

RAPHAËL Géniestet
HUTCHINSON

PELTON



FRENCH ISS. 55

CHÂTEAUNEUF- DU-PAPE

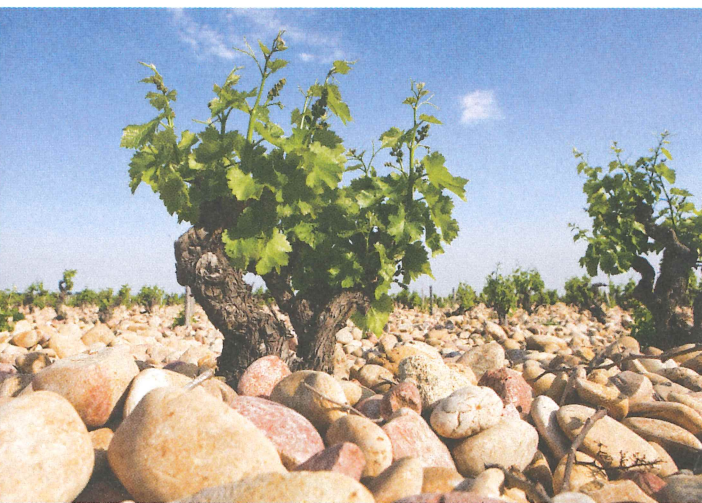
Words: Clive Pursehouse

On Thursday, July 14, the Tour de France peloton will commemorate the storming of the Bastille as the climbers storm the flanks of the Giant of Provence, the incomparable Mont Ventoux. At 1,912 meters (6,273 feet) elevation, Ventoux's white limestone mass looms over Provence to the south and the Rhône Valley to the west. This mountain has long been the litmus test for Tour champions. A place of triumphs and tragedy, the "Bald Mountain" has come to be known as the toughest climb in all of France and

has seen both tragedy and triumph. It was here in 1967 that British cycling great Tom Simpson died tragically on the road. Its summit has also been the scene for victories from some of the sport's greatest legends: Gaul, Poulidor, Merckx, Thévenet and Pantani. In 2013, the last time Ventoux hosted a Tour stage finish, it was Froome's day.

Conquering Ventoux is a test of persistence. The peak is also an accounting of the persistence of Mother Nature. The mountain is a UNESCO World Heritage site: La Réserve de Biosphère du Mont Ventoux. While Ventoux is a legend for the cruelty it inflicts upon the peloton, its greatest contribution to the world is actually as a safe haven for upward of 60 species of rare trees and thousands of species of plant life. Mont Ventoux is home to more than 100 species of birds and vulnerable species of all kinds, including the Orsini viper. Also on Ventoux are butterflies and spiders that cannot be found anywhere else in the world.

Some 50 kilometers to the southwest of the Giant of Provence sits the gem of the southern Rhône Valley: the village of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The mountain still dominates the horizon at this distance, partly because its bleached peak and upper flanks make Ventoux look snowcapped even in the heat of summer. The vineyards of this revered French village—the country's first appellation d'origine contrôlée—are remarkable



for their stony soils, littered with quartzite stones, many just as rocky as those scree slopes on Ventoux. Large fields of round river rocks, or galets roulés, mark the region's vineyards.

The geological dynamism of southern France formed both that daunting peak and the picturesque valley of the Rhône. Plate tectonics forced a limestone seabed skyward, consequently creating both Mont Ventoux and a depression in the Rhône Valley that would be plowed over and flooded by glaciers and Ice Age floods over the millennia. These famous stones were dragged and deposited here from the Alps as glaciers receded.

The region's winemaking origins are ancient, dating back two millennia to the Romans. Châteauneuf-du-Pape had long produced unremarkable wines. When the Papacy relocated from Rome to nearby Avignon in the 14th century, Châteauneuf-du-Pape—which translates to “the Pope's New Castle”—benefited greatly from the Holy See's interest in quality wine production and vineyard practices. Pope John XII directed the building of a castle and the planting of vineyards in 1317—making the most famous of Châteauneuf's established vineyards among some of Europe's oldest. Thinking that Avignon would remain the headquarters for the Papacy, there was a substantial, albeit selfish, investment placed into improving the region's wines.

The seat of the Pope eventually returned to Rome and while the esteem and prestige of Châteauneuf-du-Pape waned, its reputation for quality wines continued to develop and its vineyards continued to flourish. By the early-1800s some of the region's individual producers had begun to develop a strong reputation for their wines. One such producer, whose reputation remains at the forefront of the region today, is Château La Nerthe. While it's hard to nail down with much precision, it's quite possible that Château La Nerthe is Châteauneuf-du-Pape's oldest wine estate.

Regional archives mention the wines of Château La Nerthe as early as 1560, but there's a strong likelihood the estate is even older. While La Nerthe has changed ownership a few times,

it's one of the village's original named estates. Château La Nerthe's beautiful chateau dates to 1736 and it was in that time period that the estate really made a name for itself—and Châteauneuf-du-Pape. La Nerthe was among the region's first estates to bottle its own wines and its owner, the Marquis Tulle de Villefranche, pioneered exporting wine from Châteauneuf-du-Pape beyond French borders. As a result the chateau's reputation, as well as that of its wines, rose to the top of the region. In the 1800s, the wines of Château La Nerthe were the most sought after and highly priced in the southern Rhône Valley.

The estate currently sits on 225 contiguous acres within the heart of Châteauneuf-du-Pape and is among the region's largest vineyards, planted mostly with the area's signature grape, grenache. The Mediterranean climate makes for warm growing seasons and, typically, wines with plenty of ripeness. The soil throughout the vineyard at La Nerthe is spectacularly rocky and a classic reflection of the famous galets roulés. These stones are said to contribute minerality to the taste of the wines, as well as to the ripeness of the fruit, absorbing the sun's heat during the day and releasing it into the roots in the evening. It's this element of these rocky soils that's credited with making the wines of Châteauneuf-du-Pape so rich, powerful and unique.



Image: Futura Sunada



Château La Nerthe's Christophe Bristiel, who once rode a city bike to the top of Mont Ventoux, believes in the region as one that crafts wine of consistent quality given their unique terroir, or sense of place, and those special stones. "Châteauneuf-du-Pape's reputation puts it on par with the great wine-growing regions of the world," he said, "but unlike recent developments in Bordeaux and Burgundy, not to mention Napa Valley, the prices here have remained reasonable, offering terrific value-for-money for wine lovers who are serious about their wines. Nevertheless what drives many new wine drinkers to Châteauneuf-du-Pape is the wine's generosity, smoothness of tannins and fruit expression. Young Bordeaux blends can be rather angular and astringent whereas navigating the intricacies of Burgundy can be daunting—and costly—for anyone starting to develop an interest for red wine."

Châteauneuf-du-Pape offers wines that are straightforward without being simple, as well as signatures of this village and its long commitment to quality.

2012 Château La Nerthe, Châteauneuf-du-Pape Rouge

A blend of grenache, syrah and lesser amounts of mourvèdre and cinsault, this is a robust, rich and powerful red wine. The aromatics are dominated by black fruit and sweet clove spices, along with streaks of crushed stone. The palate is lush and full with powerful flavors of black cherry and dried figs, and it has a fine tannin structure. Four years old, the wine remains quite youthful and boisterous but it hints at serious longevity and aging potential. **\$63**

2004 Château La Nerthe, Châteauneuf-du-Pape Rouge

This wine is a testament to the potential shown in the younger bottling. Twelve years old, the wine offers elegant aromatics and a lighter hue than its youthful counterpart. The aromas have evolved to evoke more minerality as

well as dried violets and turned earth. The acidity is more pronounced and the freshness of the wine has come to the fore. The palate remains a core of dark fruit, although time in the bottle has further pronounced the minerality and an herbal, almost garrigue element. **\$N/A**

2014 Château La Nerthe, Châteauneuf-du-Pape Blanc

As the red wines of Châteauneuf-du-Pape are dominated by grenache, so the white wines are driven by the white grenache variety. This grenache blanc-based white is bright and fresh and elegant. It's a wine that flies in the face of what you often find in southern Rhône white wines, which can far too often be described as flabby and phenolic. The white blend offers a wine with extraordinary balance and freshness. Aromas of white flowers, crushed stone and peach skin introduce a palate of honey, wet stone, chamomile and lush ripe stone fruit. **\$63** **55**

