

Wines from the Rhone Region: Part One, the Northern Rhone

Written by Terry Connor

Tuesday, 09 October 2012 10:02

I wrote last time that I would go to Bordeaux; however my driver Franco insisted that we continue south, so we find ourselves headed towards the Rhone. Franco is up to something that he will not reveal. I can only hope that it involves good restaurants.

We enter The Northern Rhone in the town of Vienne, coming from Lyon. (Years ago I bought a scratch lottery ticket in Lyon. It was a loser.) On the western side of the Rhone River is the northernmost appellation called Cote-Rotie. The other appellations that sit on the western side of the river are Condrieu, Chateau Grillet, St. Joseph, Cornas, and St.-Peray. On the eastern side are Hermitage and Crozes-Hermitage. There is a Lowcountry connection here because just about everything that is produced from the vintners of the Rhone is available from our local retailers.

The primary grape for red wines of the Northern Rhone is Syrah, and for the white wines, Viognier. There are no Rose wines produced that are of any consequence. Far and away the best producer of wines from Cote-Rotie is E. Guigal. His wines are very expensive, especially one called La Mouline. It is a single vineyard product which by itself carries a very intoxicating aroma. I suggest putting it on your bucket list.

The landscape of the Cote-Rotie appellation is characterized by the most incredible terraced vineyards. These vineyards are composed of granite and other soils. The soil combination is very conducive to growing grapes that produce flavorful wines. However, this is a trade-off. The terraced vineyards erode, making them a dangerous area in which to work. In fact, these terraces are rebuilt and reinforced before each growing season. I have seen these vineyards and can bear witness to the fact that they are difficult work environments. But the attitude of the locals is that it's all worth it to have the southern exposure for the growing fruit and protection from the fierce Mistral Winds.

The next appellation south is Condrieu, joined by perhaps the smallest appellation anywhere called Chateau Grillet. Here we find terrific white wines produced from the Viognier Grape. Honey, peach and melon are the underlying flavors that make this wine a good competitor with Chardonnay. Wines produced from Viognier are very affordable and available here in the Lowcountry. Some argue that Viognier came to Condrieu (along with Syrah) with the Greeks around 600 B.C. Others argue that it was the Romans. In any case, the resulting wine did not come into production until around 1450 A.D. The 1800's saw the expansion of Viognier into other areas of France. I bring out this background because eventually Viognier came to the U.S. and met with serious success, especially in the Northwest.

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If you ever get to Condrieu, try to stay at a Hotel called Beau Rivage. Expensive? Yes. But the staff – from the parking lot to the dining room to your room – is as friendly as you will find anywhere. A most memorable place to stay, and you deserve it. While in that area, try to visit the wineries of Chapoutier and Paul Jaboulet Aine.

Hermitage would be the next appellation to highlight. Red Hermitage is produced from Syrah. The wines produced here are characterized with flavors of leather, blackberry, black cherry, and damp earth. Production is good, thus we should have little trouble shopping for a selection.

I want to bring out a point that Robert Parker made in the second revision to his book on the Rhone. He was emphasizing “food friendly” coupled with the fact that Rhone wines are one of the top choices of European Diners. Here is why: Bordeaux and Burgundy wines have been praised forever. However, if you stop and experiment with intensely flavored dishes, and the wine accompaniment is a Rhone Wine, you will see that Rhone wines often work better because, as a rule, the wines are not encumbered with new oak flavors or harsh tannins. I realize that Mr. Parker was expressing a personal opinion. But it’s one based on years of repeated, in-person visits to the Rhone. I’ll follow him to the restaurant.

Next is a detour to Napa and then back to France and the Southern Rhone. Franco needs a short vacation.

Cheers

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teacher proud of you. Do not ask me to explain why, but there is something magical about this trip that makes it a lasting memory.

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