

## DOMAINE FRANÇOIS COTAT'S LONG-LIVED AND BRILLIANT SANCERRE



The Cotat family of Chavignol have been the most famous producers in Sancerre for many, many years. François Cotat and his cousin, Pascal, currently carry on the legacy of the Cotat family in the village of Chavignol, after having split up the family legacy of vineyards, with François being the one who has retained the *cuvier* and cellars previously inhabited by his father and uncle, Paul and Francis Cotat. During their careers Paul and Francis Cotat became the most highly-regarded producers in all of Sancerre by producing long-lived and *terroir*-driven wines that transcended the popular notion regarding Sancerre as a light-hearted, early drinking and vivacious example of sauvignon blanc that was never meant for the cellar. The Cotat family has always produced wines in the great tradition of Chavignol of yesteryear, with the wines starting out life structured, reticent and rock solid and emphatically demanding bottle age to start to show their true colors. François Cotat has continued the family tradition quite faithfully, making the wines in the exact same fashion as his father and uncle did during their careers before him, with the wines barrel-fermented, aged in ancient *foudres* and casks prior to bottling and demanding plenty of time in the cellar to blossom. In contrast, cousin Pascal Cotat has changed things just a bit in his own cellars (located in the town of Sancerre) compared to his father's era, so that the wines from the half of the domaine that he inherited when the two cousins went their

separate ways are slightly different than those of the previous generation, albeit, still excellent in quality. I will be working on a feature on the wines of Pascal Cotat in the months to come, but for the moment, this article focuses on the utterly classical wines of his cousin, François Cotat.

François Cotat first began working alongside of his father and uncle back in 1979 and he and his cousin Pascal split up the family vineyards in 1998, upon the official retirement of the previous generation. François Cotat had already become the *de facto* winemaker of the family domaine prior to its being split up between him and his cousin, as his father and uncle essentially handed over the winemaking to him here in the 1995 vintage. Pascal and his father Francis took parcels in the Monts Damnés in Chavignol and Grande Côte in Amigny from the shared family vineyards, while François and his father Paul retained the small parcel of vines in the Culs de Beaujeu in Chavignol, as well as their portion of the parcels in the other two vineyards. François Cotat now farms four hectares in the villages of Chavignol and Amigny, with three and a half hectares planted to sauvignon blanc and half a hectare to pinot noir, from which he produces both a Sancerre Rosé and a tiny amount of Sancerre Rouge. The pinot noir vines are not planted on the steep slopes of the hillside that towers over the center of town and houses the Monts Damnés and Culs de Beaujeu vineyards, but rather on the flatter section of Chavignol to the east of the center of the village, on the chalky small stones that *vignerons* in the area call *les Caillottes*. This total of four hectares under vine for François Cotat also includes a bit of new vineyard land that he has purchased since he and cousin Pascal went their separate ways in 1998, as François has now added a fourth bottling of Sancerre to his lineup, called “Caillottes”, which is from younger vines planted again on this chalky, flatter vineyard land that lies between Chavignol and the town of Sancerre. The first vintage of the Caillottes bottling *chez* Cotat was in 2005, but I have never had the pleasure to taste an example of this cuvée.

François had already been the winemaker at the family domaine for many years, taking over the primary responsibilities for this from his father in 1987 (with the watchful eyes of his father and uncle always looking over his shoulder to assist if need be), and as noted above, François Cotat has continued to work out of the family’s previous cellars and winery in the center of the village of Chavignol. Towards the latter part of the Paul and Francis Cotat era, the family domaine began to commercialize wines under three different labels (perhaps anticipating the eventual separation of the family vineyards into two domaines), with the wines sometimes labeled as Paul Cotat, Francis Cotat or François Cotat, but all having been made together in the family cellars by François in this era. It was the French tax authorities questioning the variations on labels hailing from a single cellar location that eventually led to the official change in generation and the divvying up of the Cotat family’s vineyards between François and Pascal in the latter half of the 1990s. The original family cellars are promoted in the classic, old school French style, reflecting the long-time popularity and reputation of the Cotat family’s wines, as there is no placard announcing the domaine’s presence at the end of the short alleyway just past the church in Chavignol where they are located and one simply has to know where they are headed for visits to the domaine. I have not been to the domaine since the summer of 2007, but on the day that I visited, the flowers were brightly in bloom around the doorway, Madame Cotat was sweeping the entryway in the bright morning sun, but there was a flattened cardboard case box with “*Fermé*” hand-painted on it lying against the door to the *cuvierie*, trying to discourage visitors without an appointment. That said, the welcome from François Cotat and his gracious mother that summer morning was warm and convivial. In fact, Monsieur Cotat was very

generous with his time during our tasting in Chavignol, as we spent several hours tasting through the newest vintages and several older bottles as well. I cannot believe that nearly a decade has rolled by since I was last tasting here *sur place*, and I hope to remedy this in the near future.

Despite the towering reputation of the Cotat domaine in the pantheon of Sancerre, this is not an ancient domaine by any stretch of the imagination, as Paul and Francis Cotat were only the second generation of their family to bottle their own wines in Chavignol, starting their careers just after the end of World War II. Their first vintage working with their uncle was 1947. The two boys had been adopted by their uncle, Ferdinand Cotat, who was a *vigneron* in Chavignol, after their father had passed away at a young age (presumably during the war), and it was through their uncle that Paul and Francis became *vignerons* in their own rights and eventually came to become the most famous producers in all of Sancerre. Their father had made wine as well prior to his untimely passing, but his generation has been the first in the Cotat family to sell wine directly to clients, as previous generations had farmed in the area, but principally sold off their production in bulk. The small parcel of Culs de Beaujeu that the family owns was bought *en friche* by Tonton Ferdinand Cotat and planted by him in the early years after the end of the Second World War. During the era when Paul and Francis ran their domaine (up through 1997), it was Paul Cotat and his family who lived at the small house attached to the cellars in the center of Chavignol (where François Cotat continues to make his wines), while Francis Cotat and his wife lived in the town of Sancerre. It was during the 1960s and 1970s that the wines from Paul and Francis Cotat began to really garner a stellar local reputation for their high quality. The two Cotat brothers continued to make their wines in the traditional manner of Chavignol, with low yields, barrel fermentation and extended *elevage* prior to bottling, completely ignored the modern trends in Sancerre that emerged in the '60s and '70s to increase yields in the vineyards, ferment in stainless steel and bottle fairly early in the spring after the harvest, so that the new vintage could be rushed to the thirsty Parisians who fancied Sancerre as their white wine of choice in the bistros and brasseries of the City of Light.

Like Edmond Vatan at this time, Paul and Francis Cotat eschewed the more commercial style of Sancerre that grew up in those years, preferring to make wines in the ancient method that had made the white wines of Chavignol so famous for hundreds of years prior to Paris adopting Sancerre as its white wine *quaff* of choice, which meant restraining yields dramatically from what was becoming the modern norm, picking late for proper ripeness, only growing grapes in the great, hillside vineyards of Chavignol and Amigny and fermenting and aging the wines in large old barrels to produce a true *vins de gardes* style that demanded proper cellaring prior to drinking the wines. The Cotat brothers built up a loyal clientele over the course of their careers, with top restaurants clamoring for their wines for their wine lists and private clients very happy to be given an allocation each year. In addition to the three white wines that Paul and Francis Cotat jointly produced during their era (Monts Damnés, Culs de Beaujeu and La Grande Côte), they also produced a Sancerre Rosé and a very small amount of Sancerre rouge as well, which was primarily retained for family consumption and a few lucky private clients. François Cotat has continued this family tradition, which includes making anywhere from three hundred to nine hundred bottles of his rare Sancerre *rouge*, depending on the size of the pinot noir crop each year (most of the pinot noir here is still retained to produce the domaine's amazingly fine Sancerre Rosé bottling), with the red wine not undergoing malolactic fermentation and one of the longest-lived *vins rouges* of Sancerre, as well as one of the most unique. It is such a rare wine that I have

only tasted it once in my long career in wine, having happily drunk a bottle of the 1983 *rouge* at the Restaurant La Tour in Sancerre way back in the late 1980s. It is a very unique example of pinot noir and needs a couple of hours in decanter prior to serving (we decanted ours prior to ordering a white wine or our menu on that memorable evening in Sancerre, with the winter wind howling outside the windows and a wood fire crackling on the hearth- it was the perfect red wine choice).



*François Crochet (right) and my good friend, Sasha Katsman, waiting for the Chavignol Rosé to chill.*

When it came time to split up the family vineyards in 1998, due to the pressures from the French tax authorities, Francis Cotat set up a small cellar at his home in Sancerre to vinify that first harvest, as his son Pascal, who has his own business doing auto body work (primarily focused on restoring classic old cars) was not yet ready to take on the winemaking duties for his and his father's share of the family vineyards. For that reason, Pascal did not make and bottle his first wines until the 1999 vintage, receiving plenty of assistance for the first few years from his father. Today, Pascal Cotat has a small *cuvierie* and cellars established at the location of his auto body shop in the town of Sancerre. In the meantime, François Cotat has continued to make his side of the family wines at the original domaine in the center of Chavignol, with only his recent decision to start picking a bit earlier in the last couple of vintages being the sole change he has executed from the winegrowing philosophies that he learned from his father and uncle in their day. These precepts will sound familiar to those who recall the article on Edmond Vatan-

continuing to crop at low yields, hand-harvesting all the fruit, fermenting in old casks with indigenous yeasts, racking by the lunar cycle and bottling without fining or filtration. When Francis Cotat is asked about his viticultural practices, he will say that he likes to practice an enlightened form of organic farming, as he is not certified and will certainly use the means necessary to save a crop in a very difficult growing season, but in principle only organic methods are used in the vineyards. His father and uncle were renowned for harvesting later than anyone in Chavignol, with the exception of their good friend Edmond Vatan, and François followed this practice for the first fifteen years of his time as the sole proprietor of the domaine. However, as Gérard Boulay reported in the last issue of the newsletter, in the last few years, Francis Cotat has begun to pick a week or two earlier than before, in an attempt to counterbalance some of the effects of climate change.

Once the grapes are pressed in the ancient, old wooden mechanical press (which Paul and Francis Cotat used back in the day and which François continues to use for his own wines), the wines are fermented in very old *demi-muids*, which must be at least fifty years of age (and perhaps older) judging from their appearance when I was last at the domaine. Like the fermentation vessels used by Edmond Vatan, these old *demi-muids chez* Cotat are completely encrusted with tartrate crystals on the interior. All of the cuvées are handled identically in the cellars. After their alcoholic fermentations, the wines are racked in January into older, 225 liter barrels for their *elevage*, which will generally last until the new moon in May, when they are racked a final time into *foudres* for final settling prior to bottling. As is the case with Edmond Vatan as well, the lunar calendar decides when a wine will be racked by Monsieur Cotat, as he finds that the young wines in cask are very much in harmony with the cycles of the moon. After three to four weeks of settling after this racking, the wines are hand bottled without fining or filtration. During the fermentation, Francis Cotat will utilize chapitalization if he feels it is necessary in a given vintage (no vintage has needed chapitalization here since 2004, thanks to global warming) and on occasion, this has run afoul of the INAO officials in the region. Ostensibly, this is because no wine in Sancerre can be chapitalized and retain any residual sugar in the wines, which is often the case with the wines from Monsieur Cotat (particularly up to a couple of years ago, when he was still harvesting at the later dates championed by his father and uncle in their day), and François Cotat was denied the use of the Sancerre appellation in both the 1998 and 2002 vintages! Not that it really mattered to him or his clients, as both vintages produced excellent wines and he had no difficulties selling every bottle he produced in brisk fashion, despite the fact that he was not allowed to call the wines “Sancerre”. But, this is always the case here, as the domaine has legions of fans whose demand far outstrips the production from these four hectares of vineyard land.

The amount of residual sugar in the wines here in recent times, as well as the alcohol levels in certain vintages has been higher than in the past, and clearly François Cotat has taken some thought about these elements in his wines in our present age of global warming. The move to start picking at least a week earlier in the last couple of years is a quite welcome change, as the most recent vintages that I tasted for this report did seem a bit ripe and also a bit sweet to my palate, and this has not always been the case with the young wines from Monsieur Cotat. This perception, of course, varies from vineyard to vineyard, as the cooler microclimate of the Culs de Beaujeu (with its northwesterly exposition) does not show this effect from climate change as dramatically as do the more “solar” vineyards of the Monts Damnés in Chavignol and La Grande

Côte in Amigny (both of these vineyards face due south), which has been particularly riper in recent times than was the case a couple of decades ago- with the exception of extraordinarily ripe past growing seasons such as 1989. Of the two due south-facing vineyards, Monts Damnés and La Grande Côte, it is the latter which seems to be the wine that shows the higher alcohol in recent times. I would attribute the higher sugar accumulations in La Grande Côte to the ease of ripening here, as Monsieur Cotat has had to replant a portion of this vineyard in the last fifteen years or so, with the sixty year-old vines that used to be planted across the board in La Grande Côte now augmented by some younger vines as well. Today, the average age of vines in La Grande Côte is around twenty years of age, so one can see that a sizable portion of the parcel has been replanted. In contrast, the average overall vine age in his parcels of Monts Damnés is thirty years of age, and perhaps the contribution of some younger vines in La Grande Côte have played a role in the higher alcohol levels here in the warmer growing seasons of contemporary times.

However, when one speaks the roles of residual sugar and higher alcohol levels in the wines from François Cotat, one does have to keep in mind that these two characteristics will often seem quite striking in certain vintages- when the wines are young- but, that these elements seem to fade to the background as the years roll by and the wines transform with bottle age. I look back at my notes on the domaine's wines from vintages like 2004 when they were first released and I see myself commenting about the residual sugar in the young wines, but in our pair of recent vertical tastings that formed the foundation for this report, this was imperceptible to my palate in this vintage, as other elements in the wine have come to the fore with bottle age. Based on how beautifully wines like the 2004s and 2005s from François Cotat were showing at our spring tastings, it is likely that younger ripe vintages like the 2012s will also come nicely into a harmonious balance a decade or more down the road. For despite the two elements of occasional residual sugar and higher octane being parts of the equation in several recent vintages from the domaine, they are hardly the dominant themes in a mature example, as it is the extraordinary minerality and raciness of these wines which are their defining elements when fully mature. Given plenty of experience now, I generally try not to open any bottle from François Cotat until the wine has had at least a decade's worth of bottle age out from the vintage. In very top years, this is really only the beginning of its approachability, and in great vintages like 2005, the wines are not going to reach their ultimate apogees until at least twenty years has passed. This is also the same for the wines from Edmond Vatan. And once a wine from François Cotat has reached its plateau of maturity, it will remain here for decades and decades, and fifty or more years of potential longevity is the rule here, rather than the exception.

As I mentioned above, François Cotat has just started to pick a bit earlier than had been the family tradition dating back to the days when his father and uncle ran the family domaine, as the very real changes in our global weather patterns in the last couple of decades were producing more vintages in Chavignol with unprecedented levels of sugar in the grapes. He has only done so in the last few vintages in response to the realization that global warming is here to stay and picking at the traditional dates was producing wines that were higher in alcohol than he would like, as well as still often endowed with some residual sugar. As I alluded to in the introduction, such vintages were rare occurrences in the past, with an occasional vintage such as 1989 only coming along every twenty or twenty-five years, but in the twenty-first century, vintages like 2002, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2010 and 2012 have all seen soaring sugar levels from the Cotat family parcels. In the past, François Cotat, or his father and uncle before him, would make a separate

bottling of the ripest grapes, which would be called “Cuvée Spéciale”. In the old days, the Cuvée Spéciale would normally hail from the last-picked or botrytized grapes in La Grande Côte in extraordinary years, but as sugars began to mount everywhere in our era of climate change, it was not practical to make more Cuvée Spéciale and less of the other bottlings and starting to pick a bit earlier was the logical response. But, one should not underestimate how difficult this decision must have been for François Cotat to take, as tradition here is the river on which the Cotat boat has floated for three generations, and given the long, long line of utterly remarkable wines fashioned here by the family as the decades have rolled by, changing traditional practices can only have been resorted to when all other possibilities were examined and rejected.



*Looking down on the village of Chavignol from the top of the Monts Damnés.*

To underscore the serious impact of climate change in the last several years on the wines from François Cotat and his neighbors, one need only to look at the frequency of the late-harvest bottlings produced at the domaine in the last decade or so. The Cuvée Spéciale was produced by the domaine in 1989 and then again in 1995 and 1996 (a botrytis year), prior to François and Pascal Cotat splitting up the family vineyards between them in 1998. Starting in 1999, François changed the name of this bottling at his domaine to Cuvée Paul to pay homage to his father. He has produced his Cuvée Paul bottling in 1999, 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2010 since the name change, which clearly reflects the rather profound effect that global warming has had here in Chavignol, as it has in all of the wine-producing regions of Europe in the last couple of decades.

I would be very surprised if the growing frequency of these later-harvested, sweeter bottlings of Sancerre were a result of market demand and Monsieur Cotat just deciding to produce more of these styled wines for clients; to my mind it is very clearly a reflection of global warming. It is logical to recognize the increase in the number of these special cuvées as an attempt to deal with the much warmer growing conditions found in Sancerre in recent times and channeling the ripest grapes here into a separate bottling, so as to try and maintain the size, shape and classic Cotat profile of the traditional bottlings at the estate. With luck, starting to harvest just a bit earlier than in his father's and uncle's era will allow François Cotat to hold at bay at least some of the effects of climate change in his wines in the present day and we will see more grapes going into their traditional single vineyard bottlings in the coming vintages.

When one looks at just the first decade of the twenty-first century at Domaine François Cotat, with very warm vintages represented in 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2009 and 2010, it is very clear that global warming has changed the equation here quite a bit from the days of Paul and Francis Cotat. While I like all of these vintages from François to varying degrees (with the exception of the 2003s) and feel that it would be foolhardy to bet against their eventually evolving into really good wines, one does have to wonder what the impact will be on the potential longevity of the wines from these very hot growing seasons. Traditionally, fifty to seventy-five years (or more?) of life in the bottle seems to have been the norm in the past *chez* Cotat, but will this still be the case with wines that are riper, such as the vintages listed above? While labeling is never quite precise when it comes to stated octane of a given wine, as the French government gives a half a degree swing in either direction from the stated level on the label (so that a wine listed at thirteen percent could legally range from 12.5 to 13.5 percent), I did notice over the course of my tastings for this article that at the tail end of the twentieth century, the vintages here generally were listed at 12.5 or thirteen percent, but we have the 2009s listed at 14.5 percent (and even fifteen percent for the *Monts Damnés!*), and the 2006s and 2010s all listed at 13.5 percent (and probably actually coming in a touch higher than that), so one has to wonder how this aspect will affect their potential longevity. Having a bit of residual sugar in the wines in the riper vintages has often been part of the Cotat house style, and I am less concerned with how these recent vintages with a bit of sweetness will evolve over their cellaring, given that sweeter wines in the past evolved beautifully, but instinctively, I have to bet that the higher alcohol levels may take a few decades of potential longevity away from some of these wines. Only time will tell.

The discussion of the challenge of trying to cope with the serious impact of climate change in Chavignol, should not detract from the fact that François Cotat, like his father and uncle before him, has an amazingly impressive track record for producing great wines in each and every vintage- no matter what Mother Nature has in store each year. When I first began drinking the wines from the family in the early 1980s, we used to focus especially on the riper vintages in the region as the "best", so that years such as 1985, 1989 and 1990 were singled out as the finest produced at the domaine. However, as my experience with these wines has grown over the years, I now realize that this was probably not a very useful or accurate approach to the wines from the Cotat family. In recent times, I have had the good fortune to try bottles of Domaine Cotat wines from vintages that were less ripe than the so-called "great years" from this era, and some of the most hauntingly beautiful bottles of wine I have tasted from the Cotat family and Edmond Vatan from this era have been years that started out their lives tightly-knit, a



bit “green” from less overt ripeness and quite reserved in profile, such as 1988 and 1993, but which blossomed with sufficient bottle age to be amongst the most beautiful bottles of mature Chavignol that I have had the pleasure to drink. Their expressions of their underlying *terroir* are different than in the riper years like 1989 or 1990, but no less magical and simply represent a different facet of the beauty of the marriage of the sauvignon blanc grape and these complex soils. I would expect a year like 1998 here to perform similarly and be absolutely stunning when fully mature.

In the last issue, I wrote about the superb wines of Gérard Boulay in Chavignol, and how his wines evolved over extended time in the bottle, transforming from very high quality, but rather classic expressions of Sancerre in their relative youth into wines that were more fully defined by their underlying Chavignol *terroir* once they had seen twelve or fifteen years in the bottle. This evolutionary pattern for Monsieur Boulay’s wines, moving from rather “typical” Sancerre tones of green apple, gooseberry, lime, cut grass and chalky soil tones into the more profound signature elements of the great hillside vineyards of Chavignol (smokiness, citrus peel, beeswax, botanicals and far more pronounced limestone minerality), is not generally emulated with the wines from François Cotat, which will often start out life with more of these latter elements in evidence from the very beginning. This is especially true of the Culs de Beaujeu and La Grande Côte bottlings from François, with perhaps his Monts Damnés bottling a bit more cut along the lines of the wines from Monsieur Boulay in their collective youth. The family tradition of cropping at very low yields and raising the wines in the cellar in old casks and *foudres*, not to mention bottling without filtration, gives the wines of François Cotat a very different textural feel on the palate right from the outset, as well as more Chavignol character right from the moment of their release. They also tend to be far more closed out of the blocks than any other wines produced in Sancerre today, with the possible exception of the wines from Edmond and Anne Vatan.

François Cotat’s wines are unequivocally made for long-term aging, and as I mentioned above, one really should try to not open any bottles in the cellar until the wines are at least ten years of age, as this is where they first start to stir and blossom a bit from behind their excellent structures of youth. Early on, the wines here can be rather inexpressive on the nose, as they show only a small percentage of their future aromatic complexity out of the blocks, and though the bouquet of a young François Cotat wine is far from unappealing, it only hints at the depths that will emerge with sufficient bottle age. On the palate, this is true as well, with the wines starting out life tight, rock solid at the core, snappy with outstanding acids and having an almost “oily” texture behind the serious girdle of acidity with which each and every François Cotat wines begins its journey in bottle. On the one occasion that I have tasted here *sur place* back in 2006, I found that the wines were (not surprisingly) far more expressive out of cask than they are in their early years after bottling, with more of the wine’s true character in evidence when they are still resting comfortably in the cellars. Bottling here is very gentle, with the wines bottled by hand and even corked by hand, so it is not a traumatic bottling process that causes them to close down so profoundly, but rather just the transition from their more spacious surroundings in cask to the confines of individual bottles. As I alluded to above, François Cotat racks and bottles his wines according the phases of the moon to allow the wines to be disrupted as little as possible by these two processes, in the tried and true traditional method of the region that is also still followed by Edmond and Anne Vatan at their own small domaine around the corner.

Once the wines from François Cotat really reach their apogees and blossom, they are the paradigm of Chavignol *terroir*, with fruit tones of lime, pear and citrus augmented by smoky scents, beeswax, kaleidoscopic minerality, petrol, anise and lovely botanicals. To my palate, the arrival of the beeswax note in the wines from the domaine is really the harbinger that they have arrived at their plateaus of maturity and are really and truly ready to drink. Once they are open and starting to hit on all cylinders, the wines from Domaine François Cotat have a very, very long life ahead of them and fifty years out from this moment of blossoming seems like the minimum potential of their longevity. I have never had the luck to drink really old bottles from the Cotat family, but there are reports in the region of wines going back to the earliest vintages after the second world war that are still cruising along beautifully and showing no signs of decline, so there is emphatically no rush to drink these beautiful wines once they hit their plateaus. The notes below are divided up by bottling, with the three single vineyard Sancerre Blanc bottlings listed first, followed by François Cotat's incomparable and also very, very ageworthy Sancerre Rosé. I do not have any notes on the newest of his wines, the Les Caillottes, produced from his new vineyards on the flatter vineyards east of the hillside that houses the Monts Damnés and Culs de Beaujeu, and as I mentioned above, I do not have any recent notes on the very rare Sancerre *rouge* from the domaine.

I should take a moment here to discuss this unique Sancerre Rouge bottling *chez* Cotat, as the domaine was very kind to answer my questions about the wine. As only a small percentage of the pinot noir production is dedicated to red wine here, which is not too surprising, given how utterly magical the Sancerre Rosé is from François Cotat, the production levels vary depending upon the size of the pinot noir crop. Given that the Rosé is made in the same, old, crystal-encrusted *demi-muid* each year, Monsieur Cotat has to ensure that he has enough pinot noir to fill the vessel each harvest for fermentation and aging, and whatever is surplus above this quantity is what is earmarked for the *vin rouge*. If the production numbers are closer to the three hundred bottle level (a single cask), the family keeps it all for their own consumption over the years, but if it ranges up to the two or three barrel level, then some is made available to the domaine's long-time clients. As the red wine does not undergo malolactic fermentation in barrel (which would cause a problem in the cellars, as the *vins blancs* do not undergo malo and the existence of malolactic bacteria here would not be a good thing) and is bottled without fining or filtration, there have been vintages where the wine underwent malo in bottle! As I have only had that lone bottle of the 1983 *vin rouge* from the domaine all those years ago, I do not have any experience with the reds that have undergone their malo in bottle, but I am told that if given a decade's worth of bottle age and then decanted for several hours prior to serving, they are also very, very good. The domaine offers the red wine to its best customers in small quantities in the vintages where there is enough to share on the understanding that they could undergo malo in bottle, and that this is a shared risk and no bottles are to be returned down the road. No one seems to mind the arrangement. It is a red wine as unique as that of Edmond Vatan and very much worth trying if one is lucky enough to stumble across a rare bottle.

Putting this article together has been a great pleasure, as is served as great reminder of my old friend Joe Dougherty, who was one of the most passionate collectors of the wines of both Cotat cousins that I have ever met. In fact, the last time we got together, he was characteristically offering a glass out of a magnum of the 1989 Monts Damnés from the Cotats, while manning the

grill! Joe was a very modest guy, and I have little doubt that his personality resonated with the Cotat family during his visits to the domaine during the course of his life. For the Cotats are very much like so many of the French *vignerons* that I got to know in my early days visiting the top domaines of France and tasting *sur place*. They are a humble and private family, shy to all of the attention that has been washing up to their steps for many decades now, but with a great generosity underneath which is very much evident once one has gotten to know them a little bit. Having only visited with François Cotat and his lovely mother on a single occasion in his cellars back in 2006, I can only claim to have seen a page or two out of the family book, but their style is something I very much recognize and respect from other families of a similar temperament that I have gotten to know a bit over the years. This was the traditional way of life in the wine regions of France in the past (with the exceptions of the more commercially-oriented regions of Bordeaux and Champagne back in the old days), where one took the time to slowly get to know the *vignerons* over the course of cellar visits though the years. For their part, the best producers made wines the way their fathers and grandfathers had done before them, feeling the sense of trusteeship of the great *terroirs* in which their vines were planted, and maximizing these to the best of their abilities, because “it was the right thing to do.” In a nutshell, this is what François Cotat has continued to do since he took over his share of the family vineyards in 1998, and what his father Paul and uncle Francis did for nearly fifty years before him. No doubt, *Tonton* Ferdinand Cotat did the same thing himself back in his own time. It is a way of life that one sees less and less in the modern age, but it continues to resonate its value profoundly, despite the fact that it is currently so out of fashion. We are very fortunate to still be able to taste a bit of these honest and time-tested values with which the Cotat family lives, every time we open a bottle of their magical wine. Maybe with time, more of us will find our way back to the garden.

### ***François Cotat Sancerre “Monts Damnés”***

The Monts Damnés bottling from François Cotat is his most forward cuvée of the three that he produces from the family’s original vines in the steep hillside vineyards in Chavignol and Amigny. The vines here average thirty years of age, which puts them in their prime right now and the wine is consistently excellent, year in and year out. François Cotat has just over a hectare of vines here in the Monts Damnés these days, after splitting up the family vineyard patrimony in this vineyard with his cousin Pascal in 1998. With its due south exposition, this wine is always a bit more expressive out of the blocks than either the Culs de Beaujeu or the Grande Côte, so when Cotat temptation strikes when I am down in my cellar, I try to at least limit my visits of infanticide to this bottling from the domaine, as it shows the best in its early years after bottling. The Monts Damnés is the heart of the outcropping of Kimmeridgian Limestone that defines the wines of Chavignol (and neighboring Grande Côte in Amigny), which the *Sancerrois* call *Terres Blanches* and which is the very finest *terroir* to be found in all of Sancerre. As I have written about often in the past, this is the very same strata of limestone that surfaces again in Chablis to form the slope that houses the grand crus and Montée de Tonnerre in that region. While the Monts Damnés is the most forward of the three single vineyard bottlings from François Cotat, it is every bit as ageworthy as either of the other two and I have to imagine that sixty or seventy years of longevity is part of the equation with the Monts Damnés bottling, but I am yet to drink any older than examples from the 1980s.



### **2012 Sancerre “Monts Damnés”- François Cotat**

François Cotat’s 2012 Monts Damnés is a lovely wine that is approachable out of the blocks, but will also have no difficulty aging long and gracefully. The ripeness of the vintage is very nicely managed here, as the bouquet wafts from the glass in a classic blend of gooseberry, a touch of tangerine, complex minerality, fresh-cut grass and a topnote of citrus zest. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, zesty and nascently complex, with a fine core, good soil signature and lovely focus and grip on the long and vibrant finish. A lovely example of Cotat Monts Damnés. 2017-2040. **92+**.

### **2011 Sancerre “Monts Damnés”- François Cotat**

I was a bit surprised by the style of the 2011 Monts Damnés from François Cotat, as the wine was also showing a bit of residual sugar on the attack, which was far less expected in this less ripe vintage. However, this is no doubt the result of the late picking practices of the Cotat family in this era, and in more recent years this has been changed to accommodate climate change. In any case, the 2011 Monts Damnés is a lovely bottle in the making, wafting from the glass in a mix of petrol, gooseberry, tart orange, damp grass and a fine base of wet stone minerality. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, complex and shows off excellent mid-palate depth, with just a touch of residual sweetness on the attack, bright, snappy acids and excellent focus and grip on the long, youthful and energetic finish. This is already very tasty to drink in its youth, but will be even better with at least a few years’ worth of bottle age. 2017-2040+. **92**.

### **2010 Sancerre “Monts Damnés”- François Cotat**

The 2010 Monts Damnés, like all of the wines from Monsieur Cotat in this vintage, is in a funky adolescent stage and not particularly forthcoming at the present time. That it hails from one of the riper recent vintages is readily apparent, but the wine is not quite as high in alcohol as the 2009 version (14.5 versus fifteen percent) and should be really good in the fullness of time. The bouquet shows a ripe blend of tangerine, fresh-cut grass, chalky soil tones, petrol and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nicely balanced, with a rock solid core of ripe fruit, bright acids and a very long, hunkered down finish that demands more bottle age today. While this is a global warming vintage and its future is uncertain for that reason, I expect this wine to really blossom nicely in the fullness of time and may well drink like the 1989s with sufficient bottle age. 2022-2055+. **92+**.

### **2009 Sancerre “Monts Damnés”- François Cotat**

Out of the blocks, the 2009s from François Cotat really showed the torrid side of this vintage and were palpably hot on the palate and quite tropical in their fruit expression. Now, eight years out from the vintage, they remain quite alcoholic in one regard, but my goodness, how the bouquet has now come around on the Monts Damnés and is really showing distinction. The nose is a mix of orange, pineapple, damp grass, chalky soil tones, lime peel and a topnote of anise. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and quite powerful in profile, with plenty of depth at the core, sound acids and fine focus and grip on the still slightly warm finish. This is fully fifteen percent alcohol in this vintage and will always be a bit warm, but I am really impressed how the wine is coming together in its other aspects and is actually starting to drink with distinction. 2020-2050. **91**.

### **2008 Sancerre “Monts Damnés”- François Cotat**

2008 was a vintage that I bought for my own cellar, but the wines were so tight out of the blocks that I just tucked them away for future drinking and had not been back to a bottle of any of the three cuvées from François Cotat since release. Therefore, I was very happy to see how beautifully the Monts Damnés is evolving, as the wine delivers a deep, complex and nicely cool aromatic profile of lime, gooseberry, damp grass, petrol, fine minerality and orange blossoms in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and very long, with a fine core, lovely youthful grassiness in ascendancy today and impressive cut and grip on the very well-balanced finish. 2017-2040. **92**.

### **2007 Sancerre “Monts Damnés”- François Cotat**

The generally unheralded 2007s from François Cotat are evolving into the finest vintage of the decade here, with the possible exception of the cooler and still much more tightly-knit 2008s. For current drinking, it is hard to deny the beauty of this vintage *chez* Cotat, as the Monts Damnés offers up a superb and very complex bouquet of tangerine, pear, fresh-mown grass, beeswax, lovely minerality and a topnote of limepeel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a wide open personality, plenty of zest acidity, excellent focus and grip and a very long, perfectly balanced finish. An absolutely classic vintage of Monts Damnés! 2017-2045+. **93+**.

### **2005 Sancerre “Monts Damnés”- François Cotat**

François Cotat’s 2005 version of Monts Damnés is just starting to segue nicely into its secondary layers of complexity on both the nose and palate. The bouquet is still bright and youthfully vivacious, but now has some signs of maturity in its mélange of candied limepeel, beeswax, superb minerality, botanicals and a nice touch of licorice in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and crystalline in personality, with a rock solid core, fine focus and

grip and a very long, racy and blossoming finish. This is probably pretty high in octane (fourteen percent seems likely), but has a taut girdle of acidity to carry the wine seamlessly on the palate. A great bottle of Monts Damnés that could still do with a few more years in the cellar before primetime drinking. 2020-2050. **94.**

**2004 Sancerre “Monts Damnés”- François Cotat**

I had not seen a bottle of the 2004 Monts Damnés since the summer of 2006 and was very curious to see how this classically-inclined vintage was evolving with bottle age. Not surprisingly, it is outstanding! The wine is now into its apogee of peak drinkability and even better than I anticipated it would be in its youth, soaring from the glass in a complex blend of lime, tangerine, citrus blossoms, crystalline minerality and a nice topnote of gentle smokiness. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and beautifully defined by its underlying minerality, with a lovely core, great structural tension and impressive focus and grip on the very long, complex finish. With extended breathing, this wine develops a complexity to its upper register botanicals that recalls a great vintage of mature Maximin Grünhäuser. 2017-2035. **94.**

**2002 Sancerre “Monts Damnés”- François Cotat**

The 2002 Monts Damnés from the domaine is now into its plateau of maturity and is drinking with distinction. I have listed the wine as “Sancerre”, though readers will remember that this vintage *chez* Cotat was denied the AOC because of it having been chapitalized and still retaining residual sugar and the labels are marked as “Vin de Table”. In any event, this is again a riper vintage, but the alcohols on the label are only 13.5 percent and the wine has only a whisper of backend heat on the palate today. The bouquet is lovely, offering up a ripe and complex mélange of lime, pear, damp grass, botanicals, candied citrus peel and a hint of beeswax in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full and complex, with lovely focus and grip, plenty of mid-palate intensity and a very long, classy and gently warm finish. This is very tasty today, with no real signs of any of its early residual sweetness still showing at age fifteen. 2017-2035. **91.**

**2000 Sancerre “Monts Damnés”- François Cotat**

The 2000 Sancerre “Monts Damnés” from François Cotat is utterly classic in style, reflecting a cooler growing season and this wine remains relatively tight when first poured and needs a bit of time to blossom in the glass. Once it does so, this is a superb wine, offering up a pure and complex nose of lemon, beeswax, limepeel, chalky soil tones, damp grass and petrol. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still shows a touch of white pepper on the backend (from its fitful ripening season), with a rock solid core, crisp acids, excellent grip and laser-like focus on the long, complex and energetic finish. This is going to continue to improve and I might be inclined to give it just a few more years in the cellar to really allow it to peak. It will be very long-lived. 2020-2060. **93.**

**1999 Sancerre “Monts Damnés”- François Cotat**

Our bottle of 1999 Monts Damnés at this tasting was curiously still rather blocked aromatically by SO<sub>2</sub>, which never completely relaxed. Underneath the sulfur is a wine of complexity, delivering scents of gooseberry, lime, chalky minerality, cress and gentle floral tones in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and crisp, with a lovely core, fine focus and grip and a long, zesty and complex finish. This is far more expressive on the palate than on the curiously closed nose, but I assume that this was just our particular bottle. I would love to see this wine again, as the 1999 Grande Côte served alongside of it had no issues with SO<sub>2</sub> and was excellent. 2017-2035. **91-92+?**



*Note the lack of Sancerre appellation on the two examples of 2002 above- two of the very best wines in the tastings.*

### **1996 Sancerre “Monts Damnés” Cuvée Spéciale- François Cotat**

This is the only vintage of Cuvée Spéciale I have ever seen produced by the Cotat family from the Monts Damnés vineyard, but there may have been others. 1996 was a botrytis year in Sancerre and there may well also be a Cuvée Spéciale bottling from La Grande Côte as well in this vintage, but I have never seen it. In any event, the 1996 Monts Damnés “Cuvée Spéciale” is utterly stunning, trading more on its pristine expression of minerality and its utter precision and purity of fruit than I would have ever imagined possible in this vintage! The bouquet soars from the glass in a blaze of gooseberry, chalky minerality, beeswax, a touch of almond, limepeel, white flowers and a lovely esthery topnote redolent of bee pollen. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and very modestly sweet (particularly for a Cuvée Spéciale), with a lovely core, laser-like focus, zesty acids and simply stunning length and grip on the complex and perfectly balanced finish. This may well be my favorite example of Cuvée Spéciale I have ever tasted from the Cotat family! 2017-2060. 96.

### **1989 Sancerre “Monts Damnés”- François Cotat**

The 1989 vintage in Sancerre was absolutely extraordinary in quality, so it comes as no surprise that the Monts Damnés from this vintage is drinking so beautifully! The bouquet is deep, complex and tertiary in its blend of lime, orange blossoms, fresh-cut grass, chalky minerality, gentle botanicals and plenty of beeswax in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and utterly suave on the attack, with great purity and focus, still plenty of mid-palate

concentration, vibrant acids and a very, very long, complex and seamless finish. This wine has probably been at its zenith for a decade, but still has many, many years ahead of it and there is emphatically no rush to drink it over the coming years! Given how well this wine is showing today, I start to wonder if I have been too conservative with my projected windows of drinkability for the younger vintages! 2017-2040. **96.**

### ***François Cotat Sancerre “Culs de Beaujeu”***

François Cotat farms ninety *ares* in the Chavignol vineyard of Culs de Beaujeu. When he and his cousin Pascal split the family vineyards, François received all of the Culs de Beaujeu, presumably because it was half the size of the other two cru holdings of the family and less than half a hectare of vines would have been deemed too small for each cousin to exploit. I do not know how François’ receiving all of the family’s parcel in this vineyard was settled (did Pascal get larger portions of Monts Damnés and Grande Côte, or was their some sort of cash settlement for François getting the vines in the Culs de Beaujeu?), but this bottling has been a part of François Cotat’s portfolio since 1998 and his cousin does not make this wine. These are now the oldest average vines in the domaine’s portfolio, after some significant replanting in François’ parcel in Grande Côte, with the vines in Culs de Beaujeu now averaging forty-five years of age. This is always the tightest and least expressive of the three bottlings from François Cotat in its youth, which may account for its slightly lower profile amongst the three single vineyard wines in the marketplace. The relative reticence this wines displays in its youth is a reflection of the northwesterly exposition of this vineyard, which takes longer to show all of its true colors, but which eventually is every bit as complex and magical as the other two single vineyard bottlings here. I have never had any really old examples of the Cotat bottling of Culs de Beaujeu, so I do not know how it evolves with long-term cellaring, but I am sure it is a great, great wine at age thirty or forty! Perhaps, in this age of global warming, this is destined to eventually become the most sought after of the three single vineyard wines from François Cotat?

### **2010 Sancerre “Culs de Beaujeu”- François Cotat**

The 2010 Culs de Beaujeu here shows that it hails from a very ripe vintage, as there is a bit of residual sweetness still in evidence on the palate and a bit of background heat on the finish. I suspect that both of these characteristics will fade a bit over time. The bouquet is really very lovely already, offering up scents of yellow fruit, beeswax, cut grass, tangerine, chalky minerality, anise and a topnote of freshly-culled tarragon. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with a plump core, fine underlying soil signature and very good length and grip on the focused finish. To my palate, the residual sugar here is still too pronounced for current drinking and I would opt for burying bottles for another five to ten years in the cellar before revisiting this wine, just so some of that the perception of residual sweetness can fade a bit with bottle age. It will be a very tasty wine in the fullness of time. 2023-2050+.

### **2008 Sancerre “Culs de Beaujeu”- François Cotat**

The 2008 Culs de Beaujeu from François Cotat is destined for greatness, but it is still early days for this wine and it deserves to be left alone in the cellar for several more years to come. The bouquet offers up a youthful and classic constellation of yellow fruit, beeswax, anise, a touch of petrol, chalky minerality and a topnote of lemon peel. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, deep and racy, with a great core, outstanding transparency, snappy acids and superb grip on the very long and nascently complex finish. Just be patient with this wine, as it will be



dramatically better to drink five to ten years down the road than it is today and is likely to be one of the great classic vintages of Culs de Beaujeu produced here in the last quarter century! 2025-2065+. **94+**.

**2007 Sancerre “Culs de Beaujeu”- François Cotat**

All of the 2007s from François Cotat are drinking beautifully at age ten, and it is awfully hard to keep one’s hands off of them. The Culs de Beaujeu offers up a wide open and very classy nose of lemon, tangerine, beeswax, chalky soil tones, anise and a lovely floral topnote that hints at acacia blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and focused, with a lovely core, great transparency, impeccable balance and a very long, very refined and complex finish. Great juice! 2017-2045+. **94**.

**2006 Sancerre “Culs de Beaujeu”- François Cotat**

The 2006 Culs de Beaujeu cannot totally escape the shadow of its very warm growing season, but the wine has evolved so beautifully over the eleven years since its harvest that it augurs very well for the future development of some of these other more recent, warm vintages. The bouquet of the ’06 is really pretty today, offering up scents of pear, lemon, beeswax, chalk, spring flowers and anise. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, with a fine core of ripe fruit, fine soil signature and a very long, vibrant and gently warm finish. One of the results of the warm vintage here is that the Culs de Beaujeu is fully mature already, at age eleven, and probably will not be as long-lived as more classically balanced vintages, but it is a very tasty glass of wine today. 2017-2035. **92**.

**2005 Sancerre “Culs de Beaujeu”- François Cotat**

The cooler aspects of the microclimate of the Culs de Beaujeu are evident in this stunning 2005 version, with the wine showing a nice touch of yellow fruit here that is somewhat unexpected in the ripe vintage. The superb nose jumps from the glass in a mix of lemon, grapefruit, chalky minerality, incipient beeswax, white flowers and orange peel. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and displays outstanding mid-palate depth, with racy acids, laser-like focus and grip and a long, cool and classy finish. This is simply a stunning wine! 2017-2050. **95**.

**2002 Sancerre “Culs de Beaujeu”- François Cotat**

Again, this is officially “Vin de Table”, but it is also a superb expression of Culs de Beaujeu. The wine is drinking beautifully at age fifteen, jumping from the glass in a mix of tangerine, lemon, chalky minerality, a touch of anise, spring flowers and a gently more musky floral tone redolent of acacia blossoms. On the palate the wine is deep, full, complex and rock solid at the core, with plenty of ripe fruit, fine soil signature, superb acids and lovely length and grip on the very gently warm finish. Not a classic vintage like 2007, but a very, very good wine into its plateau of maturity. 2017-2040+. **93**.



### ***François Cotat Sancerre “la Grande Côte”***

After splitting up the family vineyards with his cousin Pascal, François Cotat ended up with ninety *ares* here in this beautiful vineyard in the neighboring village of Amigny. As I mentioned in my article on Gérard Boulay in the last issue, despite this vineyard carrying over into the neighboring village of Amigny, it lies on the same towering slope of Kimmeridgian limestone that houses Chavignol’s two greatest vineyards of Monts Damnés and Culs de Beaujeu, and in fact, most commentators on Sancerre simply assume that this vineyard also lies within the communal boundaries of Chavignol. When François Cotat first inherited his rows of vines here, these were the oldest vines of the domaine, with the average age fully sixty years of age. However, he has had to replant part of the vineyard over the last decades, so that now the average age of the vines here is down to twenty years of age, though the quality of the resulting wine has not changed at all to my palate. La Grande Côte shares a due south exposition with Monts Damnés, so ripeness here was always optimal in the days of Paul and Francis Cotat, but may have become more of a mixed blessing as we learn to live on a warmer planet in this age of climate change. Traditionally, bottlings of Cuvée Spéciale or Cuvée Paul have always hailed from this vineyard, and I believe this is still the case, though I do not have any confirmation of this from the domaine. The only exception to this I have ever seen was in the botrytis year of 1996, when there was a Cuvée Spéciale from the Monts Damnés. This is still the most highly sought after of the three single vineyard bottlings from François Cotat, and I have more of this wine in my cellar than I do from the other two crus, but I am beginning to think that I would be

well-served to start to add more Culs de Beaujeu to my purchasing patterns in future vintages, as its slightly cooler microclimate may well give it an advantage of global warming continues on unabated.

### **2012 Sancerre “la Grande Côte”- François Cotat**

The 2012 vintage is pretty ripe in la Grande Côte, but my gut feeling is that with sufficient bottle age, this will evolve in a very positive direction and the ripeness level will be less of a factor. Today, this wine shows its residual sweetness quite a bit, as Monsieur Cotat did not want to allow the alcohol to get too high, and this needs to evolve with bottle age before this perception will start to recede. The bouquet is complex and vibrant, offering up scents of tangerine, lime, gooseberry, white flowers, chalky minerality and a topnote of orange zest. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and shows quite a bit of sweetness on the attack, with a good core, great cut and grip and absolutely superb backend mineral drive on the very long, focused and snappy finish. With bottle age, the wine should dry out a bit stylistically and it should prove to be a long-lived vintage of la Grande Côte. 2021-2045+. **92+**.

### **2010 Sancerre “la Grande Côte”- François Cotat**

The la Grande Côte from François Cotat shows the most precision and refinement on the nose of any of these cranky 2010s, but it also has the more residual sugar of the three single vineyard bottlings. The bouquet jumps from the glass in a lovely blend of pink grapefruit, a touch of pineapple, gorgeous minerality, citrus peel, gentle grassiness and a topnote of spring flowers. On the palate the wine is full, deep and nascently complex, with a plush core of fruit, a lovely undertow of minerality, a fair bit of backend sweetness and a very long, zesty and nascently complex finish. Given how the perception of sweetness has dissipated in older vintages that started out life with residual sugar, such as the 2002s, I like the chances of this wine eventually blossoming into a truly superb bottle. But, give it some time in the cellar! 2023-2060. **93+**.

### **2009 Sancerre “la Grande Côte”- François Cotat**

The 2009 la Grande Côte from Domaine Cotat is listed at a touch less octane than the 2009 Monts Damnés, coming in at 14.5 percent alcohol, though there is some perceptible heat poking out on the finish. The bouquet today has blossomed nicely and is really quite stunning, offering up a vibrant and fairly tropical blend of pear, acacia blossoms, limestone minerality, a touch of fresh coconut, discreet grassiness and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and quite precise in its focus, with plenty of ripe fruit at the core, good soil signature and a very long, succulent and gently warm finish. I like the overall balance of the ripe 2010 a tad better than the 2009 version, but this is evolving in a very positive direction and is going to be a good drink for those that do not mind that bit of backend alcohol. 2017-2045. **92+**.

### **2008 Sancerre “la Grande Côte”- François Cotat**

The 2008 vintage of la Grande Côte is a classic in the making. The bouquet is still youthfully reticent, but with all of its constituent components now front and center, as it jumps from the glass in a mix of tangerine, lime, crystalline minerality, gentle smokiness, candied lime peel and very discreet botanicals in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and nicely layered with ripe fruit, with a fine core, a bright, bouncy backend and excellent length and grip on the cool and classy finish. Fine, fine juice in the making! 2017-2050. **94+**.

**2007 Sancerre “la Grande Côte”- François Cotat**

The 2007 la Grande Côte is now drinking with the refined harmony of maturity, but will continue to cruise along with great style for decades and decades to come. The bouquet offers up an excellent constellation of pear, tangerine, lime peel, crystalline minerality, a touch of tarragon, beeswax, smoke and other la Grande Côte botanicals in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with good intensity at the core, lovely focus and grip and a long, well-balanced and complex finish. I suspect this will not be anywhere near as long-lived as the tighter-knit 2008 version, but la Grande Côte has such a superb track record of aging *chez* Cotat that I would hate to bet against this wine living to a ripe old age. Fine, fine juice. 2017-2050. **94+**.

**2006 Sancerre “la Grande Côte”- François Cotat**

François Cotat’s 2006 la Grande Côte is now fully mature and is a very successful example of how these hot, ripe vintages can also find their way here with sufficient bottle age. The bouquet wafts from the glass in a wide open mix of pear, anise, chalky minerality, incipient notes of beeswax, dried flowers and blossoming botanicals in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, ripe and plush on the attack, with a full-bodied format, a solid core, still a bit of backend residual sweetness, but very good length, grip and complexity on the long finish. Not my favorite vintage of la Grande Côte here, but a very tasty wine. 2017-2035. **91**.

**2005 Sancerre “la Grande Côte”- François Cotat**

The 2005 vintage of la Grande Côte from Monsieur Cotat is utterly stunning. The youthful nose offers up a very deep blend of pink grapefruit, orange peel, chalky minerality, smoke, a touch of botanicals, blossoming notes of beeswax and a lovely topnote of spring flowers. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, complex and youthfully rock solid at the core, with brisk acids, outstanding focus and grip and a very long, ripe and mineral-driven finish. This seems quite similar to the 2005 Monts Damnés in terms of octane, but the wine is even more precise and seamless. A great la Grande Côte vintage in the making! 2020-2055. **96**.

**2004 Sancerre “la Grande Côte”- François Cotat**

The 2004 Sancerre “la Grande Côte” from François Cotat is utterly brilliant. The great nose soars from the glass in a blaze of tangerine, lime, complex, chalky minerality, a touch of licorice, Grönhäuser botanicals and a topnote of citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very crystalline in personality, with a rock solid core, laser-like focus and a very, very long, complex and vibrant finish. This is just on the cusp of its peak of maturity and still has many decades of brilliance ahead of it, but it is a very, very compelling glass of wine today! 2017-2045. **95+**.

**1999 Sancerre “la Grande Côte”- François Cotat**

The 1999 vintage of la Grande Côte from François Cotat is outstanding and now at its apogee of peak drinkability. The very sophisticated nose offers up a fine aromatic constellation of lime, botanicals, crystalline minerality, tangerine, citrus blossoms, a touch of caraway seed and a nice topnote of chalk dust. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and shows off lovely mid-palate depth, with bright acids, excellent focus and balance and plenty of complexity on the very long, zesty and wide open finish. A beautiful bottle in the full bloom of maturity, but with at least several decades of life still ahead of it. François Cotat’s steady hand at the helm was already quite evident by this time, having been in the cellars with his father and uncle since 1987, and he has really done a nice job with this 1999 la Grande Côte! 2017-2035+. **94**.

### ***François Cotat Sancerre Rosé***

François Cotat's Sancerre Rosé is my absolute favorite bottling of Rosé produced anywhere in the world. Like all of the domaine's wines, this is a tightly-knit and structured wine out of the blocks and it absolutely demands time in the cellar before it is ready to drink, and often when it is fully mature, it also needs some extended time in the decanter prior to serving to allow the wine to blossom fully. As I mentioned above, it is made from the half hectare of pinot noir vines that he owns on the flatter section of vineyard land in Chavignol, east of the village in the direction of the town of Sancerre. The soil here is *les caillottes* (small limestone pebbles), rather than the *Terres Blanches* (Kimmeridgian limestone) so typical in the hillside vineyards of the village, and it routinely one of the finest Sancerre rosés made in the appellation (only cousin Pascal's Rosé can approach these same lofty heights of quality). The wine is fermented, after a short skin contact, in a tartrate crystal-encrusted, old *demi-muid* that François' father and uncle probably used for the family's Rosé before him, as this is truly a well-seasoned barrel! Like all of the Cotat wines, it is fermented with indigenous yeasts and bottled to the cycle of the moon in the late spring in the year following the harvest. It starts out life tight, snappy and reticent, only reluctantly hinting at its future complexity in the first three or four years after it is bottled, and a good general rule of thumb as to when to start drinking the wine is to figure five years out from the vintage as the point to start opening the first bottle! The effects of global warming have been felt in this bottling as well, with the 2010 and 2009 versions showing more alcohol on the backend than has been customary with the Cotat Rosé, which again, might impact their customary longevity in bottle, but it will be several more years until we find out if this is to be the case. As the notes below will attest, fifteen years or more out from the vintage is still right in the prime drinking window of François Cotat's Sancerre Rosé (at least in classical vintages), and none of the oldest vintages that we tasted during our couple of marathon tastings in preparation for this article were even remotely fragile or getting to the end of the line. Based on these wines, I would have to hazard a guess that twenty-five or thirty years of life in the bottle is easily within reach of the top vintages of this iconic Rosé bottling, and perhaps they last far longer than this, but I have never had the pleasure to taste a truly old vintage of Cotat Rosé to confirm this. Over time, these wines throw a bit of sediment and should be decanted when they are older, but they also benefit from some extended aeration when they are young and really should be routinely decanted whenever they are opened.

### **2011 Sancerre Rosé- François Cotat**

The 2011 Sancerre Rosé from François Cotat is a superb young wine, which is approachable today, but really deserves some more bottle age before having at it in earnest. The bouquet offers up a fine, primary blend of tangerine, white cherry, chalky soil tones, gentle smokiness and a bit of cherry skin in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and nascently complex, with a lovely core, great acids and a very long, focused and perfectly balanced finish. Drink it now, if you cannot wait, but the more rewarding course would be to leave it alone in the cellar for at least another five years! 2017-2040. **94.**

### **2010 Sancerre Rosé- François Cotat**

The 2010 Sancerre Rosé from Domaine François Cotat is riper than the 2011, but still fairly well balanced and shows fine promise for positive evolution in the bottle. The bouquet is jumps from the glass in riper blend of melon, orange peel, chalky soil tones, an exotic touch of lavender and the telltale smokiness of this bottling. On the palate the wine is full-bodied, deep and fairly powerful in profile, with fine focus and grip, a fine base of minerality and just a

whisper of backend heat poking out on the zesty and nicely structured finish. This is not as precise as the 2011 version, and really demands a bit of time in the cellar to blossom. 2021-2040+. **92+**.

### **2009 Sancerre Rosé- François Cotat**

Like the white wines from the 2009 vintage *chez* Cotat, the Rosé is also a big and fairly buxom example, with some overt heat poking out on the backend. However, like the white 2009s, it is also nicely blossomed aromatically and more appealing today than the ripe 2010 version. The bouquet here is really pretty, offering up a suave and complex blend of orange, cherry skin, coriander seed, chalk, dried flowers and citrus peel. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, long and complex, with a rock solid core, respectable soil inflection (but nowhere near as pronounced as in the 2011 or 2008 for example), with good length and grip and a bit of alcohol sticking out on the finish. Given its octane, the 2009 Rosé here will probably be pretty short-lived by the traditional standards of this wine. 2017-2027. **89**.



### **2008 Sancerre Rosé- François Cotat**

The 2008 Rosé from François Cotat is just starting to arrive at its plateau of maturity and at age nine, is drinking very, very well. The bouquet is a vibrant blend of melon, white cherries, orange peel, chalky minerality and a nice touch of dried flowers in the upper register. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and displays excellent mid-palate depth, with crisp, zesty acids, fine focus and grip and a very long, complex and snappy finish. This is delicious today,

but is still climbing and may well be even better with another five years of cellaring! 2017-2030+. **93+**.

#### **2007 Sancerre Rosé- François Cotat**

The 2007 vintage in Sancerre has aged with great aplomb and this is very evident in this outstanding Rosé from Monsieur Cotat. The bouquet shows riper fruit tones than the excellent 2008 paired up with it, wafting from the glass in a mix of tangerine, caraway seed, gentle floral tones, chalky minerality and plenty of upper register smokiness. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and still youthful in profile, with a great core, bright acids, laser-like focus and just a whisper of backend residual sugar still showing on the very long and beautifully balanced finish. I would opt for giving this great vintage of Cotat Rosé just a few more years' worth of bottle age to allow the wine to more fully integrate its constituent components into a seamless whole. This is a great, great vintage for this bottling! 2020-240. **95**.

#### **2006 Sancerre Rosé- François Cotat**

The 2006 Sancerre Rosé from François Cotat is now into its apogee of peak drinkability, but still has plenty of life ahead of it. This wine was showing a bit evolved when first decanted, but with fifteen or twenty minutes of aeration, the fruit component roared to the fore and the wine showed stunningly well! The bouquet is a fine and complex blend of melon, orange peel, beeswax, a touch of forest floor, chalk and coriander seed as a topnote. On the palate the wine deep, full and *à point*, with fine mid-palate intensity, good acidity and fine focus and grip on the long, complex and zesty finish. 2017-2028+. **94**.

#### **2005 Sancerre Rosé- François Cotat**

François Cotat's 2005 Rosé is also pretty ripe, but it seems to handle its ripeness better than either the 2009 or 2010 versions, or is it simply that this wine has now had a dozen years of bottle age? In either case, this is really an excellent vintage for this cuvée, offering up a superb bouquet of blood orange, a touch of rhubarb, plenty of smokiness, citrus peel, chalky soil and a hint of what seems likely to be *sous bois* in the years to come. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and complex, but not as resolved as it is on the nose, with a slightly angular aspect to the wine that suggests a bit more time in the cellar is warranted. The finish is very long, the core is rock solid and the focus and balance here is exemplary, so all that is needed is just a bit more patience to allow the wine to reach its peak. 2020-2045. **93**.

#### **2004 Sancerre Rosé- François Cotat**

The 2004 Sancerre Rosé from François Cotat is an outstanding wine in the making, and at age thirteen it is at its sweet spot in its evolution. The nose delivers a bright and complex constellation of *fraises du bois*, blood orange, chalky soil tones, coriander seed, dried flowers and a nice touch of salinity in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and very pure, with a rock solid core, great soil inflection, zesty acids and superb cut and grip on the long and *à point* finish. Great juice. 2017-2025+. **95**.

#### **2003 Sancerre Rosé- François Cotat**

Given the very hot summer of 2003, I did not have great expectations for this wine, but it showed beautifully and was far above anything I could have hoped for. The bouquet is very, very pretty and vibrant, offering up scents of watermelon, orange peel, chalky soil tones and a topnote of woodsmoke. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and fairly complex, with a good core, crisp acids and a long, classy and quite vibrant finish. This will not be a long-lived vintage of Cotat Rosé, but the wine has lift and energy that belies the heat of '03! 2017-2025. **92**.

### **2002 Sancerre Rosé- François Cotat**

2002 is such a superb vintage in Sancerre and the François Cotat Rosé is a ringing success in this vintage. The wine is now fully mature on both the nose and palate, but complex, vibrant and extremely attractive on both the nose and palate. The bouquet shows more pinot noir elements than most vintages of this bottling, wafting from the glass in a mix of cherries, blood orange, chalky soil, smoky overtones and a touch of cinnamon stick in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and juicy in personality, with a fine core, vibrant acids and a very long, very complex and classy finish. A great wine at its apogee and with years and years of life still ahead of it. 2017-2030. **94.**

### **2001 Sancerre Rosé- François Cotat**

The 2001 Sancerre Rosé from François Cotat has deepened noticeably in color as the years have gone by and is now almost a light red wine in color, but the wine is still in its plateau of peak maturity and has decades of life still ahead of it. The nose wafts from the glass in a lovely blend of orange peel, a touch of watermelon, chalky minerality, a potpourri of spice tones, dried flowers and just a whisper of leather. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied and complete, with a lovely core of fresh fruit, fine expression of *terroir*, still quite sound acids and impressive length and grip on the very nicely balanced and complex finish. Fine juice. 2017-2035. **92.**

### **2000 Sancerre Rosé- François Cotat**

The 2000 Sancerre Rosé is another lovely and fully mature wine from François Cotat that still has a few years ahead of it before it begins to slide down the far side of its plateau. The mature bouquet wafts from the glass in a mix of white cherries, orange peel, gentle smokiness, a touch of autumn leaves, rhubarb and peonies. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, crisp and complex, with fine focus and cut, lovely balance and complexity and a very long, still quite zesty finish. Lovely juice, but this is further along its evolutionary path than the excellent 2001 version (or at least this particular bottle was). 2017-2023. **92.**