

### The Temperamental Wines of Chateauneuf du Pape



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 the young brut. 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 CDP’s is their 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, literally 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. Dumb phases are unpredictable, but usually begin five to seven years after bottling and can last a decade or more – so knowing exactly when to drink CDPs can be a bit tricky. You need to either buy a couple of cases of a particular producer and methodically open a bottle every year couple of years until you deem the wine ready or you can read reviews to see if others have an opinion on when to safely pop the cork.

Here are my favorites. Prices are approximate and availability for older vintages may be limited.

A wonderfully delicious way to stick your toe in the Southern Rhone pool of wine is with the **2013 Domaine de la Bastide Cotes Du Rhone** from the appellation located just to the north of Chateauneuf du Pape. The hand-picked combination of 40% Shiraz, 40% Grenache, 10% Carignan, 10% Mourvedre is made without oak aging and produces a wine with lower tannins and more fruit on the palate. Scents of cigar box, cedar and dark cherries pretty and fragrant. The mouth is filled with delicious flavors of dark currant, blackberry, dark strawberry, black currant, black cherry, leather, and anise all layered beautifully together on a balanced frame. **\$12**

Another delightful value from a CDP neighbor is the **2012 Alain Jaume Gigondas Terrasses de Montmirail** made from 80% Grenache and 20% Syrah, this wine features smoky raspberry and blackcurrant aromas and beautifully defined red fruit flavors of dark cherries, plums, baking spices and smoky cedar accented with a touch of bitter chocolate. Dusty tannins chime in on the smoke-tinged finish. **\$28**

Heading into the Chateauneuf du Pape region proper, the **2011 Pierre Usseglio Châteauneuf-du-Pape** is an affordable CDP that offers dark cherry fruit, black pepper and minerals on the nose while well-rounded flavors of black cherry, lavender, leather and pepper coat the palate and glide through on the full-bodied finish. Best of all, if you’re patient, you can put this wine away for several years for enjoyment in the future. **\$55**

The **2011 Pegau Châteauneuf-du-Pape Cuvee Reserve** is one of those wines that seems to happily find its way into my glass on special occasions. The aromas of ripe black cherries, tar, leather and cedar are simply beautiful. Flavors of sweet cherry, dark plum, lavender and tobacco are supported on an elegant frame with perfect balance. Black pepper notes persist on the long finish for over thirty seconds. **\$60**

Of course, my perennial favorite is the classic **2011 Beaucastel**. It has 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. I love it now, but can’t wait to try it in a decade when all of the flavors will meld into a more mellow version. **\$70**