

France, Rhône: Chave Hermitage Retrospective

Jeb Dunnuck – September, 2014



Jean-Louis Chave in his newly built cellar

Located in the tiny village of Mauves, just south of Hermitage, lies one of the true bastilles of traditionally made wines, and there are few vinous experiences that surpass getting to taste through the different terroirs of Hermitage and Saint Joseph in Chave's cellar.

Founded in 1481, Chave has seen a long succession of generations, with Gerard Chave, who was born in 1935, slowly beginning to hand over the reins to his brilliant son, Jean-

Louis (born in 1968), in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Today, the estate stays firmly planted in tradition, yet is far from resting on its laurels or reputation, completing work on a new cellar (just across the street from their existing cellar and connected via a tunnel) in 2014, and working hard on a number of new vineyard sites. While this new cellar includes a state-of-the-art lab, Jean-Louis was quick to point out, "you don't need a lab to make great wine." In addition, and along with the help of Jean-Louis' wife, Erin Cannon-Chave, they've continued to grow their négociant label, Chave Selection, which offers fabulous bang-for-the-buck and includes both Northern and Southern Rhône.

While Jean-Louis has a professor-like level of expertise with regards to Hermitage, today his passion is firmly directed at the steep slopes on the western side of the Rhône River, in the appellation of Saint Joseph. He has numerous new vineyards coming on-line, and while everything is currently blended into his estate Saint-Joseph, each of the individual terroirs are incredibly unique, and I'm sure will be bottled on their own sometime in the future.



One of Jean-Louis's new vineyards in Saint Joseph

With more and more of Hermitage going to larger corporations these days, it's inspiring to see this small, family owned estate still sitting near the top of the hierarchy. Jean-Louis is still young (and has a young son who takes after him, and a daredevil daughter who takes after Erin), so the future is very bright at this estate!

Looking specifically at their Hermitage, the Chaves vinify each of their individual terroirs separately, and the components are all aged in small barrels before blending and bottling without being filtered. As is the norm in Hermitage, everything is completely destemmed, and the percentage of new oak is kept to a minimum, falling in the 20-30% range. The style here is beautifully transparent, with the wines always showing the vintage characteristics clearly (which Jean-Louis breaks into a "Granite" year, or a "Sun" year). In addition, when tasted as individual components, each plot's characteristics always shine through. While the wines have the balance and purity to dish out plenty of pleasure in their youth, they age beautifully, with Jean-Louis recommending at least 15 years of cellaring for most vintages.



Tasting Notes

2001 Chave Hermitage 94+

Leading off the vertical and coming from a year described as "easy" by Jean-Louis, the 2001 Hermitage is a beautiful wine that possesses an elegant, perfumed and classical feel. Lavender, garrigue, violets and impressive dark fruit all emerge from the glass, and it shows more minerality and cut on the palate, with medium to full-bodied richness and depth. Showing very little evolution, it nevertheless has plenty of charm at this stage. Ideally, it will be given another 3-4 years in the cellar, and it should shine for decade or more after that.

2000 Chave Hermitage 96

More forward, open and textured, the 2000 Hermitage is an almost promiscuous effort that's just hard to resist. According to Jean-Louis, this wine has never shut down and has always delivered plenty of pleasure. It has classic cassis and blackberry fruit, bacon fat, violets and herbs to go with a full-bodied, layered and seamless, if not voluptuous, style on the palate. I'd line bottles up for drinking over the coming couple of years, but it should hold nicely for upward of a decade.

1999 Chave Hermitage 94

More in the style of the '01, the 1999 Hermitage is a serious effort that gives up a mineral-drenched profile of red and blackcurrants, beef blood, iron and dried flowers. More forward on the nose than the palate, with a tight, yet seamless texture that carries ample concentration and length, with bright acidity, it should continue to shine for another decade.

1998 Chave Hermitage 95+

The 1998 Hermitage is also gorgeous, yet has more concentration and depth. Described as a "granite year" by Jean-Louis, this puppy has searing, liquid rock-like qualities to go

with ample dark fruit, gunpowder and flint. Structured, firm and backward, yet with a rock-star mid-palate and finish, give it another 3-5 years and drink bottles through 2028.

1996 Chave Hermitage 91

A late vintage that's compared to 2013 by Jean-Louis, yet that carried more crop, the 1996 Hermitage is a juicy, medium-bodied effort that's ready to go. Giving up classic herbed game, bacon fat and sweet fruit, it should continue to evolve gracefully, but there's no reason to hold off here.

1995 Chave Hermitage 97

A step up and showing more minerality, structure and length, with a masculine style, the 1995 Hermitage is drinking beautifully today. Described as disappointing by Jean-Louis over the past 5 years or so, it appears to be opening up and possesses fabulous, liquid rock-like qualities to go with cassis, blackberry and wild herbs. Medium to full-bodied, fabulously textured, rich and stretching out nicely on the finish, enjoy this beauty over the coming decade.

1991 Chave Hermitage 93

At maturity, the 1991 Hermitage shows the hallmark elegance and finesse of this estate with its layered, perfumed aromas and flavors of rose petal, mint, leather and still fresh and lively fruit. More elegant and complex than powerful, this beauty will continue to evolve gracefully on its balance. Nevertheless, I'd line bottles up for drinking over the coming 4-5 years.

1990 Chave Hermitage 98

Also mature, yet with another level of texture and richness, the 1990 Hermitage is a profound effort that's drinking perfectly. Voluptuous, yet classy and still refined, with awesome cassis and blackberry fruit, flowers, rose petal and hints of rendered bacon fat, it is full-bodied, textured and layered on the palate, with no hard edges and killer

length on the finish. This beauty makes lights go off in my head, and as with the '91, I'd drink bottles over the coming 4-5 years or so.

1989 Chave Hermitage 96

Similar in style to the '95, with its masculine, firm profile, the 1989 Hermitage offers a full-bodied, rich and concentrated feel to go with plenty of ripe black fruits, toasted spice, mint and roasted herbs. From a scorching hot, dry year, it has fabulous concentration, a deep, layered texture and a blockbuster style. Enjoy bottles anytime over the coming decade.

1988 Chave Hermitage 95

And lastly, the 1988 Hermitage is an elegant, perfumed and mineral-laced effort that's drinking at point. Giving up plenty of sweet cherry and red currants, leather, crushed rock and hints of green olive, it has no hard edges, solid mid-palate richness and a focused finish. It's a mature, elegant and classy Hermitage to drink over the coming 4-5 years.

Importer: Langdon-Shiverick, Los Angeles, CA; tel. (213) 483-5900