

Stirling Wines: Rhône Reds

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Introduction

With the days waning and autumn (or fall if you prefer) just around the corner, it's time to put away the rosé and think red. For my money, the Rhône valley remains a great source of good value red, at all price points. This is particularly true at the top end of the market, where in terms of \$/Parker point, the Rhône knocks Bordeaux and Burgundy into a cocked hat.

The Rhône divides into two significant red wine zones. The northern Rhône (*septentrionale* in French) is the most important in terms of prestige but produces only 5% of the total regional volume. In the North, the climate is continental, with hard winters and hot summers. The river valley is narrow and the vines are often planted on steep slopes, though there has been a lot of planting on flatter land in St Joseph and Crozes-Hermitage.

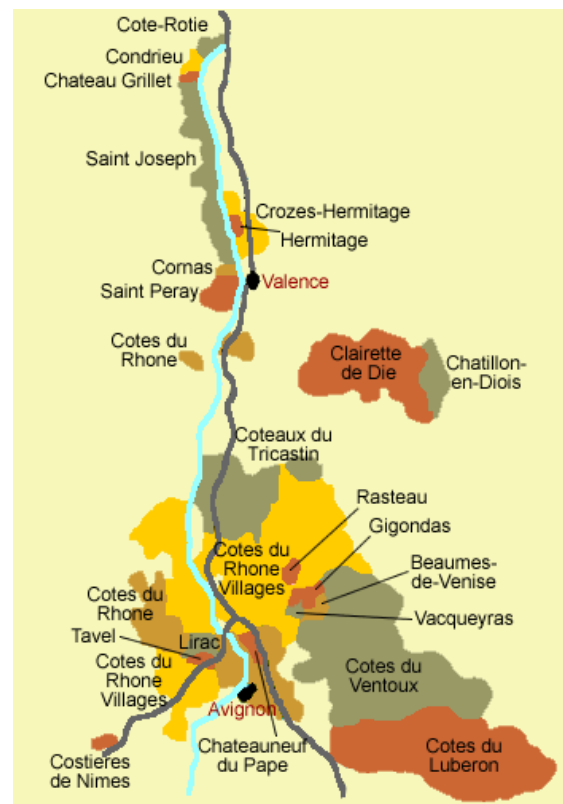
In this zone the Syrah grape is king; indeed, it is the only red grape planted in any quantity. For many years there was speculation that the Syrah/Shiraz grape came from the Middle East, from Shiraz of ancient Persia, and had been carried back in the saddle bags of crusaders. However, recent DNA testing has shown that the grape is a cross of a black variety, Dureza, and a white variety, Mondeuse, both with origins in France's Rhône region. (See previous edition of Stirling Wines).

The southern Rhône (*méridionale* in French) is much more varied. This zone is the home of Côtes du Rhône, which makes up almost 50% of the entire regional production. The climate is Mediterranean with milder winters than in the north - although the wind-chill that accompanies the Mistral wind can make it feel much colder. The landscape is much more open and flatter.

In the South the grape mix is very varied with most wines being blends rather than mono-varietals. The Syrah grape is often part of the mix of varieties and is increasingly planted to give backbone to the southern reds. But the main grape in the area is Grenache (Garnacha in its Spanish homeland). The next most

prominent grape is Mourvèdre. Note that sometimes Rhône-style blends from other countries are labelled G-S-M Grenache-Syrah-Mourvèdre. As well as the big three, Carignan and Cinsaut are also widely planted.

Co-operatives are very important in the southern Rhône, making about 70% of all the wine. But the négociants of the Northern Rhône have a long tradition of bottling southern reds under their corporate umbrella. Indeed, Guigal's Côtes du Rhône is one of France's biggest 'brands'.



The Northern Rhône – Spiritual Home of Syrah

Côte-Rôtie

The first major red wine-producing area as one descends the Rhône valley is Côte-Rôtie, literally the

'roasted slope'. It gets its name because the vines are planted on southeast-facing terraces on the northern bank of a bend in the river. In the 1970's the area was largely off the vinous map with only 70ha of plantings. However, due to the efforts of one man (Marcel Guigal) and rave reviews from Robert Parker, it is now one of the most eminent wines in France and plantings have trebled.

Côte-Rôtie is very unusual in the world of wine because although based on the red Syrah grape, growers typically add up to 10% of white Viognier to soften the wine. The resultant wines are big, deep-coloured and quite tannic but the combination of the Syrah and Viognier gives more subtlety than other red blockbusters and a uniquely perfumed nose. However, they do take at least 10 years to come round. I opened a few bottles of 1990 a month ago and they were at their peak, a perfect accompaniment to roast pork fillet.

As mentioned above, Marcel Guigal is the most famous wine maker in this area and his bottlings from the La Mouline, La Landonne, La Turque vineyards (the so-called La-La-La's) regularly score 100 points from Robert Parker. However, there are also excellent more reasonably priced wines from Gérin, Rostaing, Delas and Clusel-Roch.



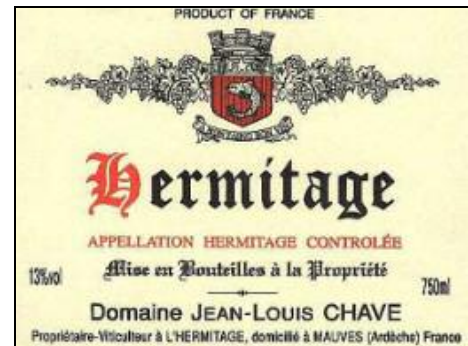
Hermitage

The other world-famous block-buster from the northern Rhône is Hermitage. This wine has a very long pedigree; in the 18th and 19th centuries, it fetched higher prices than 1st growth Bordeaux. Indeed, it was often added to weedy Bordeaux and Burgundy, so that London wine merchants offered so-called 'hermitagé' wines at higher prices than the unadulterated wines.

Hermitage comes from 132 ha on the south-facing slope of the granite hill of Hermitage. Unlike Côte-Rôtie, it is made from 100% Syrah. However, it too is

deeply coloured, very tannic, with an even longer life. Indeed, it is almost criminal to drink Hermitage under 10 years of age, as over time the wine gains great complexity and a savoury character that makes it the perfect accompaniment to game, in my view particularly venison.

Probably the best producer of Hermitage is Chave and although his Hermitage can fetch very high prices, he also sells exceptionally good St Joseph (Offerus) and Côtes du Rhône (Mon Coeur) at very reasonable prices \$15-\$25/bottle – see below. Other notable producers include Chapoutier, Sorrel and Tardieu-Laurent. La Chapelle from Jaboulet used to rank up with Chave and can be excellent but quality has been variable in recent years.



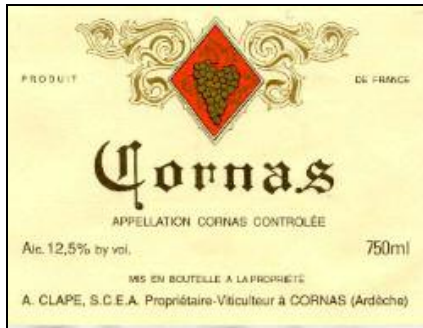
Crozes-Hermitage

Surrounding the hill of Hermitage is the much larger area of Crozes-Hermitage. The soils in this area are much richer than the hill of Hermitage and the wines are softer and fruitier. These wines are much more suitable for lamb than game. Some producers rely on the cachet of the Hermitage name and make distinctly inferior wines. However, the house of Jaboulet has long been a standard bearer for quality in the region and their Domaine de Thalabert represents good value-for money at approx £15/bottle and improves with 5-10 years age.



Cornas

Cornas lies across the river and down-stream from Hermitage. The area was renowned in the era of Charlemagne but for many years was a very rustic back-water. Throughout the lean years, Auguste Clape was the standard-bearer for high-quality, traditional wines that needed significant bottle age.



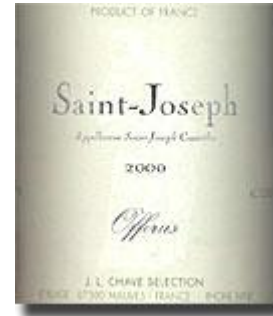
However, in recent years there has been a revolution in wine-making in Cornas, with an influx of talented newcomers. At the other end of the spectrum from Clape is the consultant oenologist and négociant Jean-Luc Colombo who has introduced techniques such as de-stemming (removing the stalks from the grapes before fermentation to reduce the possibility of harsh tannins) and makes excellent, more fleshy wines both in Cornas and elsewhere in the Rhône valley.



St Joseph

St Joseph is a long appellation that stretches along the West bank of the Rhône. It is mostly relatively flat ground but there is a core of terraced vineyards across the river from Hermitage. The wines are lighter than elsewhere in the northern Rhône because the vineyards face east and do not benefit from the warmth of the afternoon sun. Nevertheless, a St Joseph from a good producer is a wonderful, fruity, easy-drinking bottle of wine, reasonably priced at approx \$15-

20/bottle retail, often a little gem on an expensive wine list. Many of the négociants produce good value wines but a personal favourite is one from Chave (see above in Hermitage) called Offerus, which is essence of pure, sweet Syrah.



Southern Rhône –there's more to life than single varietals

Châteauneuf-du-Pape

The best known appellation of the southern Rhône is undoubtedly Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The wine is named after the 'pope's new castle' – the Palais des Papes, built in the 14th Century, when Pope Clement V moved the papacy from Rome to nearby Avignon, which was not then part of France but an imperial fief held by the King of Sicily. However, the reputation of the wine was really established in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when it was often the victim of adulteration and fraud. Perhaps as a result, it was the first area in France that drew up a rigid set of rules about where and how the wine could be made, in 1923.

In theory, 13 different grape varieties are permitted, some of them related to the white wines of the region. However, it is Grenache that dominates the plantings in the appellation, with Syrah and Mourvèdre playing supporting roles. Other permitted red varieties include: Cinsaut, Muscardin, Vaccarèse, Picpoul (best known for its white variant), Terret Noir and Counoise – a great trivial pursuit question.

The area is fairly flat and traditionally it is characterized by *galets*, large pebbles deposited by the river Rhône, which supposedly retain the heat and aid ripening. Typically, the wines are indeed warm, welcoming, voluptuous wines. The key to quality here is to balance the grape sugar levels (and hence alcoholic content) with the structure of the wine so that they do not become too hot and over-charged with alcohol. These wines are the perfect accompaniment

to grilled steak and have enough stuffing to stand up to very spicy barbeque sauces.

There a multitude of good producers in the area. Probably the most famous is the Château de Beaucastel – although their wines tend to polarize the experts because of the presence of *brettanomyces* bacteria in the winery which gives the wines a whiff of cheesy, smelly-sock complexity – something which I personally like in moderation.



Other top names include Vieux Donjon, La Nerthe, Rayas and a personal favourite Vieux Télégraphe.



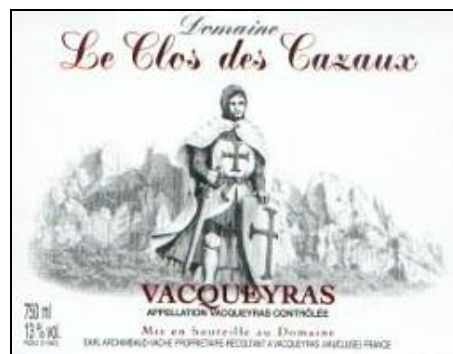
Gigondas

At their best, the wines of Gigondas can be every bit as good as Châteauneuf-du-Pape but better value-for-money. Technical wine quality is good but the lesser wines can be very rustic. The landscape here is spectacular, with the vineyards clustered under the backdrop of the most wonderful limestone rocks, the Dentelles de Montmirail. Grenache grapes must account for no more than 80% of the total blend, while Syrah and/or Mourvèdre make up at least 15%. Gigondas is not a wine for the faint-hearted, with big, bold peppery flavours. The best wines will reward up to ten years of cellaring and go really well with a roast leg of lamb, studded with garlic cloves and sprigs of rosemary. Good producers include Cayron, les Pallières and St. Gayan



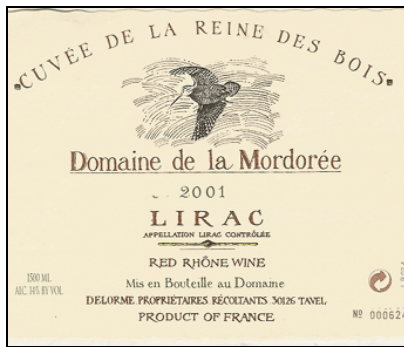
Vacqueyras

The area of Vacqueyras lies to the south of Gigondas and is in many respects its little brother. Like Gigondas, it used to be part of the Côtes du Rhône Villages (see below) but was elevated to its own appellation in 1990. The style of wine is similar to Gigondas but is even better value. A personal favourite is the Cuvée des Templiers from Cazaux.



Lirac

Lirac lies across the river from Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Many of the wines resemble a soft, ripe Côtes du Rhône Villages (see below) but Domaine de la Mordorée, who are also excellent producers of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, make very good value-for-money wines which strike a lovely balance between the weight of Châteauneuf-du-Pape and the fruit of Côtes du Rhône.



Côtes du Rhône

Much of the wine labelled as Côtes du Rhône is commoditized, easy-drinking plonk from the flat arid vineyards in the southern Rhône valley. However, there are many gems among the dross. First, there are a number of high quality estates, often with links to Châteauneuf-du-Pape, such as: Janasse, Réméjeanne, Trignon and Coudoulet de Beaucastel.



Then there are the twenty villages that form the Côtes du Rhône Villages. These villages have lower permitted maximum yields and their wine is a considerable step up in quality from the basic Côtes du Rhône. The co-operative in Rasteau is a very solid, reliable example of this wine



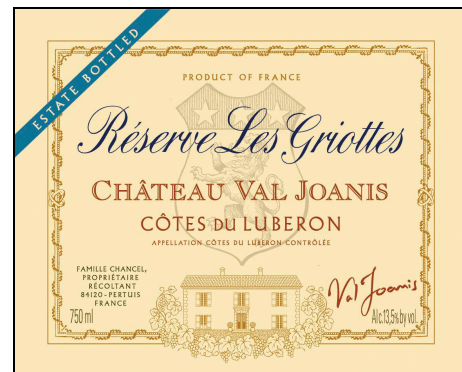
Finally, a number of the illustrious négociants from the northern Rhône source/produce their own bottlings of

Côtes du Rhône. Guigal is the most ubiquitous; Chave does an excellent wine Mon Coeur; but one to look out for is Tardieu-Laurent, described by Jancis Robinson as 'quite extraordinary texture.....very impressive and way above its station'.



Up-and-coming Côtes and Coteaux

Finally, there are the up-and-coming appellations of Coteaux du Tricastin, Côtes du Luberon, Côtes du Ventoux, and Côtes du Vivarais. These are in general similar in style to Côtes du Rhône. They are largely dominated by co-operatives but there are a number of relatively new ambitious individual producers. One that I can vouch for and a favourite of Robert Parker is Ch. Val Joanis.



Further reading

John Livingstone-Learmonth, The Wines of the Northern Rhône – the bible.

Robert Parker, The Wines of the Rhone Valley – good but dated, published in 1997

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