

## 2006 Vintage Report Rhone Valley

*(by Mulan Chan, K&L Wine Merchants Rhone Valley Wine Buyer)*

This past April, I had the opportunity to spend several weeks in France touring and meeting top producers from some of my favorite wine regions. In particular, I spent 10 days in the Rhone Valley tasting through dozens of recently bottled 2005s as well as many brut de cuves from the 2006 vintage. What impressed me the most was the marked differences between these two vintages. Richness and power one year, tempered by gracefulness and fine tuned precision the next. Which will you prefer? Hopefully both styles, and for different reasons, as they are both excellent vintages displaying distinctive character.

By all indications, 2006 in both the Northern and Southern is my kind of vintage, lying somewhere between 2004 and 2005 in terms of fruit and structure. In terms of ripeness, the 2006s' are showing more overt fruit than the 2004s, but are not as ripe as Rhones from the acclaimed 2005 vintage. Acidity levels are excellent, while the tannic structure of the wines is stellar. In contrast, although the 2005 vintage was characterized by opulent ripeness and good acidity levels, the latter half of the growing season was marked by extreme dryness, which in many instances imparted hydric stress to the vines. As a result, many vines 'shutdown' towards the end of August, leading to coarser, less finely mature/developed tannins.

So what happened? To begin with, in 2006 the Rhone Valley experienced one of the coldest winters in the last 20 years. Particularly in the northern Rhone, heavier snowfall gave way to a late and rainy spring which extended into early July. Luckily, frost was not a problem this time around. In fact, June witnessed an abrupt rise in summer temperatures, which lasted well into July. There was considerable concern at this point that summer 2006 might be a repeat of the infernal 2003 summer. Thankfully however, by August the weather had cooled considerably. This welcome respite from the heat delayed maturation, permitting sugar levels and phenolic ripeness to develop more evenly. The final weeks leading up to harvest were quite perfect, with light rains over several days in the beginning of September to combat hydric stress that seems to be a recurring theme no doubt related to global warming. The ever present Mistral blew at just the opportune time, drying the vines thus ensuring healthy dry grapes just in time for picking!

How does this very abridged weather report translate in terms of your vinous drinking pleasure? How does super fine and irresistibly drinkable sound? With beautiful pure fruit, More classic levels of acidity and fine grained tannins, the 2006s will most likely be wines to enjoy upon release and over the next 5-10 years while you wait for the more powerful and tannic 2005's to mellow out. The 2006s are long cool beauties, showing more finesse and lushness now, and possessing what the French describe as 'sucrosite'. For me, 2006 marks a return to terroir, with fruit and structure of course, but with more cut and definition than its predecessor. For anyone interested in experiencing Rhone Valley wines at their most elegant and finely tuned best, the 2006 vintage should not be missed.

--Mulan Chan