

Wine Guy: Southern Rhône Valley wines reflect warmth of Mediterranean

By: Rich Mauro Special to The Gazette Feb 19, 2019 Updated Feb 19, 2019

Some of my favorite wines anywhere have their origin in the south of France, especially the Rhône Valley. Since ancient times, vines have flourished in the valley, which runs roughly from Vienne in the north to Avignon in the south.

Most Rhône wines are red, though there are a few notable whites. The north is syrah country, as in the world-renowned wines from Hermitage and Côte Rôtie. The south is more about grenache, and this is a grape you need to get to know. The big difference is that these wines are much more focused on blends.

Neighboring Provence to the south has attracted popes, artists and literary figures. The wines benefit from proximity to the Mediterranean and typically reflect the freshness emblematic of grenache.

While the southern Rhône has several appellations of interest, the most famous is Châteauneuf du Pape (“New Castle of the Pope”). Although 13 grapes are specifically permitted, these are always grenache-dominated blends (with syrah and mourvèdre the most common additions). A fine example is the impressive 2016 Château de Nalys (\$105), one of the appellation’s oldest properties, with lively aromatics, intense dark fruits and complex leather, licorice and spice notes.

Arguably the best after Châteauneuf is nearby Gigondas, noted for spicy, somewhat rustic wines of strong but balanced character. One such wine is the 2015 Domaine Saint-Damien (\$35). This small, family-owned estate has produced a full-bodied wine of delightful character. Another nice option is the 2015 Famille Perrin La Gille (\$39). Aromatic and lush but with determination and force, this comes from the Perrin family of the renowned Château Beaucastel.

Wonderful everyday values also can be found in this region, most notably Côtes du Rhône, basically a catchall designation for wines from vineyards not in the specific appellations. Solid and flavorful, they represent some of the best red wine values in the world.

The majority red wines have 21 grape varieties officially in the appellation. Again, grenache is predominate, usually buttressed with significant additions of syrah and mourvèdre. The best are noted for generous fruit, solid and sometimes rustic body, and spicy qualities.

Two of my favorite producers are E. Guigal — the 2015 (\$19) is more intense and lushly textured than one would expect — and Les Dauphins, whose 2016 Reserve (\$13) offers up-front fruit, with forest notes and an easygoing texture.

Southern Rhône white blends, generally combinations of roussanne, marsanne, grenache blanc and small amounts of other grapes, also are worth attention. From Châteauneuf du Pape, the 2017 Château de Nalys (\$105) is amazingly aromatic and flavorful, with peach, citrus, vanilla a brioche making a succulent, exotic wine.

Of course, Côtes du Rhône Blanc is a more affordable alternative. Again, E. Guigal (2016, \$19) and Les Dauphins Blanc (2016, \$13) — marrying enticing aromas and freshness — are good places to start.

Just north of the village of Arles (famous for its association with Vincent van Gogh), the Costières de Nîmes sources fruity and substantial whites, such as the smooth 2015 Chateau Mas Neuf Paradox Blanc (\$17). From Luberon, a couple of hours east, the 2014 Pierre Henri Morel Blanc (\$17) is typically light and fresh, with delightful peach and honey.