

FRANCE, NORTHERN RHÔNE: PART 1 – UNPRECEDENTED SUCCESS

JOE CZERWINSKY, 19th Dec 2019 | [The Wine Advocate](#) | 239

Since 2015, the Northern Rhône has seen a string of very good to great vintages. At the moment, I'd put 2015 and 2018 in the "great" category and would rate 2016 and 2017 as "very good." As I've not tasted any of the 2019s, I'm not categorizing it yet, but early reports from the producers suggest it will be of similar quality.

Simply put, this number of back to back to back to back (to back) vintages has never occurred in living memory. Two years? Sure. Three years? Rarely. But four and likely five years? Never. "Global warming has been fabulous for the Northern Rhône," said Marcel Guigal as we tasted in his cellars.



As usual in the Rhône, I supplemented my visits to estates with blind-tastings of the wines.

For this report, the focus is on 2017 and 2018, the two vintages most likely to be on retailers' shelves now and in the near future. Both years were warm, characterized by lots of sunshine and generally early harvests. "For us vigneron, these are great years, because everything got ripe," said Stéphane Robert of Domaine du Tunnel. "Seventeen is very good. I'm super happy with that year. And '18 is also good—maybe a little more showy young." He compared them to 2009 and 2015 but noted those years were more tannic. "The 2009s are starting to drink well now, but who waits 10 years?"

In Côte Rôtie, Jean-Paul Jamet said 2018 is an excellent year, "very ripe yet with supple tannins and good freshness." He contrasted that to 2017, which he says is "a solar year with surprising elegance." To illustrate his point that warm vintages aren't a threat to Côte Rôtie, Jamet poured a couple of older wines from hot years. Both the 2009 and 1989 Côte Rôtie were singing. He compared the 1989 to the 2018. "I'm confident in hot vintages," he said. "Because with time, the terroir emerges."

Stéphane Ogier said, "We can feel it [2018] is a warm year like 2009, but we don't have the powerful tannins like in 2015. Seventeen was more balanced in terms of weather.... It's in the style of 2016 but more charming, more finesse, with a step up in terms of density and intensity over '16."



The vines of Cornas almost entirely cover the slopes above the village.

Perhaps the biggest difference between 2017 and 2018—and what ultimately marks the differences between them—is that 2017 was drier throughout the growing season. Some of the Syrah vines shut down during the summer, leaving the resulting wines a bit more edgy and less harmonious than their 2018 counterparts.

In 2018, said Jean-Louis Chave, “The wines are not really jammy. They’re almost as ripe as 2003, but for some reason the grapes weren’t raisiny. The vines never really stopped. In mid-August we had 40 millimeters of rain—perfect timing. And at the end of August another little rain.”

Hermitage shines this year. “In Hermitage, you can push things to the limit and still be OK,” Chave said. “Even when it’s extreme, the *grands terroirs* are still the *grands terroirs*.”

Looking at recent vintages, Chave summarized the similarities as follows: 2015 he compares to 1990; 2016 to 2010; 2017 to 2000. As for 2018, said Chave, “It wouldn’t be right to compare 2018 and 2003. The ripeness is extreme, but at the end they’re very different wines.”

In the interest of getting this report published before the end of the year, I’ve broken it into two parts, with Part 1 focusing on the appellations of Cornas, Côte Rôtie and Hermitage. I’ll have more reviews from Condrieu, Crozes-Hermitage and Saint-Joseph in an upcoming issue.



Mixed grill for two at Les Ruches in Saint Péray, with a little Clape Cornas to wash it down. As always when dining with producers, The Wine Advocate pays my portion of the bill.