



Wine Times

DARREN MCCABE OFFERS HIS
WEEKLY WINE RECOMMENDATIONS
(@DMC_UNCORKED)



Domaine de Cousignac

Côtes du Rhône: Beyond the bottle part two **Unearthing wine, wonder, and the heart of the Rhône**

The sun rises over the vineyards of southern France, scattering gold across a landscape steeped in centuries of viticultural tradition. As we continue our journey through the Côte du Rhône, we delve deeper into the region's enchanting terroir, unearthing not only exceptional wines but also the stories, people, and natural marvels that make this corner of France so captivating.

The Spirit of Côte du Rhône

Cradled between sun-drenched hills and the serpentine embrace of the Rhône River, the Côte du Rhône is one of France's most storied wine regions.

Stretching from Vienne in the north to Avignon in the south, this area boasts a patchwork of soils, microclimates, and grape varieties that have, for generations, inspired winemakers to bottle not just wine, but a sense of place.

Yet, as with all great French appellations, the Côte du Rhône is nuanced. Three tiers define its wines:

Côtes du Rhône AOC: The broadest category, covering wines produced across the region.

These are approachable, expressive, and often represent superb value—a vibrant introduction to the Rhône's bounty.

Côtes du Rhône Villages AOC: A step up in both terroir and quality, these wines hail from specific villages permitted to append their name to the label.

Here, character and complexity deepen, often reflecting the microclimates and traditions of their origin.

Rhône Crus: The highest distinction, reserved for select villages and vineyards considered the jewels of the region—names like Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Hermitage, and Gigondas. Crus are singular, iconic, and often collector-worthy, encapsulating the very soul of Rhône viticulture.

DAY THREE

Immersion in terroir, history, and gastronomy

Domaine de Panery: A Journey into Luxury and Artisanal Excellence

Nestled in the heart of the Côtes du Rhône region, Domaine de Panery is more than just a destination—it's an experience that blends luxury, nature, and culture in perfect harmony. Panéry, a former bread farm, turned vineyard in the late 19th century and was acquired by Jacqueline Ginon in 2017.

During my recent visit, I had the pleasure of meeting Fabien Revol, CMO, whose passion and vision breathe life into this extraordinary estate. He describes this place as 'rural chic'.

From the moment you arrive, you're enveloped in a world where organic olive oils and wines are crafted with care and authenticity. The estate's commitment to sustainability and artisanal production is evident in every detail - from the sun-kissed olive groves to the meticulously tended vineyards.

But Domaine de Panery is not just about produce; it's a celebration of hospitality, art, and gastronomy. The architecture and interiors reflect a refined elegance, while the culinary offerings showcase the richness of the region with a modern twist.

Art installations and curated spaces invite reflection and inspiration, making the estate a haven for both the senses and the soul.

There are around 15 rooms on offer for those who wish to stay overnight, each room is unique, decorated with contemporary objects and artworks, particularly those by Claude Viallat.

There's an outdoor pool, gym and the opportunity to have a relaxing massage. The restaurant's menu showcases fresh and trendy contemporary cuisine, prioritising local producers and seasonal ingredients. It offers an experience of flavours and aromas true to the Gard region, complemented by olive oils and wines produced on the estate, which were certified organic in 2023.

Over lunch we were treated to a range of wines and my favourite was the 2024 vintage of La Garuste, AOP Côtes-du-Rhône. A beautifully expressive rosé crafted from Syrah and Grenache grapes. This wine delights with its vibrant freshness and aromatic complexity, offering delicate notes that linger on the palate. Its mineral character brings elegance and a refreshing finish - an ideal companion for warm days and lazy lunches.

In partnership with the Ceysson-Bénétière gallery, the estate hosts contemporary artists in residence and organises music concerts, outdoor film screenings, creating a lively place, breathing the joy of life in the heart of nature.

This is a place where tradition meets innovation, and where every element - from the soil to the table - is infused with purpose and beauty. Domaine de Panery is a true gem of the Rhône Valley, and one I hope to see flourish as a beacon of luxury and conscious living. I absolutely fell in love with this place, and did not want to leave, so much so my suitcase was laden with their wines and olive oils on the way back to the UK.



(Above) Panéry pool and (below) Fabian Revol.



Domaine de Cousignac: A Symphony of Wine and Rustic Charm

During my travels through the Rhône Valley, I discovered a truly distinctive gem - Domaine de Cousignac.

This isn't just a vineyard; it's a place where music and winemaking entwine, creating an experience that's as soulful as it is sensory.

At the heart of the estate is a philosophy that wine should be felt, not just tasted. The winemaker, Raphaël Pommier, has pioneered a fascinating approach: playing music during the fermentation process. Each vintage is paired with a specific musical composition, chosen to influence the wine's development. It's a poetic and scientific blend - where sound vibrations are believed to subtly shape the character of the wine. Whether it's jazz, classical, or something more experimental, the music becomes part of the wine's story. This creative process reflects the spirit of the estate - innovative, expressive, and deeply rooted in nature. The wines themselves are organic, crafted with care and respect for the land. You can taste the authenticity in every glass. During our outdoor tasting Raphaël encouraged me to play the suggested music pairing through my iPhone so we could enjoy the full experience. Equally memorable is the accommodation. Set in a charming, rustic farmhouse surrounded by vineyards, the rooms are warm and inviting, with touches that reflect the musical soul of the estate. It's the kind of place where you wake up to birdsong, sip wine under the stars, and feel completely connected to the rhythm of rural life.

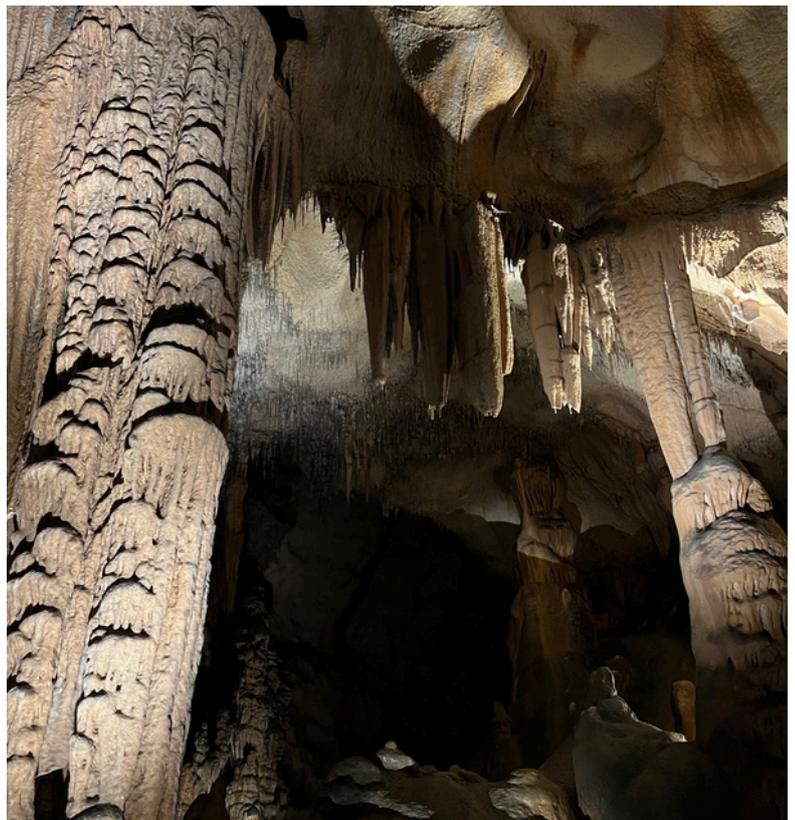
From Panery, we journeyed to Domaine de Cousignac, a beacon of organic viticulture perched atop the Ardèche hills. Here, the Pommier family crafts wines that radiate honesty. Their approach: minimal intervention, maximum expression. In every glass, the land speaks— flinty whites, supple reds, and a rosé that seems to capture the very essence of Provençal summer. Our tasting was punctuated with laughter and stories, the winemaker's passion as vivid as the landscape itself. It's a reminder that great wine is, ultimately, about people - those who coax beauty from the earth and share it with open arms.



(Above) Raphaël Pommier and Darren McCabe; (below) Grotte St Marcel.

Grotte Saint Marcel – Where Nature and Wine Collide

The afternoon brought a subterranean adventure to Grotte Saint Marcel, a vast limestone cave system whose cool darkness once sheltered ancient humans - and now, barrels of aging wine. Descending into the depths, stalactites glittering above, we sampled wines matured in this unique environment. The cave's microclimate imparts a gentle roundness, a whisper of minerality that distinguishes these cuvées from their sun-drenched peers. It's an experience that blurs the line between geology and oenology, leaving you with a sense of awe at the interplay between nature and nurture.



Dinner at Le Goût du Jour – A Culinary Conversation

Evening descended upon Le Goût du Jour, where a symphony of regional flavours awaited. Our hosts: Bruno Descamps of Xavier Vignon and Leonie Walle from Château Gigognan. Over course after course – each plate a testament to Rhône's bounty – we explored their wines in the company of the very people who shaped them.

Laughter mingled with the clinking of glasses, as we unravelled the philosophy behind each bottle. Discussions ranged from blending traditions to new sustainability initiatives, and the night was punctuated by revelations: how a single parcel, or even a single vintage, can capture the weather, the soil, the ineffable spirit of the Rhône.

Château Gigognan is a historic estate that blends centuries-old winemaking tradition with modern organic practices. Spanning 110 hectares of vines, olive groves, and parasol pines, the château is a serene haven shaped by a terroir of rounded pebbles and Roman heritage.

The estate produces red, white, and rosé wines across four prestigious appellations: Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Signargues, Côtes-du-Rhône Villages, and Côtes-du-Rhône.

All wines are vinified, aged, and bottled on-site, reflecting both the character of the vintage and the estate's commitment to organic viticulture.

Beyond the cellar, Château Gigognan offers a full immersion into Provençal life. Guests can stay in beautifully restored 18th-century rooms or rent the château itself for private events. The estate also features winegrowers' holiday homes, ideal for longer stays with panoramic views of the vines. Visitors are invited to explore the vineyard on foot or by bicycle, enjoy guided tastings, and even picnic among the vines. The estate's eco-grazing initiative, using sheep to manage weeds, is just one example of its sustainable ethos. My favourite wine was their Côtes-du-Rhône Villages Bois Des Moines, made with a blend old vine Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre, this is an intense red full of blueberries and blackcurrant – a classy and complex red.

Xavier Vignon started making wine as a hobby, and it was only when his friends sent his wine to critics which then won awards that he decided to take this forward as a serious contender. A visit to Xavier Vignon's tasting room is a journey into the heart of the southern Rhône. The estate is nestled among the picturesque landscapes of Beaumes-de-Venise and the Dentelles de Montmirail, surrounded by rolling vineyards and dramatic limestone hills.

Guests are welcomed into a relaxed, contemporary space where the focus is on sharing and discovery. Tastings typically showcase a wide range of wines – from fresh, mineral-driven whites and rosés to powerful reds from prestigious appellation. The experience is informal yet deeply informative, with staff eager to share stories about the vineyards, the art of blending, and Xavier's passion for innovation. Visitors can expect to sample limited releases and special cuvées, often accompanied by local cheeses or charcuterie.

Again, blown away by their wines I have since had a delivery of Arcane La Justice 2020 from Vinitas so I can continue to enjoy at home. It's a striking Côtes du Rhône blend that embodies both power and harmony. Crafted primarily from Grenache and Syrah, it's so expressive, offering layers of black fruit, subtle floral notes, and a hint of spice. It's generous and concentrated, yet remarkably supple, with velvety tannins and a lingering, mineral-driven finish.



(Above) Leonie Walle, Darren and Bruno Descamps; (below) La Gour Du Jour.



DAY FOUR

Adventure, Picnic, and the Art of Slow Enjoyment

Domaine Fontaine du Clos: A Wine Safari Through the Heart of Viticulture

Set against the dramatic backdrop of the Dentelles de Montmirail and Mont Ventoux, Domaine Fontaine du Clos offers a wine experience unlike any other.

My visit to this remarkable estate was not just a tasting - it was a journey through the very roots of winemaking, both literally and figuratively.

The adventure began with a Land Rover safari, a rugged yet refined way to explore the sprawling vineyards and vine nursery.

As we bounced along the dusty paths, the landscape unfolded in layers - rows of vines, mother plants, and grafted varieties, each with its own story.

Our guide shared insights into the estate's role as one of France's key vine nurseries, where over 50 grape varieties are cultivated.

This nursery is more than a technical operation; it's the foundation of future vintages, ensuring resilience, diversity, and quality in vineyards across the region.

Learning about the grafting process and the history of rootstocks - especially their importance in combating phylloxera - gave me a deeper appreciation for the science behind the glass. It's easy to forget that every bottle begins with a decision made years before, in the soil and in the nursery.

The tour culminated in a tasting session right in the vineyards, we sampled a selection of the estate's wines - elegant reds, crisp whites, and a few surprises - paired with local delicacies like goat cheese and charcuterie. It was a moment of connection: to the land, to the craft, and to the people who make it all happen.

Domaine Fontaine du Clos is not just a winery - it's a living classroom, a celebration of terroir, and a testament to the passion behind every bottle. If you're looking for an experience that blends education, adventure, and indulgence, this wine safari is unforgettable.





(Above) L'Odylée, and (below) Darren and Odile.



Picnic at Domaine de l'Odylée – Lunch Among the Vines

No journey would be complete without a picnic, and ours was hosted by the gracious Odile Couvert at Domaine de l'Odylée. Tucked away in the tranquil countryside of Violès, Domaine de l'Odylée offers a refined yet relaxed retreat for those seeking to immerse themselves in the rhythm of Provençal life. This is not just a vineyard - it's a place where hospitality, nature, and wine come together in harmony.

From the moment you arrive, the estate welcomes you with its elegant Provençal architecture and sweeping views over the vines. The property is home to beautifully restored houses - the Bastide and the Mas - each with its own character and charm. These accommodations are available for exclusive rental, making them ideal for family gatherings, private getaways, or even corporate retreats.

The interiors blend rustic authenticity with modern comfort: think stone walls, wooden beams, and sunlit rooms furnished with thoughtful touches. Outside, you'll find swimming pools, olive trees, and shaded terraces, perfect for unwinding with a glass of wine and the sound of cicadas in the background.

Visitors are invited to explore the vineyard and learn about the estate's winemaking philosophy. Guided tours offer insight into the terroir and the techniques behind their AOP Côtes du Rhône wines, followed by tastings that showcase the estate's elegant and expressive cuvées.

Amidst rows of sun-warmed vines, we dined al fresco, the meal a tapestry of local cheeses, charcuterie, and just-picked produce. Odile's wines - elegant, expressive, and brimming with life - made the perfect companions. Here, time slowed. We savoured every bite, every story, every view, and felt, perhaps, just a little closer to what makes the Côte du Rhône so enduringly magical.

Conclusion: Beyond the Bottle

As our journey through the Côte du Rhône draws to a close, it's clear that the region's true riches lie not only in its wines, but in its people, its food, its landscapes, and the reverence for tradition that pulses through every glass.

From the bold innovation at the luxurious Domaine de Panery and Fontaine du Clos, to the deep-rooted sincerity at Domaine de Cousignac and the heartfelt hospitality of Odile Couvert, every encounter has been a reminder: the Côte du Rhône is a region to be experienced, savoured, and celebrated in all its complexity.