



2008 Clos Saint-Jean Chateauneuf du Pape la Combe des Fous

A Proprietary Blend Dry Red Table wine from Chateauneuf du Pape, Southern Rhone, Rhone, France

Review by Robert Parker
Wine Advocate # 191 (Oct 2010)
Rating: 94
Drink -
Cost: \$63-\$100

Another shocker in the best sense is the 2008 Chateauneuf du Pape La Combe des Fous. As I wrote last year, this is one of the most complex and concentrated wines of the vintage. An extraordinary perfume of white chocolate, roasted Provencal herbs, lavender, licorice, black cherries and sweet black currants is followed by a broad, expansively flavored wine with a superb full-bodied texture, terrific purity and a 40+ second finish. In fact, the tannins are such that 1-2 years of bottle age may be beneficial. This 2008 should evolve for 15 years. It is almost impossible to believe that something like this could have been achieved in this vintage. Pascal and Vincent Maurel appear to have achieved great success in both 2008 and 2009 (and don't forget they produced three perfect wines in 2007). To say they are on a qualitative hot streak is the understatement of the wine world. This is a large estate of over 100 acres with extensive holdings in some of the finest sectors of Chateauneuf du Pape, especially in La Crau and high on the plateau north of the village. The Maurels had the foresight to bring in the gifted consultant, Philippe Cambie, when they took over in 2002 after their father's passing. 2002 was the worst year in Chateauneuf du Pape since 1932 because of the historic flooding that region experienced. Clos Saint-Jean's first successes were from 2003 when they produced some of the best wines of the vintage. They have followed those successes with wines that are in the top 10-12 Chateauneufs of the vintage every year – no easy task given the young generation that is pushing the qualitative envelope further and further with each new vintage. Everything is made with extraordinary attention to detail and a new winery has been built on the lower slopes of the village, behind Clos du Mont Olivet and Vieux Donjon. They now have the capacity to control temperature and have more space than they did in their old facility at the entrance to the village. A caveat about my comments on the 2009s. These wines had still not completely finished fermentation at the time of my visit. They were under 3 grams per liter of residual sugar, so in that sense they were essentially dry, but they possessed some CO₂. That being said, there is no doubt that Clos Saint-Jean has probably produced the wines of the vintage across the board in 2009. Yields were preposterously low with many of the parcels coming in at 15 hectoliters per hectare or less, which works out to about one ton of fruit per acre – financial suicide! This estate can produce as many as five cuvees of Chateauneuf du Pape in great vintages. Kudos to Pascal and Vincent Maurel as well as their brilliant consultant, Philippe Cambie. Importers: Eric Solomon, European Cellars, Charlotte, NC; tel. (704) 358-1565 and Paul M. Young, Los Angeles, CA; tel. (323) 222-2003

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The dense ruby/purple-colored 2008 Chateauneuf du Pape La Combe des Fous is more structured, firmer, and tannic. One of the more concentrated and ageworthy 2008s I tasted, it should evolve for 10-12+ years, much longer than most of its front end-loaded, fruity, soft peers. (Not yet released) What can I write that will give proper acknowledgment to what has occurred at this extraordinary estate since 2002, when brothers Pascal and Vincent Maurel took control of Clos Saint-Jean, and had the foresight to bring in the gifted wine consultant/oenologist, Philippe Cambie. Their first vintage (2002) was the worst year for Chateauneuf du Pape since 1932, but they survived it to go on a make an incredible succession of wines starting with some of the finest 2003s. Those were followed each vintage with remarkable efforts, ending with what may be the finest 2008s I tasted on my recent trip. This is an old, very large estate (110+ acres) with fabulous old vine holdings throughout the appellation. They possesses vineyards in some of Chateauneuf du Pape's finest areas, including the plateau on the west, the famed La Crau on the east, and some sensational old vine parcels just north of the village. There is considerable history at Clos Saint-Jean, with the first estate-bottled wines being produced in 1910, but Vincent and Pascal's father sold the wines as they were bottled, so frequently the wines were oxidized and tired by the time they were bottled. Now, everything is bottled at the same time, essentially after 12-15 months of aging. The same winemaking philosophy is used for all the cuvees, which are different blends from different parcels. However, Vincent, Pascal, and Philippe Cambie only age their Grenache in tank. The Syrah and Mourvedre are aged in one- and two-year-old demi-muids, and occasionally smaller barrels. With the construction of a new winery in 2009, this estate appears set to have an even more efficient operation, with more space than they had in their old, turn of the century facility. The 2008s have turned out well, primarily because the Maurels waited to achieve full maturity in this challenging vintage. There was lots of culling out of the mildewed grapes as well as enormous labor-intensive efforts at the winery's triage tables. The 2007 tastings prove that if you have been doing this long enough, at some point you will experience a level of profoundness that can still surpass anything done in the last 30+ years. The tasting of the five 2007 cuvees must rank among the greatest single tasting in the southern Rhone I have ever done in 30+ years of wine tasting. Last year (see Issue #179) I sensed something special was happening, and the bottled 2007s confirm that something rare had occurred in the vineyards and cellars of Clos Saint-Jean. Two separate tastings, one week apart, confirmed that Clos St.-Jean's 2007s represent an achievement and level of experience that will forever be difficult to replicate. Importer: Peter Weygandt, Weygandt-Metzler, Unionville, PA; tel. (610) 486-0800
