

Established in 1808 in the village of Tain L'Hermitage in the Northern Rhone, Chapoutier has grown to be a world-wide producer and distributor of quality wines. It is typically their top Hermitage wines, both red and white, that receive the most attention and accolades.

I became curious about Chapoutier Wines because of the enormous breadth of their production and also because of the Braille Labels. Before I visited the tasting room at Chapoutier, I checked with the Rhone book that I have from Robert Parker. Sure enough, there was a summary of the vast array of wines now being produced at Chapoutier.

The first level is called The Southern Wines. These are wines that are produced from grapes grown in the Languedoc-Roussillon area. Michel Chapoutier believes that a move out of the Rhone and into the Languedoc-Roussillon is good because of the possibility of producing high quality wines at competitive prices.

There are the negociant wines, which are called the second level. These wines are produced from purchased grapes. Here Michel Chapoutier is working with contract vineyards.

The third level is called Estate-Bottled wines. These are the famed Hermitage wines. Examples are the White Hermitage Chante-Alouette, a red called Hermitage La Sizeranne, a Chateauneuf du Pape La Bernadine and one that you will probably find at Total Wines called Crozes-Hermitage Les Meysonnieres.

Level four from The Rhone are the Estate-Bottled Luxury cuvees. These are wines produced from grapes grown on extremely old vines; they show microscopic yields and are aged in 100% new oak barrels.

Chapoutier also produces wines from Condrieu, St Joseph, Crozes-Hermitage, Cornas, Cote Rotie, in the Northern Rhone, and Chateauneuf du Pape in the Southern Rhone.

All four offerings mentioned above, and Chapoutier wines produced in other areas, are considered to have significantly increased in quality since Michel Chapoutier took charge in 1985. Quality based upon maximizing the concept of Terroir is the one thing that he will not compromise and it seems to be a key to his very successful program.

Michel Chapoutier is also responsible for the fact that the labels on his wine bottles include information in Braille. (This has to be one of my all-time favorite wine stories.) In 1993, when Michel was only 29 years old, his job at the winery was to be the winemaker. After work one evening he turned on the TV to watch an interview with his friend, the musician Gilbert Montagnin. Gilbert, who is blind, was talking about the experience of buying wine, explaining that he never felt comfortable going into a wine shop because he was not sure which wine he was picking up. Therefore, in order for him to take part in the simple pleasure of buying wine, he would always have to be accompanied by a companion who was able to describe the wines he was choosing.

Chapoutier knew that his friend was a big fan of his Cotes-du-Rhone and he did not like the idea that it was uncomfortable for him to seek it out. He decided to look into whether his old printing machine could actually print Braille. After a bit of research it turned out that it was a relatively simple process to add Braille to his labels. He made a decision at that very moment to add Braille text to every bottle of wine that he produced. This was a blanket decision that covered wines from Cotes-du-Rhone, Languedoc Rousillon, Provence, and even Australia. The Braille text would include appellation, name of the wine, vintage, and whether it was a red or white.

After Michel Chapoutier adopted Braille on his labels, so did many other wine producers.

WINESPEAK. As we enjoy the good life here in the Lowcountry, we find that it is further enhanced by the fact that we have access to such terrific wines such as Chapoutier. Our connection to Chapoutier is even closer to home because of the relationship Chapoutier has with Terlato Wines International out of the Chicago area. Terlato distributes in the Lowcountry thru a local distributor. Their numbers are quite good relative to sales, however a separate label called Belleruche (also in Braille) is available that features a red, a white, and a Rose. The red wine is a blend of Grenache and Syrah. The white is a blend of Grenache Blanc, Clairette and Bourboulenc. The Rose is a blend of Grenache, Cinsault, and Syrah. All three are in the \$12 per bottle class. The availability of the Belleruche bottlings is excellent.