

## Dave Phinney's French Chapter

California winemaker Dave Phinney goes all in with his Roussillon wine project

While Dave Phinney has achieved renown as one of the most innovative winemakers in California, he's also hard at work on the other side of the Atlantic building Department 66—a brand from the Roussillon region in southern France.

Phinney's involvement with France began in 2008, when a friend invited him to view some vineyard land that she had recently purchased in the Roussillon commune of Maury. Immediately enamored of the area, Phinney agreed to acquire 40 acres of old vine Grenache vineyards and soon after began construction of a winery. Today Phinney owns 300 acres of vineyards around Maury, planted to Grenache, Syrah, and Carignan in the designated Roussillon sub-appellation of Côtes Catalanes. The vines are old, averaging around 75 years of age. Department 66 currently produces between 15,000-20,000 cases a year, but Phinney says he believes it's possible push that closer to 30,000 cases in the near future, though there are no concrete plans to do so.

The biggest challenge of farming the vineyards is managing the yields, which Phinney says are the lowest in France. "We average about half a ton per acre," he says. "It's challenging



Though he's most known for California wines, winemaker Dave Phinney (pictured) is heavily involved in his Department 66 brand, which is made in the Roussillon region of France.


economically but we built the winery around the vineyards with an eye toward smaller tanks for smaller lots."

While the vines produce low yields, Phinney says the quality is consistently excellent and is among the purest expressions of terroir that he's encountered. "There's no irrigation," he says. "The soils are pure rock most of the time. It's really just an expression of that."

Led by its flagship blend D66 (\$38 a 750-ml.), Department 66 focuses heavily on Grenache, with Carignan, Syrah, Mourvèdre, and Petite Sirah—which Phinney had to petition the French government for permission to plant—all playing supporting roles. The label's prestige offering, Pharaon (\$175), is only released in particularly strong years, with 2014 as the current release. Phinney says that because 2017 was an exceptional vintage for his Roussillon vineyards, he'll likely bottle a 2017 Pharaon. Department 66 also features two more accessibly priced wines: The Others (\$28), a blend of Grenache, Carignan, Syrah, and Mourvèdre; and Fragile (\$18), a rosé predominantly made from Grenache.

Notwithstanding his busy schedule back in California, Phinney is heavily involved in every aspect of Department 66. He visits at least once a month during the regular season and is there every seven to ten days during harvest. "I have the most control of viticulture and winemaking for Department 66 out of all of my wines," says Phinney, noting that he owns all of the brand's vineyards.

Phinney got his start in the wine business in 1997 as a temporary harvest worker at Robert Mondavi Winery. He founded Orin Swift a year later, making the company name from his father's middle name and his mother's maiden name. Having started with two tons of purchased Zinfandel and no winemaking facilities, Phinney spent the ensuing years making wine for third-party players while also developing his own brands. Over the next decade, Orin Swift's annual production grew to 100,000 cases, and the company became widely known for its array of stylish, fruit-forward, and complex California wines, as well as its unique branding.

Orin Swift's most famous label was The Prisoner, a Zinfandel-based blend whose volume under the company grew from 385 cases to 85,000 cases, foreshadowing the current craze for red blends. Phinney sold The Prisoner to Huneus Vintners in 2010, along with its Zinfandel portfolio mate Saldo. In 2016 he sold Orin Swift itself, with E. & J. Gallo acquiring a portfolio that includes the cutting-edge brands Abstract, Machete, Papillon, and Palermo. 

Shane English