



Jean-Louis Chave Reflects on the Rhône

by Richard Hemming, MW

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Jean-Louis Chave counts himself lucky. Not necessarily because he farms vines that produce some of the world's best Hermitage, nor because 2015 was both an abundant and terrific-quality vintage, but because he never gets emails. In fact he can't even remember his email address when he tries to give it to a fellow wine writer at a recent lunch in London.

Incommunicado he may be, but ultimately we all benefit from Chave's offline existence because it leaves him free to concentrate on what he does best.

As a naturally modest and thoughtful person, Chave would much rather let the terroir take the credit than let his own ego get in the way. Wines of this calibre do not make themselves, however, and I was able to glean a few insights into the man's philosophy as we tasted some of his wines over lunch (see the upcoming Rhône assemblage tasting article for my tasting notes).

Time is of the essence for Chave, both in the vineyard and in the bottle. He described how long he is taking over restoring some vineyards in the St-Joseph appellation. These steep sites were abandoned after phylloxera, and require terracing walls to be installed. Constructing just one of these can take six months, and he is expecting it to be at least 10 years, and perhaps 15, before he starts to produce good wine from these vineyards.

Such an unrushed approach is a luxury that can be afforded thanks only to the success of his Hermitage, Chave says. In fact the red and white wines for which his domain is primarily famous are becoming an increasing target for counterfeiters, and he has recently been aware of fake bottles of 1945 white and 1969 red Hermitage on the market. They have also faced the problem of a Chinese company trademarking their name, which has become one of the surest signs of a wine's desirability, albeit in a very frustrating way (see [Registering brand names in China](#)).

As well as developing new vineyards, Chave is continuing to work hard on his J L Chave Sélection range. He was emphatic that these are not the second wines of his domaine bottlings, but wines made with a different philosophy. He describes them as a reaction against extremes of winemaking, which he sees as on the one hand natural wines, many of which he believes are defective, and on the other hand commercial, industrial mass-market wines which have no sense of place.

In terms of production, his approach for all wines is exactly the same, so any differences are due to fruit alone. He uses some purchased fruit, mostly for his Mon Coeur Côtes du Rhône, but, for example, the Offerus St-Joseph comes from 10 ha (25 acres) of his own vineyards, some of which may be destined for his domaine label in future.

Chave says he has no plans to make Condrieu, Cornas or Côte Rôtie, and bemoaned the gold rush of planting that has seen northern Rhône appellations boom recently. In the last 20 years, he reckons that Côte Rôtie has expanded from 60 to 300 hectares while St-Joseph and Crozes-Hermitage have grown from 600 to 1,300 hectares. In Cornas, vineyards are now being planted on the plateau at 400 metres (1,312 ft) above sea level, land that was traditionally used for pasture.

Talking of the 2015 vintage, Chave is unequivocal about the quality for reds. Because 'nature was very generous', every grower benefited and the basic level of quality has been universally raised. He even drew parallels with the legendary 1990 vintage, while adding the disclaimer that the problem with such reputable vintages is that they never live up to the expectations of the drinker, and therefore frequently disappoint. For that reason he personally favours years that are more under the radar.

As for 2016, they lost at least half of their crop from hail damage earlier in the year. The large volumes made in 2015 will mitigate that loss to some extent, but as demand for the best Rhône wine continues to grow, pressure on prices can only continue to mount. Luckily for Chave, his non-existent inbox will remain oblivious to such distractions.



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