

# Focus Varietal: Mourvèdre

**M**ourvèdre (more-vehd-ruh), with its meaty richness and wonderful longevity, forms the backbone of our *Esprit de Beaucastel*. Seventeen acres of our vineyard are devoted to Mourvèdre, representing over a third of our red Châteauneuf-du-Pape varieties.

## Early History

Mourvèdre is native to Spain, where it is known as Monastrell and is second only to Grenache (Garnacha) in importance. From the Spanish town of Murviedro, near Valencia, Mourvèdre was brought to Provence in the late Middle Ages where, prior to the *phylloxera* invasion at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was the dominant varietal.

The *phylloxera* invasion was particularly devastating to Mourvèdre. Whereas most of the other Rhône varieties were easily matched with compatible rootstocks, Mourvèdre proved difficult to graft with the existing *phylloxera*-resistant rootstock. Thus, when the vineyards were replanted, most producers in Châteauneuf-du-Pape chose to replant with varieties that were easier to graft, such as Grenache. For decades, Mourvèdre was found almost exclusively in the sandy (and *phylloxera*-free) soil of Bandol, on the French Mediterranean coast, where it is bottled both as a red wine (blended with Grenache and Cinsault) and as a dry rosé. Compatible rootstocks for Mourvèdre were developed only after World War II. Shortly thereafter, Jacques Perrin of Château de Beaucastel led regeneration efforts in Châteauneuf-du-Pape and made Mourvèdre a primary grape in the red Beaucastel wines. Since the late 1960s, total plantings in Southern France have increased dramatically.

Mourvèdre came to the New World as Mataro (a name taken from a town near

Barcelona where the varietal was grown in the mid to late 1800s. In Australia, it found a home in the Barossa Valley and in California it was first established in Contra Costa County. Until recently, the grape was rarely bottled by itself, and was instead generally used as a component of field blends. The increasing popularity and prestige of Rhône varieties and a return to the French



Mourvèdre name has given the varietal a new life. Currently about 400 acres are planted in California.

## Mourvèdre at Tablas Creek

Mourvèdre is a late-ripening varietal that flourishes with hot summer temperatures. As such, it is beautifully suited to our southern Rhône-like climate at Tablas Creek, where its lateness in ripening makes it less vulnerable to late spring frosts. In the vineyard, Mourvèdre is a

moderately vigorous varietal that does not require a great deal of extra care. The vines tend to grow vertically, making Mourvèdre an ideal candidate for head-pruning (the method traditional to Châteauneuf-du-Pape), although vines can also be successfully trellised. When head-pruned, the weight of the ripening grapes pulls the vines down like the spokes of an umbrella, providing the ripening bunches with ideal sun exposure.

Our Mourvèdre vines (like all of the vines at Tablas Creek) are cuttings from Château de Beaucastel's French vines. Although Mourvèdre was available in California when we began our project, we felt that the American source material was less intense in both color and flavor than the French clones. The berries from the Beaucastel clones are small and sweet, with thick skins and intense flavors.

## Flavors and Aromas

Wines made from Mourvèdre are intensely colored, rich and velvety with aromas of leather, game, and truffles. They tend to be high in alcohol and tannin when young, and are well-suited to aging. The animal, game-like flavors present in young Mourvèdres resolve into aromas of forest floor and leather with aging. Although it is occasionally bottled as a single varietal, the intense animal quality of Mourvèdre is often improved by the warmth and fruit of Grenache and the structure, spice and tannin of Syrah. Mourvèdre-based wines, like our *Esprit de Beaucastel* and *Panoplie*, pair well with grilled and roasted meats, root vegetables, mushrooms and dark fowl such as duck: flavors that harmonize with the earthiness of the wine.