

## Southern Rhone – C d P great 2019 and 2020

Joe Czerwinski – Wine Advocate May 2022

The Southern Rhône's largest appellation has enjoyed an unprecedented run of success in recent vintages. Yes, there have been hiccups along the way, like the low yields in 2017 because of coulure in the Grenache, followed by a lack of rain, or the low yields in 2018 brought on by mildew, but **quality has been largely excellent since 2015**.

**In 2019 and 2020, that streak continued.** Marked by largely dry, warm summers and early ripening, both years have yielded some great wines—and many excellent ones. If there is any complaint about 2019, it is that some of the wines are too dark, too concentrated, and may need additional time to come around. Gentle macerations were the key to avoid overextraction of tannins from the vintage's tiny, nearly dry berries.

In 2020, the balance seems to have come more naturally. The berries were about 10% larger and nights were cooler, leading to juicier musts and naturally higher acid levels. Of course, even in a small community of winegrowers like in Châteauneuf du Pape, opinions vary regarding which is the better year.

To Fabrice Brunel at Les Cailloux, 2019 is the one he compares to great years like 2010 and 2016, while he says, "2020 is very nice, but I think it has less concentration than 2019." Stéphane Usseglio, at Domaine Raymond Usseglio, echoes those comments, calling 2020 "certainly less concentrated than 2019." He compares it to years like 2009 and 2015. And Paul-Vincent Avril at Clos des Papes seems to be in the same camp, comparing 2019 to 2007 and 2016, characterizing 2019 as "more powerful and rich" and 2020 as "really elegant." Which vintage you prefer may depend as much on the style of wine you prefer. In my tastings, at the Fédération des Syndicats de Châteauneuf du Pape, conducted blind at the end of September 2021, and at various producers around the same time and into early October, I found some estates made better 2019s, while others made more impressive 2020s.

For lovers of white wines, the differences between the vintages are largely similar, with the 2019s coming across as fatter, riper and more concentrated than the more classically balanced, elegant 2020s. Compounding that is a trend emphasizing freshness in the white wines. While that is a movement I would like to support—and many times the wines are better for it—too often it seems like an excuse to pick underripe grapes, slap them into barrels and make ersatz Burgundy. Producers need to find a healthy medium that allows the grapes to express their unique varietal characters and warm-climate origins without being overly fat or blowsy.

Looking deeper into the cellar, I was able to try a number of 2011s (a generally underrated vintage) and 2001s (a highly acclaimed year) during my time in the region. The good 2011s are largely at their peak, and I see little reason to put off drinking them at this point. At 20 years past the vintage, the showings of the 2001s were more variable, with the entry-level cuvées showing their age, while the top wines remain excellent and should be able to cruise along for another five years or more.

At the risk of repeating myself and giving away too much regarding the 2021s, the year was defined by a cold snap in April that caused widespread frost damage, a cool summer and a vintage punctuated by sporadic rains, which caused vigneronns to repeatedly start and stop their harvests. While the whites may have benefited in some instances, the reds most assuredly did not. Selection and harvest timing will prove critical, and the proof will be in the first tastings later this year.