

WINE COLLECTING 101

Learn about developing a wine budget and game plan, storage and how to find the bottle you want at the best price. 7 p.m. tonight, 3018 Arizona Ave., NW. Cost is \$68; includes a light dinner and wines from a local private cellar. For more information, call 202-344-3700.

CINDY GREENBERG *Vine Gal*

1998 Chateauneuf du Pape: Are we there yet?

The red wines from the renowned appellation of Chateauneuf du Pape (literally “New Home of the Pope”), located in the Côtes du Rhône region of southern France, are legendary for being both fabulous and fickle.

Fabulous because the flavors, depth and complexity these wines are capable of achieving can provide you with one of the most memorable wine experiences you’re likely to have.

Fickle because trying to figure out exactly at what age the wines will provide that experience can drive you nuts.

Chateauneuf du Pape wines — or CdPs as those in the know call them — are absolutely delightful to drink when they’re young, full of bright-red cherry and berry fruit with characteristic notes of cedar and smoke. They can be a bit tannic in the first few years; however, an hour or two in the decanter will usually tame them. But given enough time in the bottle, the wines — made from a combination of up to 13 sanctioned grape varietals, including grenache, syrah and mourvedre — can develop wonderful barnyard aromas (trust me, it’s a good thing) and pronounced, layered flavors of cherry, dried herbs, earth, saddle leather, licorice and pepper. But the most remarkable trait of mature CdPs is its ability to strike a balance between flavor and structure. It is the definition of elegance in a glass.

So, what’s the problem? Well, CdPs, like most teenagers, literal-

ly shut down in their adolescence. Technically, this is referred to as a “dumb” phase and is characterized by muted flavors and shallow depth. The wine just doesn’t taste like much of anything — and even the most devoted oenophiles can be bamboozled. Several years ago, a good friend — call him Jim — opened a highly regarded bottle of 1981 Chateau Beaucastel only to find the wine muted and closed, so he poured it down the drain. Convinced the bottle was flawed, he repeated this procedure with two more bottles until a fellow guest grabbed his arm and wrestled the fourth bottled from his grasp before it, too, was condemned to the sewer. Once Jim was educated as to the errors of his ways, he seriously considered siphoning the wine out of the sink.

Dumb phases are unpredictable, but usually begin five to seven years after bottling and can last a decade or more — so knowing when to drink CdPs can be tricky. You need to either buy a couple of cases of a particular producer and methodically open a bottle every year or so until you deem the wine ready, or you can read a column like this one and know when your wine is ready to hit the starting gate.

Recently, The Vine Guy and I were fortunate enough to be invited over to the home of friends who are serious Rhone collectors to taste through a batch of 1998 CdPs. Here are my favorites. Prices are approximate and, as with older vintages,

you’ll have to hunt around to find these.

1998 Domaine de la Janasse Cuvee Vieilles Vignes, Chateauneuf du Pape, France (\$125)

Great nose with scents of barnyard, cherry and a bit of spice. Some funky cherry notes on the front of the palate, with rich notes of raspberry in the middle and hints of clove on the elegant finish.

1998 Pierre Usseglio Cuvee de mon Aieul, Chateauneuf du Pape, France (\$140)

Smoky scents of black plums and burnt meat fill the nose, but this wine still has a way to go before it comes out of its dumb phase, evidenced by the muted flavors of tar and leather. Give it several more years.

1998 Vieux Telegraph, Chateauneuf du Pape, France (\$75)

Usually one of my favorites, this sensational wine is still dumbed down a bit. Muted nose and flavors remind me that enjoying these wines is not an exact science.

1998 Domaine Pegau, Chateauneuf du Pape, France (\$95)

The aroma of ripe black cherries and barnyard scents were beautiful. The elegant, balanced flavors of sweet cherries, tobacco and cedar lingered on the palate for more than a minute. A great wine for less than the reserve cuvee above.

1998 Chateau Beaucastel, Chateauneuf du Pape, France (\$90)

I think this wine is finally emerging from its dumb phase, as evidenced by the barnyard aroma and the almost port-like nose of sweet cherry. Flavors of baked black cherry and licorice give me hope that its metamorphosis is almost complete.

1998 Domaine Pegau Cuvee Laurence, Chateauneuf du Pape, France (\$175)

My favorite of the tasting, the spectacular scents of sweet black fruits, violets and cedar captivated the nose. Integrated flavors of cherry, kirsch, tobacco, cedar and eucalyptus are supported by smooth tannins and lead to a long, lush finish.

1998 Bois du Boursan Cuvee Felix, Chateauneuf du Pape, France (\$90)

Very big barnyard aromas on the nose make me hesitate for just a second, but my tongue is rewarded with luscious flavors of black cherry, licorice and Asian spices up front and a smooth, smoky finish on the back of the tongue.



1998 Beurenard Boisrenard, Chateauneuf du Pape, France (\$85)

A closed nose led me to believe the wine was still dumb, but the intense flavors of plums, red cherry and mint lead me to believe it is about to mature in the near future.

So, the good news is that these wines are near the end of their adolescence and should be ready to enjoy in the near future. Now, if only my teenager would emerge from his dumb phase soon. ...

Do you have a favorite royalty of wine? E-mail scott@vineguy.com.

