

FOOD & WINE

THE PASTA

ISSUE

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WHAT TO DRINK NOW

Red, Red Rhône

For wintry days, there's nothing better than wine from France's sunny south.

By Ray Isle

FRANCE'S RHÔNE VALLEY is one of the great wine regions of the world, and its forceful, distinctive reds are, to my mind, the perfect antidote to a cold winter day. Something about the savory power of Syrah in the northern Rhône, and equally the luxuriant richness of Grenache in appellations to the south, makes the bite of winter wind or the whip of sleet in your face vanish instantly. They're the wine equivalents of sitting in a cozy room by a roaring fire while it's snowing outside.

Covering the entirety of the Rhône would take a book—or two—so instead, I've concentrated on a handful of appellations: in the north, the land of Syrah, Crozes-Hermitage and Saint-Joseph; in the south, where Grenache is the dominant variety, Gigondas and Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Maybe there are murmurs of discontent—*No Hermitage? What about Cornas? Nitwit, you left out Saint-Péray!* All true. But file those under “more to explore.” And of course I did include Côtes du Rhône, the second-largest appellation in France and home to some of the world's greatest wine values. So, bar the doors against the cold, roast the lamb and sear the steak, and start opening bottles.

CROZES-HERMITAGE & SAINT-JOSEPH

The top red wine appellations of the Northern Rhône, Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie, are prohibitively expensive for most wine buyers. But stellar bottles can be had from Crozes-Hermitage and Saint-Joseph at fair prices. In all cases, the red grape of the northern Rhône is Syrah: powerful, dark, spicy, and intense.

2022 MAISON LES ALEXANDRINS CROZES-HERMITAGE (\$29)

This partnership among three Rhône winemakers, Nicolas Jaboulet, Guillaume Sorrel, and Alexandre Caso, has seen its reputation quickly rise since it was founded in 2015. This powerful red, full of lasting black currant-blackberry flavors and soft, mouth-coating tannins, makes it clear why.

2020 E. GUIGAL CROZES-HERMITAGE (\$36)

For Philippe Guigal, third-generation winemaker of Rhône powerhouse E. Guigal, this wine “highlights the freshness of northern Rhône Syrah.” It's a polished, crisp red, lightly spicy and finely balanced, its blackberry flavors highlighted by hints of white pepper.

2021 ALAIN GRAILLOT CROZES-HERMITAGE (\$49)

Alain Graillot played a vital role in restoring the fame of Crozes-Hermitage in the 1980s. Now his sons, Antoine and Maxime, continue his legacy. Expressive and savory in a way suggesting green peppercorns and dried herbs, this is a truly impressive Rhône Syrah.

2020 DELAS DOMAINE DES GRANDS CHEMINS CROZES-HERMITAGE (\$49)

Often, Crozes-Hermitage only passingly echoes the grandeur of Hermitage itself. But this cuvée, with its polished power; deep, dark fruit character; and savory layers of leather, wet ink, and wild herb notes, effortlessly justifies the comparison.

2021 PAUL JABOULET AÎNÉ DOMAINE DE THALABERT CROZES-HERMITAGE (\$50)

Domaine de Thalabert, the oldest vineyard in the Crozes-Hermitage appellation, has been the property of Jaboulet since 1834. This red, from 50- to 90-year-old vines, is full-bodied and structured, its blackberry fruit accented by hints of licorice, earth, and lavender.

2021 DOMAINE COURSODON L'OLIVAIE SAINT-JOSEPH (\$60)

Beautifully fragrant, with aromas suggesting blackberry liqueur, mint, and violets, this Syrah from a fourth-generation Saint-Joseph producer is plush up front, then ends more austere and mineral-driven. You could age it. But why? It's just too good to resist right now.

FOOD STYLING: JULIAN HENSARLING; PROP STYLING: JULIA BAYLESS



CÔTES DU RHÔNE

The Côtes du Rhône region encompasses nearly 86,000 acres of vines and produces about two-thirds of all Rhône Valley wine; Côtes du Rhône Villages is a slightly more restrictive and (theoretically, at least) higher-quality designation. Because the region is so vast, there are generic Côtes du Rhône and brilliant ones. The key is choosing wisely—for instance, starting with the eight I've recommended here.

2022 LA NERTHE LES CASSAGNES CÔTES DU RHÔNE VILLAGES (\$28)

This lovely red from La Nerthe is more graceful and medium-bodied than many Côtes du Rhône, its strawberry-raspberry Grenache flavors ending on a savory herbal edge and subtle tannins.

2021 DOMAINE GRAND VENEUR LES CHAMPAUVINS CÔTES DU RHÔNE (\$29)

The intense strawberry-raspberry aroma here leads into a Grenache-based red with sweet fruit notes and modest tannins; it's luscious without being heavy.

2022 DOMAINE DE LA JANASSE TERRE D'ARGILE CÔTES DU RHÔNE VILLAGES (\$31)

This organically farmed estate makes some of Châteauneuf-du-Pape's finest wines, as well as this generous red. It's plush with ripe raspberry fruit and baking-spice notes.

2022 STEPHANE OGIER LE TEMPS EST VENU CÔTES DU RHÔNE (\$23)

Best known for his stellar Côte-Rôties, Ogier also makes this violet-scented blend of Grenache and Syrah; despite its inky hue, it's soft and succulent, reminiscent of farmers market strawberries.

2022 J.L. CHAVE SÉLECTION MON COEUR CÔTES DU RHÔNE (\$25)

Winemaker Jean-Louis Chave uses fruit from growers he knows well for this polished red: Think sleek black cherry and plum fruit with savory black olive notes.

2023 DOMAINE DE BEAURENARD CÔTES DU RHÔNE (\$25)

The Coulon family farms their estate vineyards biodynamically; their excellent wines include this floral, fragrant red. It has a gracefulness that Côtes du Rhône doesn't always achieve.

2022 CHÂTEAU PÉGAU SETIÉR CÔTES DU RHÔNE VILLAGES (\$28)

Pégau's Châteauneuf-du-Papes are among the best, and this robust red offers much of the same character of black fruit, a supple texture, hints of cured meat and pepper—without the same price tag.

2022 ERIC TEXIER BRÈZÈME CÔTES DU RHÔNE (\$40)

Eric Texier farms organically and hews to a minimalist winemaking approach. The result here is an unadulterated, spicy, almost feral Syrah character, all dark berry fruit and notes of black pepper.

CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE, GIGONDAS, LIRAC & VACQUEYRAS

The star of the southern Rhône, Châteauneuf-du-Pape sets a worldwide standard for luscious, powerful reds. Nearby Gigondas offers much of the same complexity and richness but at a more modest price, as do the up-and-coming appellations of Lirac and Vacqueyras. All these wines are driven principally by the sultry allure of Grenache.

2021 DOMAINE LA MONARDIÈRE LES 2 MONARDES VACQUEYRAS (\$30)

The young and extremely talented Damien Vache is the hand behind this organically farmed blend of Grenache and Syrah. It's peppery and luscious, full of wild herb notes.

2021 DOMAINE DES BOSQUETS GIGONDAS (\$55)

Grapevines were first recorded at this site as far back as 1376. Over the years, it's changed hands many times, but today this floral, peppery red is made by the talented Julien Bréchet.

2021 DOMAINE DE LA MORDORÉE LA DAME ROUSSE LIRAC (\$30)

Earthy, dark, and savory, this red from mother-and-daughter team Madeleine and Ambre Delorme is a testimony to the potential of the red wines of Lirac, just west of Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

2021 DOMAINE SANTA DUC HABEMUS PAPAM CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE (\$60)

This is one hell of a Châteauneuf; savory, seductive, full of rich fruit, ending on peppery tannins. Yves and Benjamin Gras are Rhône Valley stars for good reason.

2020 CHÂTEAU DE MONTMIRAIL BEAUCHAMP GIGONDAS (\$35)

From nearly 60 acres of vines, the Archimbaud family produces a potent expression of the appellation: gamey and intense, with dark berry and wild herb flavors.

2022 CHÂTEAU DE SAINT COSME GIGONDAS (\$65)

Fifteenth-generation vintner Louis Barruol makes some of the best Gigondas you can find. With its roses-and-white-pepper aroma, deep red-fruit flavors, and black tea notes, this is a stellar Rhône red.

2019 MONTIRIUS TERRE DES AÎNÉS GIGONDAS (\$45)

Savory and full of the scent of garrigue (the wild herbs that grow on the hillsides in the Rhône), this raspberry-inflected red feels slightly rustic in the best possible way. Bring on the cassoulet.

2021 M. CHAPOUTIER BARBE RAC CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE (\$130)

Michel Chapoutier makes excellent wine throughout the Rhône valley. His top Châteauneuf is loaded with sweet red berry and cherry flavors, bolstered by silky tannins.