

# WINE News

*Don't overlook the Rhône...*



## SEPTEMBER 6, 2021 FEATURES

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## Cool Times for Wines of the Rhône

By Keith Mabry

**Wow, this year is just trucking along.** The summer seems to have just arrived, yet here we are, writing about its conclusion. And do you know what wines are best suited to help with this transition to cooler times? Rhône wines! You probably knew I was going to say that—I love the wines of the Rhône. They are full and fleshy, meaty and savory, fruit-filled yet complex. Rhône wines offer all of these qualities and so much more. Great vintages and great choices are abundant. We just had a

landslide of wines arrive, so there are many great bottles to offer. In this newsletter, we look at several vintages of Châteauneuf-du-Pape that have some of the best quality-price-ratio in the category. We spotlight a couple of our favorite new Direct Import arrivals, one from the Northern Rhône and one from the south. And we finish with some of the best values the world of wine can offer. But first and foremost, let's get to drinking, with some of my favorite picks this season.

### 2016 Château de Montfaucon "Baron Louis"

**Lirac (\$24.99)** Montfaucon continues to be one of our greatest Direct Import partners, and the Baron Louis one of their best wines. The 2016 Baron is an iconic release from a superb vintage, and one of the finest wines vigneron Rodolphe des Pins has yet made. Deep fruit, savory herbs, complex flavors, and a long finish are just a few ways to describe this exceptional new wine. You're going to want a few bottles (or more), some to drink and some to save. This has a long life ahead of it. **96 DC, 92-94 RP**



### 2000 Xavier Vignon "2000" Châteauneuf-du-Pape

**(\$99.99)** Every once in a while you find something truly special. Xavier Vignon came across a tank of 2000 Châteauneuf—a great vintage from an unnamed source. This wine idled in tank for two decades before bottling. Vignon convinced the winery to let him bottle it, and we are the beneficiaries of one of this year's coolest releases. Perfumed with red fruit, peppery spices, and potpourri, this has all the character of an aged wine but none of the troubles of being improperly stored. It is a *must-try!* **94 JS**



### 2019 Clos de la Bonnette "Légende Bonnette" Condrieu

**(\$59.99)** We were introduced to Isabelle Guiller and her family a few years ago and were instantly captivated. Their hillside vineyard was established centuries ago, but fell into disrepair and lay fallow for decades before Isabelle worked tirelessly to restore it. It has a stunning vista and produces stunning Viognier. Pear, jasmine, wet stones, and beautifully balanced acidity keep this fresh and focused. This was *Decanter's* top Condrieu for the vintage, and it's mine too! **95 DC**



Cover: Overlooking the Rhône from Crozes-Hermitage. (Photo: Vins-Rhone.com © Christophe Grilhé)

## Unbreakable Châteauneuf-du-Pape

A string of exceptional vintages has graced Châteauneuf-du-Pape in the back half of the previous decade. From 2015 to 2019 (2020 is still mostly aging) the successes have been nearly boundless. Yet each vintage has something a little different to offer. The 2015s were bold with fruit early on, and are just now waking up from a short nap. The 2016s have weight, structure, fruit, and incredible balance; they continue to evolve and should delight for decades to come. The 2017s were hedonistic out of the gate and have gobs of rich fruit and spice character. The 2018s took a cool step back and provide elegant perfumes that will delight those looking for a more traditional profile. The 2019s, just now hitting the market, sit between 2015 and 2016 in terms of ripeness and structure and should have a long and exciting life ahead of them. We have assembled some of the best and brightest in our collection that will surely excite both consumers and collectors alike.

The **2016 Château Gigognan “Clos du Roi” Châteauneuf-du-Pape (\$34.99)** is a gift that keeps on giving. The winery recently released a block of this desirable vintage to us, and we are proud to feature it here. Gigognan underwent organic conversion a decade ago and rejuvenated their image when they hired Philippe Cambie as their consulting winemaker. He helped to firm up the style and bring it forward for the modern era. But, as they didn't want to drift too far in that direction, Stéphane Derenoncourt was brought on as winemaker with the thought of a more balanced approach for the future. The 2016 is at the crossroads of these two eras, and what a wine it has become. Saturated with blackcurrant and hints of raspberry liqueur, this is harmonious with its complementary flavors of garrigue, spice, and violets. This is a wine that is just hitting its stride and will continue to evolve for another decade. **95 WE, 94 WS**



As a consulting winemaker, Xavier Vignon knows where the best fruit is grown. He helped grow it. Vignon began his Anonyme project several years ago and has always kept secret the sources for this luxe cuvée—but they're always his favorite parcels of old-vine fruit from his partner-growers.

The **2017 Xavier Vignon “Cuvée Anonyme” Châteauneuf-du-Pape (\$49.99)** is a wondrous wine to behold. It is dense and chewy with an explosion of blue and black fruit flavors. Savory notes of grilled meats, dried flowers, and tilled earth accompany the fruit-filled *amuse* that we first taste. Smooth and supple tannins round out the wine and make this as close to a Clos des Papes as you can get, but at half the price. It will surely develop with bottle age, but what a show-stopper now! **95-97 RP, 94-96 JD**



One of the wines that first turned my head toward Châteauneuf was from Domaine du Pégaü. It was savory and perfumed and blew my mind with its complexity. The **2018 Domaine du Pégaü “Cuvée Réserve” Châteauneuf-du-Pape (\$49.99)** takes me back to that time. Pégaü has always been old school: concrete tanks, large oak foudres, whole-cluster ferments. The wines have structure for days but so much nuance that they are hard to resist in their youth. The 2018 is a happy medium, though. It has polished tannins and bright acidity that make it immediately enjoyable. Red fruit, thyme, licorice, and grilled meat notes ooze out of the glass and foretell of many years of great drinking. At a market low of \$50, this is the perfect wine to try from Pégaü, as its sibling vintages tend to come in 20% to 30% higher. **96 DC, 92-95 RP, 91-94 JD**



*Vintner Laurence Féraud cools off in the cellar at Domaine du Pégaü. (Photo: Domaine du Pégaü)*

We close with one of my favorite wineries in the region, and one of my favorite wine stories. Le Clos de Caillou was originally left out of the appellation when Châteauneuf-du-Pape was established back in 1936. The story involves a misunderstanding between appellation inspectors and the shotgun-wielding owner who chased them off the land when the inspectors were outlining the region. C'est la vie! Caillou has since added many parcels to their holdings inside the appellation and strives to make some of the best wines in Châteauneuf. And they succeed! The **2019 Le Clos du Caillou “Les Quartz” Châteauneuf-du-Pape (\$84.99)** is a triumph. The wine comes from two parcels, one with galets (rolled pebbles) and the other with sandy soils. This mix of sites gives the Quartz the fleshy, rich fruit I expect from the region, but also the lift, elegance, and balance that make this winery one of the best in its class! **96-99 JD, 94-97 RP, 96 DC**



## There's a New Cru in Town: The Wines of Romain Roche

One of our biggest “gets” in the past year is **Domaine Roche** from the Rhône Cru appellation of Cairanne. Romain Roche's father, Marcel, was head of the cooperative in Cairanne for many years, and that is where the bulk of their fruit went. When Romain returned to the winery in 2009, he began using fruit from the best parcels in the family holdings to produce his wines. While Romain became one of the stars of the appellation, Cairanne went from being a Côtes-du-Rhône Village to a full Cru appellation in 2016. Coincidence? Perhaps, but aside from such speculation, Roche is making some truly gobsmacking wines. We began working with him on the 2018 vintage and are pleased that his 2019s have newly arrived.

The **2019 Domaine Roche Côtes-du-Rhône (\$12.99)** is primarily Grenache with some Syrah and Carignan rounding out the blend. All raised in concrete vat, it's spicy, savory, filled with zesty red fruit flavors, and true to its Rhône roots. Most of the fruit comes from the surrounding Côtes-du-Rhône, with a small portion of Cairanne fruit blended in as well. This is a delightful and engaging Côtes-du-Rhône that has happily found its home among some of our other favorites from the region. **90 RP**

The star of the show is the **2019 Domaine Roche Cairanne (\$16.99)**. All from older-vine Grenache, Syrah, and Carignan, this is brought up in a mix of concrete tank and large oak barrels. As compared to the redder-fruited Côtes-du-Rhône, the Cairanne expresses deeper black fruit flavors alongside savory herbal and spice notes. This transcends its price point and offers a lot of wine for very little money. This should evolve beautifully for several years. **91-93 JD**



*Vineyards surround the old village of Cairanne. (Photo: Vins-Rhone.com © Christophe Grillhé)*

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't mention our small allocation of the prestige cuvée that is the namesake of Romain's father, Marcel.

The **2019 Domaine Roche “Marcel Roche” Cairanne (\$19.99)** is sourced from the oldest Grenache vines in their holdings. It's a remarkably intense expression that might even rival some of the great wines of Gigondas and Châteauneuf. Loaded with flavors of Chambord, roasted plum, and violets, this captivates with its complexity. And it's only \$20! You honestly don't have to have tons of money to collect cellar-worthy wine, and the Marcel Roche is the perfect wine to prove that point. **92-94 JD**

## A Peek at the Northern Rhône: Checking in with Remizières

**Remizières** stands as one of our favorite Direct Import Northern Rhône producers. Based in Crozes-Hermitage, they also have a couple of small parcels in Hermitage that turn out both a stunning red and white. Happily, these beauties have just arrived, and they are dressed to impress. The **2018 Domaine des Remizières “Cuvée Emilie” Hermitage (\$64.99)** is 100% Syrah with fruit coming from two sites: Les Grandes Vignes, with vines averaging 40 years of age planted on granitic soils; and Les Rocoules, with vines over 80 years of age planted on alluvial soils. The wine is big, bold, and beautiful. Densely packed with flavors of cassis, blueberries, cardamom, and smoked meats. This is a rich and concentrated wine that will find its happiest place in about a decade, but damn, it's good now! **95 JD, 95 RP, 94 WE**



The **2019 Domaine des Remizières “Cuvée Emilie” Hermitage Blanc (\$64.99)** is a tremendous Marsanne. It comes from vines averaging 60 years of age in the Maison Blanche lieu-dit, planted over clay-limestone soils. Where to begin? This is dementedly rich and creamy with notes of fig, bitter melon, lemon peel, and anise. The finish is long and inviting. This is the kind of white that sweeps you away on a long journey. Open and decant, as this has an incredible, youthful life ahead of it; or forget for a decade and discover just how amazing aged Marsanne can be. Sadly, our allocation was small and this likely won't last long. **96 RP**





## Big Wines Without the Big Prices: the Under-\$20 Challenge

One of the greatest regions for value anywhere in the world is the Rhône Valley. Here you can still drink wines from single estates that have been cultivated through many generations, each adding to their growing and winemaking know-how. You can also find superb village-level wines made by many well-established winemaking cooperatives, based in a long tradition of making wines that express their region of origin. It's mindboggling that for under \$20 you can drink this well now—and enjoy the same wines for years to come. Even with a few years of bottle age you will see increased complexity.

I stand firm that if you buy a mixed case of these wines and rediscover any of them in a few years or more, you will thank me. Take the under-\$20 Rhône challenge!

**2019 Domaine de Verquière Côtes-du-Rhône (\$11.99)** Our staple Rhône wine. It's a sad day when this is not on a floor stack at one of our locations. This enticing, fruit-filled, and delightful red will charm the pants off any wine drinker who tastes it. And it's only \$12! Red-fruited, spicy, and medium-bodied, this has a lot to offer. Also, it's organically produced! **90 WE**

**2019 Domaine de la Ganse Vacqueyras (750ml \$19.99; 375ml \$11.99)** Another great Cru appellation, Vacqueyras doesn't always get the attention it deserves. Winemaker Coralie Onde farms organically and makes a vibrant, spicy, and mineral-driven Rhône wine that transcends. Currant, raspberry, and cigar box aromas erupt from the glass. Top of the class!

**2018 Château Gigognan Côtes-du-Rhône (\$12.99)** Gigognan's Côtes-du-Rhône vineyards sit just outside the Châteauneuf appellation with all the same kinds of soils. A darker-fruited version, it has flavors of plum, currants and Herbes de Provence. This is pure Rhône in a glass! **90 WE**

**2017 Brotte "Création Grosset" Cairanne (\$13.99)** The Brotte family owns a few different estates, including one in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. This Cairanne comes from both estate and purchased fruit. It has an openness with layers of cherry fruit, strawberry licorice, and potpourri. A delicious mid-week treat. **91 JS, 90 WS, 90 DC**

**2019 Mas de Sainte Croix "Passion d'Une Terre" Côtes-du-Rhône Villages Valréas (\$14.99)** The village of Valréas lies at the northern end of the Southern Rhône, where rolling hills and a climate that drifts from Mediterranean to continental make for a red that has a more lifted and aromatic profile. Elegant, balanced, and engaging, this is my Tuesday take-home wine—serious, but not too much so. **90 DC**

**Plan Pégau "Lot #15-16-17" Vin de France Rouge (\$15.99)** Pégau is one of the greats of Châteauneuf, but this eclectic declassified wine comes from plots outside of their Châteauneuf holdings and from across multiple vintages. Oh, and it has some Cabernet and Merlot blended in! This is crazy good and shows that you don't always have to follow all the rules to make great wines. **90 RP**

**2018 Julien Barge "Les Coteaux de Légende" Côtes-du-Rhône (\$16.99)** Julien Barge is a master of Côte-Rôtie, but he has a little organic side project using fruit from the Côtes-du-Rhône. Grenache and Syrah come together to make a perfumed, spicy, tobacco-driven style. Also, at only 12.5% alcohol, this has a distinct freshness.

**2019 Domaine de la Remizière Crozes-Hermitage (\$17.99)** I threw in a Northern Rhône for good measure. Most wines from the north that carry a Cru appellation are also well north of \$25 and usually even more. But this 100% Syrah stays the course with its peppery spices, lavender notes, and red fruit flavors. It seems nearly impossible to match this quality at this price anywhere else! **90-92 JD, 91 WE, 90 RP**

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