

'16 vs. '15 Northern Rhône: Heads You Win, Tails You Win

Featuring Domaine J.L. Chave

by Josh Raynolds

At first glance, 2016 and 2015 in the Northern Rhône Valley would appear to have yielded wines with utterly disparate personalities. On paper and by reputation the 2016s and 2015s couldn't be more different. So the received wisdom goes. In reality, though, the closer one looks at these two outstanding vintages, the more similarities start to reveal themselves. My recent extensive tastings of bottled wines from both years, sampled side-by-side at many estates, have only confirmed my impressions of these two superb vintages.

2016: Elegance, Freshness and Detail – 2015: Ripeness, Weight and Power ... Right?

Well, yes and no. While the '16s, as a group, are lighter-bodied and more elegant than the '15s, they are far from delicate flowers. For a less-ripe – but by no means thin – vintage, 2016 produced an abundance of wines that exhibit admirable depth plus energy. Two thousand fifteen, a warm-to-hot year, yielded wines that possess real backbone and, often, very healthy acidity levels that will keep them fresh for years to come. Indeed, a number of producers I've been visiting since 1989 – and whose opinions I trust – believe that the '15s will be among the longest-lived wines they have ever made. The biggest difference between the two vintages, I believe, is that the tannic structure of the '15s makes many of the best wines forbidding to taste, much less drink, right now, and probably for the next decade or more.

2016: Impatient Northern Rhône Wine Lovers, Rejoice

Most of the '16s show wonderful up-front vivacity and clean, lucid fruit. This might lead one to believe that it's an early-maturing vintage that should be enjoyed for its come-hither character rather than buried in the cellar. I have a feeling, though, that

these wines, many of which are still in barrel, will continue to put on weight and gain in structure over the coming months, and that they will age positively for quite some time – but more on balance than on underlying backbone or mass. Yields in 2016 were healthy but not excessive, so there's no lack of concentration to the wines, especially those from the best producers.

Something for Everyone

Generally speaking, wine lovers can be pretty easily divided into two camps: one that prefers leaner, tighter, more savory, cellar-worthy vintages (these oenophiles are usually referred to as “traditionalists”) and the other that prefers wines in a riper, weightier, more fruit-driven style. So, in theory at least, fans of the “traditional” style should love the 2016 vintage in the northern Rhône, which was, by the numbers, a far cooler year than 2015. By the same principle, fans of brawny wines should reasonably prefer most '15s to the relatively more graceful '16s. Or so I thought going into this year's visit to the Rhône in late February and early March, but that is definitely not what I think after happily working my way through hundreds of bottled wines and barrel samples over the last month or so.

A Sort of Mea Culpa

When I reviewed the 2015s last year, I stated that “more than a few producers that I visited in January called 2015, then, ‘a vintage of the vintage rather than of terroir,’ one in which fruit and the warm growing season speak more clearly than place.” My own extensive tastings during that trip confirmed that view, but I also believed 2015 was seriously great vintage and one of the best in a generation for the northern Rhône. I'll stick with the “seriously great vintage and one of the best in a generation” part but, I would like to, at least partially, walk back or at least rephrase the part about it being a vintage of the vintage more than place.

It's been just over a year since I first tasted the '15s and this go-round I found quite a bit more detail and precision to the wines, as a group, than I did last January. That was the feeling that I was starting to get last fall, when the first wines began to show up in the market. Yes, the 2015s are more “of the vintage” now than, for example, the '16s, not to mention the '14s and '13s, but they are distinctly finer and more chiseled than those from other recent “solar” vintages like '09 and, especially, '03. There's a brightness and energy, not to mention balance, to the best '15s that's already becoming apparent and gives me confidence that, in due time, most of the wines will indeed show their terroir more than the weather conditions under which they were born.

That Pesky Supply, Demand and Price Thing

I wish I had been wrong when I predicted last year that availability of northern Rhône wines would remain tight and that prices would continue to rise, in spite of the healthy size of the '15 and '16 crops. But my fears have been realized. Several of the best négociants have told me, as recently as this month, that prices have been steadily climbing and, in some cases, exploding for the best appellations. Production and supply have always been short for top appellations like Côte-Rôtie, Hermitage, Condrieu and, increasingly, Cornas, but the pricing situation is at a crisis point. If you think that the wines are expensive now, just wait, it's about to get a lot more....interesting.

Domaine J.L. Chave

The big news here is that Jean-Louis Chave will, with the 2015 vintage, finally release this historic domain's first single-vineyard Saint-Joseph and what a wine it is. Made from fruit grown in Chave's Clos Florentin, in the family's hometown of Mauves, it is among the top wines of the appellation, to my taste. I've tasted it from barrel many times over the years, when it was a component for Chave's reliably excellent (now "regular") Saint-Joseph and while Jean-Louis always knew that, someday, it would wind up as a stand-alone wine, it took until the outstanding 2015 vintage for it to actually happen. To call it a must-buy for northern Rhône junkies is an understatement. Almost as big a news is that there is a 2015 Ermitage Cuvée Cathelin bottling, the first one since 2009 and only the seventh made since it debuted with the 1990 vintage.

2015 Ermitage Cuvée Cathelin

Opaque ruby. An insanely perfumed, highly complex bouquet evokes red/blue fruit liqueur, incense, exotic spices, smoky minerals and pungent flowers. Stains the palate with juicy, youthfully concentrated blueberry, raspberry, spicecake and floral pastille flavors that are given spine by a core of zesty acidity and a peppery element. Clings with superb tenacity on the sweet, blue fruit-dominated finish, which is shaped by velvety, slow-building tannins. **(98 points)**

2015 Ermitage Rouge

Youthful purple color. Mineral-accented dark berries, star anise, cola, olive and pungent flowers on the explosively perfumed nose. Offers impressively concentrated, expansive flavors of black raspberry, spicecake, smoked meat and candied flowers that are complicated by licorice candy and dark chocolate notes that sneak in on the back half. Sweet, sappy and precise on the floral- and dark fruit-driven finish, which shows outstanding clarity and round, harmonious tannins that build smoothly and steadily. **(97 points)**

2015 Saint-Joseph "Clos Florentin"

Lurid violet. A deeply perfumed, highly complex bouquet evokes ripe cherry and boysenberry, along with complicating notes of potpourri, incense, allspice and smoky bacon. Sappy and extremely expressive on the palate, offering intense, smoke-tinged

black and blue fruit liqueur and floral pastille flavors that are energized by an undertone of juicy acidity. Displays superb delineation and mineral lift on a youthfully tannic, floral-dominated finish that hangs on with outstanding tenacity. **(94 points)**

2015 Saint-Joseph

Inky ruby. Pungent, deeply pitched aromas of cassis, black raspberry, candied licorice and violet are complicated by suggestions of olive and smoky minerals. Smooth and seamless on the palate, offering impressively concentrated black and blue fruit and floral pastille flavors and a sexy spicecake flourish. Becomes sweeter and livelier with air, with slow-building tannins adding grip to the extremely long, sappy and floral-accented finish. **(94 points)**

2012 Hermitage Farconnet

Brilliant ruby. Smoke- and spice-accented dark berries, olive and licorice on the pungent nose. Subtly sweet blackberry and cherry flavors show excellent clarity and energy and pick up a sexy floral quality with aeration. Displays excellent delineation, a gracefully light touch and powerful mineral lift on the persistent, gently tannic finish, which features lingering notes of bitter cherry pit and candied violet. **(93 points)**

2016 Crozes-Hermitage Silène

Bright violet. Expressive, mineral-tinged cherry and blackberry scents, along with hints of smoky bacon, licorice and succulent flowers. Concentrated and energetic on the palate, offering juicy, spice-laced black and blue fruit flavors that put on weight and become sweeter with air. Closes very long and sweet, showing excellent clarity and cut on the mineral, youthfully tannic finish. **(92 points)**

2016 Mon Coeur Côtes-du-Rhône

Lurid ruby. Ripe cherries and red berry liqueur on the deeply perfumed, spice-tinged nose. Shows impressive power and breadth on the palate, offering rich black raspberry and bitter cherry flavors complicated by hints of lavender and peppery spices. The smooth, gently tannic finish delivers solid punch and repeating red berry and floral notes. **(90 points)**

2015 Saint-Joseph Offerus

Opaque ruby. Deep-pitched black and blue fruit, floral pastille, olive and smoky mineral character on the nose. Sweet, spicy and penetrating on the palate, offering juicy blueberry and cherry cola flavors underscored by a peppery quality that adds back-end spiciness and cut. Youthfully firm tannins add shape to the finish, which hangs on with impressive, dark-berry-driven tenacity. **(92 points)**