

# HENRI BONNEAU

## Chateauneuf-du-Pape

If ever two winemakers could honestly be said to have become legends in their own time, then they would be Henri Bonneau and the late Jacques Reynaud (of Château Rayas). As Robert Parker wrote in the second edition of his *Wines of the Rhone*, “It is probably no coincidence that the idiosyncratic Henri Bonneau’s hodgepodge of cellars are located at the *top* of the village of Châteauneuf du Pape. His wine, like that of Rayas, belongs in a class by itself.”

Yet when Parker completed the first edition of his book in 1987, importer Alain Junguenet had yet to introduce him to the reclusive Henri Bonneau and his wines. They were truly obscure and might have remained so. That would have been the wine world’s great loss, because Bonneau would have crafted deep, profound and utterly amazing wines whether or not the world were watching.

Nowadays, every eye and nose is turned on these tiny cellars. Not only has that meant cult status and lines of disappointed supplicants for the thousand case (and smaller) lots of wine generally released by Bonneau, it has also led to confusion in the marketplace. Because few wine merchants or consumers can quite fathom the radical (or is it reactionary?) way in which this man treats his wines.

Not one barrel chez Bonneau is ever going to see the inside of a bottle before its fifth birthday. It will then be sold under one of three names – “Celestin”, “Marie Burrier”, or just plain “Châteauneuf-du-Pape”, representing diminishing prowess. “Which name?” is a question to answer which Bonneau often struggles for the entire five years, sometimes longer. And if he doesn’t think a given wine fits one of these pigeon holes, then he creates a new and mysterious name to go with it!

In his winemaking, Bonneau has done more than any other grower in



the world to set an example of “less is more”. In his approach to harvest – as late and as ripe as possible and damn the risks – he has proven to be a man truly ahead of his time. Nowadays, wine growers the world over talk the talk of “hang to the max” and have the port-like, 15+% alcohol wines to prove it, whether or not they or their customers fall on their faces attempting to walk the walk. The truth is, there ought to be a large placard in Bonneau’s *cave* that reads “Don’t try this in your cellar!” It might not discourage the most determined young growers ... but only those few ever stand a chance of emulating his success.

To understand Bonneau’s wines – insofar as anyone can fathom such mysterious depths – one has to appreciate old, pre-clonal vines and the effect of cropping them at very low levels. Only in this way will resulting wines have sufficient extract to buffer their alcohol, not to mention withstand years in old barrels and then improve for additional decades in bottle.

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“A visit with the wry Henri Bonneau should be counted as one of life’s more memorable encounters. He is one of the most fascinating wine personalities I have ever met. His noted Provençal twang, vicious sense of humor (particularly when aimed at the French government), and encyclopedic knowledge of cuisine are added benefits when one considers just how extraordinary his wines are. In fact, if the question is posed as to what is the quintessential Châteauneuf du Pape at the highest quality level, the answer can only be Henri Bonneau’s Réserve des Célestins.”

**Robert Parker,**

*The Wines of the Rhone*

## Chateauneuf-du-Pape

Variety: *Grenache (old vines)*  
with perhaps a bit of this  
or that vine alongside!

Total acreage: 15 acres

Average production: 1,500 cs.

Vinification details: *Vinification in tank or barrel, followed by aging in old ovals and a mixture of smaller sizes as well. No wines are released before 5 years. Unpumped, unfiltered, un-* ...

Understanding your Bonneau purchasing options: It’s really quite simple. Every so often, Bonneau releases a wine. When and which we never know. It will be expensive. It will be worth the price. If you want some, act quickly! In back issues of Parker or Tanzer, you will find notes on some barrel or barrels which may correspond to the release in question, occasionally even a timely note from bottle. Bonneau is less-than-enamoured with his barrels from 1996 and has repeatedly threatened to sell them all to the negociants. His 1997s – a bad year for Châteauneuf, right? – have already received press raves. But don’t expect an imminent release.

“What marks all [of] Henri’s wines – even in more challenging years – is a superbly tuned balance of constituents. Here is essence of Châteauneuf of remarkable consistency and class.”

**Remington Norman,**

*Rhone Renaissance*