

My top 30: carbonic maceration reds

A simple technique for simplistic wines? Not so nowadays, says Andy Howard MW, who discovered there was still plenty to learn when he set out to find his 30 top examples of red wines made using this well-known, but often misunderstood whole-grape winemaking method

ASK MOST WINE enthusiasts what the term ‘carbonic maceration’ means to them, and the vast majority will think Beaujolais – and almost certainly not the top-tier, cru end of the Beaujolais market. In reality, this is a process that is both intriguing and highly scientific, yet misunderstood by many. Having been asked by *Decanter* to review wines made using carbonic maceration, it quickly became apparent how little I knew about the intricacies of the process. The more I delved into the subject, the greater my appreciation of the differences and variations found in these wines from producers around the world.

In simple terms, carbonic maceration or *macération carbonique*, referred to below as ‘MC’, relates to the process where whole grapes, protected from oxygen (normally under a veil of carbon dioxide) undergo an intra-cellular fermentation due to enzymatic reactions without the action of yeasts.

Although this technique has been used, often inadvertently, for thousands of years, it was the 1930s experiments of Michel Flanzy, a French scientist in Narbonne, which showed MC’s potential. It was embraced by producers in the Beaujolais-boom years, becoming synonymous with light, quaffable reds made from the Gamay grape, which exhibited tell-tale aromas and flavours of pear-drops and (when taken to excess) bubblegum.

Unfortunately for both the region and the process, consumers moved away from flavour profiles more akin to a sweet shop than a glass



Andy Howard MW is a *Decanter* contributing editor and DWWA judge. He runs his own wine consultancy *Vinetrades*, and was formerly a retail wine buyer for 30 years

of wine. It is only recently that forward-thinking winemakers are finding ways to adapt MC to craft some fascinating wines.

MC can only be used at the start of the fermentation process, producing up to two degrees of ethanol. Grapes must be intact and healthy, with hand-harvesting of whole bunches a key element in the vineyard. MC has a number of very positive effects on the finished wine, ranging from accentuating different aromatic elements to the conversion (and reduction) of malic acid; increasing levels of glycerol; softer tannin extraction; and bright, ripe, juicy flavours with a freshness that makes wines approachable early on. Scientific studies have shown that glycerol can increase by a factor of 10, with a halving of malic acid levels and increase in pH of 0.2.

Serious intent

However, carbonic maceration should not be exclusively associated with light, fruity, easy-drinking wines, as the technique is now being applied to wines with much higher quality aspirations. Traditionally associated with the Gamay grape and Beaujolais, MC is being embraced by winemakers in Spain, Australia, South Africa and the US, with great results being achieved using Syrah, Grenache, Cinsault, Pinotage and Pinot Noir.

Josh Bergström, general manager and winemaker at Bergström Wines in Oregon, is an advocate: ‘MC brings a lovely and complex aromatic experience that takes the fresh fruit



character from our Willamette Valley and almost “enhances” its youthful charm.’

The impact is not just about flavour and aroma. Bergström notes: ‘There is a textural element that whole-cluster fermentation and carbonic fermentation lends to the wine.’ As a result, Bergström Wines has now developed its own protocol for fermentation of its top-tier Pinot Noir wines.

In Otago, New Zealand, Akitu owner Andrew Donaldson feels the use of MC in Pinot Noir vinification is important. ‘There are lots of phenolics and sugars in the stems that aren’t found in the grape skin or berry. By harnessing these you can add to the phenolic stability of the resulting wine.’ The use of MC and whole bunches ‘encourages a slower build-up of fermentation temperature, resulting in improved tannin polymerisation and development of exciting aromatic compounds’, he says. With age, Akitu Pinot Noir develops a complex, exotic melange of spicy flavours and aromas.

Giles Cooke MW is focusing his South Australian winemaking efforts on innovative, exciting Grenache-based wines. Cooke says MC brings ‘a framework to the Grenache, adds seasoning and restraint’. All of the wines using this technique in his Thistledown range show

‘Grapes must be intact and healthy, with hand-harvesting of whole bunches a key element in the vineyard’

Above: carbonic maceration involves the fermentation of uncrushed grapes or whole bunches

a great combination of ripeness, generosity of aromatics and fruit, along with an underlying freshness and lightness.

Interestingly, it is not just New World winemakers who are experimenting with MC. An increasing number of carbonic maceration Riojas are starting to appear – a method commonly used in the past. These could hardly be more different to the classical image of an oak-driven Rioja, yet many are of high quality and well worth seeking out.

Carbonic maceration has had a bad press in recent years but, despite being associated with the cheaper end of the Beaujolais market, it is rapidly becoming a serious tool in the kit for innovative producers around the world. Their skilled winemaking uses carbonic maceration to add complexity, accentuate aromas and flavours, while helping manage both acidity and tannins. These are wines to savour, enjoy, and contemplate how science and nature are being combined using this technique. ➤

1 Akitu, AI, Central Otago, New Zealand 2017 ⁹⁵

£39 The New Zealand Cellar

A challenging year, but this 40% whole-bunch (the rest being whole berries) Pinot Noir has loads of Far-Eastern spice to complement rich, dark black fruits. Fantastic acidity keeps everything in perfect harmony. Plenty of ageing potential, clearly showing the direction in which top Otago Pinot Noirs are headed.

Drink 2020-2027 **Alcohol** 14%

2 Bergström, Cumberland Reserve Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon, USA 2015 ⁹⁵

£39-£46 Pull the Cork, Roberson

This Oregon Pinot has benefited from seven days under gas, bringing out the colour, aromatics and mouthfeel – without the tannins. Ultra-fine texture, beautiful balance; a fragrant, delicate Pinot with bright, polished red fruits. Lovely acidity to finish. **Drink** 2019-2025 **Alc** 13%

3 Domaine de la Côte, Memorious Pinot Noir, Sta Rita Hills, California, USA 2016 ⁹⁴

£59 Roberson

Sashi Moorman and Rajat Parr focus on terroir-oriented Pinot Noir. This marries earthy Burgundian characters with some Californian warmth. Elevated aromatics are complemented by fine tannins, crisp acidity and purity of fruit. Oak underpins the structure but is so understated. Fine, fresh, elegant. **Drink** 2019-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

7 Chamonix, Greywacke Pinotage, Franschhoek, South Africa 2015 ⁹³

£18-£21.50 ABS Wine Agencies, Harrogate Fine Wine Co, Noble Green, Wright Wine Co

Whole-bunch, carbonic maceration and the use of some ripasso grapes have given a plush, generous wine of purity, smooth tannins, sweet red-cherry fruit and a spicy finish. Although aged in barrels for 18 months, the oak here is beautifully supple. **Drink** 2019-2022 **Alc** 14%

8 Domaine Coudert, Clos de la Roquette, Fleurie, Beaujolais, France 2017 ⁹³

£13.75-£16.96 Goedhuis & Co, Harvey Nichols, Lant St Wine, Richard Kihl, Theatre of Wine, Uncorked

Semi-carbonic maceration, natural yeasts and old oak foudres all contribute to this benchmark Fleurie. Combines rusticity with pleasure: violets on the nose, cherry and blackberry on the palate, with some leathery notes. **Drink** 2020-2024 **Alc** 13%

9 Domaine Le Cazal, Tradition, Minervois, Languedoc, France 2017 ⁹³

£10.95-£11.75 Yapp Bros, Jeroboams, The Smiling Grape Co

Old-vine Syrah, Grenache and Carignan co-fermented in this deliciously easy-drinking yet concentrated and silky-smooth Minervois. Matured in concrete cuves for eight months. A lovely example with concentration, spice and a lingering mineral note. **Drink** 2019-2023 **Alc** 14%



4 Tapanappa, Foggy Hill Vineyard Pinot Noir, Fleurieu Peninsula, South Australia 2017 ⁹⁴

£29.05-£34 Exel, Mentzendorff

2017 was almost a perfect vintage here; Brian Croser used 30% whole-bunch fruit, cooled, then layered with de-stemmed bunches before the tank was sealed. Floral, delicate yet with great persistence – an ultra-elegant example of Australian Pinot. **Drink** 2019-2024 **Alc** 12.8%

5 Thistledown, She's Electric Old Vine Single Vineyard Grenache, McLaren Vale, South Australia 2018 ⁹⁴

£24.67-£29.99 Alliance Wine, Carruthers & Kent, The Fine Wine Co, Salut Wines

This uses 50% whole-bunch, old-vine Grenache giving a plush, soft, luscious red-berry/cherry palate. Spices, a touch of pepper and bright acidity keeps this elegant and beautifully fresh on the finish. **Drink** 2020-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

6 Blank Canvas, Syrah, Hawke's Bay, New Zealand 2015 ⁹³

£21.50-£27.99 Alexander Hadleigh, Carruthers & Kent, Christopher Keiller, Exel, Liberty Wines, The Fine Wine Co, The NZ Cellar

A highly complex and savoury Syrah from a single-vineyard site. 60% whole-bunch fermentation and co-fermentation with Grüner Veltliner skins, prior to 10 months' oak ageing. Great freshness on the palate, with bright damson and cherry fruit, black pepper to finish. **Drink** 2020-2025 **Alc** 13%

10 Gérard Bertrand, Le Viala, Minervois La Livinière, Languedoc, France 2015 ⁹³

£50.70-£57.11 (2014) Exel, Fintry Wines, Hallgarten Wines, Harrods, Wine Poole

Syrah (60%) and Carignan (15%) underwent separate carbonic maceration before blending with Grenache. Intense and profound, with violets and black fruit. 12 months in oak has imparted further complexity. **Drink** 2020-2030 **Alc** 15%

11 Heretat MontRubí, Black, Penedès, Spain 2017 ⁹³

£13.99 Jeroboams, The Smiling Grape Co

30% carbonic maceration gives this new-wave Penedès Garnacha a real lift. Deep and inky in colour, there is plenty of dark, spicy black cherry and damson on the palate, with a refreshing savoury, slightly mineral edge. Lightly oaked, there is warmth and Spanish character here. Very moreish. **Drink** 2019-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

12 Miguel Torres, Reserva de Pueblo, Maule Valley, Chile 2016 ⁹³

£11.49 Aimee's Wine House, Dronfield Wine World, EH Booths, Hoult's, Polygon Wines, Magnum Wine Co

An intriguing 100% dry-farmed País made from 95% carbonic maceration grapes. Delicately scented, it manages País' tendency to rough tannins, combining red plum and cherry fruit with a savoury finish. **Drink** 2019-2022 **Alc** 12% ➤

13 Shaw & Smith, Balhannah Vineyard Shiraz, Adelaide Hills, South Australia 2013

93
£39.50-£54.99 AG Wines, Exel,
Liberty Wines, Oz Wines, The Australian Cellar,
The Fine Wine Co, Wine Buffs, Winearray,
WineTrust100

70% whole-bunch, 30% whole berries.
Aromatic lift. Soft, smooth, fine tannins
and a light oak touch (14 months in 500L
punchons). **Drink** 2019-2025 **A/c** 14%

14 Stolpman Vineyards, Estate Syrah, Ballard Canyon, California, USA 2015

93
£32.60 Stannary St Wine Co

Yields were drastically reduced in 2015,
but 50% whole-bunch, no press wine,
natural fermentation in concrete and old
wood has given this style and intensity
with black olive notes – like a cross
between Cornas and premium Syrah from
Chile. Bitter cherry and dark chocolate on
the finish. **Drink** 2020-2026 **A/c** 13.8%

15 Te Mata, Gamay Noir, Hawke's Bay, New Zealand 2018

93
£19.20 Harvey Nichols, The NZ Cellar

A single-vineyard wine from the
Woodthorpe Terraces Vineyard, this
vibrant New World Gamay utilised 53%
carbonic maceration. Blended with
tank-fermented wine, it spent nine weeks
in used French barrels. Fresh and floral,
with raspberry and blueberry fruit notes,
and a hint of aniseed on the finish.

Drink 2019-2022 **A/c** 12.5%

19 Division Wine Making Co, Division-Villages Méthode Carbonique, Oregon, USA 2018

92
POA ABS Wine Agencies

A 100% carbonic-maceration Pinot Noir
from a dynamic artisanal producer in
Portland. Bright red fruits, spices and
great acidity to finish. Part-aged in oak
barrels for five months, drinking well now
but will age. Freshness is a key objective
here. **Drink** 2019-2022 **A/c** 13%

20 Domaine Lathuilière Gravallon, Pisse-Vieille, Brouilly, Beaujolais, France 2017

92
£13.95 Corney & Barrow

Initially firm and quite structured, with a
bit of air this broadens and develops some
lovely character. Pisse-Vieille is a vineyard
of just over 1ha on granitic-clay, with vines
averaging 50 years. Made with traditional
semi-carbonic maceration; profound and
long. **Drink** 2019-2025 **A/c** 13%

21 Herència Altés, La Xalamera, Terra Alta, Spain 2016

92
£21.85 Bancroft

Husband and wife team Rafael de Haan
and Nùria Altés are making exciting wines
in fashionable Terra Alta. 100% single-
vineyard Garnacha, whole-bunch and
carbonic maceration enhancing the
freshness and subtle aromatics of this
rich, soft and spicy wine. Despite high
alcohol, this stays refreshing and light on
the palate. **Drink** 2019-2023 **A/c** 15%



16 Réverie, Pinotage, Voor Paardeberg, Paarl, South Africa 2018

93

£34 Red Squirrel

Winemaker Jacques de Klerk is creating a
name for himself with Chenin Blanc; this is
his first Pinotage, far-removed from those
of old – 100% whole-bunch fruit, a hint of
Gamay and Cinsault with soft, sweet,
primary red fruits, refined tannins and
cleansing acidity. Just 12% alcohol, and all
the better for it. **Drink** 2019-2023 **A/c** 12%

17 Artuke, Rioja, Spain 2018

92
£11.95 Lea & Sandeman

Unwooded Tempranillo made with
carbonic maceration! Wonderfully vibrant
on nose and palate, with pronounced
floral aromatics, bright, ripe dark berry
fruit and great lift. Artuke is a small
biodynamic estate, run by the Blanco
family for more than 100 years. The 5%
Viura in the blend adds extra freshness.

Drink 2019-2021 **A/c** 13.5%

18 Château de Pizay, Morgon, Beaujolais, France 2018

92
£11.99 Majestic

Château de Pizay dates back to the 14th
centur, and is now an estate of more than
100ha. This is a serious Morgon with
structure and body to match the dark
berry fruits on the palate. Refreshing,
savoury, juicy and smooth, there is more
to this than just bright and vibrant fruit.

A great partner with a plate of charcuterie.

Drink 2019-2022 **A/c** 14%

22 Matias Riccitelli, The Party Malbec, Uco Valley, Mendoza, Argentina 2017

92

£14 Marks & Spencer

100% whole-bunch Uco Valley fruit was
fermented in concrete; the result is fresh,
vibrant and fragrant. Floral notes on the
nose are interwoven with raspberry and
plum fruit, with a distinct mineral edge to
finish. Light on its feet, this is classy yet
fun. **Drink** 2019-2022 **A/c** 14%

23 Birichino, Saint Georges Pinot Noir, Central Coast, California, USA 2016

91

£31 Berry Bros & Rudd, Butlers Wine Cellar,
Carruthers & Kent

Going down the 'natural' route, with a
rather hazy colour and slightly funky nose,
but plenty of bright, juicy, fresh red berry
fruit and typical Californian sweetness
balanced by crisp tannins and fresh
acidity. **Drink** 2019-2022 **A/c** 13.5%

24 Bodegas Zugober, Belezos 50/50, Rioja, Spain 2017

91

£10.25 Corney & Barrow

From Rioja Alavesa, this Tempranillo is a
blend of half carbonic maceration and half
de-stemmed bunches – the back label
states in Spanish that 'the formula of
happiness has two halves'. Bright, juicy,
rounded; aromatic, persistent, yet good
weight on the palate. Finishes with a slight
spiciness. **Drink** 2019-2021 **A/c** 13.5% ➤

25 **Château Combel-la-Serre, La Vigne Juste Derrière**

Chez Carbo, Côtes du Lot, Southwest France 2018 ⁹¹

£19 Linden Stores, Red Squirrel, The Grape Escape, The Grocery Wine Vault

100% Auxerrois (Malbec) with carbonic maceration. Vibrant, youthful wine, fresh aromas of blackberry and a bitter-cherry and sloe fruit-driven palate. Winemaker Julien Ilbert says this is his 'vin de soif'. He's correct! **Drink** 2019-2021 **Alc** 12.5%

26 **Domaine de Gry-Sablon, Dominique**

Morel, Fleurie, Beaujolais, France 2017 ⁹¹

£15.60-£19.99 Alexander Hadleigh, Box Valley Wine, Carruthers & Kent, Exel, Liberty Wines, Rannoch Scott, The Fine Wine Co, Wine-Man

From old vines. Although soft and juicy on the palate, there is a distinct mineral finish which lifts this above mass-produced Fleurie. **Drink** 2019-2021 **Alc** 12.5%

27 **Domaine Joël Delaunay, Gamay, Touraine, Loire,**

France 2018 ⁹¹

£10.90-£13 Aubergine Fine Food & Wines, Carruthers & Kent, Cork of the North, Exel, Inn at Home, Liberty Wines

In the Cher Valley on clay/silex soils. This is a great example of why Loire Valley Gamay should not be overlooked. Fine balance between bright, crisp cherry fruits, soft tannins and a distinctly mineral finish. **Drink** 2019-2021 **Alc** 13%



28 **Louis Jadot, Beaujolais-Quincié, France**

2017 ⁹¹

£12.99 Waitrose, Waitrose Cellar

100% Gamay from vines grown on granitic schist soils, fermented partially using carbonic maceration. Deep colour. Shows loads of juicy, fleshy Gamay character, refreshing acidity and a lick of minerals on the finish. Not cheap for Beaujolais-Villages, but an intriguing and individual wine. **Drink** 2019-2023 **Alc** 12.5%

29 **CVNE, Maceración Carbónica, Rioja,**

Spain 2017 ⁹⁰

£14.50 Amps Wine Merchants, Bon Coeur, Fountainhall Wines

A major Rioja producer also dabbling with carbonic maceration wines. This youthful, bright, juicy 100% Tempranillo has ripe tannins beneath soft, plump dark berry fruits, with violet/floral aromas. Easy-drinking but very nicely balanced, fresh and moreish. **Drink** 2019-2021 **Alc** 13.5%

30 **Marks & Spencer, Paul Sapin, Fleurie, Beaujolais, France 2017** ⁹⁰

£10 Marks & Spencer

Winemaker Jérôme Donzel's excellent entry-level Fleurie from 40-year-old vines ticks all the expected boxes. Semi-carbonic fermentation has resulted in a fragrant, elegant Fleurie that shows plenty of ripe strawberry fruit flavour, bright acidity and a savoury note to finish. **Drink** 2019-2022 **Alc** 12.5% **D**