

# Domaine Combe Queyzaire

## Côtes du Rhône



Denis Deschamps grew up in the Alpine foothills of Savoie. After earning degrees in enology and viticulture, he took up consulting in 1996 in the completely different terrain of the southern Rhône Valley. Specifically, to the far side of the valley's mighty river on its right bank, where the prevailing watershed flows eastward off the Massif Central rather than westward off the Alps.

In 2000 he took a gig in production at the Estézargues co-op, further south on the right bank. You know this small co-op's wine even if you think you don't; many of its members' brands are omnipresent in the US market. In the 1990s the cooperative became a model of non-interventionist winemaking. Its guiding principles included best farming practices; making specific cuvees for each of its ten growers under their labels rather than bulk blends under generic labels; spontaneous ferments without yeast additions; no enzymes; minimal or no fining and filtration; and bottling with a very low dose of sulfur. In 2001 the director of the co-op left for Roussillon to start his own domaine, leaving the direction to his assistant and to Denis Deschamps. In 2002, Denis became the president.

He changed nothing, encouraging his growers toward organic farming. Most converted during his tenure, which lasted 18 or 20 years, depending on how you look at it (he handed over the keys but got pulled back in when his successor didn't pan out). Despite his loyalty, he felt the keen desire to embark on his own venture. He had put in his time and now he wanted to make his own wine from his own vines.

In 2017 he bought three hectares at the end of a small valley (a *combe* in French) in Saint Nazaire, in the same general area where he had started his consulting career. Since he lives in a neighborhood named Queytrade, he coined *Combe Queyzaire* for his nascent domaine, combining the place where he comes from with the place where he goes to. In the years that followed, he added parcels in nearby Vénéjan and in Saint-Gervais, all in the Cèze Valley on the right bank of the Rhône. This is the upper end of the Gard department, where the landscape is hillier and cooler, with more forest and rainfall, than much of southern Rhône's viticulture. For appellation Côtes du Rhône (with or without the superior Villages appendage), you have to go across the plains to the east a good distance before reaching

comparable landscape in the Alpine foothills. Historically, such zones often struggled for ripeness, a problem rarely encountered these days but even so the upper Gard harvests later than many southern zones--Denis picked the 2022 vintage between three and four weeks after Estézargues finished harvesting its terrace.

Today, he farms some 37 acres organically divided among over 30 parcels with an average age of at least fifty. Out of this production, he sells about half in bulk, keeping the finest to make several reds and one white in an old cellar he rents in Saint Nazaire.

He has three terroirs. The largest, where most of his vines are, is in the western part of Saint Nazaire and in neighboring Saint Gervais, where the foothills of the Massif Central and its forests are most prominent. The wooded environment is key: these vines grow on the edge of the Valbonne national forest, an extended wooded area between the Cève and the Ardèche rivers that brings isolation and coolness. Here the soil is loess, a deep, sandy limestone mix of particulate matter blown over from Siberia back when the earth was cooling and of very poor quality (i.e., perfect for grapes).

His second terroir is just east of St Nazaire, where there's no loess but a lot of calcareous stones and thin topsoil overtop of limestone bedrock. His third and smallest terroir, where his Côte du Rhône Villages comes from, is further east on a small terrace or bench made of galets roulés--the round river stones overtop of clay and sand for which Châteauneuf is famous. Such terroirs exist in pockets up and down the right bank of the southern Rhône River."

It would be a real mistake to discount his wine as just another Côtes du Rhône. They're wines from a master at the top of his game, the best from his old vines that he makes with the same care, skill and principles he used at Estézargues. The difference is that now he's working on a very artisanal and personal level--aided at harvest by his wife, Noémie.