

# Châteauneuf-du-Pape



A Châteauneuf-du-Pape vineyard in winter: looking east towards the Vaucluse uplands

**I**F YOU ASK ANYONE WHO HAS BEEN TO CHATEAUNEUF-DU-Pape to describe the most distinctive feature of the region, they will usually say that it is the large stones covering the soil surface. Although the large, smooth, rounded stones (known as *galets*) are characteristic of the region, the soils are actually quite variable and some vineyards have no stones at all. Others soils are very reminiscent of Coonawarra because the surface is covered in limestone rubble. The stones store heat during the day and re-radiate it at night thus reducing diurnal variation. They also act as a mulch, improve drainage and reduce the risk of soil erosion.

The vineyards of Châteauneuf-du-Pape (Ch-d-P) are found just a few kilometres south of Orange on the east bank of the Rhône river. The topography varies from flat land to gentle slopes at an average altitude of 70 metres. The climate is very

similar to Clare (South Australia) and Bendigo (Victoria) if Gladstones biologically-effective day degrees and sunshine hours indices are used (Gladstones 1992). MJT's of Ch-d-P, Clare and Bendigo are 22.9, 21.3 and 21.0 °C respectively; however, Ch-d-P has approximately twice the growing season rainfall of the Australian locations.

Winegrapes have been grown in this region since Roman times, or even earlier. Two of the greatest Roman monuments in Europe were built in nearby Orange. The theatre dating from the 1st century is particularly well-preserved: it has perfect acoustics and still used for concerts.

How did the region get its distinctive name? Confronted with factional strife in Rome and encouraged by King Philippe of France, Pope Clement IV moved the papal court to Avignon

in 1309. Here it remained until 1377, during which time the magnificent Palais des Papes (palace) was constructed. In addition, a new castle (château neuf) was built to the north of Avignon and vineyards were planted in the locality. Although the well-preserved Palais continues to dominate Avignon today, only ruins of the castle remain in Ch-d-P.

With only 3,000 hectares of vineyards, Ch-d-P is a relatively small appellation by French standards—but many regard it as the most important appellation in the southern Rhône in terms of wine quality, despite great variation in quality from one producer to another. Interestingly, its reputation as a quality producer only dates from the start of this century. Red wine is the main product and less than 10% of the production is white wine.

The appellation control (AC) system had its origins here. In an attempt to protect the region from the fraud and adulteration commonplace at the turn of the century, Baron Le Roy drew up a set of rules for production which was the prototype of the AC system. The rules included the geographic delimitation of the area (land was considered suitable for vines if lavender and thyme could grow on it) and a minimum alcohol of 12.5% without chaptalisation.

Another distinctive characteristic of this appellation is that 13 varieties are permitted to be used. No other appellation in France permits anything like this many varieties for a single wine type: in most cases only up to four are permitted. Why is there such a large number? Is it just tradition or is it that each individual variety contributes something to the complexity of the wine, as some growers (= wine producers) claim? In reality, few chateaux cultivate all 13 and newer vineyards are usually planted to just four or five of the major varieties. Grenache is the dominant variety (up to 80% is permitted). The red varieties

Cinsaut, Mourvèdre and Shiraz (syn. Syrah), and the white varieties Clairette and Piquepoul (syn. Picpoul) are considered to be essential, although the proportions of each can vary considerably from one producer to another. The minor or optional varieties are Muscardin, Vaccarèse, Terret Noir, Cunoise (red) and Bourboulenc, Roussane Picardan (white). White varieties are used in the red wine as well as made into white wine. The percentage of Shiraz has increased in recent times.

In the past, 'blending' before fermentation was quite common: the different varieties were often grown together in mixed plantings and it was impractical to harvest each individual variety separately. In new vineyards, the varieties tend to be grown separately because this facilitates management. As a result, blending is usually carried out after fermentation.

Vines are usually planted on the square, either 1.5 metres × 1.5 metres or 2.0 metres × 2.0 metres. All varieties must be trained as bush vines (*gobelet*) and spur-pruned (4 to 8 two-node spurs per vine). The sole exception is Shiraz which may be trellised and cane pruned: if so, the trellis is a VSP with a single, low fruiting wire. Rootstocks are mainly 110R and 140Ru, with some SO4 on deeper soils. The maximum permitted yield is 35 hL/ha (approximately 5 t/ha). Although the minimum alcohol is 12.5%, some producers seem to aim for 14.5%. Harvest of Grenache normally takes place in late September.

**References**

Gladstones, J.S. (1992) *Viticulture and environment*. Adelaide: Winetitles.

DR PETER DRY is a senior lecturer in the Department of Horticulture, Viticulture and Oenology, The University of Adelaide and is based at the Waite Campus.



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