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## **Elegance Returns to the Northern Rhône in 2016**

**featuring Domaine J.L. Chave**

**by Josh Raynolds**

*Following the huge success of the 2015 vintage, which produced deeply concentrated, structured and age-worthy wines, 2016 pivoted almost 180 degrees by issuing an abundance of graceful, elegant reds that showcase balance and freshness over mass and power.*

*Northern Rhône wine lovers with purist leanings will be head over heels with the soon-to-be-released 2016 vintage, which offers an abundance of energetic, well-balanced and generally graceful wines. As impressive as the 2015s are, I've encountered a not-insignificant number of collectors who view many of the wines as too much of a good thing: too ripe, too rich, too heavy, too tannic...you get the picture. Most of the producers I visit on my annual trips sympathize with that view to an extent, but are also quick to point out that 2015 is a vintage for the ages and what's in the glass now will mostly bear little resemblance to how the wines will turn out down the road, maybe even way down the road.*

*There are no such qualms when it comes to the 2016s, though. A number of producers call it a "dream vintage" for the wines' collective balance, freshness and expression of terroir. Based on the performance of the wines I tasted from barrel in late March and early June, and the handful of finished wines that I was able to try when I returned home (the barrel samples in this article are scored in a range, as usual, while the finished wines in a single numerical score), 2016 is a vintage that's a must-buy for readers who prize Syrah built along pure, graceful, dare I say feminine, lines. Even so, the wines are in no way lacking depth of flavor or structure, which leads me to think that many of the wines will hit their 20th birthday in fine form.*

### **2016 Vintage Played Out in the Vineyards**

*Damp and overcast conditions defined the spring of 2016 in the northern Rhône. As a result, the growing season fell behind by at least two weeks throughout the region. A hot summer followed. In many instances the vines shut down during a torrid August, which further slowed down ripening. The weather took a cooler and much more positive turn when September rolled around. Conditions were picture-perfect through*

*the month and well into October. Growers were able to pick fruit at their leisure and harvested perfectly ripe and fresh fruit quite a bit later than usual. For example, Paul Jaboulet's Caroline Frey and Jacques Desnervois told me they harvested two weeks later than they did in 2015, with, surprisingly, no lack of acidity in the fruit. On the contrary, they said, the vintage yielded some of the most energetic wines of the last decade. The same scenario played out up north in Côte-Rôtie, where most of the producers I met with also reported harvesting anywhere from two to three weeks later than what has become normal in the region. Many producers concluded their picking in mid-October and, again, there was wide relief and surprise at the freshness and healthy acidities that the fruit was able to maintain with such a late harvest.*

*One unfortunate reality that marks 2016 is that yields across Hermitage were off, sometimes dramatically, because of brutal hailstorms that hit the region in April, right around budbreak, causing an ultimate loss of up to two-thirds in some hillside vineyards. Powdery mildew was also an issue in some spots, which further shortened the crop in some sites.*

### **Market Continues to Heat Up and Prices Follow**

*Longtime northern Rhône lovers don't need to be reminded that the best wines of the region are getting tougher and tougher to find. Prices of many wines that are serious objects of desire have also been on a steady and ongoing upward trend that are positively dizzying. The simple fact is that these wines that have developed a world-wide audience are seldom made in significant quantity. My advice to readers who feel shut out of Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie and, increasingly, Cornas, is to take a good hard look at Saint-Joseph, in particular, for high-quality wines at, usually, much gentler prices. The general quality level of Crozes-Hermitage has been on a steady climb over the last decade but I don't find the same hit ratio as I do in Saint-Joseph, so I'd tread a little more cautiously there.*

### **Domaine J.L. Chave**

In spite of lower, hail- and mildew-influenced yields in 2016, Jean-Louis Chave told me that he's extremely pleased with how the wines have turned out "because they are very accurate to their terroir," with "fine detail and balance but concentration as well." Chave is especially happy with the wines' tannin integration, which should allow them to be accessible throughout most of their lives and not demand long cellaring. I know that it's fashionable in some Rhône geek circles to gripe that today's wines at this venerable estate aren't the same as those made by Jean-Louis's father, Gérard, and they're correct. Under Jean-Louis' watch they have become more consistent and more expressive at an earlier stage than his father's wines, but with no loss of depth, intensity or age-worthiness. Simply put, these continue to be among France's vinous gems.

### **2016 St-Joseph**

I tasted the components that will ultimately make up this wine, as usual. #1) Chaillets: olive paste, smoky bacon and dark berry liqueur qualities, with subtle floral and mineral undertones. #2): Dardouille: intensely spicy and focused, displaying powerful blue fruit character, impressive depth and building violet and spice notes. #3) Baschasson: heady, mineral-accented black and blue fruit qualities, along with suave incense and potpourri nuances and mounting spiciness. This is looking to shape up as an uncommonly

powerful wine for the vintage, but the buffering mineral and spice character could bring its energy level up - the fruit is really blasting away right now. **(92-94 points)**

### **2016 St-Joseph 'Clos Florentin'**

Tasted in two components. #1) Le Clos: vibrant, mineral-inflected red and blue fruits, with olive, smoked meat and allspice notes and a touch of tobacco. Hefty, but its focus is maintained by a core of juicy acidity. #2) Les Clos Vieilles Vignes: hugely perfumed, displaying intense blueberry, cherry liqueur and candied violet qualities and exotic spice and smoky mineral flourishes. More weighty than the "regular" Clos but more energetic as well, showing seamless texture and a remarkably long floral-inflected finish. I'm guessing there won't be many Hermitages that will match this wine for sheer elegance as well as depth. **(93-95 points)**

### **2016 Hermitage**

Jean-Louis Chave showed me this unfinished wine in components. #1) Les Beaume: a gorgeous bouquet evokes red and blue fruit liqueur, incense, Asian spices and smoky minerals. Shows a very suave blend of depth and energy, silky texture and vibrant black raspberry and boysenberry flavors that spread out steadily on the back half. #2) Meal: much more firm and stern than the Les Beaume, showing bitter cherry, licorice and olive character and solid grip. Chewy and focused, but there's a core of appealingly sweet dark fruit as well. Opens up a bit with air, but this is solid and has a serious backbone. #3) Ermite: complex and intensely perfumed, displaying exotic floral and spice notes and powerful, alluringly sweet dark berry character. The floral quality dominates a very long, smooth finish where fine-grained tannins build slowly and in harmony with the dark fruit. #4) Bessards: Succulent and focused, displaying ripe dark fruit liqueur, spicecake and violet pastille qualities energized by vibrant spice and mineral flourishes. Sweet and densely packed yet animated, with superb clarity; a sexy cola nuance emerges on the back half. The mix of depth, power and energy here is textbook Chave, and this bottling will be a must-buy for those who can find and afford it. **(96-98 points)**

