

#### Question 4:

Discuss the various factors that account for the differences in quality, style and price of the red wines of Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

(An essay format is COMPULSORY for this question)

#### Answer:

##### Introduction

Châteauneuf-du-Pape is one of the most important AOCs in France and certainly the most important one in Southern Rhone. It is important for many historical reasons, including being the first AOC to be established and creating a template for other appellations. It is also important as its quality and style are considered as one of the best in France if not the whole world, being copied and emulated in many regions (for example Languedoc, Barossa Valley and California). Having said that, Châteauneuf-du-Pape does not have one and unified style and it can present different quality levels and command different prices. This essay discusses how the major factors in the vineyard, winery and market influence these differences.

##### Vineyard

In general, Châteauneuf-du-Pape benefits from a warm and dry Mediterranean climate. Plentiful of sunshine (around 2700 hours every year) allows the grapes to ripen easily (even the late-ripening varieties, like Mourvedre). However, given the size of the AOC (3313 ha), there are various terroirs available allowing for the production of different styles and quality levels. The producers looking for the ripe-fruit flavours, rich and powerful wines can use the grapes from the vineyards planted lower elevations, on the south-east and south facing gentle slopes. This, together with the valet soils, retaining and radiating the heat, give a lot of warmth and sunshine throughout the day and night to the grapes. However, this also brings the risk of losing the freshness, the acidity and speeding up the ripening process, which can lead to the loss of varietal characteristics. In the extreme cases, if the producer does not pay attention to this, it can lead to over-ripe fruit and hamminess of the wines, losing the balance, creating flabby wines, decreasing the quality and stylistically reminding the wines from the New World. Many of the producers that look for more elegant and refined styles and which want to keep the freshness and give more space for the development of complexity, chose the slopes on a bit higher elevation (however, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, in general, does not have dramatic differences in elevations) and more north facing slopes. This allows the grapes to ripen slower but still getting enough sunshine and warmth. Producers may also blend grapes from the vineyards with both characteristics, in order to find the right balance between the powerful and ripe fruit and the elegance and freshness.

Another factor that has a significant importance on the style, quality and price is the age of the vines. Many producers in Châteauneuf-du-Pape have access to old vines (especially Grenache, Syrah, Mourvedre and Carignan). Old vines tend to give much lower yields (increasing the price as less wine can be produced), leading to smaller and concentrated grapes. These grapes create more intense wines with higher tannins and bigger structure (thanks to the small berries and their high pulp to skin ratio) - this contributes to the style and quality of these wines.

Choice of grapes in the final blend (18 grapes varieties are allowed in Châteauneuf-du-Pape AOC) can have a significant impact on the style, quality and price. The most important grape is Grenache Noir (sometimes 80% is used), which brings high levels of sugar (meaning high alcohol wines), lower acidity, medium tannins and aromas of red fruit, white pepper and sweet spices.

Syrah is a common blending partner here, contributing dark colour, tannins, acidity, ripe dark and red fruit, spices and dark pepper. The third common variety is Mourvedre, growing in the warmest vineyards, adding concentrated ripe black fruit, game and meaty aromas, tannins and dark colour.

## Winery

Producers need to make a set of chores in the winery contributing to the style, price and quality. Many of them are related to finding the right balance between the tannins and the structure and the high alcohol. Therefore, destemming is often avoided, in order to increase the level of tannins (fortunately, the climate here is warm enough to allow the stems to get fully ripe so any green and astringent tannins can be avoided). a similar reason is behind frequent punching downs and pumping overs during fermentation - quality-focused producers want to have higher extraction rated to support and balance the high alcohol. 🗨️

Most of the wines are fermented using the traditional fermentation technique (most often with ambient yeast to increase complexity, however, inoculated yeast can be used by the producers that look for consistency over quality). However, some producers use full or semi-carbonic maceration in their winemaking process, in order to produce softer and more approachable wines. As a result, these wines can be released earlier, allowing for a better cash flow 🗨️ producers (decreasing the price), but also often decreasing the quality and significantly changing the style. Traditional Châteauneuf-du-Pape wines need extended ageing time, in the range of 5+ years to be mature enough for consumption. 🗨️

Use of oak for ageing is another important factor. Large, neutral oak casts are used for the traditional style, while small, new oak barriques giving modern style with stronger oak influence and softer wines thanks to the micro-oxygenation. Some producers also mix these approaches, trying to find the right balance. New oak barrels add to the cost of production, often resulting in higher prices. Time of ageing is another factor influencing the style and price. Longer ageing means more mature aromas and flavours, better integration of components and often higher complexity and quality. This also means higher costs, due to the bigger investment of time and resources (e.g. storage space) on the producers' side, meaning higher prices. 🗨️

## Market 🗨️

The demand of the Châteauneuf-du-Pape wines is large, with about 70% of these wines being exported. Producers like Chateau Beaucastel, Chateau Rayas and Domaine Pegau produce high-quality wines with a range of styles and commanding high prices. However, there are also other producers, including co-operatives and negociants, who focus more on lower prices and lower quality.

## Conclusion 🗨️

Overall, Châteauneuf-du-Pape AOC offers a wide range of styles, quality levels and prices of red wines - from a tradition powerful, yet elegant and refined wines, to powerful and over-ripe wines, through many styles, quality and price levels in between. It cannot be denied though that this appellation has everything it needs, including the unique terroir and quality-focused producers, to create some of the best red wines in the world. 🗨️