

JOE CZERWINSKI – FRANCE, NORTHERN RHONE

The Wine Advocate | December 2019 and January 2020

Since 2015, the Northern Rhône has seen a string of very good to great vintages. At the moment, I'd put 2015 and 2018 in the "great" category and would rate 2016 and 2017 as "very good." As I've not tasted any of the 2019s, I'm not categorizing it yet, but early reports from the producers suggest it will be of similar quality.

Simply put, this number of back to back to back to back (to back) vintages has never occurred in living memory. Two years? Sure. Three years? Rarely. But four and likely five years? Never. "Global warming has been fabulous for the Northern Rhône," said Marcel Guigal as we tasted in his cellars.

For this report, the focus is on 2017 and 2018, the two vintages most likely to be on retailers' shelves now and in the near future. Both years were warm, characterized by lots of sunshine and generally early harvests. "For us vigneron, these are great years, because everything got ripe," said Stéphane Robert of Domaine du Tunnel. "Seventeen is very good. I'm super happy with that year. And '18 is also good—maybe a little more showy young." He compared them to 2009 and 2015 but noted those years were more tannic. "The 2009s are starting to drink well now, but who waits 10 years?"

In Côte Rôtie, Jean-Paul Jamet said 2018 is an excellent year, "very ripe yet with supple tannins and good freshness." He contrasted that to 2017, which he says is "a solar year with surprising elegance." To illustrate his point that warm vintages aren't a threat to Côte Rôtie, Jamet poured a couple of older wines from hot years. Both the 2009 and 1989 Côte Rôtie were singing. He compared the 1989 to the 2018. "I'm confident in hot vintages," he said. "Because with time, the terroir emerges."

Stéphane Ogier said, "We can feel it [2018] is a warm year like 2009, but we don't have the powerful tannins like in 2015. Seventeen was more balanced in terms of weather.... It's in the style of 2016 but more charming, more finesse, with a step up in terms of density and intensity over '16."

Perhaps the biggest difference between 2017 and 2018—and what ultimately marks the differences between them—is that 2017 was drier throughout the growing season. Some of the Syrah vines shut down during the summer, leaving the resulting wines a bit more edgy and less harmonious than their 2018 counterparts.

In 2018, said Jean-Louis Chave, "The wines are not really jammy. They're almost as ripe as 2003, but for some reason the grapes weren't raisiny. The vines never really stopped. In mid-August we had 40 millimeters of rain—perfect timing. And at the end of August another little rain." Hermitage shines this year. "In Hermitage, you can push things to the limit and still be OK," Chave said. "Even when it's extreme, the *grands terroirs* are still the *grands terroirs*."

Looking at recent vintages, Chave summarized the similarities as follows: 2015 he compares to 1990; 2016 to 2010; 2017 to 2000. As for 2018, said Chave, "It wouldn't be right to compare 2018 and 2003. The ripeness is extreme, but at the end they're very different wines." In the interest of getting this report published before the end of the year, I've broken it into two parts, with Part 1 focusing on the appellations of Cornas, Côte Rôtie and Hermitage. I'll have more reviews from Condrieu, Crozes-Hermitage and Saint-Joseph in an upcoming issue.

As I wrote in Part 1 of this report, the Northern Rhône has been on a hot streak. Readers should refer to that article for more specifics on the weather and vintage conditions. While that means prices for the top cuvées of the glamour appellations are likely to soar, it also

means that many of the “lesser” appellations can exceed expectations. In this part of the report, we’ll look at Crozes-Hermitage and Saint-Joseph, two sprawling regions that provide the bulk of the Northern Rhône’s production.

Most of the vineyards of Crozes-Hermitage spread out across the ancient river terraces of the Rhône and Isère rivers, which join south of Tain l’Hermitage at Pont de l’Isère. These soils aren’t too different to the eye from some of the galets roulés found further south along the Rhône, with reddish clays and lots of rounded river stones of various sizes. The villages in the southern portion of this area are La Roche de Glun, Pont de l’Isère and Beaumont-Montoux. North of them lies the Plain de Chassis, hit hard by hail in 2019. Many growers lost 50% or more of their crop last summer.

Moving still further north, the commune of Mercuriol lies almost due east of the Hermitage hill. Many growers here also own parcels in Hermitage proper. The soils here are also based on old river terraces but show more variability in their clay bases and topography. Wrapping around behind the Hermitage hill, Crozes-Hermitage includes the village of Larnage, known for its white clays, and the villages of Crozes and Gervans, whose vineyards are based largely on granite.

With all of the variability in the appellation, it helps to know where the estates are based and where they’re sourcing grapes. I’ve tried to include that in the wine descriptions when I know it, as it can make a substantial difference in the wine styles. There’s no doubt in my mind that the appellation is too large, but don’t expect any serious efforts to subdivide it. Producers aren’t allowed to indicate commune names on the label to differentiate their cuvées, but some have come up with names for their wines that attempt to communicate this information.

From the plains—the largest production area—the red wines are normally ripe, generous and sometimes simple expressions of Syrah. Most are meant to be consumed young, so they are made with approachability in mind—destemmed, with relatively short, gentle extraction and minimal *élevage*. Of course, there are also exceptions capable of aging up to decade or more, like the whole-cluster, barrel-aged wines of Alain Graillot.

Talk Crozes from granite, and it’s a different story. Some of those wines can approximate Hermitage itself in terms of structure and aging potential, and in the warm vintages, they can excel. Jaboulet’s Domaine de Roure, which comes from a granite slope in Gervans, is a prime example. On the opposite bank of the Rhône, the appellation of Saint-Joseph stretches for close to 40 miles, from Cornas in the south to Condrieu in the north. The slopes directly on the Rhône face east, so many of the best (south-facing) vineyards are tucked into the valleys of tributaries. Again, it pays to know the villages of the appellation, as the soils and exposures can vary.

In the south, almost all of the slopes are granite-based, and the communities of Mauves, Tournon and Saint Jean de Muzols form a formidable trio. Tournon lies just across the Rhône from Tain l’Hermitage and is home to the lieu-dit Saint-Joseph that lent its name to the appellation. Chave, Coursodon and Gonon are in Mauves; producers like Eric and Joël Durand and Courbis in Châteaubourg are right on the border of Cornas and produce wines from both appellations.

As one heads north, almost every transverse valley boasts vineyards, with wider, flatter ones giving more generous yields and wines that are at their best young and narrower, tighter valleys like the one near the spectacular medieval village of Mallevall often providing more concentration. But producer is—as always—a defining variable.

Throughout Crozes-Hermitage and Saint-Joseph, yields were lower in 2017 than in 2018. Given the sunny weather, larger yields aren’t always a bad thing, and the 2018 wines typically have a sense of openness and generosity to them. With many of the producers yet to achieve cult status, buyers have the luxury of picking and choosing which wines and styles they prefer. Enjoy!