

The Northern Rhône



IN MY LAST QB ARTICLE, “Que Syrah, Syrah” (Nov/Dec. 2013), I gave a cursory overview of the Syrah grape from origin to notable locations of great producers. Now I want to drill deeper into my favorite region for these wines – the Northern Rhône. As I wrote previously, regardless of whether one believes that Syrah is an indigenous grape from France, or was brought to the Northern Rhône from Shiraz, Persia by the Greeks or by the Romans, it has been cultivated here for a very long time. In fact, if you visit the area, a prominent chapel stands alone atop the Hermitage hillside, above the town of Tain-l’Hermitage. It was built as a retreat, although in fact, it was the domicile of Gaspar de Stérimberg, a holy knight who found the great Hermitage hillside on his way back from the Crusades in 1224. Although Hermitage was rarely mentioned between Roman

times and the 17th century, it gained fame and notoriety after King Louis XIII stopped at Tain and was served some of the local wine. He was so impressed that he subsequently served it at the Court of France.

The importance of these powerful wines was influenced significantly during the 18th and 19th centuries by the Bordelais. During these two centuries, many of the wines from the Bordeaux were “hermitaged” by the addition of the powerful Syrah grape from the Northern Rhône to bolster the body of the relatively weaker wines. This was a common practice in Bordeaux, even for the venerable chateaux e.g., Châteaux Latour, Lafite, Margaux, Haut-Brion, as well as lesser wines.

During the late 1800s to mid 1900s, several of today’s famous producers started by forming co-operatives, e.g., Chapoutier, Delas, Paul Jaboulet Aîné, and Leon Revol. Few single producers bottled their wines, and a general economic malaise was prevalent in the area. By the mid 1980s, there was increasing awareness of the great wines from this region, in no small part due to the fondness of Robert Parker who extolled their merits in his new publication, *The Wine Advocate*.

The total Hermitage appellation consists of only 131 hectares, or 316 acres, which, taking into consideration with the high quality of most of the output, accounts for the relatively high prices for many of the offerings.

So what is it about Syrah grapes grown in the Hermitage appellation that makes the wine so special? Obviously it is the terroir, or the place where the grapes are grown. It is not just the soil, or lack thereof, at the place, but the angle to the sun, the precipitation, the wind, the temperature, and amount of average sun exposure per day. Given that of the above variables, weather has the biggest variable impact on terrior, we find that the recent vintages of 2009 and 2010 are among the best ever. Accordingly, I thought this would be a good time to explore the portfolios of several of

my favorite producers.

Domaine Jean-Louis Chave is certainly the source of some of the greatest wines in the world. Since its start in 1481, it has reached the very heights of world-class Syrah production under the ownership of Gerard Chave. The Domaine has become increasingly sought after, especially for vintages beginning in the 1980s. I am fortunate to have followed Chave and pounced on the great vintages of 1988, 1989, and 1990. All three of these Hermitages can be considered “life event” wines. In general, they are extremely complex wines blended from 9.3 hectares, or 23 acres, made up of seven distinct grape sites, averaging 48 years old. Each one brings different attributes to the finished wines. Although these wines are powerful, they are also often described as elegant and warm, with the nose of warm cooked blackberry and nuances of spice and leather. These wines immediately evoke the term Italians use for these infrequent wine life experiences – a meditation wine.

Although Chave began passing the reins to his son, Jean-Louis, in 1994 after he returned home from his rigorous wine training at age 26, all agree that the transition was done perfectly, and there





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have been several great vintages since Jean-Louis joined with his father, namely 1996, 1999, 2001, 2003, as well as the profound 2009 and 2010. Most of the Hermitage Rouge from great vintages need 20-70 years to be best enjoyed. Although these organically produced wines sit at the pinnacle of Hermitage, Chave does produce a unique cuvée in most years, beginning in 1990, named Ermitage Rouge Cathelin (2000-2500 bottles). Although great, it is so rare that most serious wine drinkers do not believe it is worth the premium of \$3,000 over the Hermitage Rouge priced at \$670 (prices for the 1990 vintage). In fact, more reviews for 1990 do not find the Cathelin the equal of the base Hermitage.

Another super-premium Hermitage is produced by M. Chapoutier. Headed by the world-wide roving wine ambassador, Michel Chapoutier, he makes millions of bottles of wine (many from Southern France at very low prices rendering high value wine), and he is most known for the production of his Hermitage Rouge coming from

19.5 hectares (48.2 acres). His family arrived in Tain before the French Revolution and bought a winery and vineyard in 1808.

All of these Hermitage vineyards are formed biodynamically and unlike Chave, Chapoutier produces four expensive, specific wines from very old vineyards Hermitages (labeled Ermitage) with bottle count as follows: Les Greffieux- 3000; Le Pavillon-7000; Le Meal- 5000; and L'Ermitage-5000. A blend of different vineyards, Monier de la Sizeranne is the workhorse with production of 29,000 bottles. Prices range from \$200 plus for the single labels, to under \$100 for the Sizeranne. The wines are all superb, especially from those vintages listed earlier, but can be wonderful from less vintages also. Favorite foods with these great wines include beef casserole, meat stew, prime rib, goat, and cheese that is not powerful.

In closing, if you buy any of the above wines, I'm sure you will be very pleased with your purchase. A future article will finish my review of the best of the Northern Rhône. À votre santé! 🍷

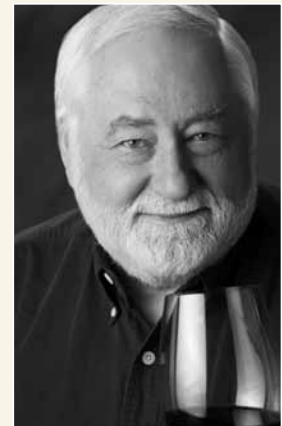


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