

Focus Varietal: Counoise

Perhaps the question we hear most frequently at wine events and in our tasting room is “Counoise? What on earth is Counoise?” Even the *Wall Street Journal* joked about Counoise’s obscurity in a recent article about blends. Yet the grape is a key component of many Châteauneuf-du-Pape wines, and comprises 10% of the Beaucastel Rouge.

Early History

The precise origin of Counoise (pronounced “Coon-wahz”) is unknown. According to the great Provençal poet Frederic Mistral, it was introduced into Châteauneuf-du-Pape from Spain by a papal officer, who offered it to Pope Urban V when the papacy was based in Avignon in the mid-14th century.

Counoise was planted in the vineyards of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and was given a prominent place in the wines of the celebrated *Château la Nerthe* estate of Commandant Ducos in the late 19th century. Ducos was a student of the characteristics of various grape varieties, and played a key role in the development of the Châteauneuf-du-Pape region. When the Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée laws regulating (among other things) each region’s permitted grape varieties were passed in the 1930s, the varieties planted by Ducos (including Counoise) comprised 11 of the 13 allowed Châteauneuf-du-Pape varieties.

The varietal saw a similar rebirth at Château de Beaucastel when, in the mid 1900s, Jacques Perrin increased the planting of Counoise as a complement for Syrah. Its moderate alcohol and tannins, combined with relatively high acidity, good fruit and aromatics, balance Syrah’s characteristic intense spice, strong tannins, and high alcohol.

Counoise at Tablas Creek

We brought Counoise cuttings from Château de Beaucastel in 1990 and they spent three years in USDA inspection. Once the vines cleared quarantine, we began the process of multiplying and grafting, and we currently have 5 acres planted. The grape is particularly suited to the geography of Tablas Creek, as it produces most reliably



in stony hillside soils and reliable sun. It is easy to graft, is moderately vigorous, and ripens fairly late in the cycle.

We knew that we wanted to list the individual varieties on the front label of our bottles beginning in 1999. Before we could do that, though, we had to get past the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms -- the federal agency which, until the reorganization mandated by the Homeland

Security Act, oversaw label approval for wine. Since no one else in the States had used Counoise on their label, it fell to us to demonstrate it was a legitimate grape. The process, which included submitting a full dossier of materials (in French and English), took two years. Now Counoise is a fully registered (if not widely recognized!) grape varietal.

Flavors and Aromas

Counoise is a pretty garnet color, and has a rich, spicy character, with flavors of anise, strawberries, and blueberries, good acids and soft tannins. In certain years we bottle a small amount of varietal Counoise; our first single varietal release was the 2002 vintage. The 2005 Counoise is currently available in limited quantities through the Tablas Creek VINSider wine club.

Counoise comprises 5-10% of our *Esprit de Beaucastel* blend and 10-15% of our *Côtes de Tablas* blend. In both wines, it helps open up the more closed varieties of Mourvèdre and Syrah. Its soft tannins and forward fruit rounds out the blend and provides an element of finesse to the final product. 🍷