

WINE News

We've done the hard work. Now, enjoy our wines of the Rhône.



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Looking Forward to a New Era of the Rhône

By Keith Mabry

We recently passed the anniversary mark in the pandemic era and we can finally see that light at the end of this long tunnel. And for the wine industry, it was not just a pandemic but also a series of tariffs that exacerbated a terrible situation. The impact of those wine tariffs plus the pandemic had a compound effect—disrupting pricing, the supply chain, and access to many of the wines we enjoy. A brief but hopefully permanent suspension of those tariffs might mean these paradigm-shifting events will soon be in the rear-view mirror.

Despite this, we have still found some incredible offers from one of our favorite wine regions—the Rhône. We have even made a few new connections (albeit remotely) with several producers in both the

northern and southern Rhône. We are excited to introduce our new organic producers: Domaine Belle from Hermitage; and Mas de Libian, a Demeter-certified Biodynamic producer from the southern Rhône.

The Rhône continues its streak of excellent vintages with no signs of slowing. Soon to be hitting our shores (fingers crossed—tariff free!) is the very exciting 2019 vintage. We are enthusiastic about this vintage and we have some very special pre-arrivals to show you, many of which will arrive by year's end. Even the 2020 vintage, most of which is still in barrels and tanks, shows exceptional promise. From 2015 to 2020 and hopefully beyond, this is the era of the Rhône. Let's begin with some new staff favorites.

2018 Moulin de la Gardette “Cuvée Ventabren” Gigondas (\$39.99)

Proprietor JB Meunier has well established himself as one of our great, go-to Gigondas producers. And his 2018 Ventabren is just sublime this year. A potpourri of garrigue, red fruits, anisette, and lavender are framed by a creamy palate and sweet tannins. This has wonderful acid and should evolve gracefully for a decade. But what a thrilling wine to drink right now! **96 DC, 91-94 RP**



2018 Domaine des Remizieres “Cuvée Christophe” Crozes-Hermitage (\$34.99)

Winemaker Emilie Desmeures has a modern take on northern Rhône Syrah, but her wines still speak strongly of terroir. Cuvée Christophe, named for her brother, comes from their chalkiest parcel. Robust, rich fruit flavors of blackberry, currants, violets, and Asian spices make for a sumptuous and inviting red. About an hour in the decanter and the wine unfolds with satiny texture and long flavors. Simply gorgeous stuff. **94 JD, 93 WE**



2018 Julien Barge “Les Coteaux de Légende” Côtes-du-Rhône (\$16.99)

One of our new Direct Imports, Julien Barge is famous for his old-school and long-lived Côte-Rôties. This Côtes-du-Rhône side project is a study in the engaging qualities of a Grenache-driven wine in the hands of a Syrah master. Perfumed and spice-driven with fresh cracked pepper and briary red fruit, this way overdelivers for an entry-level wine. An outstanding addition to our portfolio.



Highlights from Hermitage and the Neighborhood

By Keith Mabry

Domaine Belle Hermitage

The Belle family's roots run deep in the commune of Larnage, just a stone's throw from Tain l'Hermitage and its famed hill. In the 1930s Louis Belle had consolidated much of his family's vineyard holdings in Larnage but preferred growing fruit over winemaking. As such, he became one of the founding members of the Cave de Tain, the esteemed cooperative that helped define the appellations of Crozes-Hermitage and Hermitage. He sold his fruit for decades while continuing to acquire a few small parcels here and there across several of the other communes of Crozes. Louis eventually handed over the property to his son Albert in the 1970s. When Albert's son Philippe returned from oenology school in the 1990s, they began building a winery, and the modern age of Domaine Belle was born. Philippe assumed all duties in 2003 and slowly began the process of converting to organic farming, starting in 2008. They were officially certified in 2014. From whites to reds, the hallmark of this family

resides in the distinct soils of Larnage, the only commune within Crozes to have clay-limestone-based soils. Though they make exquisite whites, the reds are currently our focus.



Le famille Belle. (Photo courtesy of Domaine Belle)

The **2018 Domaine Belle "Les Pierrelles" Crozes-Hermitage (\$24.99)** comes from younger vines averaging 20–25 years of age in the southern end of the appellation. Here the galets (rolled pebbles) cover the soil composed of red clays and sands. A little warmer and riper grapes, from the radiating warmth of the galets, makes for lush and inviting Syrah. This has a lusty mouthfeel with warm, red fruit flavors of cherry and creamy raspberries, followed by smoky spices and red flowers. This is a supple and inviting red that will instantly charm you, like it did us. **90-93 RP**

The patriarchal namesake wine is the **2017 Domaine Belle "Cuvée Louis Belle" Crozes-Hermitage (\$29.99)**. The fruit comes from those beautiful clay-limestone soils in and around Larnage. This has an underlying structure and seriousness guaranteed to translate to longevity. The vines range from 20 to 100 years of age, fruit is partially destemmed, and the grapes are fermented with native yeasts. Those Larnage soils create a beautifully structured and balanced red showing its full-bodied texture with flavors of black cherry, savory smoky spices, new leather,



Farming wine grapes in Crozes-Hermitage sometimes requires special equipment. (Photo courtesy of Domaine Belle)

and lavender. This is a lingering and memorable red, guaranteed to develop for many years to come. **93 JD**

Guy Farge St-Joseph

One of our great direct relationships in the northern Rhône is with vigneron Guy and Thomas Farge.

They specialize in St-Joseph, with small parcels in nearby Cornas and St-Peray. They make lovely whites and reds from these regions, and most of their vineyard holdings for St-Joseph are in and around the village of Saint-Jean-de-Muzols. We currently have two of their esteemed St-Joseph reds in stock. All vines are planted on the terraced granitic slopes of the appellation.



The **2018 Guy Farge "Terroir de Granit" St-Joseph (\$29.99)** is a testament to this soil. Like all red St-Joseph, it is 100% Syrah. The grapes are partially destemmed (about 70%) and native yeasts are used. The wine ages for about 12 months in used 400-liter barrels. It is smoky, spicy, and filled with red fruit and floral aromas. It is a textbook St-Joseph. It is the perfect foil for some grilled Korean style pork ribs, or pork ribs of any kind, really. **91-93 RP, 90 JD**



The **2018 Guy Farge "Passion de Terrasses" St-Joseph (\$39.99)** is an exercise in depth of flavor and longevity. These are from the Farges' oldest vines averaging 100 years of age. The wine is whole-cluster fermented and aged in 400-liter barrels, a mix of new and used. It is deeply concentrated with meaty bacon undertones framed by lusty blackberry fruit and rich cassis flavors. This is a keeper for sure, but a beautifully grilled rib-eye with some roasted vegetables seems about right. **93-95 RP, 91 JD**

The Greatest Value in the Wine World: Côtes-du-Rhône

By Alex Pross

This is not hyperbole! The greatest values in the wine world, particularly when discussing red wines, reside in the Rhône Valley—and more specifically, Côtes-du-Rhône. Mainly Grenache and Syrah-based, with grapes like Carignan, Cinsault, and Mourvèdre thrown in, these wines have beautiful fruit, wonderful structure, admirable depth, and often are like baby versions of Chateauneuf-du-Pape at a fraction of the price.

Value Picks in Côtes-du-Rhône In Stock

We have a wonderful array of choices in Côtes-du-Rhône, but rather than overwhelm you with options here, I am going to pick my three favorites—all under \$20 a bottle!

2018 Delas Frères “Saint-Esprit”

Côtes-du-Rhône (\$10.99) One of the most consistently outstanding wines year-in-and-year-out, this perennial value once again delivers with dark red and blue fruits, spice, licorice, and subtle hints of baking chocolate on the nose while the palate is kirsch, blackberry, and wisps of red raspberry and licorice notes. This is a fantastic value and drinks like a wine several times its modest price.

2019 Domaine Olivier Hillaire “Vieilles Vignes”

Côtes-du-Rhône (\$15.99) This concentrated, spicy red oozes black plum, cherry, black pepper, and licorice



flavors. More full-bodied than the Delas, this is a sexy wine.

2019 Domaine de Marcoux Côtes-du-Rhône

(\$19.99) This is a beautiful red wine from this trailblazing biodynamic Rhône Valley producer. A wonderful blend of Old World and New World stylistically, this wine has gorgeous fruit notes while simultaneously displaying Old World charm of spice, garrigue, leathery notes, and hints of white pepper. A beautiful red wine that really represents the heights inexpensive Côtes-du-Rhône can achieve. **90 JD**



2019 Côtes-du-Rhône Red Pre-Arrival

You would be wise to snatch up these values on pre-arrival, as there is a good chance they will sell out!

2019 Domaine St. Damien “Plan de Dieu Vieilles Vignes” Côtes-du-Rhône Villages (\$15.99) 90-92 JD

2019 Chateau de Saint Cosme “Les Deux Albion” Côtes-du-Rhône (\$24.99)

2019 Franck Balthazar Côtes-du-Rhône (\$24.99)

2019 Le Clos du Caillou “Les Quartz” Côtes-du-Rhône (\$34.99) 92-94 JD

2019 Les Clos du Caillou “La Reserve” Côtes-du-Rhône (\$39.99) 92-94 JD

2019 Châteauneuf-du-Pape Pre-Arrival

By Alex Pross

The Rhône Valley, and more specifically Châteauneuf-du-Pape, has been on a roll in recent years, with vintage-after-vintage-after-vintage that flirt between good to outstanding. The 2019 vintage is shaping up to be on par with other stellar vintages such as 2016, 2015, 2010, 2009, 2007, and 2005. What you get from Châteauneuf-du-Pape that separates it from Bordeaux, Burgundy, and California Cabernet, is you can get the top red wines for \$50 to \$100, with some amazing whites as well. Nowhere else in the wine world can you drink the very best wines of an appellation as cheaply as you can in the southern Rhône and Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The wines have beautiful fruit, great structure, and wonderful complexity, with energy and drive. With a challenging economy worldwide and, thankfully, a retraction of tariffs, the prices for these magnificent wines makes them very attractive purchases. Most wines are due late summer, early fall. *All wines listed are Châteauneuf-du-Pape:*

2019 Domaine Grand Veneur “Les Origines” (\$49.99) 94-96 JD

2019 Le Vieux Donjon (\$49.99) 98 DC, 94-96 JD

2019 Bosquet des Papes “A la Gloire de Mon Grand Père” (\$54.99) 94-96 JD

2019 Bosquet des Papes “Chante le Merle” Vieilles Vignes (\$59.99) 94-96 JD

2019 Domaine de la Janasse “Chaupin” (\$69.99) 96-99 JD, 95 DC

2019 Domaine de la Mordorée “La Reine des Bois” (\$69.99) 96-99 JD

2019 Château de Beaucastel (\$79.99) 96 DC

2019 Domaine du Vieux Télégraphe “La Crau” (\$79.99) 96-98 JD

2019 Domaine Grand Veneur “Vieilles Vignes” (\$89.99) 96-99 JD

2019 Olivier Hillaire “Les Petits Pieds d’Armand” (\$89.99) 96-98 JD

2019 Clos des Papes (\$99.99) 98 DC

2019 Domaine de la Janasse “Vieilles Vignes” (\$99.99) 97 DC

Mas de Libian: Mondo Bio Vino

By John Majeski

“Our salvation resides above all in the work of our hands and the love of our hearts.” Such are the soulful, eloquent words of winemaker H el ene Thibon, who with her talented son Aur elien and other family members cultivates the sunlit, terraced vineyards of Mas de Libian in the Ard eches region of the southern Rh one. She represents quite a celebrated lineage, having grown up on the property, a former hunting lodge held by her family for over 350 years. She was surrounded by a sizeable scholarly library as well, as her paternal grandfather was the renowned spiritual philosopher Gustave Thibon (1903–2001). Not to be outdone, in a recent fascinating documentary by Deborah Richman Cohen, humorously called *Weed and Wine*, H el ene was fondly and favorably profiled along with her son, as they worked another year and harvest in their French countryside vineyards. Their vinous ordeals were contrasted by the filmmaker with the problems faced many thousands of miles away by a legal marijuana farm in Humboldt County. Oceans apart, but both faced the challenge of bringing in the best crop!

By long applying biodynamic techniques in adherence to the rhythms of nature, H el ene has determinedly ploughed and fertilized her vineyards with the help of horsepower—first with Nestor, a strong Comtois workhorse, and recently, after he sadly passed, with another magnificent equine named with Bambi. Yes, Bambi the horse. They were both adored members of the family and labored long and diligently with true “equinimity.”

Meticulous work in the various plots throughout the year always promises a cleaner harvest and ideal fruit, as these wines are a testament to the care and integrity of the winemaker’s hand. The **2019 Mas de Libian “Bout d’Zan” C otes-du-Rh one (\$14.99)** was cultivated on clay-limestone soils and is a bright, convivial (dare I say happy?) blend of Grenache and Syrah, showcasing a wealth of primary red fruits on the nose—cherries, raspberries, pomegranates, with fetching notes of licorice and spice on the silky smooth, medium-bodied palate. An incredible value, and a wine to share and pair with virtually any Mediterranean dish.



H el ene and Bambi amid the vines. (Photo courtesy of Mas de Libian)

On the more complex scale, the **2019 Mas de Libian “Khayyam” C otes-du-Rh one (\$19.99)** originates from Grenache, Mourv edre, and Syrah vines deeply rooted beneath the classic alluvial rolled pebbles of the southern Rh one that retain the sun’s relentless heat and release it gradually during the night to improve phenolic ripening. Named for the brilliant Persian scholar, poet, and mathematician of the eleventh-century who wrote some of the most stirring and evocative poetry to both women and wine, this bottle is a testament to love, revealing an elegant aromatic profile with floral undertones and an expansive, juicy palate of red plums, black currants, thyme, and lavender, tinged with pepper and licorice pastilles. Balanced tannins and pliant acidity give this wine the promise of cellaring for a decade.

Mas de Libian also produces a wonderfully sophisticated white Rh one, the **2019 Mas de Libian “Cave Vinum” Vin de France Blanc (\$19.99)** that tasted blind, could have passed for a Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape Blanc. An inspired blend of Viognier, Roussanne, and Clairette, this white wine is an ideal aperitif, laced with graceful aromatics and harmonious flavors of orange blossom, blanched almonds, and sun-kissed stone fruits—white peach, apricot, and Asian pear. To your health!



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3005 El Camino Real, Redwood City, CA 94061

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