

Les Wineries du Rhône

M. Chapoutier



PORTRAIT —

M. CHAPOUTIER, DISCOVERER OF TERROIRS

Under Michel Chapoutier's leadership, with solid teamwork and a healthy dose of innovation, company profits have risen 30-fold over 25 years.

Michel is clearly an authority; a bon-viveur, completely self-taught, who currently holds the post of president of Inter-Rhône, setting out his own concept of the négociant's role, and championing their rights through sheer intuition.

If a winemaker produces a wine which is universally popular, he will soon reach production capacity, and will have to turn to subcontractors to supply the wine or grapes he needs to make more. And that automatically makes him a négociant. The late 19th and early 20th century was a time of crisis for the French wine industry. This is when the first 'age of the négociant' ended: as prices plummeted, négociants reneged on their commitments to suppliers, leaving them to face their problems alone.

This led directly to the formation of winemaking cooperatives, kick-starting a second 'négociant era.' Around the 1960s, however, the system was marred by growers who preferred to keep the best grapes and wine for themselves and sell their lesser products to négociants. By the 1990s/2000s this rather spiteful attitude had disappeared completely, and so began the **"modern" age of the négoce, where outsourcing is based on equal partnerships and proper written**

specifications. This is where the Rhône Valley is ahead of the field. Supplies are often insourced; buyers are frequently agricultural engineers specialising in oenology, who can also give advice and oversee proceedings on-site.

Creating value

"I often get asked whether I make négoce wines or owner/producer wines. My answer is that I make Chapoutier wines. We wouldn't dream of asking Louis Vuitton if it was an employee making his bags, or a subcontractor. As soon as I put my name to a bottle, it means that it's a Chapoutier through and through," says Michel.

Michel sees the négociant's role as adding value in terms of expertise, creating extra margin. In the past, négociants were often

accused of making their money by purchasing at low cost; this should absolutely not be happening – négociants should be making their living by adding their skill, quality and flair.

Taking it step by step

Another ongoing battle for Michel Chapoutier is to oil the cogs of business, removing obstacles detrimental to trade. In Australia and Chile, growers are free to plant 1,000 vines per hectare to give yields of 200 hl per hectare. In Spain, producers have changed their business model to produce wine at €30 per hectolitre, to supply the budget end of the market. "Our problem is, young students start out buying Chilean wine within their price range, then when they start earning, they stick to what they know," says Michel.

If you go into a room with two staircases and one of them has a few steps missing, you'll clearly go for the one that's intact. And that's the problem with the French wine industry: it simply won't listen to its customers. 50 years ago, we wouldn't have known what to do, but now we know exactly how it all works.

**Michel Chapoutier,
President of Maison
Chapoutier**



Established in 1808
Employees: 250
Sales: 67,058 hl
Turnover 2016: €52 million, including €27 million to export
Brands: Pavillon, De l'Orée, Chante-Alouette, Bernardine, Belleruche



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Breaking the mould

So what gives Michel, this born fighter, the energy to keep going? It is, he says, the new generation of winemakers, including his own daughter; they are more open-minded and business-like, but haven't lost the passion for their craft. Michel bought his business at the age of 25, and considers

himself to be self-taught. **He feels that one of Maison Chapoutier's key strengths is to find innovative solutions where others made in the same mould simply do the same thing over and over again.** His was the first domaine in the Rhône Valley to introduce biodynamic farming, and is now the largest estate in France to follow biodynamic principles. "I had to grow my business quickly, so I started to scout out new terroirs. In Roussillon, we breathed new life into old, forgotten terroirs where they grew the naturally sweet Vins Doux Naturels, while in Portugal and Australia we set about creating our own terroirs." For Michel, it's all about intuition; he's sceptical of the Cartesian way. He simply feels that red Côtes du Rhône terroirs may be more suitable for whites, and is subsequently proved right by the quality of those whites, made by growers who had the courage to make the switch. "A discoverer of terroirs," says Michel, "is someone who can listen to the soil and understand what it can yield."



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