

Les Wineries du Rhône

Cuvée du Vatican
Château Sixtine



PORTRAIT —

A CHANGE IN CONTINUITY

The Diffonty family have been making wine in Châteauneuf-du-Pape for four generations. Jean Marc Diffonty took over from his father Félicien in 1993, bringing a new dimension to the family story. Jean-Marc wears two hats on his stylishly shaved head: as a wine maker he heads up Château Sixtine, a 15-hectare estate in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, but has also made forays into the world of négociant wine with his Cuvée du Vatican brand. Depending on the year, he can sell from 300 to 400,000 bottles, some 90% of which are exported. To keep pace with the steady growth of his business over the last 5 years, Jean-Marc is busy building a new winery on a historic site along the Route de Courthézon, which is due to be operational for the 2025 harvest.

From bulk to bottle

Châteauneuf-du-Pape is a historic vineyard area in the southern Rhône, arguably the best known and most highly regarded, and the one that first defined the principles and operation of the Appellations d'Origine system in 1936. And the Diffonty family is one of Châteauneuf's historic families – Jean Marc's father was mayor here from 1965 to 1995 – and over the years has seen huge changes in its prestigious vineyards. “My grandfather could barely read and was no good with figures,” Jean-Marc remembers, “so it was easier for him to sell in bulk, and the same went for his colleagues. Sales of bottled wine didn't really take off until after the war. My father decided that if he was going to make the change, he'd need a strong brand, and as

this was Châteauneuf-du-Pape, he felt it should involve popes and the papacy. He decided to call his wine Cuvée du Vatican, which seemed appropriate, as there had been numerous popes in Chateauneuf, but there was only one Vatican.

De Vatican à Sixtine

There was a consequence, though, and one that Félicien could never have foreseen: people began to think the estate actually belonged to the Pope. Jean-Marc even heard potential contacts argue that they didn't want to fund a bunch of priests. So he changed the name, and while he was at it, also the profile of the wines. They were made mainly from Grenache and aged for two years in foudres, giving woody wines, lacking in concentration and slightly maderised, as was popular at the time. In 1998, Jean Marc produced a single-vineyard selection blending a greater proportion of Syrah and Mourvèdre in with the existing Grenache to give a fresher result with better balance. He liked it very much, and called it Réserve Sixtine de la Cuvée du Vatican. What started out as a bit of fun quickly became the Domaine's top wine in terms of volume, press reviews and medals awarded. But it raised a problem involving hierarchy, as customers didn't understand how a sub-brand could take precedence over a brand. Then there was the fact that export markets don't understand the word *cuvée*, failing to link it with the notion of an estate. “In 2010, I decided that the estate's own wines would be called Château Sixtine, and that Cuvée du Vatican would be used only for the négociant side of the business.”

Steady growth

The négoce part of the business launched around the turn of the millennium, sparked by customer orders. Jean-Marc's customers had begun to request more wine than the estate was able to provide, so he simply went for it, making his selections then tasting and blending – sometimes even using the estate's own wines which had been partially downgraded. And his customers responded with exceptional loyalty. Some have been with him for over 25 years, so he knows exactly what sort of wine they're.

Jean-Marc Diffonty



Established: 1901
2 employees
2022 turnover: €1.7 million
incl. 86% from export



“ My customers know I'll supply exactly what they want”

looking for. In fact, their level of trust is such that they no longer even ask to taste the wines before they're bottled. The whole transaction is done by email.

“Consistent quality and fair prices mean I have customers who will buy from me whatever the vintage. As long as the wines give value for money and quality control is strict, the négoce will thrive.” Another major change is that where his father, who spoke no English, sold his wines mainly in France, Jean-Marc has made a complete about-turn,

exporting 90% of his production to northern Europe, North America and Asia. Cuvée du Vatican, the négociant range, comprises chiefly Côtes du Rhône with a limited amount of Côtes du Rhône Villages, and Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

New Premises

To keep pace with his burgeoning business, Jean-Marc is building a new winery. It's been a few years since he's been able to promote his services, as the current premises are simply too small to handle more volume. The new facility will be located on the historic Château Sixtine site just outside Châteauneuf, and will provide not only an extended vat room, but will, crucially, have three times the current pallet storage capacity. The existing winery was designed to handle 70,000 bottles a year, but now distributes over 400,000. Gone are the days of constant juggling. It's time to usher in a new stage in the life of Château Sixtine and Cuvée Vatican.



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