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The changing face of the Rhone

A year since our last update on the Rhône, it is time to examine the performance of this somewhat overlooked French fine wine region in the secondary market. The Rhône has undergone considerable broadening over the past decade, with the number of wines trading rising 761%. The number has doubled in the last three years alone.

The wines of the Rhône continue to provide **remarkable value for money**, indicated by low price to score ratio. As examined in our August Market Report, the Southern Rhône represents the lowest entry point into the fine wine market bar Sauternes, getting 1% cheaper over the past two years. At the same time, the quality of its wines has been improving.

Despite rising 10% in value over the same period (and costing double the price), the top wines of the Northern Rhône remain more affordable than Champagne, Piedmont, Burgundy, Bordeaux, Australia and California. When it comes to the price performance of the Northern and Southern Rhône indices in the past five years, the Northern index has risen 19%, while the Southern has risen 18%. The affordability of the wines from the south has helped them make steady long-term gains, though both groups have followed a similar price performance pattern, as indicated by chart 3.

In an increasingly active and diverse market, the Rhône has held its share of trade by value at 3% in 2019. Guigal, Beaucastel, Clos Pape and Chapoutier have been in buyers' sights. Meanwhile, trade has been dominated by the critically acclaimed 2015 and 2016 vintages. Will the Rhône's quality and low prices drive market demand further in the year ahead? With 93% of Châteauneuf's production devoted to red wines, that's what I spent the bulk of last issue focused on. This issue, we flip the script, and the majority of the wines reviewed are white, which are increasingly in demand throughout the world.

My blind tastings held at the Fédération des Syndicats de Producteurs de Châteauneuf-du-Pape included 82 white wines from the 2018 vintage. It's a round, ripe year, but crop size was affected by the mildew that was so pervasive in May and June. The wines are generous, but in keeping with modern sensibilities, most retain a sense of freshness.

Also in this report, I've tracked down my notes from an early-morning visit at Domaine Raymond Usseglio. Lesson learned: Avoid scheduling appointments at 7:30 in the morning! Vigneron Stéphane Usseglio is crafting some outstanding wines from his family's old vines and has started a small négoce business under his own name as well. Both ventures (listed separately) are well worth checking out.

Cairanne and Rasteau

These two neighboring communes have produced some exciting wines over the past few vintages. I suppose one could say the same about just about any appellations in the Southern Rhône, but for me, these are two that deserve special mention.

In the dry summer of **2017**, the deep clay soils common in these appellations provided the vines with just enough moisture to keep the vines ticking along, allowing for complete physiological ripeness. The resulting wines don't show the same signs of water stress and tough tannins that can be seen in wines from some other locales. They're dense and

powerful, with ripe tannins and flavors. Yields were down from the previous year by about 35% because of the drought and cool weather at flowering, which caused coulure in the Grenache.

Conversely, the wet weather in the spring of **2018** posed special challenges to these same vignerons. With short windows between rains to apply treatments, many found it impossible to apply the proper treatments because of the wet clay. "It was impossible to get the tractors in the vineyards. I got stuck three times," said Laurent Brusset.

As a result, yields in 2018 were down anywhere from 30% to 65% compared to normal (i.e., 2016). The quality, however, is surprisingly good. After June 10, there was very little rain—just enough fell in August to refresh the vines and get them through the final ripening push. The 2018s are wines of charm and drinkability rather than super ripeness and power, but they may actually be better received by today's market. Like Cairanne and Rasteau, Lirac is another Southern Rhône appellation whose prices are only just catching up with the high quality of the wines being produced. Just across the river from Châteauneuf-du-Pape, with soils that are similar in many cases, it's another place that value-oriented consumers should be seeking out.

With the 862 reviews from the Southern Rhône published earlier this summer, the total is now over 1,200—with still more to come. Stay tuned...

Do low yields equal high quality ?

This question makes regular appearances in one form or another on the prestigious Master of Wine Examination. Often enough, in fact, to think that there must be more to it than a simple "yes" or "no" response.

If one has some basic knowledge of historic vintages and quality assessments, it's relatively easy to come up with some differing examples. Yields in Bordeaux were generous in 1982, and in the Southern Rhône in 2016. Yet both are great vintages. In the last decade, Bordeaux's lowest yields occurred in 2013, which was pretty much disastrous.

Still, there must be something to this idea, which has permeated the culture of wine for centuries. Heck, it is the driving force behind the ban on irrigation throughout much of Europe. Looking just at the Southern Rhône, the appellations have limits regarding maximum permitted yields. In Châteauneuf du Pape, the limit is 35 hectoliters per hectare (about 2.5 tons per acre), which is quite restrictive. Contrast that to Pauillac (Bordeaux), where the limit is 57 hectoliters per hectare.

Depending on individual vineyard sites and management, volumes in the Southern Rhône in 2017 and 2018 were down anywhere from one-third to one-half when compared to 2016. If the quality of a vintage was determined by yields alone, both of those years in the Southern Rhône would zoom past 2016. That's not the case. Both are good, even very good years, and some producers have even made better wines than in 2016 (I didn't check the scores, but I suspect not many). Overall, neither vintage is as good as 2016. So, what happened?

In 2017, a cool, wet April and early May interfered with fruit set in the Grenache, a condition known as *coulure*, in which many of the berries either fail to pollinate or abort near the outset. After that, the rest of the growing season was extremely dry, with some appellations receiving essentially no precipitation from mid-May through the start of harvest, at the end of August. The combination of fewer berries and lack of water meant the berries that did develop remained small and concentrated.

At Clos Saint Jean in Châteauneuf du Pape, Pascal Maurel said the estate lost 40% of its usual volume to *coulure* and dry weather in 2017, but he considered this fortunate. “The low yield meant ripening could progress in spite of the drought.”

That’s a key point in looking at the 2017s. While many of the wines are powerful and tannic, driven by the natural concentration in the grapes, few of the wines show excessive hardness or underripe qualities, because in most cases ripening didn’t have to stop and restart. Also, knowing that they were facing tiny berries, plentiful tannins and ripe fruit, many vigneronns adjusted their vinifications accordingly, either extracting more gently or adjusting the proportion of whole bunches. Interestingly, some producers used more whole bunches to balance the concentration and ripeness in the berries, while others backed off on whole bunches to avoid too much stem impact.

In 2018, the spring got off to a warm, early start, and the Grenache set a healthy crop. But from May through the middle of June, the region was under steady rain and humidity, without the typical *mistral* to dry out the vines. If producers weren’t on top of their vineyard spraying—or couldn’t access the vineyards because of the wet soils—downy mildew began to run rampant through the vineyards.

Numerous parcels lost 50% of the crop, while others were entirely destroyed. Hardest hit were those who practice organics or biodynamics, as the timing of treatments was so critical. Generally speaking, vineyards in lower-lying areas were more affected than those at higher elevations. Much of Gigondas was largely spared as a result.

By the time normal summer weather and the *mistral* returned, the damage was substantial. But as more than one producer told me, “After July 1, it was a perfect year.” The wind dried out the mildew, and the damaged berries fell away. The fruit that was left ripened under ideal conditions, including a brief August rain event that refreshed the vines and prevented any shut down but didn’t bring in any additional rot. The vigneronns who were able to preserve their crops were rewarded with largely plush, sumptuous wines, many of which are delicious already.

Opinions are divided about how good the vintage really is. Marc Perrin (Perrin Famille, Château de Beaucastel) is a proponent. Said Perrin, “For me, 2018 is a top vintage. The tannins are long and deep.”

Domaine du Pegau’s Laurence Feraud disagrees. She will not be releasing a Cuvée da Capo from either 2017 or 2018. “In 2018, there’s weakness in the mid-palate. Bigger berries, thinner skins,” she said.

Where does that leave consumers? Actually, sitting pretty and spoiled for choice. With four consecutive good (or better) vintages from 2015 – 2018, buyers can be choosy when selecting special bottles for the cellar and yet be reasonably certain of getting a good drink at a reasonable price for everyday drinking. And preharvest reports about 2019 are promising, too.... Keep those fingers crossed! At more than 750 wines in Part 1, I had to draw the line somewhere. Unfortunately, that means many of the white Châteauneufs got bumped to Part 2 of this report, along with the rest of the Southern Rhône appellations. Look for them at the end of September.