

Wines from the Rhône Valley

by Sean Morley

(originally published in the January 2002 Round Table Magazine)



One of the less well-known wine regions of France, producing some good quality wine at relatively good value, is the Rhône Valley. In the spring, the Wine Committee will be presenting a tasting of Rhone Valley wines. The following is a general introduction to the Rhône region.

The Côte du Rhône region is located in southeastern France, beginning south of Lyon around Vienne following the Rhône River and broadening into a valley before reaching Avignon (approximately 124 miles in length). This area produces approximately 35 million cases of wine annually. In fact, Northern Rhône and Southern Rhône have little in common other than geography and are two distinct regions.

Northern Rhône

The soil in the Northern Rhône is comprised primarily of granite and schist with some iron and limestone. The grapes tend to be grown on rocky slopes that require terracing to hold the soil. The stony terrain provides the vines with a regular supply of water.

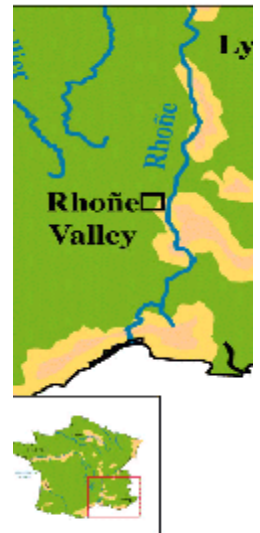
Northern Rhône wines are almost all red wines based on the Syrah grape. Some white wine is produced using the rare aromatic Viognier grape in Condrieu; Rousanne and Marsanne grapes are used in Hermitage. The St-Péray appellation is known for producing sparkling wines with a nutty flavour – heavier than sparkling wines from Champagne.

Some commentators are of the view that the Northern Rhône region makes the best Rhône wines. In particular, wines from the Côte Rôtie, Hermitage and Cornas appellations stand out for producing deep purple, fruity, full-bodied wines. The Cote-Rotie 1999, Tardieu-Laurent was recently described as “...not dissimilar from some of the profound 1947 Pomerols.” (Wine Advocate)

If you are interested in a Northern Rhône wine, try the P. Jaboulet Aîné Les Jalets (Crozes-Hermitage), 1999 from the Club wine list. The Club has some Hermitage and Cornas in the cellar.

Southern Rhône

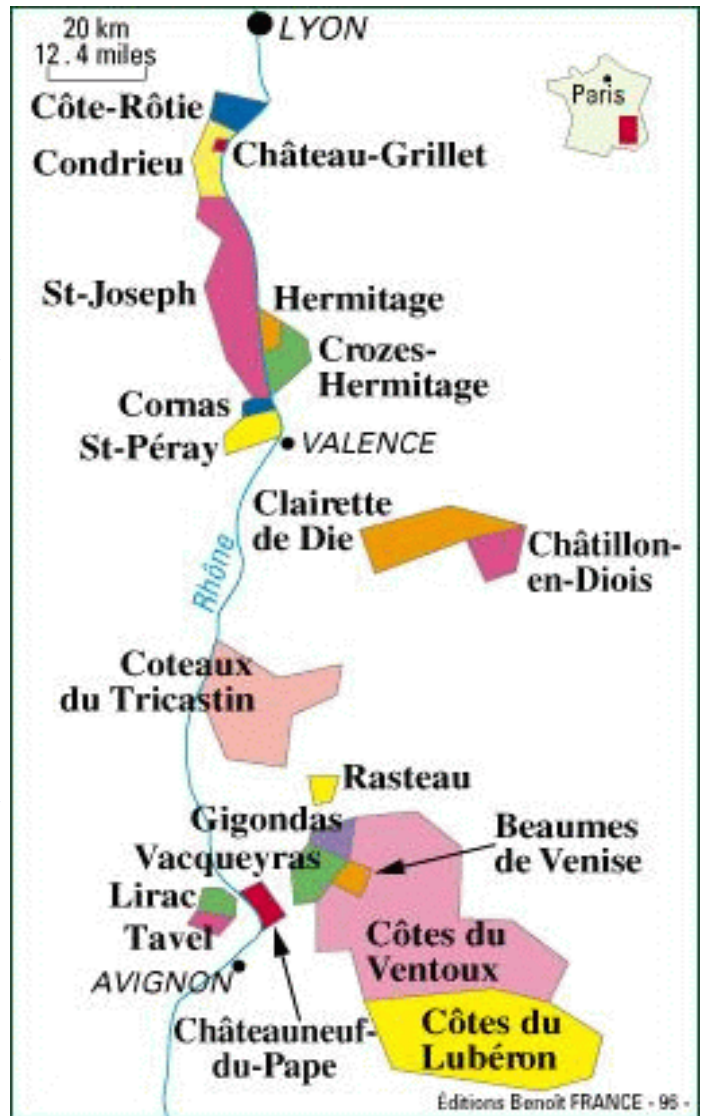
Southern Rhône, generally described as the Côtes du Rhône, is characterized by soil comprised of clay and sand with some limestone. Unlike the Northern Rhône where one grape variety dominates,



up to a dozen grape varieties can be used in producing Southern Rhône wines. Wines from Châteauneuf-du-Pape, for example, are based on Grenache (80% in some cases) but mixed with other grape varieties such as Cinsaut, Syrah, Mourvèdre, Muscardin and Vaccarese for body and warmth, and Clairette and Pipoul for mildness and finesse. Almost all of the wines produced in this region are red wines with a small amount of rosé being produced.

Southern Rhône is generally comprised of Côtes du Rhône-Villages (16 villages producing superior quality wine), and the Vacqueyras, Gigondas and Châteauneuf-du-Pape appellations. Châteauneuf-du-Pape is the largest and most important part of Southern Rhône.

The Club wine list offers a good selection of quality Southern Rhône wines. Consider trying the Depagneaux Châteauneuf-du-Pape 1998, the Domaines Perrin Vacqueyras 1998 or the Domaine St. Gayan (Gigondas) 1996. The Vacqueyras has been described as: “Impressive. Rich, dense, full-bodied and dark in colour, with supple and sweet tannins. Balanced, showing plum, blackberry and lead pencil complexity. Harmonious finish, could use cellaring. Best from 2001 through 2006. Score – 88” (Wine Spectator).



In the near future the Wine Committee hopes to be able provide a report from the field. □

