



CHATEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE



## Overview:

Burgundy meets the Rhone. An utter respect for tradition, and in some ways a total break. We've watched as Mounir and Rotem Saouma, of Burgundy producer Lucien Le Moine, slowly developed their estate and wines in Chateauneuf-du-Pape, and the results today are too extraordinary and distinct to ignore.

Let's start at the beginning: 5 acres in Pignan. A sale was being conducted through the French state that presented the opportunity to buy a somewhat neglected parcel adjoining some outstanding plots (notably Rayas' Bois de Rayas and the Pignan lieu dit). The Saoumas have long loved the area and its wines, have many friends, and saw they could potentially acquire land in a way that would not be possible in Burgundy.

The sheer vitality of these vines today is extraordinary. We know and love Mounir Saouma because of the way he transmits both unknown and acknowledged great crus of Burgundy through his elevage into masterpieces, but it turns out he may be an even more talented vineyard manager. Mounir's philosophy is in theory straightforward. He has worked to improve drainage in his vineyards, works with organic manures, and doesn't mind the low yields he is getting in his plots. As is the case with most things in life, simplicity appears only after deliberation and experience.

From this plot Mounir has been able to acquire additional vineyards, and today farms a total of 21 acres across 8 vineyards in all 5 villages of the appellation (Chateauneuf-du-Pape, Bedarrides, Sorgues, Courthezon and Orange). The kaleidoscope of the terroirs he works with is reflected in the cellar, as well, where a combination of barrels, foudres, cement, and eggs are used, all except the last of which can be considered "traditional" within the diversity of Chateauneuf's viticultural history. The fruit is pressed firmly with small presses dating from the late 1970s, left in tank to macerate at relatively cool temperatures for 8 days, and then transferred to the various vessels. The wines are never punched down, never racked, and never sulfured until a light addition a month before bottling. They age for between 24-36 months, including the white, which as you might expect has an outsized focus here.

The wines are stunning: precise, intense, complex, expressive visions of Chateauneuf. They somehow speak to the past, but also to the present (and we would guess, the future), all in their own voice.



## Châteauneuf-du-Pape's New Paradigm

Mounir Saouma's Châteauneuf-du-Pape cuvées are unlike anything else out there

- James Molesworth

<https://www.winespectator.com/blogs/show/id/55171>

The last time I caught up with Mounir Saouma in Châteauneuf, he was taking over a parcel of vines in the Pignan lieu-dit that wasn't doing well. One in three vines were dead and the vigneron had his work cut out for him.

I could barely recognize the parcel when I saw it again. Full of life, completely filled in and looking remarkably homogenous and balanced (the existing vines at the time of the purchase were recently planted, so the age gap between those and Saouma's planting is only a few years).

"When you grow vines in Burgundy, everything else is easy," says Saouma with a laugh, referring to his Lucien Le Moine brand farther north. "There there's maybe [4 inches] of soil. Here, I can go down [3 feet] deep when I plant a vine. It's a joke, it's so easy!" he says in a warm-hearted way.

Indeed the depth of soil matters, but so does Saouma's efforts. As for the coulure that hit hard this early season, Saouma is hedging his bets by letting the second-generation clusters stay on the vines. Normally these clusters, often two weeks behind the development of the first generation, would be green harvested as they would struggle to ripen.

"But look at them," says Saouma. "Even though they formed two weeks behind the first ones, they don't look that far behind. "Plus, the first generation clusters are so light, the vines will probably have the energy to ripen both. We'll pick the first ones probably a touch overripe, and these will have that much better acidity. We can try to find balance that way, and make up for the crop loss of the coulure."

This domaine, which now totals 21 acres in Châteauneuf and an additional 22 acres in Côtes du Rhône-Villages, is creating a new paradigm for wine, a statement I don't make lightly. Saouma's techniques are atypical; the results are simply thrilling. The reds are sublime, offering a purity of fruit I have rarely seen anywhere, while harnessing the power of Châteauneuf into an elegant expression of Grenache on sandy soils.

"People say my Châteauneuf is Burgundy style," says Saouma. "Yes, it's a different style. But it's not Burgundy style. They say that because they don't have a reference."

He says this not with boastful pride, but rather a thoughtful, intellectual approach, adding, "Different doesn't mean better. I'm not saying my wines are better, I'm just saying I do things differently. Beaucastel makes wines in a different way from me and I love their wines," he says.

Saouma's right. I don't have a reference for his wines either, other than that I've been tasting Châteauneuf in the region for 15 vintages now. I've never seen a unique style executed to such precision. I'd say that's the definition of a new paradigm.

The reds are fermented as whole clusters, with a third of the grapes crushed. No SO<sub>2</sub> is added and the grapes go directly into vat for a seven- to nine-day cold maceration, with no punch-down or pumping-over. The fermentation starts naturally with the cap lightly washed a few times to keep it from drying out. After ferment, the must is pressed directly into aging vessels for the *élevage*, during which no sulphur is added. As the wine sits on its fine lees, they are eventually digested, and only a light sulphuring is done two months prior to the bottling.

At first glance, the low sulphur is a recipe for disaster, with volatile acidity, oxidation or brett likely to rear their heads.

"Yes, I am taking a risk, a big risk," says Saouma. "But if you are going to take risks, you have to guard against them. I top off every week. Every seven days," he emphasizes. "Other vigneronns might top off every two weeks or once a month. And natural winemakers rarely top off. Eighty percent of oxygen exchange in wood is through the bung—only 20 percent through the oak. This way the wine is protected and it can nourish itself off the lees."

The 2016 Châteauneuf Omnia will be aged for 24 months before bottling. It shows stunning kirsch and cherry compote flavors with a gorgeous floral hint and a bright mineral finish. The 2016 Châteauneuf Arioso is pure Grenache just from the Pignan lieu-dit, and it receives 36 months of *élevage* before bottling. The cassis core is dark and dense, but electric in feel, almost pulsating through its beguiling, incense-filled finish. The 2016 Châteauneuf Petit Livre takes free-run juice from the Arioso vat and is aged in a single demi-muid for 60 months prior to bottling. It has unbridled plum and blackberry flavors, with a *pâte de fruit* intensity but live-wire acidity. The finish is a blaze of fruit, silky tannins and fine minerality. It just zooms through, with riveting energy, yet shows terrific clarity, as if it were in stop-motion at the same time. It's a thoroughly mind-boggling wine.

We tasted through multiple vintages of each *cuvée*, including the Petit Livre back to 2012, which still sits in demi-muid. But the 2016s capture the essence of what has shaped up—over a week's-plus worth of barrel tastings—into one of the finest young vintages I have tasted. It's a perfect storm here, matching vintage quality to a vigneron who's about to become a lot better known. Even Saouma seems to realize things like this don't happen often. "2016 is something totally new. We don't have words for it yet. There is something unusual between the color and the tannins," he says. "When you pour the wine and see the color, it's so dark. But then the wine is so fresh, the tannins so integrated. We don't know why, but it's doing its thing."

Maouna is doing his thing too. And it's unlike anything I've seen here before.

## Omnia 2016

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Mounir Saouma likes to describe Chateauneuf-du-Pape as a mosaic, with all the wild traditions and differences together making for very different interpretations. Omnia, Latin for “all,” is his attempt to encompass the entire region’s terroir and winemaking history (and perhaps future) in one glass. The fruit comes from 9 vineyard parcels across all 5 of the Chateauneuf communes, Chateauneuf-du-Pape, Courthezon, Sorgues, Bedarrides and Orange (in early vintages, when the Saoumas did not have all the vineyards they have today, they would purchase fruit; today, Rotem & Mounir Saouma is 100% Estate). The wine is then vinified and aged in foudres, cement and 500 liter barrels – a little bit of everything.

The aging is as Mounir ages his Burgundies: extremely long, never racked, no fining, no filtration. It would be easy to say that we expected the experience running one of Burgundy’s leading producers, Lucien Le Moine, would show in Mounir’s wines. But the actual results need to be tasted to be believed and understood: a wine with beguiling fruit and savory richness, yet extraordinary finesse and detail.

### **Vineyard**

From his original plot of 5 acres in Pignan, Mounir has been able to acquire additional vineyards, and today farms a total of 21 acres across 9 vineyards in all 5 villages of the appellation.

### **Winemaking**

The wine is 80% Grenache, 10% Syrah, and 10% Mourvedre. The fruit is pressed firmly with small presses dating from the late 1970s, left in tank to macerate at relatively cool temperatures for 8 days, and then transferred to various vessels. The kaleidoscope of the terroirs he works with is reflected in the cellar, as well, where a combination of barrels,

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foudres, cement, and even eggs are used, all except the last of which can be considered “traditional” within the diversity of Chateauneuf’s viticultural history. The wines are never punched down, never racked, and only receive minimal sulfur after 18 months.

*“This is sublime, with beguiling rooibos tea, blood orange and sandalwood aromas out front followed by a long and silky display of lightly mulled cherry, damson plum and raspberry fruit flavors. Light shiso leaf and sanguine notes lace up the finish while the fruit echoes admirably.”*

**2015: 96 Points Wine Spectator**

## Arioso 2014

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Mounir Saouma’s story in the Chateauneuf-du-Pape started with a state sale of a small plot in Pignan, one of the most famous vineyard areas of Chateauneuf-du-Pape. Within this first vineyard acquisition, Mounir has one plot of 100% Grenache planted in the 1930s which yields naturally at a miniscule 1 ton per acre. From these vines he produces Arioso.

In the northeast of the appellation facing “the giant of Provence”, the massive Mont Ventoux mountain”, Pignan’s exposure brings freshness to the natural high ripeness achieved in this area. The rocky and sandy soils of this original plot add a sense of elegance. When you start tasting you understand why some have compared his wines to the great Rayas wines of the 1980s or, perhaps as expected given Mounir’s renown as owner and winemaker of Lucien Le Moine, to Burgundy. The sheer density of the low yielding, old vines dances with the freshness and elegance provided by the site. On the label is aptly explained: “Arioso is a style of opera somewhere between an aria and a recital. We chose this name for our wine because it is evocative of both the ethereal and profound”.

### **Vineyard**

The small 100% plot of Grenache Noir planted in the 1930s produces bunches that have very few and small grapes, and are widely spaced. The yields are dramatically low as a result, but the grapes are very healthy due to the spacing, and the concentration from the low vigour and the age of the vines is intense.

### **Winemaking**

The wine vinifies with whole clusters after an 11 day cold maceration, and then spends 3 years in 228 and 500 liter barrels, never racked or sulfured.



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*“When Rotem and Mounir Saouma aren’t working in Beaune at Lucien LeMoine, their micro-negociant firm, they are in Châteauneuf, tending the 21 acres of vines they’ve acquired since arriving in 2006. The attraction wasn’t only affordable land; it was also grenache, a variety they find compelling. Arioso is an ode to the variety, pulled from the first parcel they purchased, a north-facing plot in Pignan planted in 1942. They treat the fruit gently, using ambient yeasts and no pump-overs or punch-downs, for three to four weeks, then let it sit in 500-liter barrels with all the lees for 36 months. The wine sings, the flavors jewel-toned in their clarity and precision, etched by the fine acidity. “Red wine in a white dress,” one taster said, remarking on its elegance. If you open it now, decant it a few hours before serving; otherwise age it for another five to ten years.”*

**96 Points Wine Spectator**

*“Alluring, with blood orange, raspberry and bergamot notes that glide through on silky but persistent tannins, while black tea, dried anise and incense notes weave in and around them. A refined mineral echo pierces the otherwise very seductive finish, making for an intriguing contrast. An impressive effort for the vintage.”*

**95 Points Wine Spectator**

# Magis 2016

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Another unsurprising but jawdropping discovery when encountering the Saouma wines: Magis, Mounir's white Chateauneuf from the heavily limestone Pierredon vineyard in Bedarrides. It makes sense that a producer of great white Burgundy would quickly become enchanted by the possibilities here. Only 3% of Chateauneuf is white, and virtually all of it is bottled after 6 months. Mounir's chateauneuf is aged 18-24 months and has already been compared to some of the great white Burgundy crus for its depth and minerality.

## Vineyards

From the first little bottling of white that Mounir did, he became more intent on buying and in fact planting vineyards to produce white Chateauenuf. This wine has been in the past fully from the heavily limestone Pierredon vineyard in Bedarrides, but additional plots in Courthezon have been planted.

## Winemaking

After a hard pressing into new 500 liter barrels, fermentation takes place, and the wine remains undisturbed for a minimum of 18-24 monts, never pushed down, racked and never sulfured. Composition is 75% Grenache Blanc, 10% Clairette, 10% Roussanne and 5% Bourboulenc.

*"A beauty, with singed macadamia nut, brioche and hazelnut hints leading the way for a mix of creamed Jonagold apple, white peach, persimmon and Cavaillon melon flavors. A buried spine of chamomile and jasmine keeps everything focused while extending through the very long and beguiling finish. Grenache Blanc, Bourboulenc, Clairette and Roussanne."*

**97 Points Wine Spectator**

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**2015: 97 Points Wine Spectator**

*“Light brilliant yellow. A highly perfumed bouquet evokes mineral-accented pear nectar, orange gelato, iodine and mineral scents, along with a deeper suggestion of honey. Impressively energetic, sharply focused citrus and orchard fruit and floral flavors stain the palate while showing zero fat. A sexy floral nuance emerges steadily as the wine opens up, along with hints of toasted brioche and green almond. Wonderfully concentrated yet nervy; the ridiculously long, focused finish features lingering floral and mineral qualities. This is one of the most impressive bottles of Rhône white wine that I can recall, from the north or the south, and I’d have no qualms about setting it up alongside the best from Burgundy.”*

**2015: 96 Points Vinous Media**