



The Northern Rhône Shines in 2012 and 2013

by Jeb Dunnuck

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The Northern Rhône continues its string of solid vintages with the outstanding, fruit-loaded 2012s and fresh, yet concentrated 2013s.

Looking first at the 2012s, I'm thrilled with how these wines turned out as this is an outstanding, classic year where just about all of the appellations excelled. Starting out cool, rainy and late in the spring (which impacted yields), 2012 warmed substantially as the summer went on to finish with consistent, warm temperatures and no rain pressure. Vignerons who waited for full maturity were able to bring in spectacular grapes. Stéphane Ogier, who made some of the highest-rated Côte Rôties in this report, comment that 2012 "was a good vintage to take risks" and that most top Vignerons didn't bring in substantial amounts of grapes until the first week in October. The wines have beautiful richness and texture, with fruit-filled, forward and rounded characters. These will be approachable in their youth, yet evolve gracefully in bottle. Reminiscent of a deeper, richer 2007 vintage, it's as good, if not better than 2011. In addition, quality is consistent across the board, with a bevy of outstanding wines made in all of the appellations.

Moving to the 2013s, this was a difficult vintage to wrap my head around. As in the south, the vintage started with a dismal spring and record-breaking moisture, particularly in May, when the region received more than 240 millimeters of rain.

This decimated the old-vine Grenache in the south, but it also significantly impacted yields in the north as well with most vigneron reporting anywhere from 25-40% loss. This nature imposed reduction is one of the reasons this vintage is as successful as it is.

Going into the summer months, June was particularly dry, but cool, and this was followed by notable rain events in July. At this point, two things saved the vintage. First, August and September were gorgeous, with warm, even temperatures and below average moisture. Second, the tiny yields, due to the miserable spring, resulted in a crop load that the vines were able to completely ripen before additional storms hit in mid-October. Harvest was complicated and fast, with most vigneron not starting until after the October 2 and bringing in everything by the 8th or 10th. A number of vigneron told me that this was the first vintage where they didn't harvest a single grape in September. Looking at rainfall totals as a whole, 2013 was certainly above average, however, this is less a factor for these steep, rocky hillside vineyards in the north.

Looking at the 2013s reviewed for this report, almost all of which were tasted as barrel samples, they have inky colors (from the cooler nights), higher than average acidity, high, yet ripe tannin, and good concentration. Compared by older vigneron (younger vigneron literally had no reference point) to 1983 (which is before my wine drinking time), the top wines have surprising concentration. In fact, if looking at dry extract, a number of 2013s match what was achieved in 2010. Going by the numbers, 2012 is next, followed by 2011. I think some of the baby fat and flesh will fall off these wines by the time they're in bottle next year, but there's no denying that the top wines have beautiful concentration and good ripeness. Nevertheless, the old-school feel, elevated tannin and high acidity means these wines are not for immediate appeal. Michel Chapoutier, who produced some incredible 2013s, told me the vintage has more obvious minerality, yet great phenolic ripeness. He plans to leave his top cuvées in barrel for an extended élevage. Stylistically, these wines will never offer the upfront decadence of a 2009 or 2010, nevertheless, I think there are profound wines hidden in the vintage that will handsomely reward cellar time.

As to the overall quality across all of the northern appellation, the vintage is less consistent than 2012, with Hermitage, Cornas and Côte Rôtie producing the top red wines. Saint Joseph struggled slightly in the cooler vintage, yet I'm increasingly seeing world-class wines from these steep, granite slopes. Readers on a budget need to grab mixed cases from the likes of Guigal, Courbis, Chapoutier, Delas, Paris, Chave, Coursodon and Durand. Put them in blind Hermitage tastings in a decade and have fun.

More good news across both vintages is the quality of the whites. In fact, 2013 is incredible in Hermitage, and I think Jean-Louis Chave and Michel Chapoutier have made some of their finest wines ever. Condrieu is slightly less successful in 2013, with Christine Vernay (of Domaine George Vernay) calling it a difficult, late vintage, but also saying the wines have classic, fresh characters with good density. Despite a difficult year, there are plenty of successes and 2010-2013 have all offered a bevy of beautiful whites from this incredible appellation. I want to reiterate though, Condrieu is not a wine to bury in the cellar. As a whole, they benefit from a year in bottle following release and then drink beautifully over the following 2-3 years. They can certainly age and evolve longer, but in my view they don't improve. The whites from the Northern Rhône, both the Viognier-based effort from Condrieu and the Marsanne and Roussanne wines from Saint-Joseph, Hermitage, Crozes Hermitage and Saint Péray, continue to soar in quality and now is a terrific time to dive into these wines. They're incredibly food friendly, have great textures and stay fresh, elegant and highly drinkable. The fact that the top Marsanne and Roussanne-based wines can age for decades is just icing on the cake. When it comes to whites, there's few wines I'd rather drink.

Looking at prices, these shot up after the incredible 2009 and 2010 vintages, but they've held steady or fallen for the 2011s and 2012s. Given the falling Euro, we should see solid prices on the 2012s. However, given the more difficult vintages in 2013 and 2014, there's not going to be any pressure for retailers to move these wines, and with quantities down, I recommend getting these 2012s while you can.

TOP PRODUCERS IN THIS REPORT

SAINT-JOSEPH

***** (Outstanding)

Chapoutier, Guigal, **Chave**, Domaine Coursodon, Delas Frères, Pierre Gonon, Ferraton Père et Fils, Eric et Joel Durand, Paul Jaboulet Aîné

HERMITAGE

***** (Outstanding)

Chapoutier, **Chave**, Delas Frères, Guigal, Paul Jaboulet Aîné