



The Rhône Valley

Special Report



Gnarled vines and giant galets at the Mount Redon plateau in Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

2007-2010 IN THE NORTHERN & SOUTHERN RHÔNE

France's Rhône Valley is the source of some of the most user-friendly and ageworthy wines in the world. Whether your preference leans more towards the opulent Grenache-based reds of the Southern Rhône, or the intense, cool Syrah beauties from the Northern Rhône, there is something for everyone to discover and enjoy from this magnificent region. The last several years have been good to the Rhône Valley, with a string of successful vintages from 2007 to 2010 that each bear the distinctive characteristics of their year. I've put together the following qualitative assessment regarding the drinkability and aging potential of each vintage, as well as a brief synopsis of each year's growing season, to help you decide what to buy, drink and cellar. As always, you can find K&L's entire inventory of Northern and Southern Rhône wines online, complete with staff and critics' reviews, at KLWines.com.

The Southern Rhône: 2007-2010

2007

No doubt many of you are keenly aware of the many accolades bestowed upon the 2007 Southern Rhône vintage. But for all of the enthusiasm surrounding these wines, perhaps you are wondering what conditions are necessary to create the "perfect storm" of vintage greatness?

Vignerons in the Southern Rhône were blessed with a near-perfect, temperate, dry, growing season that resulted in fully ripe grapes with good levels of acidity and fine, supple tannins. Temperate and dry are the key words here. Flowering occurred in early May, a month that was also marked by nearly 400-plus millimeters of spring rain. However, by June

drier weather prevailed, with only 35 millimeters of rain falling between June and September, making it the driest season of the last 20 years.

Despite the aridity evidenced in the region, temperatures were a bit cooler than average, too. The average daily temperature, as recorded in Orange from May 1–October 1, 2007, was 80.3 degrees Fahrenheit, which is cooler than the average temperatures for the same periods in 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006. Additionally, between July 1st and September 15th, the region experienced forceful high winds, known locally as the *mistral*.

Although the growing season was unusually dry, these strong winds helped ensure the sanitary health of the grapes, preventing rot and mildew. From September 16–18 the region received another 20 millimeters of rain; however, this brief moisture did not affect grape quality. The exceptional ripeness and health of the fruit resulted in a relatively easy harvest, (i.e. very little *triage*, or sorting of the grapes). Along with the high quality of the vintage, yields were also a bit higher than normal throughout the Southern Rhône, with Châteauneuf-du-Pape producing between 32-34 hectoliters per hectare, near the region's allowed maximum of 35 hectoliters per hectare.

All of this data translates to a very strong showing for the Southern Rhône in 2007. Beautiful, clean fruit, moderate-plus acidity and excellent phenolic ripeness mean great drinking across the board, from entry level Côtes du Rhône to high-end and ageworthy Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The quality in this vintage is so consistent that I would recommend that Rhône enthusiasts snap up not only their tried and true favorites, but venture out and try some less familiar but intriguing wines too.

2008

Since the 2003 vintage, the Southern Rhône Valley has enjoyed a string of great vintages. Whether your preferred style leans more towards big and brawny (2003 and 2005), fine and elegant (2004 and 2006) or super plush (2007), the wines have been consistently good. All of that changed with the roller coaster 2008 vintage.

Cool, humid and rainy weather plagued the Southern Rhône in 2008. In a nutshell, the growing season got a really late start, with cooler temperatures throughout the region from April–June. July and August offered the region a reprieve from the rain. However, frequent cloudy skies and cooler temperatures did nothing to encourage ripening. Because of the cooler, damp weather, many growers faced ongoing issues managing rot and mildew. As a direct result, overall yields in 2008 were down (around 23 hectoliters per hectare compared to an average of 30-32 hectoliters per hectare) because of poor crop set, rot and mildew issues.

A couple of big rains in early September meant that harvest got started rather late in 2008, as growers waited and hoped more hang time would help increase sugar levels and phenolic ripeness. Picking got underway in late-September (they usually start a week or two earlier), and did not finish until the second half of October.

It seems that vineyards blessed with a higher degree of limestone, those located in the upper terraces of Gigondas, fared better than those with more heavy clay bases. Why? Limestone provides better drainage, helping to keep those vines from getting too water-logged.

The upshot of this erratic growing season is a vintage that is lighter, brighter and definitely less serious than the last several vintages. In general the wines, although balanced and finely structured (fine tannins, good-plus acidity), lack a certain intensity generally found in

Châteauneuf-du-Pape or Gigondas. Lots of bright red cherry fruits, partnered with a freshness and, dare I say, “smoothness” makes this vintage a pleasure to drink now and for the short term. Many producers, like Chante Cigale in Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Moulin de la Gardette in Gigondas, did not produce a top or prestige bottling, and chose instead to use their fruit to produce the best possible benchmark wine, which means there are bargains to be found. But unless you are building a vertical from a particular domaine, 2008 is not a vintage that I would recommend investing in heavily for cellaring over the long term.

Another word of caution here: The quality of this vintage is, to me, one of the most variable and inconsistent that I can remember. There are some wonderful, fresh, absolutely drinkable reds to be enjoyed, but I have also tasted my fair share of dilute, unripe and imbalanced Rhônes that clearly reflect the troubles of the vintage. Ask around, read our reviews on KLWines.com and taste what you can before buying.

2009

After the dip in quality in 2008, the Southern Rhône was back on top and in the game with the 2009 vintage.

The vintage began with a cool and damp early spring that gave way to a warm and uncharacteristically dry summer. Like the 2007 vintage, the Southern Rhône Valley also experienced below average levels of rainfall for the majority of the 2009 season. From the first week of June until the middle of September, fewer than 30 millimeters of rain fell. The annual average over the prior 20 years was a more generous 161 millimeters. There were concerns among winegrowers that the lack of rainfall would lead to vine stress and ultimately hamper physiological ripening. However, rain did finally arrive mid-September, which relieved vine stress, thereby allowing grapes to achieve riper and finer tannic structure. Overall clean grapes, albeit some with high sugar and pH levels, were

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Left: The road to Domaine Ferme Saint-Martin. Right: The winery's current line-up.

brought in throughout the harvest. In addition, the excellent ripeness and health of the fruit resulted in very little need to conduct a rigorous triage, or sorting/selection of the grapes.

Along with the consistent quality of the vintage, yields were (like 2008) a bit lower than normal throughout the Southern Rhône, with the average yields in Châteauneuf-du-Pape hovering around 28 hectoliters per hectare, considerably below the authorized maximum of 35 hectoliters per hectare. In a nutshell, all of this data translates to yet another very strong showing for the Southern Rhône in 2009. The fruit was beautiful, clean and juicy, exhibiting a vibrant intensity in the wines and making them a touch fresher and lighter on their feet than the luxuriously plush 2007s.

In addition, moderate-plus acidity and, in most cases, fine-plus medium tannins translate to great drinking across the board, from entry level Côtes du Rhône to bigger hitters from the great terroirs of Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas. Stylistically, I would place the 2009s somewhere between the 2006 and 2007 vintages, with a touch more charm, plushness and less acid than the 2006s, but they are also a bit less ponderous than the 2007s.

In terms of cellar potential, the 2009s should stand the test of time. However, I suspect that most wines will be drinking best a few years earlier than their 2007 counterparts. Why? Less overall intensity, a similar tannic structure and good, but not exceptional levels of acidity (an important component for the aging of many wines). The good news is there are fantastic 2009 Rhône wines from every appellation at price points for anyone interested in trying wines from this region.

2010

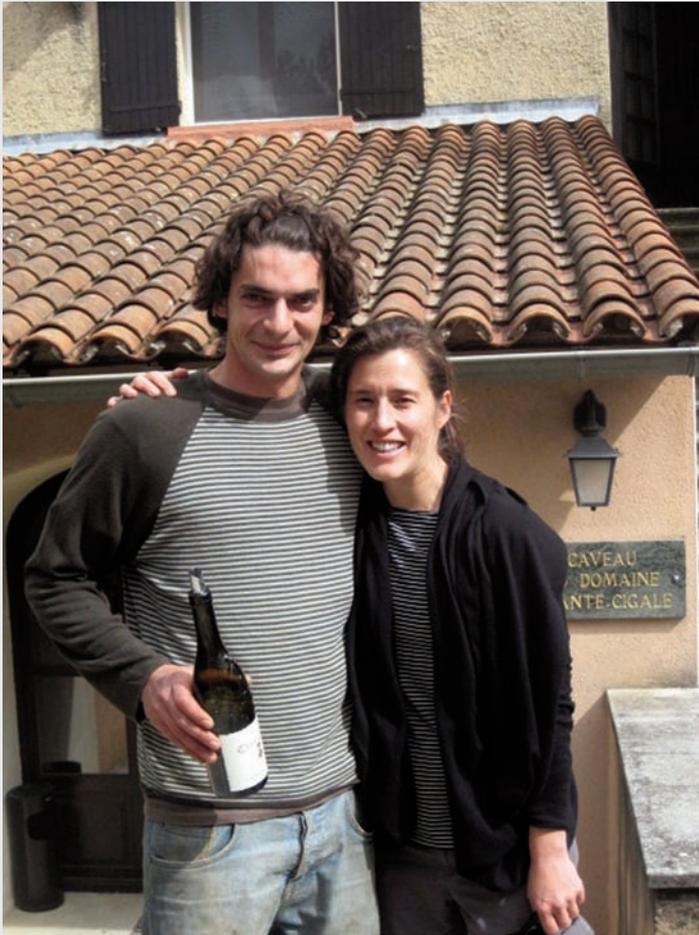
With the 2010 vintage, the Southern Rhône is poised to have its strongest showing since 1998. This is, of course, only my opinion. However, a week of tasting through a selection of 2010 wines from across the Southern Rhône Valley this past spring has inspired me to make such a grand proclamation.

A rather wet and rainy spring in 2010 gave way to a clement growing season that lasted majority of the summer. Cooler days and nights, especially during July and August, mercifully counter-balanced the unusually dry weather during this time as well. Rain in the first week of September helped relieve hydric stress in the vineyards resulting from the lack of water. Ultimately, the region experienced a longer than normal, relatively mild growing season that served the phenolic development of the grapes well.

Château de Montfaucon vigneron and owner Rodolphe de Pins exclaimed that for him "...2010 was a perfect growing season. A long, and (not too) cool growing season, with none of the heat spikes of other vintages that often contribute to hydric stress on the vines." Harvest at this Côtes du Rhône domaine took place 10 days later than in 2009, and although his yields of Grenache were 25-30% lower this year, Carignan and Mourvèdre (both late ripening) more than made up for it. The fruit was beautiful, ripe and balanced.

Overall, production for 2010 will be down a bit, due mostly to the series of early spring frosts that led to *coulure* (the failure of fruit to develop after flowering) in many vineyards, which resulted in lower yields. Unfortunately Grenache, which exhibits a particular proclivity to this viticultural hazard, suffered the most.

My first impressions of the 2010s have left me incredibly optimistic. Rich and full, with deep, pure and very precise fruit nuances, the wines have good-plus acidity, with excellent tannic structure that I would describe as considerably more refined than the 2005s, but more prominent than the super plush 2007s. This is a vintage with just enough of everything, not too much of anything and, as I see it, tremendous potential. Do I think that they are ageworthy candidates? At this point, yes, I really do. It's still a bit early to predict exactly where these 2010s will go stylistically, however, I am really excited to follow their development.



Mulan and Alexandre Favier at the wine cellars of Chante Cigale in Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

The Northern Rhône: 2007-2010

2007

It's easy and convenient to consider the Northern and Southern Rhône Valley as one winegrowing entity. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth, as the 2007 vintage demonstrates. Whereas 2007 in the Southern Rhône was a relative walk in the park for winegrowers, the same vintage in the north separated the men from the boys, so to speak. This was a vintage where hard work and extreme vigilance paid off.

In the north, a warmer than average spring caused the vines to flower two to three weeks earlier than usual. The precociousness of the growing season led to a larger than normal fruit set, too, and many growers chose to conduct a green harvest in order to reduce potential crop levels to maintain the intensity and concentration of the remaining fruit.

Throughout July and August, grey skies, cooler temperatures and a light but consistent pitter-patter of rain throughout the region encouraged the onset of mildew and rot amongst the vines. Many growers (who did not take their customary August vacations as most of the French do) stayed home and tended their vines, often having to apply mildew and rot preventing sprays and treatments during this critical time.

Towards the first of September, sugar levels were by all accounts behind schedule and disconcertingly low, at around 9-11 degrees potential alcohol. Luckily, the following three weeks brought sunny, warmer and

slightly windier mistral weather, which helped the vines play "catch up" in their ripening process. Harvest began a bit later than normal, around the third week of September, as growers hoped to take advantage of the late, great weather.

The results of this stressful and tumultuous growing season are Northern Rhône wines which, although in most cases are very balanced and pretty, lack the intensity of their Southern Rhône cousins. Unlike the 2007 Southern Rhône wines, which seem to be uniformly plush and lush, the 2007 Northern Rhône wines tend to be leaner and more angular in nature. Unlike the 2003 or 2005 vintages, the tannins found in the 2007 Northern Rhône wines are fine; however, the wines are characterized by higher levels of acidity and "nervy-ness." In my opinion, 2007 is a vintage for Northern Rhône aficionados or those who appreciate red wines from cooler climates like Burgundy, the Loire Valley or New Zealand's Central Otago.

2008

Cold, rainy and humid weather plagued the Northern Rhône as well as the Southern Rhône in 2008. Producers from Côte-Rôtie down to Cornas fought off cool weather and heavy rains well into the first week of September. Luckily, the mistral picked up shortly thereafter. However, producers had to practice severe triage in order to salvage the results of a less than grower-friendly vintage.

Crisp, light and fresh are key words for describing the 2008 Northern Rhône wines; some of the wines even seem to have a more Burgundian profile than a Rhône one. In general, this is not a vintage to have and to hold for five-plus years. Select wines judiciously and do research into a particular wine before making a huge monetary or storage space commitment. There are definitely some elegant and nuanced Northern Rhône wines out there, you'll just want to enjoy them a bit sooner than more powerhouse or intense vintages like 2005, 2006 or 2009.

2009

The 2009 vintage in the Northern Rhône is outstanding. Big, fulsome, high intensity wines are hallmarks of this vintage, from the vineyards of Côte-Rôtie to Hermitage and all the way down to Cornas. Uncharacteristically ripe, the 2009s will be well-received by the press and easy to understand for most folks. For the most part, they should age very nicely, and in some instances will show much better after several years.

Some wine critics, most notably Robert Parker, are comparing the quality of the 2009s to that of the 1999 or 1990 vintages. Warm temperatures and a relatively dry growing season produced full-bodied Syrahs that were not plagued by the spotty rains, cooler temperatures and uneven ripening of 2007 and 2008. However, despite ripeness and subsequent higher alcohols, most growers were pleased with the phenolic ripeness (pips, skins, stems) of their grapes, and felt that pH and acidity were within the realm of providing great structure and ageability to the finished wines. 1961? 1999? 1990? 2001? 2003? These are the vintages that have been mentioned in trying to gauge the potential greatness of the 2009s, but only time will tell how the wines will develop. Stylistically, I would place them somewhere between 1999 (healthy, ripe grapes, producing rich, super intense reds) and 2001 (beautiful balance, more finesse with excellent acidity). I would definitely make some room in the cellar for these wines.

2010

Similar to the Southern Rhône, late spring 2010 brought cool temperatures and wet weather to the Northern regions. And like the south, many vigneronns had to contend with coulure, or shatter, in their vineyards. Once established, this diminished fruit set (mostly Syrah), ripened through an uncharacteristically warm July and subsequently milder August. The first week of September brought warmer temperatures once



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again, which was cause for some concern as warmer temperatures and low precipitation could lead to vines “shutting down” before reaching adequate sugar levels and phenolic ripeness. Fortunately, rain and a gentle mistral wind the third week of September helped to alleviate this threat. Ultimately, the region took advantage this “rain time,” pushing harvest well into October.

Apart from yields being considerably low for the vintage, there is much to look forward to with the 2010 Northern Rhône. The pure, clean Syrah fruit demonstrates excellent concentration and focus and seems to echo the inherent qualities of the ageworthy 2009 Northern Rhône. As of this writing (Spring 2011) we are still about a year out before any of these 2010s hit store shelves. However, when they do, I predict that they won’t hang around for very long.

Now that you have a more complete picture of the last four vintages in both the Northern and Southern Rhône, we hope that you’ll visit our website, KLWines.com, to see our carefully selected wines from the 2007, 2008 and 2009 vintages (the majority of the 2010s are still in barrel and won’t arrive for another year). You can also call customer service or visit any one of our three California locations to meet with an educated salesperson who can help you stock your cellar full of the best Northern and Southern Rhône gems.

Mulan Chan-Randel
K&L Wine Merchants, Rhône Valley wine buyer

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