

THE WINES OF SOUTHERN RHONE.

The Rhone Valley begins in the north just a few miles south of the southern edge of Beaujolais and extends for almost 150 miles to just west of Marseilles on the Riviera. The Southern Rhone is the much larger part of the Rhone Valley shown on the schematic. We will explore the Northern region in a later column.

The most well-known area is **CHATEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE**, which is the area along the river shown in red just below the pink. It is the name of a city. The appellation regulations allow 13 different grapes in the red wines, but traditionally one or more of three grapes predominate: Syrah, Mourvedre and Grenache. The whites generally feature a dominance of either, or usually both, of Roussanne and Marsanne, but 11 other grapes are authorized, of which Grenache Blanc is the most used. Truly excellent wines come from this appellation. The 2007 vintage was spectacular, with at least six different producer's reds obtaining a perfect score of 100 from Robert Parker, the world's premier wine critic. (Parker personally covers Bordeaux, Rhone and California). "I have tasted the 2007 [Clos Saint Jean] Chateaufneuf du Pape

Deus-Ex Machina three times from bottle. On two of the three times I thought it was the single greatest red wine I have ever tasted." The great, consistent producers of this appellation include Clos de Papes, Beaucastel, Pierre Usseglio, Clos Saint Jean, Henri Bonneau, de la Janasse, Chapoutier (these not in any particular order). Chapoutier, de la Janasse, and Usseglio each makes one or more 100% Grenache wines (98 to 100 Pts in 2007), while the others are blends. Other recent great vintages include 2006, 2005 and 2000 for reds and 2003 for reds but only from the top producers, and 2006, 2000 and 1999 for whites. These top reds and whites will last for decades if properly stored, and the moderate ones for usually a good fifteen to twenty years. Try one of these Chateaufneuf-du-Papes: 2006 **Domaine Charvin** Châteaufneuf-du-Pape 93pts (\$65 at Houston Wine Merchant and Spec's); 2007 **Le Vieux Donjon** Châteaufneuf-du-Pape 95+ (\$70 at HWM); 2007 **Beaucastel** Châteaufneuf-du-Pape Blanc 95 and Red 96 (each \$100 at Spec's). I was lucky enough to obtain four bottles of the 2007 Deus-Ex Machina upon release.

Rhone Valley



The next best appellation of the Southern Rhone is **GIGONDAS**. This appellation requires some of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvedre, allows another 17 grapes (6 of which are white grapes), but it is usually a wine made up mostly of red Grenache. Only red and rose wines are allowed. When found, these wines present exceptional values. 2007 **Cabasse** Gigondas is \$24 at Spec's; 2003 **Domaine des Bosquets** Gigondas is \$35 at Spec's; 2007 **St Cosme** Gigondas is \$31 and 2006 is \$26 at Spec's, while the even better 2006 Gigondas Valbelle is \$44.

The appellation which sells the most wine is the **COTES DU RHONE**, which covers all of the Rhone; a large step up is the **COTES DU RHONE VILLAGES**, which covers 16 villages of the Southern Rhone. The nomenclature is Cotes du Rhone-Villages with the village name usually appearing in much larger typeface; these are generally excellent wines. The village wines must be at least 50% Grenache and either at least 20% Syrah or Mourvedre with the remainder any of 10 other varieties. These wines will age for 3-12 years, and most are ready to drink upon release (which is two years after the harvest) but the best often need months if not a year or so. The best of these wines is Cotes du Rhone-Cairanne, followed by Chusclan and Laudun. Laudun has the best white wine of the appellation. The red wines are quite easy to find as much of fine quality is produced. 2006 **Cabasse** Cotes du Rhone-Villages Seguret Casa Basse is \$15 at Spec's; 2005 **de l'Ameillaud** Cotes du Rhone-Villages Cairanne is \$17 at Spec's; 2006 **Guigal** Cotes du Rhone is \$13 at Spec's; at HWM 2006 Coudoulet de Beaucastel Côtes du Rhône is \$30; 2006 Domaine de Mourchon Côtes du Rhône-Villages Séguret Grande Réserve (91 pts) is \$30; 2006 Domaine de Mourchon Côtes du Rhône Tradition 2006 (90 pts) is \$20 [a Best Buy].

The three stars of the Southern Rhone are the red grapes Grenache, Mourvedre and Syrah. Grenache is widely grown in Spain; Syrah is the Shiraz when from Australia, and is becoming the dominant new grape phenomenon in the US where it is grown to great effect in the California Central Coast and in Washington's Columbia Valley.

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