

JEB DUNNUCK

France, Northern Rhône: The Blockbuster 2015s and Elegant 2016s

featuring Domaine Jean-Louis Chave
as reviewed by Jeb Dunnuck

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The reference point for traditional, classic Hermitage must be that of the Chave family, whose history with this region goes back over 500 years. The estate is located in the tiny village of Mauves, and they pull from some of the prime terroirs on Hermitage Hill, including Bessards, Hermite, Péleat, les Rocoules, and Beaumes. In addition to producing one of the best Hermitages out there (Red and White), Jean-Louis Chave has also invested an incredible amount of time, energy and money into his vineyards in Saint Joseph over the past decade or more. Today he releases a classic estate Saint Joseph as well as a new single vineyard cuvée from an ancient site located south of Mauves called Le Clos. This was previously known as Domaine Florentin and has an incredible amount of history associated with the estate, which was purchased by the Chave family in 2009. I expect it won't be long before we see another single vineyard Saint Joseph from his vines in Beshesson, located north of Saint-Jean-de-Muzols. Looking at the vintages reviewed here, the 2015s certainly rival what the estate produced in 2009 and 2010, with a style not too dissimilar from a hypothetical blend of 2009 and 2010. These are ripe, exuberant wines, yet trust me, they have plenty of tannin, depth and length, and will be long-lived. The 2016s, which were brought up completely in the new cellar, are much more streamlined, tight, and fresh. They're classic, elegant wines. but my money is on them needing plenty of cellaring to be approachable.

2016 Chave Hermitage Blanc

As always, I was able to taste the 2016 Hermitage Blanc from separate components, with each showing singular characters, yet possessing awesome purity, depth, and length. The barrel of l'Ermite had an insane, liquid rock-like minerality as well as a purity of fruit that was off the charts. The Rocoules was slightly more fresh and lively than normal, but the sample from Péleat had blockbuster levels of fruit, concentration, and length. The only downside; due to the hail, is that there's just a handful of barrels of this elixir to go around. Nevertheless, this will be a profound Hermitage Blanc that readers should snatch up. **(98-100 points)**

2015 Chave Hermitage Blanc

Matching the otherworldly 2009, the 2015 Hermitage Blanc is a perfect wine and certainly one of the greatest whites ever made from this hallowed estate. The normal blend of 80% Marsanne and 20% Roussanne from the l'Ermité, Péleat, and les Rocoules lieux-dits, it exhibits a huge, opulent bouquet of buttered citrus, flower oil, orange marmalade, quince, and honeysuckle that's to die for. This majestic, full-bodied Hermitage Blanc has a huge mid-palate, thrilling purity of fruit, and a finish that won't quit. It's capable of lasting for 4-5 decades, but still has the sexiness of the vintage front and center and will be enjoyable early in its life. **(100 points)**

2010 Chave Hermitage Cuvee Cathelin

I was able to taste the 2010 Hermitage Cuvée Cathelin on release, and I still remember that day like it was yesterday, so I was thrilled to see Jean-Louis open this bottle during my visit for this report. Always a cellar selection that sees an extended élevage in oak, this beauty is still inky purple in color and offers off-the-chart notes of crème de cassis, saddle leather, ground herbs, liquid rocks, and spring flowers. Full-bodied, thick, and unctuous on the palate, with building tannin and a massive mid-palate, it needs to be forgotten for at least a decade but will be just about immortal in the cellar. As I wrote on release, this is one of the most spectacular wines in the world and would certainly qualify as a desert island wine for yours truly. **(100 points)**

2016 Chave Hermitage

The 2016 Hermitage looks to be an elegant, classic Hermitage from the Chave family. All the samples rated between 94 and 97, with the le Méal and Bessards being the standouts. The vintage yielded concentrated, pure wines that don't have the sheer grandeur of the 2015s, yet have ripe, polished tannins and incredible purity of fruit. If you love Chave Hermitage, you'll love this 2016. It's going to be relatively accessible with just short-term cellaring and keep for three decades. **(94-97 points)**

2015 Chave Hermitage

Not yet bottled, the 2015 Hermitage has perfection written all over it and reminds me of the 2010. Graphite, charcoal, liquid rock, and sensationally pure crème de cassis notes all soar from the glass of this full-bodied, concentrated, opulent 2015. This is a big, sexy beast of a Hermitage, yet it has the classic minerality, purity, and balance shown by just about every wine made from this estate. Forget bottles for 4-5 years, count yourself lucky, and enjoy over the following 4-5 decades. **(98-100 points)**

2016 Chave Saint Joseph

I tasted multiple barrels destined for the 2016 Saint Joseph, a vintage that's liked quite a bit by Jean-Louis. All the barrel samples showed terrific depth of fruit, darker, smoky, meaty nuances, lots of minerality, with the purity and elegance of the vintage front and center. I tasted barrels from Le Clos as well as Beshesson, but I'm not sure if they'll be released as stand-alone cuvees. If so, both are brilliant wines you should snatch up. **(92-94 points)**

2015 Chave Saint Joseph

There are two Saint Joseph releases in 2015, and Jean-Louis finally decided to bottle his Le Clos cuvée separately. Hats off to him as both wines are up with the crème de la crème of the appellation. Looking at the classic 2015 Saint Joseph, this beauty offers loads of kirsch, currants, and blackberry fruits intermixed with more smoked meats, cedar, and minerality. It's a rich, powerful, mineral-laced Saint Joseph to drink over the coming 10-15 years. **(94 points)**

2015 Chave Saint Joseph Le Clos

The 2015 Saint Joseph Le Clos comes from a single parcel of very old vines located south of Mauves that been resurrected by the Chave family. This is a beautiful, warmer terroir that's a mix of granite soils on the hillside and deeper, more sandy soils down on the valley floor. This killer wine is up with the best wines of the vintage and offers lots of kirsch and framboise, complex notes of bouquet garni, sweet, sweet tannin, and a full-bodied, seamless style that just begs to be drunk. It should be capable of lasting for two decades. **(96 points)**

From the Cellar:

1991 Chave Hermitage Blanc

Jean-Louis always like to open older bottles of the whites to show how they age, and in this case, he opened two beauties. The 1991 Hermitage Blanc was fully mature and firmly in the middle of its drinking plateau. Caramelized citrus, honeysuckle, flowers, and orange rind all emerge from the elegant, fresh, lively effort that's drinking beautifully today. I don't see any upside, yet it should keep for at least another decade. **(96 points)**

1978 Chave Hermitage Blanc

From a sensational vintage in the Rhône Valley, the 1978 Hermitage Blanc is a step up, boasting a vibrant gold color as well as thrilling notes of white truffle, hazelnuts, browned butter, and brioche. Fully mature, yet still concentrated, rich, and textured, it's a gorgeous wine and a tribute to the age-ability of these incredible dry Hermitage whites. Count yourself lucky if you have a bottle of this. **(98 points)**

1966 Chave Hermitage

The day before my visit, Jean-Louis and his father Gérard Chave opened a number of older Hermitage and tasted through them together in their cellar. Jean-Louis commented that every now and then Gerard likes to revisit older vintages, which in a cellar as deep and grand as this one, is akin to going back in time, and it's a special moment they spend together. The bottles had been recorked and left in the cellar overnight, and Jean-Louis was incredibly gracious in letting me taste through these wines, which were all poured blind. Starting with the youngest wine, the 1966 Hermitage was still vibrant ruby-colored, with no bricking or hint of its age in its color. It had a fresh, bright, juicy style as well as classic bacon fat, olives, peppery herbs, decaying flowers and gamey aromatics. It's bright acidity and medium-bodied style make me think it's best enjoyed over the coming decade, but it's a regal, elegant wine that will continue to evolve slowly. **(93 points)**

1959 Chave Hermitage

A bigger, richer wine that seemed even younger than the 1966, the 1959 Hermitage (which had been recorked at the domaine) was more lifted and perfumed, with lots of violets, exotics spices, white pepper and assorted darker fruits. With a hint of volatile acidity, full-bodied richness, sweet tannin, and a great finish, this ripe, sexy, thrilling Hermitage blew me away. **(95 points)**

1959 Chave Hermitage

Lastly, and a year you don't see very often due to the war, the 1942 Hermitage wasn't bottled until after the war was over. It was fully mature, yet not tired and holding steady, offering beautiful black fruits, menthol, smoke, and truffle aromas and flavors. Silky and seamless on the palate, with notable freshness and purity, it was a fitting cap to an incredible visit at one of my favorite estates in the world. Life is too short not to drink as much Chave Hermitage as you can! **(94 points)**

