

DOWN CELLAR BY JIM BRYANT

Chateauneuf-du-Pape

Most wine aficionados are well aware that Robert M. Parker is one of the most influential people in the wine industry. Through his publication, *The Wine Advocate*, he rates various wines on a scale of 50 to 100, and many retailers have a love-hate relationship with him. If Parker rates a wine above 90 points, retailers have a hard time getting the wine, and if it rates 89 or below, they can't sell it.

This leads me to a discussion of one of my favorite wines, Chateauneuf-du-Pape, which is wine from the Southern Rhône Valley in France that has the reputation for being very expensive, but in reality can be found at good prices and represents great value.

Because Parker is a strong advocate for this particular wine (he drinks more of it than any Rhône variety), the price skyrockets because of the increased demand created by the attention given to it. And, if most wine drinkers knew that from the mid-1860s to 1914, great Chateauneuf-du-Pape sold for approximately the same price as first-growth Bordeaux (versus to 10 to 20 percent of first-growth Bordeaux prices today) Chateauneuf-du-Pape would likely be among the world's most undervalued wines. This would drive up the price of these little gems even further. And on top of this, Chateauneuf-du-Pape remains one of the most food-friendly wines available.

But here's the good news: While there are a handful of "cult" Chateauneuf-du-Pape with stratospheric prices, the vast majority of these wines (and some of the best for food pairing) are in the \$40 to \$80 range—just a fraction of classified Bordeaux and cult California and Australian wines.

Fortunately for wine drinkers, all recent vintages (1998–2005) have been of very good to outstanding in quality, which helps to keep prices reasonable. The range of food that pairs well with Chateauneuf-du-Pape



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is extensive. The wine almost always has a hint of pepper, and it marries well with stronger, more flavorful items; classics are lamb and steak *au poivre*. Chicken cooked with spices as well as *coq au vin* also make great partners, especially if the wine is older (5 to 15 years). But perhaps my favorite food with Chateauneuf-du-Pape is ratatouille.

There are many producers of Chateauneuf-du-Pape. By law, up to 13 different grape varieties can comprise the final blend; however, most producers use predominantly Grenache, Mourvèdre, and Syrah. One of the most famous producers (and historically my favorite), Beaucastel, was the only producer that used all 13 varieties. It still does, and several other producers have experimented with the idea as well.

Beaucastel uses a relatively high percentage (30 percent) of Mourvèdre,

which gives the wine a very distinctive aroma and taste. Other favorite producers include Domaine du Pegau, Clos des Papes, Domaine du Caillou, Henri Bonneau, Chateau Rayas, Domaine Pierre Usseglio, Vieux Donjon, and Vieux Telegraph.

These wines are a product of their soil (or lack thereof). The vineyards throughout the region are filled with large smooth stones (galets), which range in size from several ounces to multiple pounds. In fact, there is often no visible soil in these vineyards because the galets are so deep. It's almost impossible to walk in the vineyards under such circumstances. Obviously, the roots strive to reach water, and due to the vineyards' composition and the external heat in the summer (which is retained at night due to the heated stones), roots have been known to reach depths of 40 feet, as I witnessed at Domaine du Cail-

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Alps to the Mediterranean. All in all, the vines (very old in many cases) are very stressed, and as a result, they put forth some of the smallest—and thus, the greatest—fruit for wines. The wines are generally accessible while still young (three to five years), but they improve considerably with 5 to 15 years of age or even longer.

As with all wines from Europe, wine drinkers must be aware of vintage variations, but

with the exception of 2002, all vintages since 1997 have been excellent to outstanding.

Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape is a wonderful place to visit. It is named “New Castle of the Pope,” because the Pope moved the papal residency from Rome to Avignon (30 miles south of Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape) in the 14th century. He made his summer residence at the Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape castle. Today there is no castle to visit, as it is largely in ruins, but the wineries offer pleasant opportunities for visits, and Avignon

is a beautiful, ancient Roman city with deep student roots. If you tire of winery visits and Avignon, the beaches of the Mediterranean are not far away.

I would be remiss if I did not note one of my favorite restaurants, La Beaugraviere, in nearby Mondragon. It is famous for the use of truffles in many of its dishes and for having the world’s largest cellar of Rhône wines. Robert M. Parker often lists it as the source of one of his “meals of the year.” Santé.

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“I am very pleased and excited to offer this opportunity to travelers who have always wanted to visit the spectacular wine and food regions of Italy,” says Bryant. “I have the most unimaginable passion about this region, and this promises to be an amazing gastronomical and viticultural tour.”

The tour has been customized from beginning to end. The starting point is Rome, the Eternal City, where participants will explore the finer parts of the city, history, and culture. The tour continues on to Florence and the Tuscan countryside. Accommodations in the heart of Florence will be close to the Piazza del Duomo, the Piazza della Signoria, and Michelangelo’s statue of David. Travelers will then journey to the Tuscan countryside towns of Siena, Greve, and San Gimignano.

The Tuscan portion of the trip will include a visit to Badia a Coltibuono and its cooking school, restaurant, and vineyard. Travelers will visit Diego Molinari’s winery, La Cerbaiona, and finish the day with a fabulous dinner at the Poggio Antico restaurant in Montalcino.

Moving northward, the journey will continue to the Cinque Terre region of Italy, which is a landmark of the Italian Riviera and is resplendent with scenery and beautiful vistas. “I believe—and many other agree—that Cinque Terre is the most beautiful place on earth,” says Bryant.

The terrain will then turn from rolling hills to steeper inclines, as travelers enter the Piemonte region, one of the finest gastronomic and wine-growing areas of Italy. The stay will be at the Hotel Castello di Sinio, one of the oldest medieval castles in Le Langhe and a Baroque-style residence built in 1142 of stone and massive chestnut timbers.

The Piemonte experience begins with a fabulous dinner at the Trattoria della Posta restaurant before visiting such vineyards as Elio Altare, Mauro Veglio, Gaja, Poderi Aldo Conterno, and others. Participants will also visit Banca del Vino, have lunch at Osteria Vellio and La Contea in Nieve, and dine at the Borgo Antico restaurant.

Continuing north in Piemonte, the final stop on the tour is Turin, home to the 2006 Winter Olympics. This major city offers many fine restaurants, shopping, architecture, and history.

This first-ever Italian Wine and Food Tour with Jim Bryant is expected to fill very quickly. For more information and to make your reservation (deposit required), please contact Travalex International at 847-882-0400, or e-mail billm@excapes.com. U



An up-close view of the terraced vineyards of Cinque Terre. Tour participants will have the opportunity to partake of this region’s most delightful food and wine.

