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# Sommelier INDIA

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# Where Earth, Wind and Terroir Meet

The family held an open competition soliciting designs from the world's top architects, and after much debate, the winner was declared: Bijoy Jain of Studio Mumbai

It was in late 2023 that I first heard about the Perrin family's decision to renovate their famous flagship winery in Châteauneuf-du-Pape: Château de Beaucastel. It was clear that this was no mere rebuilding of the winery but a reimagining of the estate itself, to make it future proof in a world where water would be scarce, climate would have changed. In a first, the family held an open competition soliciting designs from the world's top architects, and after much debate, the winner was declared: Bijoy Jain of Studio Mumbai, and his French colleague, Louis-Antoine Grégo of Studio Méditerranée. Their joint mandate for Beaucastel included expanding its limits physically and emotionally to include the elements that typify Châteauneuf-du-Pape's terroir – earth (the unique *galets roulés* of the southern Rhône), wind (the mighty Mistral) and water – increasingly in erratic supply.

I confess I spent hours delving into details of the project – it was fascinating. I spoke extensively to the architects, the cerebral Bijoy Jain and the pragmatic Grégo; and interacted with Charles Perrin, heading the project for the family.

The story gradually unfolded virtually before me: the golden earth, the river-buffed *galets*, the Mistral whipping through the vines around a golden-ochre winery. I had visited Beaucastel before, years ago, but this project stimulated my

imagination. So, when an opportunity arose to visit the south of France recently, I took a detour and drove towards Beaucastel.

For the many who 'ooh' and 'ahh' over wineries steeped in tradition, of centuries-old châteaux towering over manicured greenery, or breathtaking swirling pink-and-silver titanium roofs, Beaucastel might seem a letdown. There are no towering turrets here. It seems to rise out of the earth, and therein lies its magic. The original manor house is intact, but built into one of its ochre-yellow walls is a small door.

Through the door I went, feeling like Alice in Wonderland. Immediately I found myself in surroundings I had seen in the images of the new Beaucastel. Starkly simple, it seemed to merge with its surroundings, swaddled in the embrace of its surrounding bush-trained vines.

Beaucastel sales director, Maxime Simon greeted me at the door and talked me through the estate's early history, closely entwined with that of the region. As the name Châteauneuf-du-Pape suggested, it is linked to the Popes who moved briefly from Rome to the south of France centuries ago. "There can be no better marketing line than being named the wine of the Popes!" he laughed.

At the start, Beaucastel was simply a farm, and wine was one of its several products, including

almonds and olives. The story goes that King Louis XIV of France enjoyed stopping at Beaucastel to rest on his way to see the Pope. So pleased was he with Monsieur de Beaucastel's lodgings that he awarded him 100 hectares of land and the rights to collect taxes for the town of Courthézon. The Perrins' took over from the early 20th century. Third generation scion, Jacques Perrin was a visionary who converted to organic farming when the practice was far from fashionable. "The farmers had begun to plant Grenache: large, juicy berries with high alcohol. It was not easy to say no to pesticides," said Maxime. But Perrin stood firm. "Our job as farmers is to create life, not destroy it," he said.

Today, Beaucastel celebrates 50 years of turning biodynamic, but the years in between were not without hardship. Rain is not plentiful here, pointed out Maxime, "The Mistral is powerful – blowing at 70km an hour – and we experience it 150 days every year. It's a tough environment for making wine."

Yet Beaucastel thrived, even flourished, becoming one of the world's most famous wine estates, one of few to use all 13 permitted grape varieties for its red Châteauneuf. The Perrins went on to create several iconic brands, including the Brad Pitt-owned Château Miraval. But despite the pressures of expansion, the Perrin family vowed to stay grounded. Their wine and their family's future were of paramount importance. This vision of a future-ready Beaucastel was communicated to the architects: build from the earth itself, allow the elements to handle the energy load. "We are not trying to distract or impress the world, just inspire it," said Charles Perrin.

Inspiring Beaucastel is, seamlessly blending cutting-edge modern technology with nature's bounty. Its famous natural cooling systems harness the Mistral's power downwards into the winery, driven through wind towers that create a naturally air-conditioned environment minus the use of external power. The rain-harvested

water is channelled into underground cisterns, amplifying the cooling further. Inside, new concrete tanks and 5000-litre *foudres* tower over the original tanks built by Jacques Perrin.

The winery, mainly underground, is powered by solar panels because, says Charles Perrin, "If a guest notices the building before the wine, we've failed." Most striking of all are the 'rammed earth' walls, created from deconstructed old sheds on the estate, ground into gravel, and constructed into unpainted, open-faced walls. Grégo referred to it as 'taking terroir and making it vertical'. No steel or concrete was bought for the project. The €12 million project is all about historic techniques, transformed anew. The new winery had risen like a phoenix from the ashes of the old.

And then came the time for the tasting of the wines. Charles Perrin generously opened bottle after bottle. The **Beaucastel Blanc 2024**, a blend of six grapes matured in stainless steel and oak, showed notes of citrus, apricot, and honey with a saline finish. The **Beaucastel Vieilles Vignes 2021**, 100% Roussanne vines planted in 1909, was all honey, peach, white flowers, and flint – delicious. "This is best drunk young before 10 years, or then after 20 years," advised Charles Perrin.

We moved to the reds. The **Beaucastel rouge 2023**, bottled in July 2025, was Grenache-dominated, lively yet structured with balanced yet youthful tannins, while the cool vintage, **2018 rouge** showed developed flavours of dark berries, chocolate, and a long finish. Next up was the **2007 rouge**, a stunning vintage – all cherry, fig, and smoky notes with silken tannins. Just as I was leaving Charles disappeared into the cobweb-covered wine racks and emerged with Beaucastel's pride and joy – the **Hommage à Jacques Perrin 2021**. The 'homage' is a hat tip to their far-sighted ancestor's belief in Mourvèdre, the original grape of the region. The full-bodied wine showed stewed dark cherry, plum, forest floor, and wood smoke – a mere toddler in wine terms, but showing signs of greatness to come. ❖

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