

# Domaine Pierre Jean Villa

## Saint Joseph



Pierre Jean Villa is a solid, well-built man, and maybe that's why he gravitates toward elegance in wine. He grew up surrounded by the vines and vigneron in the northern Rhône town of Chavanay but learned to make wine in Burgundy, which may also explain his bent for finesse. He first learned the ropes working at Mommessin's Clos de Tart. After Boisset bought the Mommessin firm, Pierre Jean worked in Beaujolais and then for three years at Domaine de la Vougeraie with Pascal Marchand.

In 2003 he returned to the Rhône and became the manager for Vins de Viennes. This is the company that Yves Cuilleron, Pierre Gaillard, and François Villard created to resurrect the ancient vineyard area of Seyssuel, just north of Vienne on the left bank, as well as to do business as a *négociant*. For seven years Pierre Jean handled the administration and winemaking at the firm, eventually becoming the fourth partner. The other partners had their own domaines to run; Vins de Viennes was Pierre Jean's bailiwick, and he made it what it is today.

In 2009, after a lot of thought, he handed in his keys and started his own Domaine Pierre Jean Villa from scratch, and this is worth pausing over, because that's no mean feat. He began with parcels in St Joseph, Condrieu, and Côte-Rôtie, plus he had a parcel in Seyssuel for his Esprit d'Antan. Some of these parcels—notably, the long-ago abandoned terraces behind his new winery in Chavanay—had to be cleared and planted. He made vintage 2009 at his buddy Jean-Michel Gerin's domaine in Ampuis while overseeing the renovation of an abandoned fruit-processing building on the western edge of Chavanay. He moved into his new winery the following year.

In 2013 a young man named Justin knocked on his door in Chavanay to ask for a job. He had impressive degrees in both viticulture and wine making from Toulouse and Montpellier, and he was doing an internship with Yves Cuilleron at the latter's nearby domaine. Villa declined; he could just manage on his own. Justin returned several times and made it quite clear that he wanted to work here and nowhere else. Pierre Jean said okay, we'll give it a trial run.

Now Justin is a full-time employee and Pierre Jean says it's the best decision he's made since starting off on his own. Moreover, Justin became a member of The Grateful Dead, the famous northern Rhône band you've never heard of featuring Paul Amsellem from Domaine Georges Vernay, Yves Gangloff, and Pierre-Jean Villa. Thanks to Justin and a growing team, the

domaine turned to farming its 42 acres in an increasingly organic manner and with ever more detail. For example, in 2017 experiments began on the hillside parcels using mulch under certain vines and sowing sedum under others to see if either worked well enough to replace herbicide, which was the final step for 100% organic farming. In 2021, the domaine received organic certification (using, for weed control, either mulch for the most difficult sites; or ground cover that doesn't compete with vines, sedum being their favorite; or they work the soil using a small machine or a hoe).\* Sedum seems to work the best--it takes little water, it grows low to the ground and so doesn't attract humidity, and it checks erosion. Plus, the stuff is local--it grows on the rock walls!

In 2018 he entered into an agreement with the French park service to farm a new experimental organic vineyard in the hills completely surrounded by forest. He's working with state biologists to study the effects of agroforestry on, in this case, a grape crop. Pierre Jean likes his wines, of course, but it's the vineyard work and the progress he is making with cutting edge organics that he is most proud of. He's also pretty happy and proud of the fact that his son Hugo and daughter Pauline have decided to join him at the domaine (decisions long in the making but formalized in 2021).

The cellar work remains hands off: spontaneous ferments--many with a percentage of stems, some without any, a decision taken at each harvest--normally no fining or filtration and racking and bottling is done according to the lunar calendar. The domain started in 2009 with a cellar full of new barrels, but by vintage 2015 Pierre-Jean managed to transition to having most of his *élevages* take place in older barrels. In 2018, he got a number of 15 and 13-liter foudres to age a portion of his two whites in, and in 2019 he bought a number of clay jars for aging the whites plus large wood uprights for the reds. Specifics are enumerated below.

Stylistically, Pierre-Jean takes the best from the traditionalists and from the modernists (those who dominated late in the last century) to make wines that are clean, pure, deep, mineral and elegant.

\*Note that the domaine is certified in France by Ecocert, but not certified in America by USDA.

[www.pierre-jean-villa.com](http://www.pierre-jean-villa.com)