



France, Southern Rhône: The Great 2016s (Part One – Châteauneuf du Pape and Gigondas)

featuring Domaine du Terme
reviewed by Joe Czerwinski

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While it's generally accepted—particularly in red wines—that low yields translate into higher quality, there are always exceptions. How those low yields were arrived at may make more difference than we like to admit in this world of overgeneralizations. And what constitutes “low yields” can likewise vary from season to season or vineyard to vineyard.

Zeroing in on recent years in the Southern Rhône, vigneron and wine lovers alike have been blessed with several consecutive high-quality vintages. The 2015s, which I reviewed last October (in Issue 233), are classic examples of a warm, dry year. A few show signs of heat stress or overextraction, but it's clearly a solid vintage.

The 2016 growing season was also warm and dry. But water tables had been refreshed by ample winter precipitation, and the vines flourished. A couple of rain events occurred at propitious times in the growing cycle, and while disease pressure was negligible, yields were up considerably compared to 2015.

Still, the harvest period was dry and stress-free. Several winemakers mentioned that it was a lazy man's vintage, because there was not much to do to ensure a good harvest. Without the threat of poor weather, one had to simply wait until the desired ripeness was reached and then pick. “It was a holiday year,” said Claire Fabre of Vieux Donjon.

As young Jean-Baptiste Lafond said during my visit to his family's Domaine Lafond Roc Epine, “Sixteen is more balanced, softer, with more finesse and drinkability.”

By and large, that sums up the vintage quite nicely. The wines are full-bodied and rich but retain remarkable freshness and acidity. Alcohols are high, but very few of the wines show obvious heat or dried fruit character. The fruits tend toward the red side of the spectrum, unlike the dark fruits of 2015. The tannins tend to be supple, even silky, but plentiful, making the wines (in most cases) approachable now, yet in most cases they'll also be capable of aging for a decade or more.

Looking at 2017, yields were down as much as 50% because of poor fruit set in Grenache and an extremely hot, dry summer, so fans who miss out on the 2016s will undoubtedly have to pay higher prices for wines that may not be as good. The 2017 reds I tasted out of barrel or tank were impressive, but there will be less wine produced and more global demand.

The white wines from the Southern Rhône are often overlooked, but they've become increasingly refined and elegant in recent years. Alcohol levels are trending lower, with more producers in search of what they call minerality and freshness. Some go too far, but it is a period of experimentation in the white wines, with many different blending options and grape varieties to explore.

The best examples balance the richness and warmth of this region's natural climate with other elements, be they citrus zest, brine or, more generically, freshness. Given the heat and early picking dates (at many estates, the white grapes were harvested before the end of August), the 2017s are surprisingly good, and many are highly recommended in this report.

Just like last year, I tasted the wines under a variety of circumstances. Most were tasted blind with the assistance of various regional bodies, such as the Fédération des Syndicats des Producteurs de Châteauneuf-du-Pape, who gathered the samples and provided the facilities for three mornings of tastings, and the Syndicat AOC Gigondas, who organized two mornings of tastings. Each afternoon, I visited five to six estates and tasted with the owners, winemakers or cellar masters. Some of these tastings involved barrel or tank samples of the nascent 2017s, which I've included when I could make a reasonable projection of the wine's quality. In some cases, wines were still fermenting(!), or the blending process wasn't far enough along. Finally, I tasted a few of the wines with their American importers.

The 2016 vintage in the Southern Rhône seems comparable to 1982 in Bordeaux (also a high-cropping vintage) for the profound impact it's likely to have on the market. These are incredible wines produced in reasonable quantities that are still largely undervalued (outside a few trophy collectibles). The wines are approachable yet age-worthy. And with that combination of quality, drinkability and value, they're going to bring in more new Rhône consumers than ever before.

Smart consumers will snap up wines from their favorite producers and any of the microproduction cuvées as soon as they can, as the 2017s will be even more expensive and harder to find when they're released. Grabbing any remaining 2015s is a decent fallback position, as those wines are also quite good and, in some cases, may be longer-lived than the 2016s.

In order to get reviews of the hardest-to-find wines in your hands as soon as possible, I've prioritized the publication of reviews from Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas in this Part One of our Southern Rhône coverage. I spent a week in the region tasting the wines of the other Southern Rhône crus, plus Côtes du Rhône Villages, and those reviews will appear in Part Two, which will be published in the Interim End of September Issue. As in all truly great vintages, many of the wines from these other appellations have excelled in 2016.

2017 Gigondas Reserve Black Label

Domaine du Terme's 2017 Gigondas Reserve Black Label will stay in tank another year and then get some bottle age before it's released, and by then, this blend of 80% Grenache, 10% Mourvèdre and 10% Syrah should be just about approachable. At the moment, it's full-bodied and tannic, balanced by pepper, cherry and stone fruit notes. **(90-92 points)**

2016 Gigondas

Just a step behind the Reserve Black Label bottling, Domaine du Terme's 2016 Gigondas was also still yet to be bottled in June. It's 80% Grenache and 20% Syrah, with aromas of raspberries, garrigue and peppery spice. Full-bodied and open-knit, it's more approachable than the Reserve. Drink it young for the rich fruit and enjoy the ride while waiting for the Reserve to come around. **(91-93 points)**

2016 Gigondas Reserve Black Label

Still in tank, the 2016 Gigondas Reserve Black Label is a tannic, full-bodied blend of 80% Grenache, 10% Mourvèdre and 10% Syrah. It showcases gorgeous aromas of flowering garrigue, ripe cherries and stone fruit, and while it still has high levels of dissolved carbon dioxide, it feels velvety in the mouth in spite of that. It should be a beauty in another couple of years. **(92-94 points)**