



Tim's Wine Market

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By JP Donnelly-Davis

With over 2,000 years of unbroken winemaking tradition, France's Southern Rhone Valley is a region overflowing with history. From Greek settlers to Roman invaders, then rebellious popes in the midst of a church schism, each civilization that has settled in the area has made great contributions to local viticulture. As a result, the Southern Rhone has often been at the forefront of not just France's wine industry, but the entire Mediterranean and beyond.

Yet, just 30 minutes west we find the Costieres de Nimes, a region that shares not just the history but also the winemaking style of the Southern Rhone Valley. Why, then, have these wines been historically ignored? Unfortunately, its geographic location seems to be the culprit. Though the Costieres de Nimes supplied much of the wine for the Roman garrison, and in fact much of the early blending wine for Chateauneuf-du-Pape, it lies further south and west than the other Rhone appellations. In fact, for decades, the area was considered part of the Languedoc, not the Rhone, at a time when that region had a reputation for low-quality bulk wines. Finally, the producers in the Costieres de Nimes established their reputation when the region was granted appellation status in 1989. Today, it is a hotbed of innovative winemaking led by Young Turks who dismiss the old methods of the past for clean, soulful winemaking.

One such producer is Chateau Guiot, a winery that traces its history back to the Knights Hospitaller. In the Middle Ages, the Order of St. John cultivated several vineyards in the Rhone, and historical documents have confirmed that Chateau Guiot was once a fortress and winery during that time. Like so many prominent medieval wineries, long centuries of disuse followed, and eventually the property was purchased for a song by Francois and Sylvia Cornut in 1976. Over the next decade, Francois and Sylvia installed stainless steel fermenters and temperature control, at the same time cleaning up and re-planting the estate's old vines of Grenache and Syrah. Today, Chateau Guiot is managed by Francois and Sylvia's two sons, Alexis and Numa. The twins came on board in 2007, and their first major action was to purchase a neighboring vineyard planted to white varieties. It is hard to believe, but for almost 700 years there had been no white wine produced at the Chateau, until now.

Mas de Guiot Chardonnay 2020 - \$18

We do not feature a lot of Chardonnays for this club, as Tim prefers varieties that make a statement, which this variety rarely achieves in our price range. Though Chardonnay's immense popularity cannot be denied, the less expensive examples rarely display the character of the site where they are grown. To compensate, winemakers often employ the use of new oak, which Chardonnay absorbs like a sponge. In the mind of many wine critics, oak flavors are erroneously associated with complexity in these wines, when in reality new oak is used to compensate for a lack thereof. However, neutral barrels properly maintained over years enable the wine to mature, while imparting none of the baking spice flavors of oak. This is the style of oak maturation used by the Cornut brothers, and indeed most of the Old World.

What makes this wine successful is the unique character of the vineyard. The soils look a lot like Chateauneuf-du-Pape, with large, round stones on a bed of clay and limestone. The property is nestled between the Cévennes Mountains to the north, the Mediterranean Sea to the south and the Alpilles to the east, so the microclimate of the vineyards is ideal. The winds from the mountains, coupled with the Mediterranean breezes, keep the vineyards cool and allow the Chardonnay grape to retain its natural acidity. To make this wine, the Cornut brothers source from older vine plantings of Chardonnay, which are over 35 years old. All grapes are harvested by hand, destemmed and chilled after picking, then pressed off the skins into stainless steel tanks. Alcoholic fermentation occurs in the tank before racking to larger neutral oak barrels for three months of aging on the lees. This wine is then filtered before bottling.

Upon opening, this wine displays ripe notes of dried apple, lemon peel, carambola and toasted panko breadcrumbs. Drink now through 2022 with fried cod, baked brie en croute or roast cauliflower dishes.

Chateau Guiot “Tradition” 2018 - \$15

The aptly named “Tradition” is the chateau’s most popular red wine. Both varieties used in its production, Syrah and Grenache, have been cultivated in the Costieres de Nimes since the earliest days of the appellation. Typically, the Grenache of the region is grown on clay soils, trading some of the dried herb and licorice qualities of neighboring Chateauneuf-du-Pape for a leaner, red fruit-driven profile. Syrah contributes tannin, complexity and sage-like characteristics, much like its neighbor in the Northern Rhone. Numa and Alexis Cornut source the grapes for this cuvee from the original vines replanted by their parents, with an average vineyard age of 45 years.

Similar to the Chardonnay, all of the fruit used to make the “Tradition” is harvested by hand. However, the grapes are only partially destemmed in the winery to allow for additional aromatic complexity. In the cellar, fermentation takes place in temperature-controlled stainless steel. After fermentation is complete, the wine rests in stainless steel, with a percentage racked into concrete vessels, for a year before filtration and bottling.

When you open this wine, you will want to decant it for at least half an hour. Once this wine has some time to open up, it is quite robust, with notes of dried raspberry, wild blackberry, red licorice, dried lavender and Herbs de Provence. Drink now through 2025 with roast chicken and fennel, cured pork loin or soups and stews with a tomato base.

Chicken with Pancetta, White Beans and Herbs de Provence

by Tim Varan

8 bone-in chicken thighs, trimmed of extra fat

Salt and pepper

2 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra for drizzling

2 ounces pancetta, chopped fine

5 garlic cloves, peeled and smashed

2 sprigs fresh rosemary

1 teaspoon dried Herbs de Provence

2 (15-ounce) cans cannellini beans, rinsed

1 cup chicken broth

1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley

The first time I saw this recipe in Cook’s Country, it caught my attention, as the preparation reminds me of a quick version of cassoulet. For those unfamiliar, it is the great southern French bean, sausage and preserved duck dish that is ubiquitous to Rhone and Provence. However an authentic version takes a whole day, or two, to properly make. This version gives a nod to the flavors, but can be quickly assembled for a week night meal. I cooked it for my family and they loved it, but I thought a small change would make it more reminiscent of an example I once tasted in Arles, France, not far from Chateau Guiot. The fix was easy, a teaspoon of Herbs de Provence mixed in as the beans cook gives this dish an authentic character. Also, do not skip the drizzle of olive oil over the top of the finished dish. A good peppery example makes it even more traditional.

Adjust the oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add chicken and cook, skin side down, until well browned, about 7 minutes. Transfer to rimmed baking sheet, skin side up, and roast until chicken registers 175 degrees, 15 to 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, pour off all but 1 tablespoon fat from skillet and return to medium heat. Add pancetta, garlic and rosemary, and cook until garlic is golden brown, about 3 minutes. Add beans, broth, Herbs de Provence and 1/4 teaspoon pepper. Bring to simmer and cook until slightly thickened, 5 to 7 minutes. Discard rosemary sprigs and season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer beans to platter and drizzle with extra olive oil. Top with chicken, sprinkle with parsley and serve.