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Rows of Syrah grapevines near the village of Cornas in the Rhône Valley of France.

The Northern Rhône, Part II

IN THE NORTHERN RHÔNE, PART I, I focused on two producers of my favorite Hermitage. A third renowned producer is Paul Jaboulet Aîné. It is most known for its top wine, La Chapelle, due to its outstanding quality during the years ending in 1991 as well as 1997.

From the late 1960s to 1997, the firm president was my dear friend Gérard Jaboulet. He was known worldwide as the Rhône's wine ambassador. He traveled around the world extolling Rhône wine virtues and was loved by all he met. I was fortunate to meet him on many occasions in this country and France. My greatest experience



Paul Jaboulet Aîné Hermitage La Chapelle, years (from left) 1988, 1989, and 1999.



Found on wine lists of the world's greatest restaurants are the "La La's," shown here (from left) 1988 Guigal Côte-Rôtie La Turque, 1989 Guigal Côte-Rôtie La Mouline, and 1988 Guigal Côte-Rôtie La Landonne. **RIGHT:** Syrah grapes have been grown in the Rhône Valley since Roman times.

came in June 1997 when I arrived to his winery unannounced and was given a great tour and tasting by the assistant winemaker as Jaboulet was in a long meeting with bankers. When he exited the boardroom to talk to his wife, and saw me, he said he would change his lunch plans with his bankers and take me to his favorite local restaurant. In the meantime, he arranged for me to taste at M. Chapoutier's for the next two hours (what pain!). After that, Jaboulet picked me up and we drove to a beautiful restaurant where we sat along the Rhône and ate and drank some of France's best. Alas, it was the last time I saw Jaboulet, as he died at age 55 within the month. The world lost one of the greatest people who lived large. I miss him sorely.

With regard to the wines, many people think that the 1961 La Chapelle is the greatest Rhône wine ever made. This wine, in my opinion, deserves its reputation, as well as does the 1978 and 1990. In fact, two other wines from the 1980s (1983 and 1989) also consistently perform at the highest levels. When Larry Stone (the United States' most famous sommelier) worked at Charlie Trotter's, he wrote an article published in the *Chicago Tribune* stating that after the end of the 20th century, the 1989 La Chapelle would be remembered as one of the greatest Rhône wines of the 20th century. Years later, when Stone served me both the 1989 and 1990 at a tasting, I reminded him of this because I thought that the 1990 was the better wine and equal to the greatest wine I'd ever tasted. His advice was to drink the 1989 over the next 30 years and then move to the 1990.

After 1991, Paul Jaboulet Aîné slipped in quality during the 1990s and the following years. It was acquired by the famous Bordeaux firm Château La Lagune, and it has resumed its lofty place, especially with the 2009 and 2010 vintages.

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Other famous producers of Syrah from the Cornas appellation include the historical reference point producer Auguste Clape, the new superstar, Vincent Paris, and another leading estate, Jean Luc-Colombo. Many people consider Cornas the "biggest" or most manly wine in the world, although it does not have the longevity of Hermitage or my next and final appellation, Côte-Rôtie.

There are several producers of Côte-Rôtie who deserve to be taken seriously, but none approach the exalted offerings of Guigal. The history of the Guigal winery is relatively new. The founder, Etienne Guigal, worked for the producer Vidal-Fleury, rising through the ranks to head winemaker and then left to found Guigal in 1946. Struck by temporary blindness in 1961, he was joined by his 18-year-old son Marcel. Together they expanded the business. In 1984 they bought Etienne's former employer, Vidal-Fleury, increasing their area by 140 percent to 29 acres total. Today, from their estate and negotiated operations, they produce over 40 percent of all Côte-Rôtie. Etienne died in 1988, after working 65 harvests, and Marcel was joined by his son, Philippe, in 1999. Together, they have made great wines since Marcel's father and grandfather bought

the single vineyards from 1976 to 1995. While he offers an excellent basic Hermitage, as well as a high level variant, Ermitage Ex-Voto, and makes other lesser-known Northern Rhône appellation offerings, he is known worldwide for his Côte-Rôtie.

Côte-Rôtie translates as "roasted slope" in English. Regardless of price or producers, these wines, predominantly Syrah with a small allowable and desirable percentage of the white grape Viognier to tame these monsters, offer a unique wine which is redolent of bacon fat, espresso, violets, smoke, earth, spices, black pepper, and red and black fruits. Obviously we're talking

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about big and complex wines. Guigal's basic Côte-Rôtie is almost always one of the greatest values and is produced in enough quantity to be easily found. I recommend this wine as the starting point to understand the Côte-Rôtie appellation. Although it is not inexpensive (\$50+), it is an incredible value given the quality of the wine. It generally improves for 10 years and lasts 10 more.

The next level in quality is the Côte-Rôtie Château d'Ampuis, which has double the Viognier, 7 percent or so. It is similar, but "bigger" than the Brune et Blonde and improves and lasts for 5-10 years more respectively. The average price is \$150.

Finally, Marcel, and predominantly Philippe Guigal, make three of the greatest wines in the world. They are as rare as any, and quite expensive (\$500), but worth every cent and more. They are very hard to find and tend to be on the wine lists of the world's greatest restaurants. Known as the "La La's", they are La Mouline, La Turquie, and La Landonne. These are mythical wines which in most years approach perfection and are often rated as perfect, or 100 point wines – a rare event for any wine at any time. The aroma and taste of the wines almost takes your breath away. I always have them with food, usually a rack of lamb.

La Mouline (5,000-6,000 bottles) and La Turquie (5,000 bottles) often have high, single digit Viognier blended with Syrah, while La Landonne (10,000-12,000 bottles) is 100 percent Syrah and the biggest in nature. I will not describe each in detail, as it is almost futile to describe them regardless

of wine knowledge or writing skill. La Mouline is generally thought to be more feminine in style, although all three are very imposing wines, which must be experienced to be believed. Of all wines I have ever had (and I can modestly say I have had at least one, and in most cases, multiple bottles of glorious vintages of all world renowned wines), these are the three wines one must experience before death. The good news is that the 2009-2012 vintages are all superb and will give many of us the best, and maybe the last chance, to buy these jewels so they can best be appreciated within our lifetimes.

Happy hunting! À votre santé! 🍷

Editor's note: Jim Bryant's Down Cellar wine articles may be found online at www.qbarrington.com.



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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