

FRANCOIS PASCAL COTAT COTAT

Loire

Chavignol

Two Cotat brothers, Francis and Paul, set one of the longest-running track records for great wine in all of France, becoming a controversial legend in their own time. And they did this “merely” by following time-honored traditions, long after those had been forsaken by other growers.

I suspect many wine folk first heard of them as I did, through Hugh Johnson's *Modern Encyclopedia of Wine*, where one reads: “totally traditional ... most prestigious ... making only about 1,000 - 1,500 cases ... wooden press ... in cask ... they never fine or filter ... bottle at the full moon ... bottles from the '30s are still in good condition.” If certain reactionary aspects of winemaking no longer strike the reader as quite so *weird* as they did when Johnson wrote those words in the early eighties, that might in part be due to the example the Cotats have set for a younger generation of vintners. That new generation now includes their own sons, Francois and Pascal.

Wine journalists the world over have celebrated Francis and Paul. The young Turks of the Loire like Didier Dagueneau do them homage. Even so, these two make an unlikely pair of modest heroes. Ask them a question about their winemaking methods and you'll get a smile, followed by a lengthy discussion if not an argument ... just between the two of *them!* Don't expect it to be resolved. “Method?” they seem to be trying to tell you, “We've never worried about our *methods*. Do you like the wine?!” Indeed we do, and could we please have some *more?*!

If there are two critical aspects to the *méthode Cotat*, these are late harvest and seemingly utter passivity in the cellar. In good years, Cotat's Sauvignon fruit ripens well past fourteen percent potential alcohol, and is often bottled with some residual sugar left behind. Extreme examples are



segregated and labeled as “cuvée spéciale”. If

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Every label may tell a story, but the Cotats' labels are worthy of a novel!

Until the late nineties, each design proudly proclaimed in large capital letters: “Chavignol”. Certainly the word Sancerre was there, but in much smaller letters, since from the family's viewpoint, the home town was the terroir. This technical violation of French labeling law had overlooked that situation for years. Now, the chagrin of Francis and Paul, the town name has been relegated to small letters.

Around the same time, the legal authorities began poking their noses into Francois Cotat's barrels, supposedly in response to charges that the wines “lack typicity.” This loaded expression turned out – in the case of the 1998 wines – be nothing but a code word for “contains residual sugar”. The I.N.A.O. announced that the wines would be denied the Sancerre appellation. Recently, they denied A.O.C. based on a chaptalization technicality. Somebody may dislike the Cotats, and the wine will sometimes be labeled “vin de pays”. Their customers – including us – will love it no less for that!

Sancerre

Varieties: Sauvignon, Pinot Noir
Combined acreage: only 10 acres
Average production: 2,000 cases
Vinification: consult text at left

Sancerre bottlings of Francois Cotat:

Reserve des Monts Damnés

Les Culs de Beaujeu

La Grande Côte

Rosé

Rouge

Sancerre bottlings of Pascal Cotat:

Reserve des Monts Damnés

Les Culs de Beaujeu

La Grande Côte

La Grande Côte

Rosé

Many years, one or more bottles will bear the label “Cuvée Spéciale” to indicate a special selection of late-harvested fruit. The site with which such a bottling is most frequently associated is the Grande Côte.

“This tiny estate produces unfiltered, legendary Sancerres that are known for their extraordinary longevity. Cotat has made so many superb wines ...”

Robert Parker, The Wine Advocate
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“... they don't hesitate to export nearly the whole lot of their wine to the U.S. (and with what success!). ... don't despair ... savour these loveliest expressions of Sancerre terroir as befits them, from the wine list of select restaurants ...” [!]

Bettane & Desseauve

Le Classement 1998

THE COTATS *cont.*

ever there were living testimony to the oft-avowed adage: “let nothing in the grapes at harvest be lost” an occasional preserved fly in the bottle will testify to the complete lack of cellar “treatments” at this address.

Many of the blackened, sometimes warped barrels in the cellar were first used by the family around the turn of the century! Even the look of the bottle is old-fashioned. After corking each one entirely by hand, it is sealed by a dip in colored wax.

The “Mont Damnés” is the steepest, chalkiest site in Sancerre and the Cotats rendition is usually their brightest and stiffest wine, is such bottlings which the family will trot out at mealtime in twenty or more year-old, gloriously fresh editions. Their complexity, richness and length steal your breath away.

The steep, chalky Mont Damnés is traditionally considered the greatest terroir in the town of Chavignol. That the Cotats wine from this site has frequently sold for a bit less reflects their perception that these old vines don't give quite as much depth as the truly ancient vines in other parcels! Mont Damnés is characteristically redolent of citrus, currants and gooseberry, with a strikingly chalky in aftertaste.

As their vines in “Culs de Beaujeu” (referring to the “beautiful buttocks” of hills depicted on the label) matured, the Cotats realized that perhaps *this* vineyard after all, with its frequent variations on red fruit, nectarine, melon and nut oil flavors “may in fact be our best site.”

And then there is the fruit of their oldest vines in the “Grande Cote”, for which they still usually charge a premium. This is usually the most exotically ripe, sensual, occasionally downright gaudy wine in the cellar. Tropical fruits and nut oils are common components. But there is still a *cantus firmus* of chalky terroir.

Oh ... and pinot, a grape which in fact pre-dates Sauvignon in these parts. From this, Cotats bottle a masterful rosé. Blindfolded - and I have tried this trick on numerous occasions - it is often possible to identify this wine as Sancerre ... without realizing that one's glass holds Pinot and not Sauvignon! That is an experiment useful in convincing folks of the efficacy of terroir. There is also sometimes serious ... *very* serious red wine. A „78 I drank with them at twenty years age would have put 98% of „78 Burgundy to shame.

Francois and Pascal? I'm getting to that! In the nineties, the French legal authorities came down on Francis and Paul for operating out of a single facility and bottling one set of cuvées when in fact the tax code maintained their separate identity. Paul lived at the winery, whereas Francis lived in the nearby town of Sancerre. Paul's son Francois was already actively working with his father and uncle, whereas Francis son Pascal ran his own thriving business in Sancerre, doing specialty body work and old restoring automobiles. So Francis erected a rudimentary cellar to house his share of the wine and, much to the chagrin of us customers, turned the marketing over to a group of investors from the Caymen Islands!

Happily, the Caymen Island deal was short lived, and Pascal himself started to get the “wine itch”. Facilities were established on the lower floor of the auto business, and in 1999, the Domaine Pascal Cotat was off and running. Meantime, Francois officially took over from his dad. So now, have our old share of wine back, but we have two talented and ambitious young vintners, each looking to remain true to, yet inevitably personalizing, a great winemaking tradition.

Loire

“,0 n n'a pas le droit mais on le prend.” (We don't have the right but we take it) is the unofficial motto of this domain which makes very special, cult Sancerres: big, magnificent, Rhône-like Sancerres; Sancerres bought by Pompidou; Sancerres that M. Bally of shoe fame comes to collect in a truck.

Don't have the right to what, precisely? Well, first Sancerre gets distinctly smaller billing than Chavignol on the label because, INAO be damned, the Cotats believe that, as Chavignol was once more famous than Sancerre, they were cheated out of their rightful appellation.

Then, is it dry or is it sweet? Mostly it is dry ... But you never know ...

And who, exactly, is the winemaker here? Time was when Francis and Paul worked together, Now they each have their own labels, as does [Paul's son] Francois.”

**Jacqueline Friedrich,
Wine and Food Guide to the Loire**