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**The 2015 Northern Rhône: Outstanding Wines for the Long Haul
featuring Domaine J.L. Chave
by Josh Raynolds**

For wine lovers who favor richness, weight and emphatic flamboyant fruit, 2015 will be a vintage to dive into, deeply. While I suspect that all but a few wines will be rather monochromatic on release, I'm confident that time will bring greater complexity and somewhere-ness to the '15s – and they definitely have the concentration to age. Patient wine lovers who heed what many producers and wine lovers call the “15-year rule” for northern Rhône Syrah and allow their 2015s to lose some baby fat for a decade and a half will be richly rewarded, but those hoping to find nuance and detail during the first few years after the wines hit the market may wonder what the fuss is about.

The tannins in the 2015s are definitely present but they're not strict, as they often were in the 2010s and 2005s when I tasted those wines from barrel at a similar stage of development. In that regard the '15s show some resemblance to the often excellent and sometimes decadent 2009s, which as a group have yet to actually shut down. But the '15s, as a rule, are fresher than the '09s, which come across as broader and weightier. I believe that the '15s will always show better delineation and lift than their '09 siblings because they possess the energy to buffer their ripeness. But I should emphasize that we're speaking in relative terms here as few people will be able to call the '15s graceful or elegant wines unless they're comparing them to the richest New World renditions of Syrah, or Shiraz.

How Did the 2015s Get That Way?

The 2015 growing season was preceded by a rainy winter that replenished water tables that had suffered through drought-like conditions since 2011. The months that followed

were warm to hot but not excessively so, and well-timed, beneficent rains and, even more important, cool nights allowed the fruit to mature steadily and to maintain healthy acidity levels. With no disease pressures in 2015, the vines rebounded from their weak performances of recent vintages and produced a healthy crop of clean, perfectly ripe fruit that was mostly harvested between September 1 and 20. The skins of the grapes were thick but not leathery, and sugar levels, although on the high side, were buffered by healthy acidity. These are perfect conditions for producing concentrated and ageworthy but vibrant wines.

A number of producers that I visited this winter told me that because the grapes were so healthy and concentrated, they were able to work gently with their fruit, performing fewer punchdowns and pumpovers than usual. Careful extraction has contributed to the delicacy of the '15s, and it also explains the round, harmonious tannins that mark so many wines, even those from appellations where one might expect serious structure, as at Hermitage and Cornas. Another interesting aspect to 2015 is that since vines across the region achieved full or almost complete stem ripeness, many producers opted to include more whole clusters than usual in their fermentations. That has added an exotic measure of spiciness and floral character that I find awfully intriguing in Syrah.

The Region's Appeal Broadens

This January's four-day Marché aux Vins in Ampuis, an annual showcase for northern Rhône wineries and one of France's most heavily attended public wine fairs, attracted the highest number of attendees in its 89-year history, with more than 25,000 tickets sold in total. I wasn't surprised to hear this as in recent years more and more producers that I visit have been reporting a dramatic uptick in demand for their wines, both from the trade and from consumers who buy directly from the wineries. The short crops of 2014 and 2013 didn't help matters but with 2015, which has received an enormous amount of often breathless coverage, demand for the best northern Rhône wines is currently at record levels.

More than a few producers told me that they've been surprised by how many of their customers have told them that they became more interested in their wines due to sharply rising prices for Burgundy and Bordeaux. In the case of Burgundy, recent vintages have witnessed often minuscule production and many long-time buyers have found themselves completely out in the cold. I've heard similar stories from Beaujolais producers about increased demand for their wines. What's interesting, I think, is that when I asked if it wasn't strange that a Burgundy aficionado would turn to Gamay or

Syrah to satisfy a Burgundy craving, the explanation that I received was that many of these buyers had always indulged in northern Rhône wines (and Beaujolais) to some degree but that market circumstances now demanded that they increase their consumption of those wines.

In addition, many Burgundy aficionados are fixated on the minutiae surrounding small, closely defined vineyards and wines made by family producers in the Côte d'Or. They can find a strikingly similar culture in the northern Rhône valley and in Beaujolais, which gratifies their obsession with detail and – let's be honest – scarcity, which drives much wine collecting. While it might not yet be quite as impressive to brag about your collection of Grandes Places or Viallière bottlings as it is to flaunt your stash of Bonnes-Mares or Chambertin-Clos de Bèze, that day may be upon us sooner than we think.

Domaine J.L. Chave

After suffering through the short crops of 2014 and 2013, Jean-Louis Chave told me that he was relieved to realize a normal crop, “which is always low, anyway, with all the old vines,” in 2015. Even better, he said, was the fact that the fruit was uniformly of extremely high quality—“healthy, ripe and with great natural acidity”—thanks to the cool nights that the region enjoyed, along with some well-timed rain. After showing me numerous barrels of his 2015 Ermitage components, Chave opened a bottle of his 2003 Hermitage (he still added the “H” to the name back then) to demonstrate the contrast between “a really hot-around-the-clock vintage” and those new wines that we'd just tasted. Looking back at my original notes on the 2003 components, I have little doubt that the '15 here will be more elegant, fresh and precise than the '03. At this stage it seems to be built more along the lines of Chave's 2010, but less tannic, or maybe even 2013, but with more weight and with a dose of, say, 2009 thrown in for ripeness. I'll also add, once again, that the Saint-Joseph here, especially from a great vintage like 2015, delivers remarkably good value for its quality, especially compared to Hermitages of equal quality.

2015 Ermitage

As usual, tasted vineyard by vineyard from barrels. 1) from Les Beaume: Powerful, deep-pitched cherry, blueberry and violet character; intense mineral and spice overtones add vivacity. 2) from Meal: Densely packed but uncannily fresh and energetic, displaying sweet raspberry, cherry, spicecake and floral pastille qualities and a core of juicy acidity. 3) from Ermite: Superb depth of dark fruit and floral character; a core of minerality provides energetic lift and focus, giving an impression of energy, not weight. 4) from Bessards: Mineral and floral notes accent ripe blackberry and cherry, and a sexy

Asian spice flourish lends an exotic touch and back-end cut. The final wine should be a knockout and I envision that it will come off as a hypothetical cross of Chave's 2009 (power and heft) and 2010 (energy and structure). **(96-98 points)**

2015 Saint-Joseph

Tasted from barrels, vineyard by vineyard. 1) from Clos Florentin: High-pitched red fruit and floral character, with juicy acidity and a late mineral flourish. 2) from Le Croissant, in Clos Florentin: Deeper and darker fruits, showing intense violet and licorice notes along with olive, game and smoky mineral qualities on the back half. 3) from Chaillets: Mineral-accented cherry and blackberry qualities are sharpened by a peppery flourish. Concentrated but lithe, displaying excellent focus and chewy texture. 4) from Baschasson: Intense dark fruit scents and flavors; smoky mineral and spice notes add vivacity. Rich yet urgent as well. The final wine will be one of the best examples of this bottling yet, I'll wager, delivering serious depth and flavor intensity but energy as well. I suspect that it will match up favorably with plenty of Hermitages from the vintage. **(92-94 points)**

