

Newsletter

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An opportunity of free accommodation in the pretty village of Uzes just outside Avignon proved too good to pass up this summer. The location justified the adage that the best vineyards are almost always found in areas of considerable natural beauty and historical importance.

As for wine my focus was on finding a great name in Bandol and a top Cotes du Rhone. I had been a big fan of Bandol ever since I bought a parcel of Domaine Tempier many years ago. Having done some due diligence the consensus among the wine writers and critics was that **Chateau de Pibarnon** was perhaps making the best wines, with the added advantage that their style allows for slightly earlier drinking than some of the others. As their red is made from almost 100% mouvedre this is an issue as this grape variety can produce wines of enormous structure and longevity.

The appellation of Bandol is located near the coast between Marseilles and Toulon. Along the seashore are resorts while inland, on the hillsides overlooking the Mediterranean, vineyards have been carved out of the available land. Chateau Pibarnon is the highest and perhaps most extreme of these with its vineyards set in a large south-southeast facing amphitheatre carved out of the hillside. The vineyards provide a stunning sight from the chateau but more importantly the rocky soil and exposure, along with the altitude, seem to give the wines an elegance that producers lower down in the valley cannot match.

I was greeted at the chateau by Maxime Bourret and subsequently joined in the tasting by the current owner, the dapper Eric de Saint Victor. The property was purchased by his parents in 1975 and is very much a family affair.

We started with the Rosé 2008 made from 50% mouvedre and 50% cinsault. The mouvedre provides the colour (several hours of skin contact), while the cinsault provides juice and pulp only. A slow cool fermentation in stainless steel tanks follows the pressing.

The wine showed stony sappy flavours and while quite austere initially it blossoms and grows in the glass. Enough structure to happily last and improve over the next few years.

The reds that I enjoyed the most were the 2005 and 2007. 2005 was a great vintage in southern France, the grapes being harvested by hand in perfect condition at the end of September. The final blend was 90% mouvedre and 10% grenache. Tasting revealed a dark wine packed with fruit and spices. Well structured but silky due to the ripe tannins this is a wine to enjoy over the next twenty years. (Wine Spectator 95 points “This focused red shows concentrated mineral, plum and dark cherry flavours, with tobacco box notes. Lithe yet powerful.”)

2007 was a truly great vintage and the wine showed even more intensity than the 2005 version. Pure and stunning this will be magnificent in a couple of years.

My next stop was the Rhone and more particularly Chateauneuf du Pape. I already represent Domaine de la Janasse there and was keen to find another top producer. One name that kept popping up among the wine writers was **Grand Veneur** and I decided to drive over for a visit. As luck would have it as I started my tasting the winemaker (son of the owner) walked in. Two and a half hours later, having toured all of the domaine's vineyards and tasted through thirty samples from bottle and cask, I had placed an order. In France the appellation is everything, at least as far as what a winery can charge. This was brought home very clearly during my tour of Grand Veneur's vineyards. On one side of a little road cutting through the rocky, head pruned vineyards was Chateau Beaucastel and on the other, immediately adjacent, a vineyard owned by Grand Veneur called 'Les Champauvins'. The former is a great Chateauneuf du Pape and the latter a humble Cotes du Rhone -Villages. The soil, rocks and vines are almost identical but the price that can be fetched, notwithstanding the quality of the wine, is entirely different. I adored the Champauvins 2007 which was full of fruit and garrigue, guaranteed to provide pleasure for years to come (91 points Parker).

I also purchased some of their Chateauneuf du Pape 'Les Origines' 2007. I enjoyed their regular Chateauneuf and admired the most expensive 'Vielle Vignes', but for me Les Origines hit that sweet spot of a superb wine at a sensible price (93-96 points Parker).

At the domaine I tasted through many cuvees of vintages 2005-2008. All showed different characteristics with the 2005 a blend of the red fruit dominated 2006 and the black fruit dominated 2007. At the end of the day the 2007s stood out and I purchased as much as I could afford of what I believe will be recognized as one of the great vintages in the southern Rhone.

On the topic of 2007 I must recommend several other wines which have just arrived. In particular I would mention the Roussillons from **Domaine Gauby**. The white is absolutely stunning, elegant, floral and extraordinarily light on its feet. Also in is the 2007 white Bordeaux from **Chateau du Seuil**. This was a great year for whites in Bordeaux (not so good for reds) and this wine is a lovely example. Not to be forgotten are the brilliant gruner veltliners, Steinsetz 2008 and Renner 2007 (93 points Wine Spectator) from **Schloss Gobelsburg** (Kamptal, Austria).

The schedule of wine events for January – April 2010 is nearing completion and will be out in mid-December, so stay tuned!

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