

Stirring the Lees with James Molesworth



James Molesworth

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Domaine de Mourchon: Big Wines From a Small Place

Outside of the glamour appellation of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, there are numerous domaines in the southern Rhône that produce wine in relative obscurity. Many of these lie in the broad Côtes du Rhône and slightly more specific Côtes du Rhône-Villages appellations. While the appellation system only serves as a function of potential quality—theoretically wines from Châteauneuf are better than Côtes du Rhône—the appellation system can't account for lazy or shoddy wine making any more than it can account for hard work and perseverance. A poorly-run estate in Châteauneuf can make horrible wine, regardless of its *terroir*. An energetically-run property in Côtes du Rhône-Villages can make an outstanding wine, in spite of its apparent geological hurdles. Such is the case with Walter McKinlay's [Domaine de Mourchon](#), located up in the hills above the Ouveze River, behind the striking cliffside village of Séguret. McKinlay, 73, is a transplanted Scotsman. Affable and easygoing, he purchased the 60-acre property in 1998, and vinified his first wines that year. "Typical story," he says. "Francophile. Figured it would be nice to buy a vineyard." McKinlay says he looked at about 40

different vineyards before settling on the one at Domaine de Mourchon. When he purchased it, there were only vines. Since then he's built his own winery and house on the property, as well as a single golf hole so he can keep close to his Scottish roots. "We pull the odd golf ball out of the grape bunches while at the sorting table," he says as he points to the small green just a 70-yard shot away from his front door. "It's only a little half wedge, but when the mistral is blowing, it's pretty tough to hit the flag, and the balls roll down into the vineyard." When he first laid eyes on the property, McKinlay was hooked. But he admittedly loved the land itself, a craggy spot of limestone with a panoramic view of the valley below—rather than harboring any visions of potential wine quality. "To me, it just looked fantastic. Of course, it was more an aesthetic standpoint," he says matter-of-factly. "Obviously there was some technical advice that was given to me as well." Good advice, as it turns out, since the domaine now produces two consistently very good to outstanding red cuvées (along with a tasty rosé that accounts for 15 percent of the production). Winemaker Sébastien Magnouac, who trained with Denis Dubourdieu, was brought on in time for the 2000 vintage. The red wines are destemmed and then fermented in stainless steel tanks just below the reception area in the small, modern gravity flow winery. The juice undergoes a combination of *remontage* and *pigeage* before flowing down to the next level for aging in concrete vats and barrels. The Côtes du Rhône-Villages Séguret Tradition is typically a blend of Grenache, Syrah, Carignane and Cinsault (though there is no Cinsault in the '05 version). It's racy and fresh, with lots of red and black fruits and a briary hint. The Côtes du Rhône-Villages Séguret Grande Réserve is a blend of Grenache and Syrah only, from the estate's oldest vines, some of which are 60 years old. The wine is aged 40 percent in barrel (one-quarter of which is new) for 9 months before moving back to vat to finish its *élevage*. It's darker and more powerful than the Tradition, with lots of tobacco and *garrigue* notes. McKinlay lives with his wife in the house on the estate; his daughter lives in a house on the next hill. At lunch one day during my recent November trip, his daughter needled him, telling him he can finally charge more for his wines now that he's gotten good reviews. "But I want to offer a good value," he says. "I *like* offering value." The wines from this domaine are not impossible to find—about one-quarter of the 7,000 annual case production makes it to the U.S. The '05s, which I tasted at the domaine, are probably the best yet. They'll be released here next year. If you've had the wines, let me know what you think.