



RHONE 2015 EN PRIMEUR

RICH, SUPPLE AND FRESH

2015 is a genuinely exciting vintage in both the Northern and Southern Rhône and will, as always, represent tremendous value. It comes after a short series of nice but slightly middling vintages. Unlike the atypical 2014s, whose lighter style and pretty fruit will deliver excellent early drinking, 2015 sees the Rhône return to its classic roots: rich flavours, supple tannins, and a distinctly fresh minerality which has always distinguished the better vintages.

With a series of very good but small harvests in Burgundy, and the recently reengaged enthusiasm for Bordeaux en primeur, not to mention the seductive charms of recent vintages in Tuscany and Piedmont to distract buyers with eclectic tastes, the Rhône has been somewhat overshadowed in recent years. We have therefore carefully considered our selection this year, and propose a concise selection of the growers, wines, and styles that have really caught our attention in 2015.

Comparison to other vintages at this early stage is always dangerous, but a number of producers did draw comparison to 2010 and 2005, although they anticipate slightly more forward drinking in their 2015s, and in the Southern Rhône 2007 was mentioned by more than one grower. What is clear is the vintage has produced some very exciting wines, many of which have the potential for long ageing. Whether you prefer the detailed distinction of Syrah from the Northern Rhône, the generous charms of Viognier in Condrieu, the pithy timbre of a Marsanne/Roussanne blend, or the juicy, supple richness of a Southern Rhône blend, the Rhône 2015s are not short of style or appeal.



THE GROWING SEASON

Hot, dry and precocious is how an uncanny number of growers described the growing season in 2015. The early months of January and February were the warmest seen in the southern Rhône since 2007. High winter rainfall meant the underground water reserves were well charged for the hot year ahead.

Growers remarked on how ahead of schedule the whole season was, with flowering taking place in the warm sunshine of early summer. Following an uncomplicated fruit-set, the ripening berries began to mature under a sizzling summer sun. In the south a dousing of 100mm rainfall at the beginning of June topped up the water table so that vines were prepared for the long, hot summer months. Temperatures between 15th June and 20th August hit 35°C every day in Châteauneuf du Pape.

Towards the end of August both the south (on the 13th) and the north (on the 17th) enjoyed a long awaited summer rain shower followed by a drop in extreme temperatures. In both instances this meant the vines avoided any extreme water stress, which can often result in the vine shutting down and producing green and unripe flavours despite fierce summer heat. Since 2015 was spared this misfortune, the berries continued their phenolic ripening in ideal conditions. After small harvests in 2012 and 2013, 2015 saw a full crop picked at optimal ripeness.

One concern of a hot, dry year is that the all-important acidity of the grapes will plummet, leading to jammy flavours, flabby whites, and the prospect of only a short lifespan in the cellar. Many growers spoke of their fears in the run up to harvest regarding acidity, but in fact the replenished water reserves and the thick skin of the sunbathed berries meant the levels of tartaric acid remained adequate. As a result, the vintage is marked by a distinctively fresh, salty minerality that balances with the rich fruit flavours and liquorice spice in the reds. The better whites, too, have a surprising freshness despite their rich apricot, blossom, and nutty flavour profiles.

THE WINES

As mentioned above, a marked quality of the 2015s is their freshness. It would be incorrect to describe this as a high-acid vintage, but it was a point of conversation with every grower we visited that the wines have a particular salty freshness.

The tannins of the Syrah in the north are very fine, giving the wines an appealingly juicy, supple character. The alcohol levels of the north are certainly higher than in some recent vintages, but a modest increase of 0.5% abv means the wines are pitching between 13-14% rather than 12.5-13.5%; and their rich fruit characters and mineral freshness mean the alcohol integrates well, affording an impressive balance to the wines. The northern whites are undeniably richer than their 2014 sisters, but their creamy, rich apricot is tempered by a floral elegance in the better growers. The Marsanne in St Péray has also performed well.

In the south Mourvèdre has had a tremendous year, and those blends which have a high proportion of this late ripening variety have retained their elegance, whilst the earlier ripening and sweet strawberry scented Grenache adds flesh and body. It is the case that some growers may have over-egged it in 2015, and high alcohols of 16%+ can be found across the southern appellations. However, the growers offered here have all made good picking and blending decision, and alcohols have remained the right side of 15%.

These wines are rich and seductive; but they are not blockbusters. They retain a savoury undertow, with well-integrated alcohol and supple tannins. Overall it is a homogenous vintage of high quality across the whole region. As always, careful selection is needed, but we hope there is something for everyone here. A case or two to tuck away for later drinking will certainly reward in years to come, so you can buy with confidence.

CATHERINE PETRIE

RHONE BUYER