

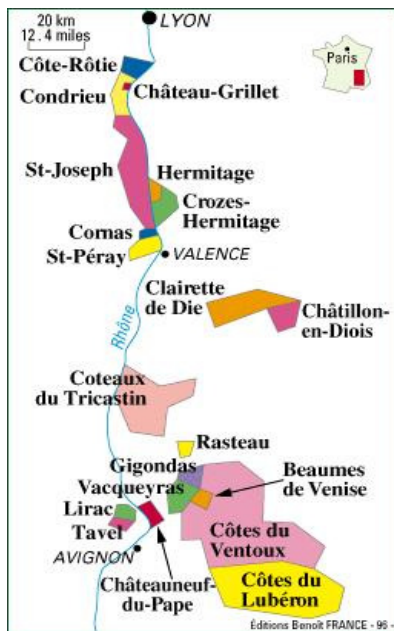
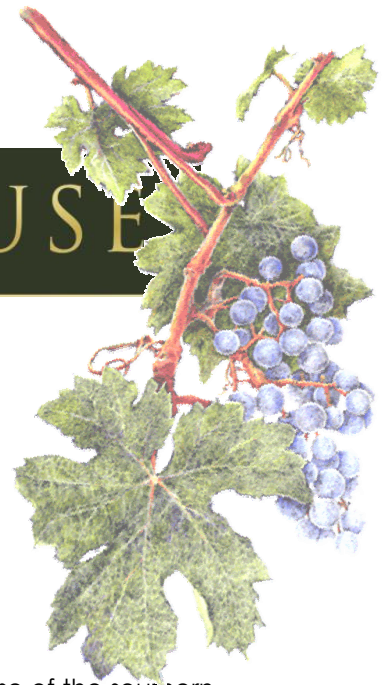
THE GLASSHOUSE

WINE APPRECIATION SOCIETY

MODULE 10

THE CÔTES DU RHÔNE

'To my eye, there are no more beautiful vineyards in France than those of the southern Rhone. Culturally, we are already in Provence, a land of tangy speech, of lavender, of old songs.....The sun burns bright here and seems to set slowly, drawing colour out of the landscape as it does so: orange stones, grey cypresses, white houses, silver olives, green vines and purple lavender.' Andrew Jefford



BACKGROUND

As we move our focus away from varietals and towards regions the Côte du Rhône is a great place to start.

A huge area that runs from the south of Lyons almost to the Mediterranean, this region boasts an amazing diversity of wines and styles. This area is on average hotter than any other wine region in France and many of its wines reflect this climactic feature with some of its red wines being robust and full bodied.

Red wines account for 77% of total output – and yet the small quantities of both white and rosé do not detract from the fact that these are amongst the finest of their types in the world. Viognier the white wine grape of the northern Rhône is seeing a surge in popularity and planting while Rosé finds its greatest representation in Tavel in the southern Rhône.

This is a fabulous part of France – and worth spending time discovering the history, the geography, the villages and as well as the wonderful wines. In this region there is still the chance to experience the France of old, as well as occasional big vineyards there are still the very small boutique family owned vineyards dotted around quiet country roads where you will hazard upon an absolute gem of a wine at very little cost.

I have just had the luxury of spending five weeks in the region and have visited a number of vineyards and met the wine makers. There is great value to be had too. The generic term Côte du Rhône or Côte du Rhône Villages applies to the lower cost wines but can also provide some absolute gems – these are always found in the south and produced in the greatest quantities of all. At the other end of the scale in the north at Côte Rôtie, St Joseph and Condrieu you will need to ask your bank manager for permission to buy the wines. One of my favourite wines of all time comes from here almost at the most northerly tip of the region at Guigal having first come across it served as the house wine in one of my favourite Brasseries in Paris. (Brasserie Balzar in 5th)

SUMMARY INFORMATION OF THE REGION

Size of the vineyards:	70,000 hectares (170,000 acres)
Vineyards:	8 to 10,000 winemakers
Soil:	Granite in the north of the Rhône region Limestone in the south
Weather:	Continental in the north of the Rhône region (cold winter/ warm summer) Mediterranean in the south (mild winter /hot summer)
Red Grapes in Rhône:	Grenache 55% Syrah 15% Carignan 15% Mourvèdre
White Grapes in Rhône:	Clairette 35% Grenache blanc 20% Ugni blanc 20% Bourboulenc Marsanne Roussanne Viognier
Production:	450 million bottles 77% red wine - 8 % rosé - 5 % dry white wine 14% of French wine production
Type of Wine:	Full body red wine (north) Light to medium body fruity red wine (south) Dry full body white wine (north)

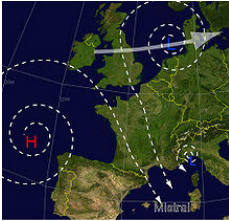
GEOGRAPHY AND STRUCTURE

One of the reasons for the diversity of wines from the Rhône derives from the very different geographic and mineral features of the area. The region is, in truth, two separate zones. What unifies the region is the very presence of the Rhône but what differentiates the regions is the narrow and often vertiginousness of the valley in the north then opening out into a broader shallower valley in the south. In the north the river is born in the 'cold wet mud of an alpine glacier' and then slides swiftly south before opening up into a more leisurely river at Avignon and then the estuary lands beyond. The vineyards as divided into the north and south actually have little in common. The north is highly vintage sensitive due to cooler winters while the south is much more forgiving. In the north the vineyards can be tiny with growers occupying as little as a few hectares here and there; in the south vineyard are bigger and there are more of them.

The southern Rhone produces about 25 times as much wine as its northern counterpart. The northern Rhone is very similar in structure to Burgundy while the south is like a burgeoning Bordeaux with the negociant structure similar to that found in Burgundy. Thus for example Guigal has its own domains of little more than 14 hectares producing the highest quality Côte Rôtie and Condrieu. It also buys from 70 or so growers in these two appellations. But for their Côtes du Rhône – which we are tasting tonight – he will buy wine from over 400 producers.

The Rhone seems to have a very bright future. Staggering to think that 50 years ago even in the northern Rhone vineyards were being abandoned. Despite its variety and differences the Rhone is one of France's most flourishing wine regions at the moment. It is well administered and promoted. Its greatest wines are beginning to be sought after internationally as are the finest Bordeaux and Burgundies. There is also a growing feeling that the great breadth of this region will permit the production of good everyday drinking wine in greater quantities and appeal than Burgundy can ever manage and of greater consistency and stylistic approachability than Bordeaux.

CLIMATE



The strong north to south wind – the mistral – is a constant feature except in the south facing slopes of Mont Ventoux which provides shelter to the vineyards there. I recently experienced this first hand as I drove back in a howling gale from the coast to a village on the south side of Mt Ventoux to find it still and gloriously warm for late October.

Andrew Jefford describes this perfectly..'Before we tackle soils and slopes, a word about wind. In this corridor it never stops. And you only have to look at the stooped trees and shrubs of the hilltops to know which way it blows: from north to south. This is the penetrating mistral: cooling yet health-bringing, chasing away the fogs and fungal diseases which can beset Bordeaux and Champagne, yet at its most demonic, enough to tear tender young shoots clean off the vines. Most of the Rhône's greatest vineyards are thus in sites which provide some protection from the worst blows'.

The Northern Rhône is most famous for being the home of both Syrah – known to the rest of the world as Shiraz - and Viognier. Neither are produced in great quantities. The vineyards here are small and often located on very steep slopes. There is some amazing scenery with vines hugging the valley walls – wine making is no easy task here. The great wines are Côte Rôtie made with 100% Syrah and at Condrieu the flagrant Viognier – both of these are at the northernmost tip of the region.



As we progress further south we pass through St Joseph and Crozes Hermitage. It was from Hermitage that the first Syrah cuttings were taken to Australia in the 1830s.

In the south the grapes are predominantly Grenache and Syrah with Carignan, the grape of huge profundity in the region, and Mourvedre.

In parts of the southern area the soils are almost entirely rock or schist and in Vaqueras and Gigondas it sometimes seems that the vines are growing out of the very rockface. Here the heat in the summer can be overwhelming

As the Rhone gets wider and more leisurely and the heat rises further the wines get fuller as the river flows toward Avignon and at Chateauneuf du Pape – with its 13 grapes, in theory – you are hit with a full bodied 'roar of alcohol'.

THE WINES WE WILL TASTE TONIGHT

Tavel, Rosé - La Closeraie

As you travel into Tavel from Avignon there is a sign at the side of the road proclaiming the village of Tavel to be France's number 1 village for rosé. You will also see the proud boast on the bottle from which we are sampling

Guigal Cotes du Rhone

The single estate wines of Guigal are amongst the most respected wines in the whole of The Rhône. This wine derives from the family's negociant business and is a fabulous wine.

St Joseph – Dauvergne Renvier

Predominantly Syrah with great purity and intensity

Crozes Hermitage – Cave de Tain

At Hermitage the soils change to being a mix of granite – somehow a misplaced lump of the Massif Central- and river deposits. Crozes Hermitage which surrounds Hermitage itself is a bigger area appellation with the wines again predominantly made of Syrah.

Vacqueyras – Domaine de Grand Prieur

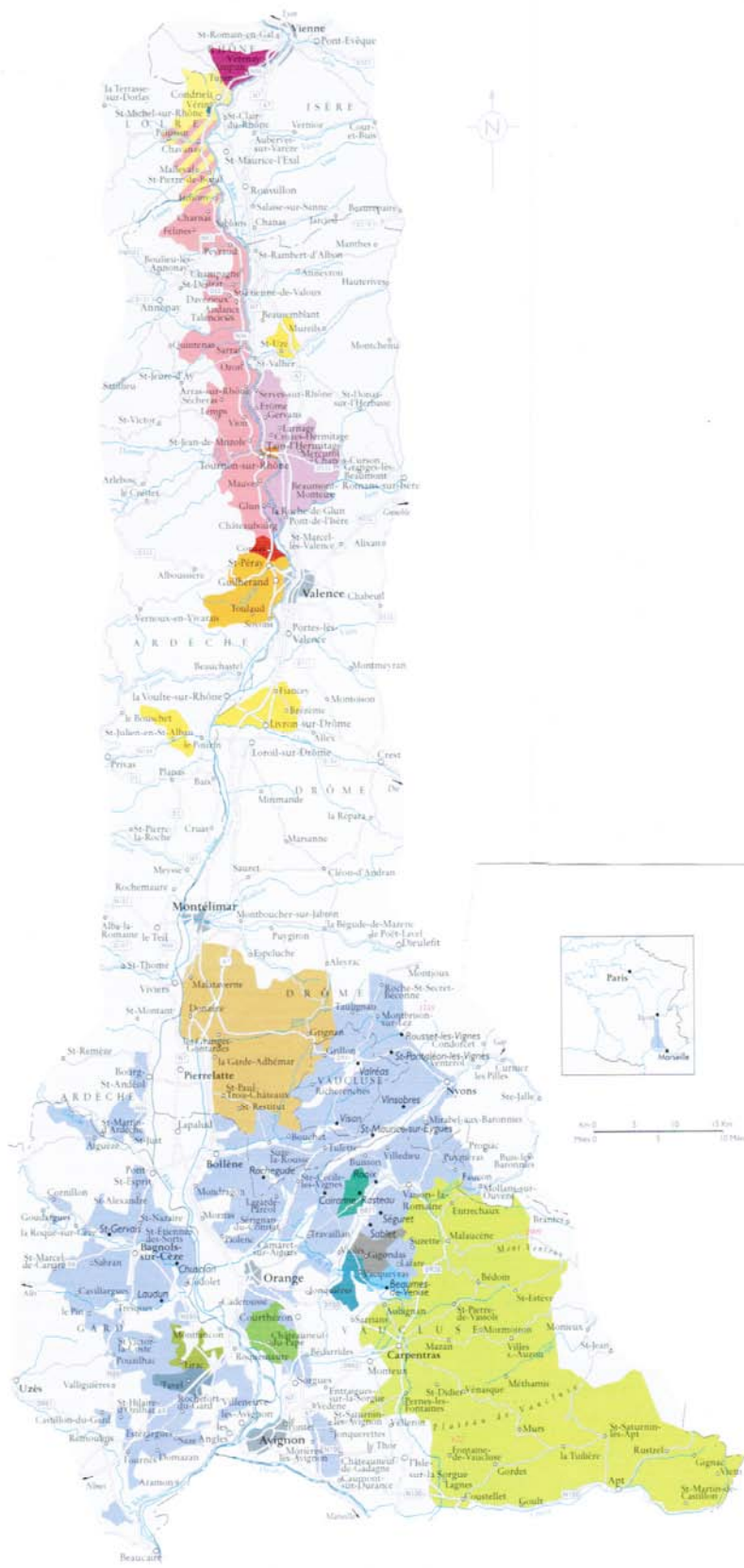
Mainly Grenache and a recent appellation, from 1990, not as high as its neighbour Gigondas – and these wines are often softer and fleshier.

Chateauneuf du Pape

The iconic area which spread out between Orange and Avignon is a huge appellation of 3,200 hectares. It is hot here and the land is gently contoured with the terrain consisting in places of giant rolled boulders whilst in others sand and fine stones. The wines here vary but at their best... 'is unique within French wine: a grandly soft wine, deliciously burdened with sweetness and spice like a cedar whose branches are laden with snow' – Andre Jefford.

Chateau Pesquié - Mont Ventoux

In the sheltered lee of Mt Ventoux this family owned estate is highly regarded by Robert Parker and Jancis Robinson. The Chateau is a stunner.



- Côte Rhône
- Château Grillet
- Condrieu
- Condrieu/St-Joseph
- St-Joseph
- Hermitage
- Crozes-Hermitage
- Cornas
- St-Péray
- Côtes du Rhône
- Côteaux du Tricastin
- Châteauneuf du Pape
- Côtes du Rhône/Villages
- Côtes du Ventoux
- Gigondas
- Lirac
- Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise
- Rasteau
- Tavel
- Vacqueyras
- Département boundary
- Vison Named Côtes du Rhône Villages