



“Qu’est-ce que ces vins ont-ils en commun?”

“Quickly, bring me a beaker of wine, so that I may wet my mind and say something clever.”

Aristophanes

How can the same grape vary in flavor when produced in different countries? For example, the wines from Australia are forward with fruit, bold, and fun. On the other hand, the wines from France are restrained, engaging, and filled with mystery. When it comes to the Syrah grape, where it is grown and produced is fundamental to knowing what to expect.

For the first quarter of 2004, we have chosen to explore those mysterious and interesting Syrah wines from the Northern Rhône in France. Last year we selected three different Shiraz from South Australia, which were forward, opulent, and luscious, and the wines from Northern Rhône are stylistically opposite. Once you’ve tried these wines, you can decide which style you prefer. We love both styles for a multitude of reasons; food pairings being a major one.

We could spend years dissecting the differences between appellations, but think geography when learning about the Rhône wines from France. The Rhône area is divided into two major areas: the Northern Rhône producing predominantly Syrah and Viognier, and the Southern Rhône, where most of the grape production is Grenache, Roussane, and Marsanne. Although many producers in the Southern Rhône use Syrah in their wines, it is mainly used as a blending grape.

The Rhône area, stretching 40 miles long, is in the Southeast quadrant of France, where the weather is perfect to grow Syrah due to the sunny, warm climate where it thrives. The Northern Rhône accounts for only 5,500 acres planted in grapes, thus producing less than 1 million cases of wine annually. This small growing area was nearly abandoned years ago due to the steepness of the hills and the intense labor required to maintain the grapes. The Northern Rhône is comprised of 7 small appellations. The appellations: Côte Rotie, Hermitage, Cornas, Crôzes Hermitage, and St. Joseph produce mostly Syrah. Condrieu and Chateau Grillet, produce mostly Viognier. For this quarter we have chosen wines from Crôzes Hermitage, St. Joseph, and Cornas.

Of the three wines chosen, the St. Joseph produced by Philippe Verzier, is perhaps the lightest bodied, a general rule of thumb for wines from this appellation. They are pleasant, fruity, and ready for drinking in 2-6 years. The Crôzes Hermitage of Domain Albert Belle shows more body and is much more affordable than the wines from neighboring Hermitage. The Côtes-du-Rhône, from Domaine Auguste Clape in Cornas, is the fullest-bodied and will age for 5-10 years.

Typical descriptors for Syrah from Northern Rhône:

Fiery, intense flavor, black currant, spicy aroma, cassis, licorice, concentrated berry fruit, raspberry, blackberry, chocolate, smoky, wild, manly, barn-yardy, powerful, massive, violets, green olives, bacon, underbrush.

Typical Color Profile:

Ruby red, purple, mahogany, almost black when bottled.

Five Reasons Why PlumpJack Loves Syrah from the Northern Rhône:

1. Some can age up to 15 years.
2. Those hillsides are so steep we feel obligated to pay homage to its winemakers.
3. The flavors can go from powerful and robust to finesse-ful and elegant.
4. Food combos are interesting and versatile.
5. These are as powerful as big Cabernets, but the prices are very affordable.

2001 St. Joseph, La Madone, Cave de Chante Perdrix, Philippe Verzier

\$22.99

Here are the facts:

Location of Winery: Overlooks the Rhône River from high above the town of Chavanay

Owners: Philippe Verzier

Vineyards: La Madrone

Climate: Warm to hot

Approximate age of vines: 50 + years

Cases produced: 200

Winemaker: Philippe Verzier

Alcohol: 12.5%

Tasting Profile: Blueberry fruit notes in the nose, smoke, pepper, and leather—a blockbuster

Aging Potential: 2-8 years

Varietal component: 100% Syrah

Interesting Fact: Due to his father's untimely death, Philippe only 30 years old, has 12 vintages under his belt. Additionally he has 2.2 acres of the prestigious Condrieu vineyards which has made him a force to contend with.

2000 Crôzes Hermitage, Les Pierrelles, Domaine Alberte Belle

\$22.99

Here are the facts:

Location of the winery: In the rolling hills of the Village of Larnage

Owners: Albert Belle and his son Philippe

Vineyards: Les Pierrelles which is the closest hillside to Hermitage

Climate: Hot

Approximate age of vines: Exact number unknown, but 20+ for sure

Cases Produced: Less than 1000 exported to the United States

Winemaker: Albert and Philippe Belle

Alcohol: 12.6%

Tasting Profile: Rich licorice, cassis, chocolatey leather, red and blackberry fruit, with hints of toasty oak. Chewy and chunky.

Aging Potential: Drinkable but will certainly be better in 5-8 years.

Varietal Components: 100% Syrah

Interesting Fact: Les Pierrelles takes its name from the small stones that cover the vineyard. The wines are aged sur lie in barrel for at least a year.

2002 Cornas, Domaine Auguste Clape, Côtes-du-Rhône

\$25.99

Here are the facts:

Location of Winery: Near the village of Cornas

Owners: Auguste Clape

Vineyards: 14 acres

Climate: Protected from wind to contain the heat

Approximate age of vines: 10-75 years

Cases produced: 200

Winemaker: August Clape with help from his son, Pierre-Marie

Alcohol: 12.5%

Tasting Profile: Massive, purple color, barn-yardy nose, deep black currant and dark berry flavors. Slight toasty finish and solid wine.

Aging Potential: 6-12 years. Drink now, but open 1 hour before meal

Varietal Component: 100% Syrah

Interesting Fact: Auguste Clape is the mayor of Cornas, and his wine is said to be much like his public service—solid and consistent. His secrets are ripe fruit and old vines. Technically the wine from Clape is a Côtes-du-Rhône, but we've put this in the Cornas category because Clape only uses vines that are 20+ years old for their Cornas. This Clape wine is from the Cornas area, but Auguste Clape will not call it Cornas due to using young vines, thus labeling it as a Côte-du-Rhône.