

Soil Hunters

THE PERRIN FAMILY DIGS DEEP INTO THE SOUTHERN RHÔNE

By MITCH FRANK Photographs by JON WYAND

VINSOBRES IS ONE OF THE LAST VILLAGES IN FRANCE'S SOUTHERN RHÔNE REGION BEFORE the valley narrows and the Northern Rhône begins. It's a beautiful, rugged place, isolated and sleepy, with rolling hills dotted with vines, olive trees and oaks used for growing truffles. • It's also perfect cycling country, which is how the region's most ambitious winemaking family found prime vineyards here. "We all ride bicycles, my father especially," says Marc Perrin, whose father, Jean-Pierre, is the oldest member of the winemaking team at Famille Perrin. "Cycling is a fabulous way to discover *terroir*. You smell, you see, you hear, you feel the wind,



Brothers Pierre (left) and Marc Perrin are avid cyclists who have discovered several prime vineyards in the Southern Rhône while on two wheels. The Perrin family are experts on the region's terrain.

you feel the slopes. When you drive you don't feel anything."

Marc, 41, is walking on a hillside planted with old gnarled vines reaching up like grasping hands from ground that's littered with stones. "We didn't know Vinsobres 10 years ago," he says. "Cycling here, my father said, 'This is a nice place. It's cooler, it's windy, it has more altitude. It might be a good *terroir* for Syrah.'"

From the spot where he's standing, Marc can see all the way down the valley. The snowy summit of Mont Ventoux and the jagged ridge of peaks above Gigondas are visible. Toward the southern end sits the town of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, topped by the ruins of the castle that once housed the pope. Beyond that lies the Mediterranean.

Thanks to their cycling reconnaissance and to plenty of hard work in their vineyards, the Perrins know this valley better than anyone. Over the past century, they have built what may be the Southern Rhône's most impressive wine company, thanks to their no-nonsense focus on making good wine from good land.

Since 1909, they have protected and improved Château de Beaucastel, one of the best *terroirs* in Châteauneuf. "The Perrin family is an institution in Châteauneuf-du-Pape," says Philippe Cambie, the area's leading consulting enologist. "And, along with Château Rayas and Henri Bonneau, they are ambassadors of the appellation across the globe. They lead the way."

Yet their work in Châteauneuf was only the beginning of their success. In the past 40 years, the Perrins have built the négociant La Vieille Ferme into a highly profitable brand that offers good quality for a great price, and in 1989, they even branched out to California, helping establish Tablas Creek in Paso Robles. But their most ambitious expansion has been their label Perrin & Fils. Since 1997, they have quietly bought and developed hundreds of acres of vineyards in the Southern Rhône's best spots.

Today the Perrins produce 700,000 cases of wine a year from more than a dozen appellations for their various brands. And yet they are not slick or corporate. They are shrewd marketers, but they are also down-to-earth, no-nonsense people who love their region and enjoy making good wine. "What is very important about us is that we really are a family company," says Marc. "Not just a family of shareholders, but a family that really runs a company."

WHEN THE MISTRAL IS BLOWING, THE Southern Rhône can seem a savage place. For more than 100 days a year, the legendary wind tumbles down from the Alps into the funnel of the lower Rhône Valley, rushing past the vineyards on its way to the sea, sometimes at more than 60 miles per hour. Though the climate is Mediterranean, nourishing olive trees and cypresses, the wind has helped shape a rugged terrain, parts of which, like Vinsobres, look like the American Mountain West.

The wind and the landscape have also sculpted a rugged people who are fiercely independent. France could not officially claim Châteauneuf and the surrounding region until 1791; the area was a papal fief. Even today, many residents see the government in Paris as an unwanted intrusion.

The Perrins fit that individualist mold. Despite their growth in the past few decades, they have no shareholders or financial directors to answer to. Their corporate "board" is made up of family members. Management consists of Jean-Pierre, 67, and his brother



François, 57, as well as Jean-Pierre's sons Marc, Pierre, 39, and Thomas, 37, and daughter Cecile, 27, and François' sons Charles, 32, and Mathieu, 30. They divide the work evenly, and all play a role in the winemaking.

The mistral is blowing now, and Marc is standing at the other end of the valley, in Beaucastel's 173-acre vineyard, discussing what sets the Southern Rhône apart from other regions. People speak of the Rhône Valley, but that's a geographical construct.



The Perrin family outside Gigondas: (standing left to right) François, Cecile, Jean-Pierre and Pierre; (kneeling) Marc; (sitting) Mathieu, Charles and Thomas.

“There is as much difference between Northern Rhône and Southern Rhône as there is between Northern Rhône and Burgundy,” he says. “The north is continental, the south is Mediterranean. The north is butter, the south is olive oil.”

All he has to do to prove the difference is point to the ground. In the north, the soil sits on top a layer of granite. Here, it’s a mélange of sand, clay and limestone. Beaucastel’s vineyards, flatter than those of Vinsobres, are striking—a vast field of round white

stones, planted with gnarled old freestanding vines, trained in the traditional goblet style. The vineyard lies at the northern edge of the Châteauneuf appellation, in an old riverbed, with the stones placed by the Rhône itself. The river changed course repeatedly over millions of years, depositing sand, clay and rocks carried down from the Alps as the mountain chain was forming. A layer of limestone lies four feet below the stones, formed when the Mediterranean covered the region 60 million years ago.



Marguerite Perrin, mother of Jean-Pierre and François, stands in front of Beaucastel's coat of arms. She still lives at Château de Beaucastel, the estate her late husband modernized.

Beaucastel is the Perrin's prestige estate. Historical records show that a man named Pierre de Beaucastel owned the property in 1687, when Louis XIV named him a noble. Wine was made and sold at what was known as Domaine de Beaucastel since at least the early 1800s. But phylloxera arrived in Châteauneuf in the 1860s, and what had been a booming wine region, with 1,700 acres of vineyards, shrank to less than 500 acres in a decade. Grafting to American vine rootstocks saved the area, but many vigneron were already ruined. Replanting was expensive, and wealthy newcomers began buying up properties on the cheap.

An olive merchant named Pierre Tramier purchased Beaucastel in 1909. He would later pass it down to his son-in-law, Pierre Perrin. Perrin's son Jacques controlled Beaucastel during the post-World War II era, putting a large stamp on the property. "He was a visionary," says Marc, who remembers helping his grandfather in the vineyards as a boy. "He made most of the choices that make us what we are."

At the end of World War II, when Jacques was planting at Beaucastel, Grenache accounted for 90 percent of the vines in Châteauneuf. With its big fruit flavors and high alcohol, it was a popular variety during post-phylloxera replanting. Jacques decided to bring

At the end of World War II, when Grenache dominated the vineyards of Châteauneuf, the Perrins brought back a once-prominent grape: Mourvèdre.

back a variety that had virtually disappeared from the appellation—Mourvèdre, which was a dominant red grape in the southeast before phylloxera. Rich in tannins and acidity, it produces tough wines that are firm when young. "Grenache is the flesh of the wine, a very sexy grape," says Marc. "It's like fireworks. Mourvèdre is the opposite. It starts quiet but it grows on the palate. Syrah is the link."

Jacques sourced Mourvèdre cuttings from Provence, and the tannic grape, with its spice, tobacco and leather flavors, became an essential part of Beaucastel's character. As of 2009, Grenache still accounted for 73 percent of vines in Châteauneuf, and most properties use 85 percent to 90 percent Grenache in their red wines. Beaucastel uses 30 percent Grenache, 30 percent Mourvèdre, 10 percent Syrah, 10 percent Counoise and 5 percent Cinsault. Eight red and white grapes make up the remaining 15 percent of the blend.

Another key decision Jacques made was to adopt organic viticulture. He started in 1956, and today all of the Perrins' vineyards are certified organic or in the process of being certified. He was also one of the region's pioneers in estate bottling, beginning the practice in the 1970s. In 1976, he renamed the estate Château de Beaucastel.

When Jacques suddenly died of cancer in 1978, his two sons, Jean-Pierre and François, stepped in. Jean-Pierre had already been working with his father. François left school to help. They continued Jacques' methods in the vineyard and the winery. And in 1989, a vintage when the Mourvèdre was particularly gorgeous, they created a new special cuvée, Hommage à Jacques Perrin, made with 60 percent Mourvèdre.

THE PERRINS HAVE A FAMILY TRADITION: NO one is allowed to rest on their laurels. In the late 1960s, the family purchased a négociant brand called La Vieille Ferme, or The Old Farm. Young Jean-Pierre was put in charge. He bought wine from farmers throughout the region, aged it, bottled it and sold it by mail. The brand rapidly proved a success. Within a few years, Beaucastel's American importer, Vineyard Brands, was bringing it into the United States. (The U.S. is the biggest export market for all of the Perrins' wines. They sell 30 percent in France and 25 percent in America.) Today, the family sells 6 million rooster-adorned bottles of La Vieille Ferme red, white and rosé annually.

In 1984, Jean-Pierre and François launched a much more risky endeavor. They had known their American importer, Robert Haas, for more than a decade. He and the Perrin brothers decided to start a winery in California. But the Perrins weren't going to be involved unless the project met their standards. For five years, the partners searched California for an ideal limestone soil, hoping to

find something similar to Beaucastel's bedrock. They settled on a 120-acre plot of limestone and scrub in Paso Robles, a virtually unknown Central Coast area at the time. Worried that American clones of Rhône varieties weren't up to snuff, they imported cuttings from Beaucastel, even though it meant waiting several years for them to be released from federal agricultural quarantine.

Tablas Creek has inspired many California producers of wines made from Rhône grape varieties. It has also provided vines. After



The gates of Château de Beaucastel

Recent Releases From the Perrin Family of Wineries

WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews of these and other Perrin wines using the online Wine Ratings search.

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
CHÂTEAU DE BEUCASTEL		
Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2008	93	\$99
Châteauneuf-du-Pape Hommage à Jacques Perrin Grande Cuvée 2007	99	\$535
Châteauneuf-du-Pape White 2009	93	\$108
Châteauneuf-du-Pape White Vieilles Vignes 2009	95	\$185
Côtes du Rhône White Coudoulet de Beaucastel 2009	89	\$39
MAISON NICOLAS PERRIN		
Côte-Rôtie 2007	92	\$82
Crozes-Hermitage 2009	91	\$33
PERRIN & FILS		
Châteauneuf-du-Pape Les Sinards 2007	90	\$45
Châteauneuf-du-Pape White Les Sinards 2007	91	\$39
Côtes du Rhône-Villages 2009	89	\$15
Côtes du Rhône-Villages Cairanne Peyre Blanche 2009	90	\$25
Gigondas La Gille 2007	92	\$35
Gigondas Vieilles Vignes 2007	94	\$80
Vacqueyras Les Christins 2007	90	\$31
Vinsobres Les Cornuds 2007	91	\$22
TABLAS CREEK		
Côtes de Tablas Paso Robles 2009	93	\$30
Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc Paso Robles 2008	89	\$40
Esprit de Beaucastel Paso Robles 2008	90	\$50
Roussanne Paso Robles 2009	90	\$30
LA VIEILLE FERME		
Lubéron White 2010	86	\$9
Ventoux 2009	86	\$10

receiving several requests for cuttings of their clones, the Haas and Perrin families opened a vine nursery. While recreating Beaucastel in California didn't lead to instant success, the partners have adapted to the environment without compromising their original vision. The Tablas Creek Esprit de Beaucastel 2007, a blend of Mourvèdre, Grenache, Syrah and Cunoise, scored 94 points.

CONTINUING HIS TOUR OF THE VALLEY, Marc steers his SUV to the side of a road outside the village of Gigondas and climbs out. The Dentelles de Montmirail, jagged limestone peaks that look like dinosaur teeth and mark the start of the Alps, loom uphill. The mistral is blowing fiercely. To make walking even more challenging, the vineyard soil is nothing but sand. But to Marc, that sand is the source of beautiful wines, and an example of why his family began buying vineyards in various spots up and down the valley.

"Look at Gigondas and Vacqueyras," he says, contrasting this site to the next town up in the valley. "Our vineyards are four miles apart. The grapes are the same, the viticulture is the same, the climate is the same, our winemaking is the same. The wines are completely different. The difference is the soil."

In 1997, around the time that Jean-Pierre's sons began to join the business, the family decided to expand again. La Vieille Ferme was a success, and markets were asking for more wines, perhaps a reserve. Instead of sourcing more grapes, the Perrins started buying land. "Look at the big négociants—Guigal, Jaboulet, Chapoutier," says Marc. "We thought, 'All these names live in the North. They own vineyards in the North, but in the South, they are négociants. We know the South. We are vigneron. We will become the specialists of the South.'"

Perrin & Fils, which the family is renaming Famille Perrin beginning with the 2010 vintage, is not a négociant—it's a domaine, with 640 acres scattered across seven appellations throughout the Southern Rhône, including the villages of Vinsobres, Cairanne, Rasteau, Gigondas, Vacqueyras and Beaufort de Venise. They control another 100 acres through long-term leases. They even produce a Châteauneuf—Les Sinards—sourced from parcels with different soil types than Beaucastel and from some of Beaucastel's younger vines.



Cecile and Charles at the family's restaurant in Gigondas, l'Oustalet.



Mathieu, Marc and Jean-Pierre walk through Les Cornuds vineyard in Vinsobres. Jean-Pierre is semi-retired, but a constant mentor.

They farm all of the vines with the same organic methods they use at Beaucastel. Converting a property to organic takes time. “It takes three to five years to stop the chemicals; you can’t turn them off immediately,” says Marc. After 10 years, the soil is alive with worms and microbes that make it more porous. One of the most important factors in viticulture is water management. Deep roots can reach water in dry times in a hot climate like the Southern Rhône, and that’s what the Perrins strive for.

“It’s not a commercial thing. We don’t put the certification on

“My father and uncle were very smart. They were both very nice when we came in; they said, ‘OK, it’s your business.’”—Marc Perrin

the label,” says Marc. “Organic means you have a vineyard where the soil is porous and where there is animal life. The other way, with chemicals, you kill the soil. In organic, the roots can go deep easily. That’s what’s important. To me, the rest is bullshit. When the roots go deep, they interact with all the elements in the soil, which gives the wine complexity.”

Riding their bikes through the valley, looking for new vineyards, the Perrins weren’t seeking a magical formula. They wanted to emphasize the differences among the Southern Rhône’s many appellations. In Vinsobres, their wine is 50 percent Syrah and 50 percent Grenache. It shows ripe fruit, but also has racy graphite notes reminiscent of the Northern Rhône. Cairanne is known for south-facing vineyards with clay soil, shielded from the cool mistral. There Mourvèdre can ripen fully, and Grenache gets sup-*perripe*. The Perrins’ blend of 50 percent Grenache, 30 percent Syrah and 20 percent Mourvèdre is fruity, with a spicy finish. Vacqueyras is a clay plateau, another moist soil that produces rich Grenache, and the resulting wine, 75 percent Grenache and 25

percent Syrah, is all about power.

And then there’s Gigondas, which the Perrins believe could rival Châteauneuf someday. “The Grenache here is almost like Pinot; it is very feminine,” says Marc. They own several parcels in Gigondas, including a walled vineyard just below town, the Clos des Tourelles, which produces a wine so elegant, they may release the 2010 as a single-vineyard bottling. The Perrins purchased the estate, an old monastery, in 2008, and are nursing it back to health.

MARC DRIVES into the heart of Gigondas, parks the car and quickly ducks out of the mistral and into a warm, inviting restaurant. This is

l’Oustalet, which the family bought a few years ago. François’ son Charles manages the restaurant.

François, Pierre, Mathieu and Thomas are waiting at a table. Charles brings over the menu, smiling because it is a special truffle menu. The oak trees in Vinsobres have been generous this year. As they wait for the first course, the cousins chat about the latest developments with each of their projects. Thomas manages marketing for Canada and is flying to Toronto that day to meet with clients. Mathieu is responsible for the property in Vinsobres, so Marc updates him on what was going on there when he visited that morning.

Watching them interact, it is apparent that five generations in, this family functions like a team. Each member has his own responsibilities, his own area to shine in, but each also works well with the others. The cousins share not just genes, but a common mindset.

As Charles pours a bottle of Beaucastel Blanc Vieilles Vignes 2008, the cousins discuss what it has been like working for the elder generation. After taking the reins of their company at 35 and 25, respectively, Jean-Pierre and François could be excused for assuming they knew best when their sons got involved.

“My father and my uncle were very smart,” says Marc. “They were both very nice when we came in; they said, ‘OK, it’s your business.’ The board makes the decisions and someone says, ‘OK, I’ll do that.’ The key is that we are all involved in the winemaking, because that is the core of our business.”

There’s a saying in the wine business—the first generation creates the winery, the second builds it up and the third sells it off. But the Perrins are looking to continue to the sixth generation, and for François, there is nothing surprising about welcoming in the newest family members. “We fight sometimes, but then we go home and we’re family,” he says. “You need each new generation to play its role. The world changes.”

Whether it’s as farmers, winemakers, businessmen or *terroir* hunters, the Perrins have a talent for changing with the world. It’s made them leaders on every tier of the store shelf. □