

## PREMIUM

## Walls: Cunoise spreads its wings

One of the Rhône's lesser known grape varieties is seeing a revival not just in its native region, but also much further afield. Matt Walls explores how more and more winemakers might be calling on Cunoise in a changing climate.



Matt Walls

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Ben Brenner and Matt Nagy of Benevolent Neglect, Napa.

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Scroll down to see tasting notes and scores for four pure Cunoise wines to seek out

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## Rhône origins

Before 1990, Cunoise was found only in the south of France, almost entirely in the southern Rhône, where it has been grown for centuries.

Cunoise plantings in the southern Rhône make up just 142ha, so less than 0.5% of the total vineyard area. But interest is increasing once again – thanks to some of the characteristics that originally made it unpopular.

Jean-Etienne Alary, of Domaine Alary in **Cairanne**, is one of the few Rhône producers to bottle a pure Cunoise. ‘I really like Cunoise, which is also called Pinot de la Vallée du Rhône, as it produces fine and elegant wines; light in colour, with fruity but also spicy aromatics like white pepper, and a tobacco side I really enjoy,’ says Alary.

Cunoise might produce elegant wines, but it’s a difficult variety to work with, as it’s susceptible to powdery mildew, grey rot and esca. It’s also a late-maturing variety, so in cold years it can be difficult to fully ripen the grapes.

Because of this – and also because of its low alcohol content and very pale colour – it was abandoned in the 1970s. But today, ‘it’s really interesting to have some Cunoise as we are looking for finesse, lightness and freshness,’ says Alary.

Jean-Marc Autran, of Domaine de Piaugier in Sablet, also makes a pure Cunoise. His father originally planted it for its low alcohol levels and high acidity: a useful counterpoint to Grenache.

These characteristics are becoming increasingly attractive in a **warming climate**, which is why he thinks more and more winemakers are planting Cunoise, even if overall volumes remain small.

Other Cunoise fans in the Rhône include Domaine de la Solitude in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, **Domaine Richaud** in Cairanne, Domaine de la Monardière in Vacqueyras, **Domaine La Ferme St-Martin** in Beaumes de Venise, Château de Manissy in **Tavel**, **Mas de Libian** in the Ardèche, and Domaine Jean David in Séguret.

## The Beaucastel connection

Autran says he was inspired to produce a pure Cunoise after tasting the Cunoise of **Château de Beaucastel** in **Châteauneuf-du-Pape**. For its classic Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Cunoise is the fourth largest component at 10% of the blend, after Mourvèdre (30%), Grenache (30%) and Syrah (15%).

A little while ago, César Perrin sent me bottles of his Mourvèdre, Syrah and Cunoise blending components for the 2020 vintage to compare. It was instructive for me too.



Mourvèdre, Cunoise and Syrah blending components of Château de Beaucastel. Credit: Matt Walls.

The Mourvèdre was the most complete wine, delivering great amplitude and generosity of flavour, compared to the fat and concentration of Grenache.

The Syrah was the metal rebar, the tensile core. It was straight and focused, more tannic and directional, and will increase the wine's longevity and future complexity.

The Cunoise wasn't terribly distinctive aromatically; I found it spicy rather than peppery, with a note of cigar tobacco and a touch of violet to its bright black cherry fruit. This component was deliciously drinkable and approachable, with discrete tannins and good acidity. It delivered fluidity, freshness and moderate alcohol – valuable traits in any modern Châteauneuf blend.

## Further afield

Tablas Creek in **Paso Robles**, part-owned by the Perrin family, was the first domaine to grow Cunoise in the US. Importing it in 1990, plantings have since spread as far as Washington State. A brief online search turned up an impressive 15 pure examples, mostly from around the Central Coast.

Benevolent Neglect in **Napa** has featured a pure Cunoise in its range since 2015. Winemaker Matt Nagy points out that 'the Old World has hundreds of years of tradition but it's much more rigid. We can do whatever we want.'

All the pure French Cunoise I've encountered to date has undergone traditional vinification, but approaches in the US vary. Some, such as Keep Wines, opt for **carbonic maceration**. Benevolent Neglect chooses traditional vinification for its low alcohol, chillable red, but it also makes a Cunoise rosado. For Nagy, 'it's a shapeshifter of a grape, it fits a lot of styles.'

And according to Nagy, it's well-adapted to their **increasingly challenging climate**. 'It's drought tolerant, it's used to hot weather and poor soils... and you can adapt on the fly to the climate conditions you have.'

Ben Brenner is another co-owner of Benevolent Neglect, and he says 'in Napa, everybody makes a **Cabernet** or a **Chardonnay**, but they're not really all that different in the end.'

Nagy agrees, 'it's rare in 2022 to have a grape we're still figuring out,' he says.

'We've found a little community of really cool winemakers also making Counoise,' says Brenner – so many that they're planning a Counoise festival at their tasting room in downtown Napa this winter.

Compared to the famous names of Napa, Counoise is still very much a niche grape. 'We always joke that the future is Counoise,' says Brenner.

But as many wine regions are being forced to **adapt to an increasingly hot, dry climate**, Counoise is a grape that winemakers around the world are taking more seriously.

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## Matt's tasting notes and scores for four pure Counoise wines



### Benevolent Neglect, Counoise, North Coast, California 2019

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Pure black cherry with some dusky tobacco notes over the top. There's a lovely sense of purity and clarity to the aromas. Light-bodied and fresh, with a light dusting of fine tannin and balanced acidity. This really shows the potential that this grape has for a light-bodied...

Points 93

### Domaine de Piaugier, Ténébi, Côtes du Rhône Villages Séguret, Rhône 2020

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Showing a good deep colour for a Counoise. Fresh and vibrant blackberry and black cherry. There's a gentle sweetness to the fruit here, and it works well. Quite tannic and grippy, with an enjoyable slick of smooth, concentrated black fruit. The high alcohol stated on the label – 15% –...



Points 91



## Keep Wines, David Girard Vineyard Counoise, Sierra Foothills, California 2019

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Slightly reductive nose, spicy and flinty with a touch of thyme. Light-bodied, with bright acidity and very discrete, wet-clay tannins. This is really fresh and energetic, smashable cherry juice. It's a difficult wine to score, as it was delicious when poured directly after...

Points 91



## Domaine Jean David, Tapatara, Vin de France, Rhône 2019

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Light- to medium-bodied, it's quite extracted but still quite light in body. Perfumed black cherry and blackberry, this is very drinkable but still has good weight of fruit, tannin and acidity. It's remarkably dark and tannic for a Counoise, in fact, and would be good with a lean piece of...

Points 89



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