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Wine Harvest 2015: Northern Rhône Winemakers report A Very Promising Vintage

The growing season was hot and dry, but cool nights and just enough rain kept grapes balanced
by James Molesworth

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Across the Northern Hemisphere, winemakers in many regions are reporting one of the earlier grape harvests they've seen. They're scrambling to pick fruit and find tank space. Wine Spectator will be providing snapshot looks at harvest in major wine regions, providing an early preview of what wine drinkers can expect.

Up next, France's Northern Rhône Valley, where normally poker-faced vigneron are smiling from ear to ear. They report a growing season that was as hot as 2003 at times, but with cool nights and well-timed rains that produced very promising wines.

The Good News: 2015 looks like a vintage with serious potential.

The Bad News: So far, none. Even yields are in the normal range.

Promising Grapes: Syrah, Marsanne, Roussanne and Viognier all excelled.

Analysis: Early reports from winemakers throughout the Northern Rhône Valley indicate a potentially classic vintage. The growing season went without a hitch, late-season rains were

well-timed and yields were in the normal range. Even producers not known for hyperbole wore cat-ate-the-canary grins as they finished picking grapes.

"2015 made some amazing grapes," said Jean-Louis Chave, whose Hermitage and St.-Joseph bottlings are perennial benchmarks for the region. "A perfect spring followed by a perfect drought-like summer. Finally we got rain, followed by Indian summer, which helped a lot for a better physiological ripeness."

The idyllic growing season featured warm and dry conditions, along with cooler nights that allowed grapes to retain their natural acidity. The late-August and early September rains were well-timed, giving the vines a kick-start to finish ripening after some slowed or stopped because of hydric stress. And thanks to the drought, the grapes had formed thick skins, enabling them to shrug off any disease-inducing moisture.

Temperature-wise, 2015 was hotter than 2003, a vintage of extreme heat and drought. But unlike 2003, the 2015 season enjoyed cooler nights and well-timed rains, which allowed for later ripening and produced grapes with healthy skins (some grapes shriveled in 2003, marking some wines with noticeable prune and cooked flavors).

The only potential pitfall would have been to pick too early, based on rising sugar levels that indicated higher alcohol, before full physiological ripeness had been achieved. Most producers assumed the rain would come, waited and then picked soon thereafter. Nearly all harvesting was finished by mid- to late September.

"We had no disease pressure; it was a healthy and particularly rich vintage," said Michel Chapoutier, whose Tain-based estate produces wines from every Northern Rhône appellation. "Although we identified some hydric stress in a few areas, the little rains of the 24th of August and 1st of September enabled [the vines] to unblock everything and end up with a very interesting sugar/acidity balance. Thus it was important not to rely on degrees and analysis this year, to avoid rushing to harvest and get unbalanced wines."

Chapoutier believes that wines from granitic soils are concentrated, but not so much that they hide the signature style of that terroir. And wines from more sedimentary soils show finesse, despite ripe alcohol levels.

"For the reds, the physiological ripeness is very good, but more importantly, the maturity of the tannins reached impressive levels," said Philippe Guigal of the famed E. Guigal estate and négociant in Ampuis. "And the size of the vintage is not small."

The region's white wines also look to be equally impressive, though some vignerons found appellation differences. "Hermitage white has more balance than Condrieu, probably because

the Marsanne grape copes better with heat than Viognier," said Louis Barruol, whose St.-Cosme négociant label produces top-quality wines throughout the North.

Paul Amsellem of Domaine Georges Vernay in Condrieu had no such concerns. "[2015] will be one of the best of the last 60 years, maybe like 1947," he said.

Such comparisons to historic vintages were echoed by most of the top vignerons, a rarity among Northern Rhône growers, who generally tend to be less hype-driven in their assessments than most. "My father keeps on saying [that 2015] is the most exceptional vintage he has seen in the past 55 years, and 55 years ago was the legendary 1961. It's a 'wow' vintage," said Guigal.



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