

WINE News

River of value: our buyer's guide to the latest from the Rhône.



MARCH 18, 2019 FEATURES

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The Unbreakable Rhône Valley

By Keith Mabry

The Rhône has been blessed with a series of magnificent vintages, despite the challenges some of them featured. In both the north and south regions, we see quality wines with distinctive character, each representing their specific terroir and appellation. The 2015 vintage was a benchmark for the north, featuring wines that were dense, fruit filled and structured. Entry-level wines are approachable, while the top cru wines are meant for the ages. In the south, we saw great concentration as well, with rich, ripe fruit. The vintage produced many satisfying wines for immediate consumption and a whole lot of classics to cellar. In 2016, the northern Rhône wines are fleshy and harmonious with fine tannins,

sweet fruit and a near-term accessibility. In the south, 2016 is a new benchmark for this region. Consistent and near-perfect weather offered structure and deeply ripe fruit. As we approach the release of a new vintage, where does that leave 2017? It turns out, another great vintage for both north and south. The vintage was marked by drought, mostly in the south, which lowered the overall yields but made very concentrated wines. As we cross these three great vintages, this newsletter will offer some of our favorite Rhône wines from both the north and the south. Some are in stock and some are offered on pre-arrival. Let's start with a few favorites on the shelves right now.

2016 Domaine des Escaravailles "La Ponce"

Rasteau (\$24.99) One of the best wines to come from the Rasteau region, this has hallmarks of Châteauneuf quality but at half the price of comparable producers. Fleshy and fruit-filled, this is filled with flavors of raspberry coulis and smoky mineral notes. The iconic scarab beetle on the label might be the first thing to catch your eye, but what's in the glass will surely linger in your mind for days afterwards. **95 JD, 93 RP**



2016 Domaine des Rémissières Crozes-Hermitage

(\$15.99) One of our favorite producers in the north, Rémissières has brought us the region's Syrah-based wines for a fraction of what the market generally asks. Possessing the pure elegance of the 2016 vintage, this wine swims with gorgeous black fruit and peppery spices, all on a medium-bodied frame with sweet tannins. Dollar for dollar, this is surely one of the best Syrahs from any region. **90 WS**



2016 Domaine Tourbillon "Vieilles Vignes"

Gigondas (\$24.99) Tourbillon was a wonderful discovery a couple of years ago. Making both Châteauneuf and Gigondas, this producer delivers a mix of dynamic fruit with classic sensibilities. Their Gigondas is one of my favorites in-store right now with its brambly black fruit, violets and garrigue nose. The palate is pure 2016 sumptuousness. **91-94 JD**



First Look at Some 2017 Châteauneuf-du-Pape Pre-Arrivals

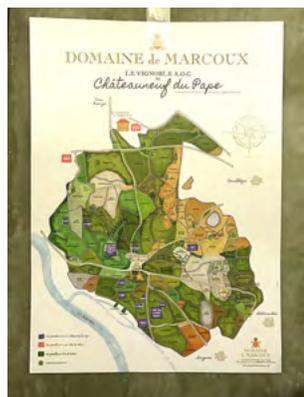
By Keith Mabry

We have secured limited allocations from three of the top estates—in any vintage—and we are pleased to offer these before the rest of the market catches on. These are some of my favorite producers and I have been fortunate to visit them each on various occasions. Luckily I did some 2017 barrel sampling last year and I am extremely excited to finally get to share my impressions of these soon-to-be-classic new offerings. As 2017 was driven by drought, the wineries were faced with extremely low yields. What they lack in quantity, though, they make up for in concentration. Concentration means great fruit density and also acidity, making many of these wines immediately charming and approachable upon release. Prices are pre-arrival (PA).

Domaine Marcoux

I often begin at Domaine Marcoux, because I like to use it as the yardstick by which I measure all the other producers. I can never get enough of this property, founded by the Armerier sisters, Sophie and Catherin. Each visit is a master class in the expression of the region and the balance that can be achieved through meticulous vineyard practices and low-interference winemaking. I tasted through several barrels of the 2017s that had just finished their fermentation. The yields for 2017 were low by contrast to 2016. For

example, in 2016 the average was around 25 hectoliters per hectare (that would be just shy of 300 cases per hectare). In 2017, the average was about 14 hectoliters per hectare (that's about 155 cases for the same amount of vineyard land). For the **2017 Domaine de Marcoux Châteauneuf-du-Pape (PA \$54.99)**, words like sexy and concentrated appeared often in my notes during my tasting of the new vintage. Candied plum, baking spices, dried blueberries and a sweet but muscular palate was the main impression. Relatively close in style to the 2016, it has a silky, saturated profile that offers amazing texture and length. **92-94 JD**



Vineyards of Domaine Marcoux.

Chateau Vaudieu

Just outside the town of Châteauneuf-du-Pape lies Chateau Vaudieu. The original house is a stunning restoration of a castle built in the 18th century, one of only three still in existence. The property itself is historic, and their next door neighbor is none other than Chateau Rayas, one of the icon cult producers in the region. Some of Vaudieu's best vineyards have much of the same decomposed sandstone soils that make Rayas so famous. The regular **2017 Châteauneuf-du-Pape (PA \$44.99)** is a blend of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre, from a mix of soils including red clay, limestone, and of course that beautiful decomposed sandstone. The wine demonstrates a wonderful elegance, showing more of its fresh fruit nature than the concentration of some of the other releases. It's a wonderful wine of purity. **90-92 JD**



CdP: Rock on.

All of the specialty releases from Vaudieu are driven by a specific plot or soil type from the estate. The **2017 Chateau de Vaudieu "Val de Dieu" (PA \$69.99)** comes from a little valley on the east side of the property that has a mix of sandy limestone, sandy clay and decomposed sandstone. That sand means great drainage, and what you get is a wine that's more bright and fresh but never lacking in concentration. **93-95 JD**

The **2017 Chateau de Vaudieu "Amiral G" (PA \$99.99)** is from a single parcel of their oldest Grenache on a high plateau with red clay and the famous galets (the big rounded pudding stones). This is what most people associate with Châteauneuf and it has that warm confiture of deep black fruit. It's sure to please the most ardent of collectors. **94-97 JD**

The **2017 Chateau de Vaudieu "L'Avenue" (PA \$99.99)** is all Grenache, from red sandstone with some clay-limestone. It is a pure expression with lively black raspberry flavors interlaced with violets and roses petals. The sandy soils bring elegance to the party. It is my favorite wine from the estate. **92-94 JD**

Domaine Giraud

Finally, Marie and Francois Giraud, of Domaine Giraud, almost never seem to occupy the same space. Each time I visit, one is at the winery while the other is out working in the vineyard or traveling the international market. Both are delightful and their teamwork builds into one of the most sumptuous wines in our portfolio. The **2017 Domaine Giraud Châteauneuf-du-Pape (PA \$49.99)** is loaded with concentrated strawberry fruit, peppery spice and garrigue. Though not showing as rich and ripe as the 2016, this has tremendous acidity. Its slightly more restrained nature should give it a long, sustained life in the cellar. **92-94 RP, 91-93 JD**

Côtes du Rhône: Where the Values Reign

By Alex Pross

The Rhône Valley is a veritable treasure trove of outstanding wine values, and is arguably the epicenter for the world's best wine values overall. With back-to-back great vintages in 2015 and 2016 there's an abundance of amazing values. We have five of them that offer not only the best bang for your buck but also their own unique take on what a Côtes du Rhône can be.

At this price, the **2016 Delas Freres "Saint-Esprit" Côtes du Rhône (\$9.99)** is a show stopper! Delas is one of the Rhône's top producers. They have an amazing line-up of wines that runs the gamut from top-notch Côte-Rôtie down to a humble Côtes du Ventoux. The 2016 Saint-Esprit is bright and zesty with copious amounts of dark berry fruit along with sexy mocha and spice notes. **95 DC**

If you're searching for something a bit more rustic but still packed with fruit, subtle earth and game notes, then the **2016 Domaine la Garrigue "Cuvée Romaine" Côtes du Rhône (\$13.99)** is the wine for you. The structure and complexity coupled with length is rarely seen in a wine this inexpensive and makes the Cuvée Romaine one of my favorite wines we currently offer. **93 JD, 90 RP**

Want a decadent, richly textured red that gives you oodles of fruit and a velvety mouthfeel? The **2015 Domaine de la Janasse "Reserve" Côtes du Rhône (\$15.99)** hits the spot with an irresistible abundance of fruit, spice, chocolate and velvety tannins. **92 JD**

Going up a tad in price, we have a dynamic duo that offer up the experience of fine Châteauneuf-du-Pape while having the price tag of a daily drinking Côtes du Rhône. The **2016 Domaine de la Janasse "Terre d'Argile" Côtes du Rhône Villages (\$21.99)** slowly unfurls on the palate to reveal poached strawberry, blackberry and cassis notes that lead to a mineral streak, fine tannins and perfect acidity. This is an outstanding value. **92 RP, 92 JD, 92 JS**

Our last wine is affectionately known as "Baby Beaucastel." The **2016 Coudoulet de Beaucastel (\$24.99)** is a rock star! The pedigree here is undeniable. Aromas of garrigue spice, dusty tannins, and intense cherry fruit mingled with strawberry and red licorice notes give you an insight into the quality of Chateau Beaucastel. **94 JS, 92 JD 92 RP**



2016 Châteauneuf-du-Pape: A Legendary Vintage

By Alex Pross

I vividly recall my excitement in 2017 upon arriving in the Rhône Valley with my colleague Keith Mabry. We had both heard about how fantastic the 2015s were, and we were eager to taste the wines from bottle at our various appointments scattered throughout Châteauneuf-du-Pape. As we went from appointment to appointment, we were not disappointed. The 2015s were as advertised—very good wines with some great examples mixed in. However, both Keith and I had the same eureka moment—as good as the 2015s were, the 2016s were even better! As unbelievable as this seemed, the more places we visited and the more wines we tasted, we could not escape the growing conclusion that the 2016s were some of the greatest wines we had ever tasted. The concentration of fruit coupled with the balance and delineation of the wines made them sumptuous yet fine, with a richness that was expressed without seeming too sweet. At their very best, the 2016s are some of the finest examples many that properties have ever crafted.

Our shelves are packed with 2015s and the 2016s will soon be arriving. In order to not overwhelm you, I have chosen four examples that I think showcase the greatness of the vintage. The **2016 Chateau de Vaudieu Châteauneuf-du-Pape (\$44.99)** is a richly textured red that oozes supple red fruits, spice and velvety tannins. It is a gorgeous red that offers immediate pleasure and is an ideal choice for those looking for a rich, indulgent wine. **94 WS, 93 RP**



The **2016 Domaine de la Janasse "Tradition" Châteauneuf-du-Pape (\$49.99)** is primarily Grenache. It opens up with intense raspberry and floral aromas that quickly fade to a palate bursting of fresh, macerated berries and spice. A modern take on Châteauneuf-du-Pape, this is a great wine for the California Cabernet Sauvignon lover. **95 JD, 93 WS, 93 RP, 92 JS, 92 DC**

An up-and-coming producer is Domaine la Barroche. Their **2016 Domaine la Barroche "Signature" Châteauneuf-du-Pape (\$54.99)** is a fantastic entry-level offering that challenges many top cuvées made by other producers. Pure fruit flavors, multiple levels of complexity, and a sense of balance and elegance make this a top-notch offering that doesn't break the bank. **95 JD, 94 DC, 93 WS**



We finish up with a 99-point masterpiece that you can get for under \$100. Only in the Rhône Valley can you get critical acclaim like this for less than a C-note. The **2016 Domaine Cristia Châteauneuf-du-Pape Vieilles Vignes (\$89.99)** is made from 100% old vine Grenache grown on sandy soils. This results in an amazing elixir that deftly combines beautiful dark fruit notes with exotic spice, dried herbs and mineral notes. Incredibly complex and nuanced, this is a beautiful wine and can stand toe-to-toe with the greatest wines of the vintage. **99 JD, 95 RP, 95 WS, 95 VN**



All quiet on the western bank: Looking toward Saint-Joseph across the river from the hill of Hermitage.

The Cornas Stone of Northern Rhône

By John Majeski

I remember hitchhiking through rural France as a young man. In almost every village square, I encountered a memorial to the war dead—somber granite structures erected in honor of those who fought and died in the First World War. So many gallant young men left farm, field and vineyard and dropped their secateurs for a Berthier rifle. One can only imagine the lives waylaid and brave sacrifices made. Today, after a century, the memory fades, and mosses and lichens now fill the names on those proud monuments.

Thankfully, all the granite wasn't quarried for memorials. For instance, in the northern Rhône, it often forms the geologic spine of many famed vineyards, such as those of Guy Farge, whose great-grandfather Henri founded an estate in 1920 from land acquired from a retired general. It wasn't until 1980 that Guy took the domaine under his own name, along with the challenges inherent in cultivating fruit on the often steep, sun-drenched granitic soils of Cornas and St-Joseph. Hard work takes its measure, so recently Guy passed the estate to his eldest son Thomas.

The **2016 Guy Farge "Harmonie" Cornas (\$39.99)** was sourced from prime parcels in Les Reynards and Sauman, and is a marvel of freshness, elegance and structure. Aged in older barrels for one year, it unmasks aromas of potpourri, blackberries and dried flowers. The palate reveals violets, kirsch, black olives and a whiff of pepper. Syrah is a robust grape and has a special affinity for granite, while the modest clay content in Les Reynards adds suppleness and a savory element to the lush black-berried fruit. Pair this velvety red Cornas with a hearty beef brisket. **97 points Decanter World Wine Awards**



Traveling a few miles north, the **2016 Guy Farge "Terroir de Granit" Saint-Joseph (\$24.99)** pays homage to the signature soils of the region, and is vinified from a special parcel. It's given a subtle barrel regimen that allows the Syrah fruit to express its silkier, sleeker nature. The dark cherry, black raspberry, spice and licorice all lend an element of natural sweetness and insouciance to the wine. Finished with lusty tannins, this would complement a Moroccan lamb dish or lavish moussaka. **93 RP**

For those passionately seeking a mature relationship, Guy Farge sets you up with the **2016 Guy Farge "Passion de Terrasse" Saint-Joseph (\$29.99)**, which is made from century-old vines, stems intact (we should all be so lucky), is whole cluster fermented, and aged in large old casks and some new wood for around 13 months. The venerable nature of these Versailles Treaty-era vines gives the wine an aura that does not go unnoticed in the glass. Aromas of charred meat, floral, vanilla and blackberry frame a palate of generously ripe black fruit dashed with cracked pepper, wisps of wild mint and sous bois. Tannins kick in to make this the perfect partner to a nice char-grilled rib eye or beef bourguignon. **92 JD**

Red enough yet? Let's refresh our palates with the **2016 Guy Farge "Vania" St-Joseph Blanc (\$29.99)**. This is a shimmying, golden-hued blend of Marsanne and Roussanne that's fermented in steel vats followed by older oak barrels for about seven months. A virtual Copacabana of exotica, its bursts with lively tropical and orchard fruit aromas—apricot, melon, mango, papaya, honeysuckle, guava—and further shows off floral, spicy, nutty and marzipan notes. Pairing? Any dish that can handle the full, ripe Bette Midler flamboyance of this audacious white Rhône.



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