s. That's of little relevance to wine lovers who like their Châteauneufs on the fruit-forward, plush and even exotic style. In 2016 consumers have a wealth of choices, since many of the wines are show-stoppers – sometimes literally, as some flirt with alcohol levels in the 17% range, despite what the labels might say.

That said, 2016 is no 2007, much less a 2003, two vintages that I have heard some people mention in comparison. To me, it compares more favorably with 2009, a vintage that continues to show extremely well, with wines of abundant fruit and soft, rounded textures. Like the 2009s, I will be surprised if the 2016s ever go through an extended closed, much less dumb stage, given their opulent fruit and well-absorbed tannins. I also believe that many of the wines will surprise people with their ageworthiness, as their fruit, while ripe and rich, is seldom jammy or cooked. If the style of 2016 is in your wheelhouse, it is definitely a historic vintage and one to explore in depth.



A portion of Domaine de la Janasse's 2018 vintage resting in their cellar in Courthézon

Looking Ahead To 2018 And Changing Times

I will be taking a deep dive into the 2018 vintage starting in January 2020, with notes to follow much sooner after those tastings than occurred this year, for which I have no small degree of regret. My initial tastings of the unfinished wines have been quite positive, I'm happy to say, as the wines are looking to be something of a stylistic rerun of the 2017s. The vintage is also, unfortunately, a rerun of 2017 in terms of yield and paucity of Grenache. The issue in 2018 wasn't frost or rain, but rampant mildew in July, courtesy of hot, damp weather. Once again, producers have leaned heavily on late-ripening Mourvèdre and Syrah for their blends, and many of the wines, as with 2017, will show darker personalities than usual – or perhaps, given recent weather patterns, this is the new usual.

Because of the ongoing problems that recent vintages have heaped upon Grenache, there is a strong movement in the region toward planting more of the less-common (until now) varieties allowed in the appellation, like Cinsault, Counoise, Terret Noir and even Vaccarèse, which had dwindled to a mere handful of vines by the late 2000s. A few years ago, I began to notice that an increasing number of producers were including white grapes, or increasing their use of them, likely in an effort to mitigate the power of the increased percentages of Mourvèdre and Syrah in their wines. There's little doubt that the general style of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, which in the vast majority of cases is a blended wine, is starting to change here and there, and I'm betting that the pace will only accelerate as growers and winemakers deal with today's agricultural reality. Really big change might not come to pass in our lifetime, but our children will likely experience it if Grenache becomes untenable as the dominant variety in the southern Rhône. Many growers fear that this is happening before our very eyes. Robert F. Kennedy said in 1966, "Like it or not, we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also the most creative of any time in the history of mankind." The times are definitely getting interesting in Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

vinous (92-93) pts

Domaine du Vieux Télégraphe 2017 Châteauneuf-du-Pape Télégramme

Châteauneuf Du Pape, Southern Rhône

Red wine from France

Drinking window:

Deep ruby-red. Intensely perfumed raspberry and cherry aromas open up quickly with air and develop suggestions of candied flowers and baking spices. Stains the palate with intense red fruit preserve flavors that are lifted and sharpened by a smoky element. At once lively and well-concentrated, finishing with solid, fruity thrust, supple tannins and persistent spiciness.

Josh Reynolds, December 2019

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Domaine Du Vieux Télégraphe

Grape/Blend

90% Grenache, 10% Mourvèdre

Release price

\$53.00

Winery/Importer Contact Info

vignoblesbrunier.fr. USA: Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant - kermitlynch.com.

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vinous (94-95) pts

Domaine du Vieux Télégraphe 2017 Châteauneuf-du-Pape La Crau

Châteauneuf Du Pape, Southern Rhône

Red wine from France

Drinking window:

Full shimmering ruby. A complex, highly perfumed bouquet evokes ripe boysenberry, Chambord and Asian spices, and a sexy floral nuance gains strength with air. Sweet and seamless on the palate, displaying a suave blend of power and delicacy to the concentrated red and blue fruit, lavender pastille and spicecake flavors. Shows impressive energy and a mineral quality on the gently tannic, penetrating finish, which hangs on with strong, floral-driven tenacity.

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Domaine Du Vieux Télégraphe

Grape/Blend

65% Grenache, 15% Mourvèdre, 15% Syrah, 5% other permitted varieties

Release price

\$105.00

Winery/Importer Contact Info

vignoblesbrunier.fr. USA: Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant - kermitlynch.com.

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vinous

93_{pts}

**Domaine du Vieux Télégraphe 2016 Châteauneuf-du-Pape
Télégramme**

Châteauneuf Du Pape, Southern Rhône

Red wine from France

Drinking window: 2022 - 2031

Vivid ruby. Mineral-laced red berry preserve, spicecake and floral aromas are complemented by suggestions of smoky minerals and pungent herbs. Juicy, sharply focused raspberry and bitter cherry flavors become deeper and sweeter with air while maintaining energy. Shows very good breadth and thrust on the sweet, red-fruit-dominated finish, which is framed by gentle, slow-building tannins.

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Domaine Du Vieux Télégraphe

Grape/Blend

90% Grenache, 10% Mourvèdre

Release price

\$48.00

Winery/Importer Contact Info

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vinous

95_{pts}

**Domaine du Vieux Télégraphe 2016 Châteauneuf-du-Pape La
Crau**

Châteauneuf Du Pape, Southern Rhône

Red wine from France

Drinking window: 2024 - 2034

Brilliant ruby. Ripe cherry and red berries on the deeply perfumed nose, along with hints of smoky minerals and potpourri. Palate-staining cherry and raspberry liqueur flavors show impressive clarity and depth, and a spine of juicy acidity provides lift and focus. Finishes extremely long and sweet, delivering solid thrust, a hint of candied flowers and suave, harmonious tannins.

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Domaine Du Vieux Télégraphe

Grape/Blend

65% Grenache, 15% Mourvèdre, 15% Syrah, 5% other permitted varieties

Release price

\$90.00

Winery/Importer Contact Info

vignoblesbrunier.fr. USA: Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant - kermitlynch.com.

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