

Château Rayas Châteauneuf-du-Pape

"There are no signs on the dusty, narrow, dirt roads of Southern Rhône's Châteauneuf-du-Pape directing you to Château Rayas," writes Per-Henrik Mansson. "That's no accident. The late Louis Reynaud and his late son, Jacques, used to do all they could to keep unsolicited visitors at bay. Now, Louis' grandson, Emmanuel Reynaud, is doing his part to uphold the tradition."

Remarkable Rayas

According to Stephen Tanzer, "Emmanuel Reynaud has quickly shown himself to be a worthy caretaker of this fabled estate's superb holdings and a flexible, non-interventionist vinifier." A young Rayas displays a grip of fruit and tannins, but it's born with a surprising midpalate fatness -- what the French call "gras." In top years, the wine has the staying power to improve just as much as some of France's finest crus. It has been said that Rayas can transcend, in top years, its Southern Rhône roots to achieve the finesse and ethereal balance of a velvety Pinot Noir.

Château Rayas is a winery that seems frozen in time. Wooden staircases leading to different areas and floors inside the "chai" are worn, steep and rocky. However, Emmanuel did make a concession to modernity when he lined the inside of the cement fermentation vats with epoxy, a durable, corrosion-

resistant coating. The wine is matured, however, in large, ancient wood vats, or "foudres" that are 80 to 100 years old. "These foudres were around when my grandfather was alive, and he bought them secondhand," says Emmanuel.

Château Rayas shines despite its modest surroundings

Rayas' rustic look not only reflects the owners' dislike for the trendy, it advertises their commitment to tradition. This philosophy comes through in the wine: In bad or good vintages, it tastes genuine. In a world of sameness, the Reynaud family makes

a wine that's idiosyncratic even by the local standards of Châteauneuf. Rayas is unusual because its vineyards face mostly north (less heat, thus more finesse). It's also unusual because the wine is 100% Grenache. (Rayas has 27 acres planted to this varietal.) It helps that the vines are relatively old -- between 15 and 60 years, according to Emmanuel.

Finally, Rayas harvests late, sometimes very late. "That's the game we've always played in the family: We want ripe fruit, and we'll pick late if necessary," said Emmanuel. "You must know how to take risks. To win, you must be ready to lose."

