

CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE'S DRIVING FORCE

Consultant Philippe Cambie pushes himself to the edge to make outstanding wine

BY MITCH FRANK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JON WYAND



Philippe Cambie (center) talks wine with client Michel Gassier (left). Taking on his first client in 1998, the respected consultant has worked to improve wine quality in Châteauneuf-du-Pape and across the Southern Rhône ever since.

To understand Philippe Cambie's winemaking philosophy, you have to imagine what life is like in the center of a rugby scrum.

Cambie is the most successful winemaking consultant in France's Southern Rhône Valley. He works with an impressive array of vigneron and properties—62 at last count, with 25 of them in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, the south's most prestigious appellation, including a diverse range that counts Clos St.-Jean, Lucien and André Brunel of Les Cailloux, Paul Jeune of Domaine Monpertuis, Le Vieux Donjon and Tardieu-Laurent, among others.

The consultant is just as busy outside Châteauneuf, helping small growers in Gigondas, Cairanne, Languedoc and elsewhere to leave economically unviable relationships with local co-ops and start their own domaines. His name may not be as famous as those of his clients, but anyone wishing to discover the *terroirs* of the Southern Rhône could start by tasting the wines Cambie helps make.

Cambie is most passionate about the *terroir* of Châteauneuf. But the key to good winemaking, he believes, is people, and the secret of his success is teamwork. "I don't need a client to have good *terroir*," says Philippe Cambie. "I need a client with a good feeling for what he wants—I need a client with guts." Cambie learned teamwork—and guts—in the scrum.

Born in the Languedoc, Cambie and his brother both grew up playing rugby, the de facto regional sport of southern France. Today, Cambie, 50, dominates any room he walks into—standing 6' 2", he has a booming voice and a sizable girth. He's fat, and he'll tell you as much. In his teens and 20s, Cambie was large, but back then it was all muscle. He was a talented athlete and played in rugby leagues, both amateur and semiprofessional, for more than 15 years.

A scrum can be an awesome, terrible sight—

eight men from each team, locked in a phalanx, working to drive their combined mass against the other eight men, pushing and jostling for the ball. Cambie spent his career as a prop—one of three men up front who meet the other team head on. It's a perilous position that demands trust in your teammates—if the scrum should collapse, you could suffer severe injury. Your entire team is pushing you from behind while the opposing team is pushing from in front.

"Rugby is my roots," says Cambie. "It's a great culture, because it mixes classes. Even though you come from different social backgrounds and education levels, on a rugby field you're all equal. You learn from your teammates. That's how I feel about my work. My clients learn from me, and I from them."

He's a big believer in using collaboration to make good wine. "Going to 10 wineries in a day, Philippe knows the quality of the vintage within two days," says client and friend Michel Gassier, owner of Château de Nages in Costières de Nîmes. Cambie's success is rooted not only in his ability to understand the *terroirs* of the region and the chemistry of the wines, but in his ability to challenge his clients. "Philippe is great at questioning you," says Gassier. "A lot of producers say, 'I want to make a better wine.' Philippe asks, 'What's a better wine? What do you want to make? Where do you want to sell it?' He provokes the thought process."

Today, Cambie still has his shoulder down, driving the scrum forward. He is a perfectionist who tortures himself over mistakes. But it all stems from loyalty to his team.

It's a clear winter night in Provence. The air is crisp outside, but the atmosphere in La Fenière, one of the region's famed restaurants, is warm and inviting. Cambie is spending the evening with some clients—Gassier and Michel Tardieu of the négociant Tardieu-Laurent. Like most of the people Cambie works for, they're also his good friends. They're laughing and trading stories of past harvests.

In between jokes, Cambie is taking pictures of each dish put in front of him and scribbling notes for his blog. He's a true gastronome, a favorite of chefs, and a good home cook.

Yet his deep passion for food and wine comes at a price. Cambie is clinically obese. He's fully aware of it, and often makes self-effacing jokes about his weight. But he can't beat his problem. A few years ago, he considered gastric bypass surgery to tame his appetite, but decided to focus on improving his diet and exercise regimen instead. His friends admit that they worry about his health.

Cambie sees his gustatory appreciation as deeply rooted. "Wine is meant for food," he says. "Wine, just like food, is a blend of people, the land and culture." Cambie was born in 1962 into a land of food and wine—Pézenas, the heart of the Languedoc's Herault wine region. His mother, Jacqueline, a calm, thoughtful woman, he says, came from a family of grapegrowers. His father, Yves, worked as a banker, but his real passion was guitar. "He should have been an artist," says Cambie. "My father was like me—he had a hot temper but was very kind. He would have given everything for his family. I am the same."

After studying food chemistry and working at a brewery, Cambie changed direction and studied enology at the university in Montpellier. When he needed practical experience to finish his degree, he knew where to go. His father's cellar was full of Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas that Philippe had sampled.

In 1986, he moved to Châteauneuf, working at a bottling plant

"[In rugby], you learn from your teammates. That's how I feel about my work. My clients learn from me, and I from them." —**PHILIPPE CAMBIE**



Cambie (standing, third from right) with the Armentières rugby squad in 1992.

as part of his studies and playing on a regional rugby squad. Some of his future clients played on the team with him; others were fans. Cambie then spent several years outside his beloved south of France, trying out various jobs on the less glamorous side of wine, including a stint as director of a bottling plant for a large négociant and a job as sales director for a cork firm. He was unhappy, but he believes that period gave him valuable experience.

In 1998, Cambie returned to Châteauneuf, taking a job as an enologist at a nearby laboratory that provided technical support and advice to area wineries. Then he was asked a favor. "Some friends needed help one harvest, and since I was an enologist by training, I said, 'Fine, I'll do it,'" he recalls, adding, "I came for one season, and here I am."

The morning after the dinner at La Fenière, Gassier drives up to a small winery just outside downtown Châteauneuf. Cambie is taking some guests to visit clients, and Gassier is functioning as translator (and chauffeur) for the day. The winery belongs to Pierre Giraud, Cambie's friend and his first client, back in 1998. Giraud was an old rugby teammate and a longtime grapegrower who had decided he wanted to do more than sell to négociants. Châteauneuf was gaining recognition internationally, and families who had been farmers for generations decided they wanted to sell their own wines. But Giraud needed help.

"I learned from the people I worked with," says Cambie. "It's not a one-way relationship. He taught me more about viticulture than I could teach him about enology. Of course, I had taught him everything about rugby," he says, laughing. Giraud was a good teacher for someone new to viticulture—today, Domaine Giraud includes 47.5 acres in 64 parcels scattered all over the appellation, with soils ranging from stony to sand to chalky clay. "It's a very complex place. I'd have to write 10 books to explain the *terroirs*," says Cambie. "You can't have a recipe, because every parcel is different."

Now Pierre is retired, and his children Marie and François run the

winery. As Cambie climbs out of the car, Marie, an attractive, focused young woman with dark hair, walks out of the front gate and happily greets him. Once everyone is inside, she disappears into the small vat room and emerges with several glasses of wine to taste.

Giraud makes three red wines: a large cuvée made from 65 percent Grenache, and two small cuvées with 90 percent and 100 percent Grenache, respectively, sourced from 100-year-old parcels that Marie's great-grandfather planted. Fitting his size, Cambie always samples from a large glass with a healthy pour. He smiles as he tastes the 2009 Châteauneuf-du-Pape Les Gallimardes. He loves Grenache. He calls it the king of Rhône varieties, a grape that when grown properly offers the quintessential power with elegance that defines Châteauneuf.

When Cambie began helping Pierre, he brought the attention to detail and technical proficiency that a new winery needs. "My message is 'respect the grape,'" he says. Cambie added a vibrating sorting table so that only the best bunches made it into the vats. He put whole berries in the vats rather than crush them, believing that when fermentation begins with whole berries the process is slower and there is more fruit in the resulting wine. He used pump-overs during fermentation, which he believes extract tannins and color more gently than *pigeage*, or punch-downs. The Les Gallimardes 2008, from a weaker vintage in Châteauneuf, scored 94 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale.

"What is good is that Philippe just supports you," says Marie Giraud. "I make the wine I like. Sometimes we don't agree, and I do what I want. He supports, he does not impose."

"I don't mind being questioned, or evolving based on my clients," Cambie says. "Rugby will teach you humility quickly—rugby and my parents."

Not long after he started working with Giraud in 1998, Cambie



Pierre Giraud (left) of Domaine Giraud, with daughter Marie and son François, who are now in charge of operations. Giraud was Cambie's first client, when Pierre was making the transition from selling his grapes to estate bottling.

found his second client—an old friend and rugby fan, André Brunel of Les Cailloux. The following year, he added seven more, and the list kept growing.

In 2002, Vincent and Pascal Maurel, the brothers who own Clos St.-Jean, hired Cambie. They were impressed with his ideas and were eager to improve their winery. A few years earlier, they had struggled to find a new importer in Belgium and wondered why. When they tasted their wine alongside some of the best in Châteauneuf, they were horribly disappointed at how old-fashioned and flawed their wine tasted. Since Cambie's arrival, the wines have been transformed. The top cuvée in 2009, Sanctus Sanctorum, scored 95 points.

"Philippe is very demanding," says Vincent Maurel. "He's a perfectionist who succeeds because of his work in the vineyard. He calmly explains things, with diplomacy. He examines the land and finds its potential by studying the vines and tasting the wines they produce. Then he tries to make the most of what each area can give by adapting farming to each spot."

Another of his new clients around this time was Isabel Ferrando. Originally a banker, Ferrando decided to take the plunge into wine, first spending a few years working in Gigondas, learning the ropes, then buying Domaine St.-Préfert in Châteauneuf. A local restaurant owner recommended Cambie.

"Philippe visited the property and we talked for three hours," she recalls. "I told him about the wines that I loved and what I hoped to do. I had heard that he was very demanding and difficult, that he chose his clients. That was true. I often disagreed with Philippe, because we both have very strong personalities. But we always understood each other when it came to the essential: making wine of excellent quality."

Their first vintage working together was 2003, a year of incredible heat. Cambie told Ferrando not to water her vines—the opposite of what her neighbors were doing. He believed that her old vines had deep enough roots to withstand the drought without water. He also told her to delay picking, even when other properties were finished with harvest. Cambie's intuition proved right—



Cambie with Groupe ICV director Didier Robert in the ICV lab facility in Beaumes-de-Venise, which provides the technical support for Cambie's consulting accounts.

“Philippe is very demanding. He’s a perfectionist who examines the land and tries to make the most of what each area can give.” —VINCENT MAUREL

many properties picked grapes with plenty of sugar but unripe tannins, but his clients picked grapes that were completely ripe. In a vintage marked by variable quality, St.-Préfert’s Collection Charles Giraud cuvée scored 96 points.

Cambie has too many clients to stand still for long. An hour after he arrived at Domaine Giraud, he’s standing in a vineyard on the other side of town, with another client, Julien Bréchet, one of the young brothers who manages Château de Vaudieu. After taking over from a previous generation, Julien and his older brother Laurent hired Cambie, modernized the cellars and are shifting to organic viticulture in their 170 acres of vines. “Because the estate is large,” Julien explains, “we used to do the same thing in the vineyard everywhere. But you have 97 different types of soils at Vaudieu. So the first thing we worked on with Philippe was to design different approaches, parcel by parcel.”

Cambie is walking among the vines. What does he look for when he first visits a vineyard? “There’s a lot of intuition. It’s a combination of the potential of the *terroir*, the state of the vines, what grows nearby and, most importantly, whether I feel I have a partner to work with. You have hypotheses, and sometimes it works and sometimes you’re wrong. It takes four to five years to tell.”

In most cases, Cambie urges his clients to shift to organic viticulture. “For the plants, it’s important because it’s a good equilibrium for them. The objective is that the vines find the right balance, so man has to intervene as little as possible. I’m not a fundamentalist. I’m not saying that only organic farming can produce great wine.”

It can be hard for him to visit his clients outside the Rhône more than a few times a year, but parcels in Châteauneuf get constant attention. “I drive by every day, because I live in Châteauneuf,” he says, laughing. “Seriously though, I live in the vineyard. I’ll make a big visit to each vineyard four or five times a year, but in reality, I live in Châteauneuf, I am always here. Sometimes on Sunday mornings, I just drive around and look.”

“The most important decision is when to pick,” he says. “When most of the region has finished picking, I’m just starting.” Gassier remarks that that can drive clients crazy, as they wait and worry that they’ll lose their crop. Cambie will stop by almost every day and taste the grapes. “I’m tasting for ripe fruit, softer tannins, the skins grow softer,” he says. “If you can’t eat the grapes, they’re not ripe.”

After chatting with Bréchet, Cambie and Gassier head to the nearby town of Sorgues for lunch with six more clients at another of the consultant’s favorite haunts, Restaurant Gérard Alonso. Everyone has brought several bottles. It’s exactly the kind of meal Cambie enjoys—good food, good wine and smart people. He’ll often get clients together to taste and talk so that they can learn from one another.

It stems from his belief in collaboration. “Philippe always shares his experiences with other domaines,” says Ferrando. “Often, during vinification, this is very useful. Certain vintages share characteristics from one *cave* to another—alcoholic fermentation that stops abruptly at the same time across the appellation, very weak acidity for certain grape varieties—Philippe anticipates these problems by bringing his experience from one *cave* to another.”

Three hours later, lunch is over, but Cambie is still tasting. It’s exhausting even to watch. He’s getting over a cold, and at one point he breaks down coughing for a minute. He has to fly to Florida first thing in the morning, part of a sales trip to promote some wines. He works a grueling schedule even for a healthy man. “We are all concerned about his health, but we have to respect his choices the way he respects ours,” says Gassier later. “Philippe tries very hard—too hard—to help others.”

Sometimes that constant effort can hurt. In 2010, Ferrando ended



Cambie tastes with Michel Tardieu (left), of négociant Tardieu-Laurent, and Tardieu’s son, Bastien. Like most of Cambie’s clients, Tardieu is also a close friend.

her work with Cambie. She was ready, she says, to begin making more decisions on her own. But she also cites Cambie’s grueling schedule and his lack of concern for his own health; Ferrando didn’t think he could keep up. Cambie still comes to the winery every vintage to taste the blends and share his opinions. “Philippe is a loyal friend and we always enjoy seeing one another,” she says.

Cambie admits that he is obsessed with his work—he’s a perfectionist. “I am moody. I am tortured by my mistakes,” Cambie says. “In 2002, the harvest was horrible. I was sick the entire time. I hate to lose.” But he says he is trying to take things easier, trimming his schedule. Across the table, Gassier chuckles and says, “He’s lying.”

Taking things easy just isn’t in Philippe Cambie’s nature. He goes into everything as a competitor. Making wine is his sport, his life. He’s a lifelong bachelor—“Rugby is not a good life for marriage”—and while he’s close with his brother, Gilles, a biology professor who also lives in the south, his clients are his family and his friends.

Seeing the effect he has on people and their wines, it’s hard to imagine what Châteauneuf would be like if he weren’t there, pushing, driving, shouldering the load. In many ways, Cambie is still the prop, pushing the scrum ever forward.

THE LONG AND TALENTED REACH OF PHILIPPE CAMBIE

Enologist Philippe Cambie is one of the most sought-after consultants in Châteauneuf-du-Pape today, who also extends his efforts to outlying regions of the Southern Rhône Valley and beyond. Representing a wide range of styles, many of the 50-plus properties under his guidance are making exciting wines. Here is a look at several of Cambie's top projects.

DOMAINE LES APHILLANTHES

Fourth-generation vigneron Daniel Boule's 116 acres of vines are situated on the fine sandy, red clay and gravel soils around the hamlet of Travaillan, just west of the town of Cairanne. Boule has worked with Cambie since 2005. While farming biodynamically, Boule has used Cambie's help to create his own domaine, having previously sold his grapes to the local co-operative. The wines debuted under their own label in the '99 vintage and have quickly established a track record for superb value.

Côtes du Rhône-Villages Cairanne L'Ancestrale du Puits 2009	90	\$27
Côtes du Rhône-Villages Le Cros 2010	90	\$24
Côtes du Rhône-Villages Vieilles Vignes 2010	91	\$27

CLOS ST.-JEAN

Run by brothers Vincent and Pascal Maurel, this domaine represents one of the most dramatic turnaround stories of any of Cambie's clients.



Pascal (left) and Vincent Maurel of Clos St.-Jean

Founded by the Maurels' grandfather in 1910, nearly two-thirds of the domaine's 108 acres of vines are in the prized La Crau sector. Historically the wines were made in a tannic, rustic style and released years after the vintage, but the Maurels made a 180-degree swing after hiring Cambie, starting in 2003. He helped convince them to shift to destemming for silkier texture, while focusing on the best portions of their vineyards. Yields and total production are low for an estate this size (some of the crop is still sold off as well), and today the wines are some of the most sought-after Châteauneufs around.

Châteauneuf-du-Pape Deus Ex Machina 2009	94	\$100
Châteauneuf-du-Pape La Combe des Fous 2009	94	\$100
Châteauneuf-du-Pape Sanctus Sanctorum 2009	95	\$300
Châteauneuf-du-Pape Vieilles Vignes 2009	91	\$55
Châteauneuf-du-Pape White 2010	91	\$70

DOMAINE DES ESCARAVAILLES

One of Cambie's first clients was Gilles Ferran, whose 173 acres of vineyards are located at 750 to 900 feet of elevation in the hills around the town of Rasteau. Ferran, who joined his family estate in 1987, eventually connected with Cambie, and the two worked together to debut Ferran's Escaravailles label in the 1999 vintage, with just over 1,650 cases. Today, Ferran produces a hefty 20,800 cases annually, with several releases available for less than \$25 a bottle.

Côtes du Rhône Les Antimagnes 2009	90	\$18
Côtes du Rhône Les Sablières 2009	90	\$15
Côtes du Rhône White Galopine 2010	90	\$35
Côtes du Rhône-Villages Cairanne La Boutine 2009	91	\$39
Côtes du Rhône-Villages Rasteau Héritage 1924 2009	91	\$30
Côtes du Rhône-Villages Rasteau La Ponce 2009	91	\$24
Côtes du Rhône-Villages Roaix Les Hautes Granges 2009	91	\$30

DOMAINE GIRAUD

This family-run domaine mirrors a transition common in the region over the past couple of decades, as the Giraud family has switched to making its own wines rather than selling its production to négociants. The brother-and-sister team of François and Marie Giraud work alongside their father, Pierre, and have quickly risen to prominence in the appellation thanks to their powerful yet pure bottlings of Grenache. There are three cuvées of red, based on various vineyard parcels.

Châteauneuf-du-Pape Les Gallimardes 2009	94	\$60
Châteauneuf-du-Pape Les Grenaches de Pierre 2008	92	\$75
Châteauneuf-du-Pape Tradition 2009	93	\$45
Châteauneuf-du-Pape White Les Gallimardes 2010	92	\$60

PHILIPPE CAMBIE

This is Cambie's personal label. It debuted in the 2007 vintage, skipped the difficult '08 vintage and then returned in full with the '09 harvest. Cambie sources wine from some of the clients he works with, but guards their identity. The wines, which often emphasize Grenache in the blend, are aged and bottled at Michel Gassier's Château de Nages in Costières de Nîmes.

Châteauneuf-du-Pape Les Halos de Jupiter 2009	93	\$65
Châteauneuf-du-Pape Les Halos de Jupiter Adrastée 2009	93	\$68

Costières de Nîmes Les Halos de Jupiter 2009	88	\$20
Côtes du Rhône Les Halos de Jupiter 2009	90	\$23
Côtes du Rhône-Villages Rasteau Les Halos de Jupiter 2009	90	\$33
Gigondas Les Halos de Jupiter 2009	89	\$40
Vacqueyras Les Halos de Jupiter 2009	90	\$37

MICHEL GASSIER

Michel Gassier is one of Cambie's closest friends. Gassier grew up in a farming family and eventually inherited the fruit-and-vineyard business that his great-grandfather started in the 1940s. Today, Château de Nages, located in Costières de Nîmes at the southern frontier of the Rhône, still has its orchard business, run by Michel's brother, Bertrand. The vineyards are Michel's passion and he's taken a new approach to winemaking since Cambie's arrival in 2006, looking for minerality and freshness in the estate reds and whites. This is one of Cambie's higher-volume clients, making 50,000 cases annually, one-third of which is exported to the United States.

Costières de Nîmes Lou Coucardié White 2010	90	\$30
Costières de Nîmes Nostre País White 2010	90	\$20
Costières de Nîmes White Château de Nages JT 2010	91	\$22
Costières de Nîmes White Château de Nages Vieilles Vignes 2010	89	\$18
Syrah Costières de Nîmes Les Piliers 2009	87	\$18

—James Molesworth



Michel and Tina Gassier of Château de Nages

THE WINES OF PHILIPPE CAMBIE

Philippe Cambie currently consults for more than 60 properties, listed alphabetically below, with the year he began working for that producer given in parentheses. Above and opposite, you'll find brief profiles of five of his top clients and his eponymous label.

CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE

Domaine Barville (2006)
 Domaine Bosquet des Papes (2006)
 Château Cabrières (2010)
 Les Cailloux / Lucien & André Brunel (1999)
 Clos du Caillou (2001)
 Clos St.-Jean (2002)
 Colombis (2004)
 Domaine La Consonniere (2007)
 Château de la Font du Loup (2000)
 Domaine Giraud (1998)
 Domaine Grand Tinel (2000)
 Domaine Olivier Hillaire (2000)
 Cave Jamet (2008)
 Domaine Patrice Magni (2000)
 Domaine du Merle (2000)
 Domaine de Monpertuis / Paul Jeune (2000)
 Clos Mont Olivet (1999)
 Domaine Porte Rouge (2003)
 Le Puy Rolland (2000)
 Vignoble Jean Royer (2000)
 Clos St.-Paul (2000)
 Domaine des Senechaux (2006)
 Château de Vaudieu (2003)
 Le Vieux Donjon (2000)
 Domaine de Villeneuve (1999)

CORSICA

Domaine la Punta (2009)

COSTIÈRES DE NÎMES

Château de Nages / Michel Gassier (2006)

COTEAUX D'AIX

Château Paradis (2005)

COTEAUX DU TRICASTIN

Château Bizard (2009)

CÔTES DU RHÔNE-VILLAGES

Domaine Les Aphillanthes (2004)
 Domaine Boisson (1998)
 Domaine du Bramadou (2006)
 Domaine Cros de Romet (1998)
 Domaine de Dionysos (2001)
 Domaine Galuval (2009)
 Domaine La Manarine (2001)
 Domaine Roche (2009)
 Domaine Rouvre St.-Leger (2008)
 L'Oratoire St.-Martin (2000)
 Tardieu-Laurent (2000)

CÔTES DU VENTOUX

Domaine de la Bastidonne (2000)
 Château Juvenal (2011)
 Domaine de Marotte (2000)

GIGONDAS

Domaine des Bosquets (2004)
 Domaine des Florets (2010)

Domaine La Garrigue (1998)
 Domaine de Longue Toque (2009)
 Maison Gabriel Meffre (2009)
 Domaine St.-Damien (1998)

LANGUEDOC

Château Castigno (2006)
 Château Puech-Haut (2009)

LIRAC AND TAVEL

Domaine Duseigneur (2007)
 Domaine Maby Rue St.-Vincent (2011)

MACEDONIA

Tikves Winery AD Skopje (2009)

PRIORAT

Bodegas Mas Alta (2004)

PROVENCE

Domaine du Garde Temps (2007)

RASTEAU

Domaine La Collière (2002)
 Domaine des Coteaux des Travers (2000)
 Domaine des Escaravilles (1999)
 Domaine de Fond Croze (2008)
 Domaine Grand Nicolet (1999)

VINSOBRES

Domaine Constant-Duquesnoy (2007)