



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

This quarter, we are taking a deep dive into the Northern Rhone region of France and wines made from the Syrah grape. For a quick geography lesson, in viticulture terms the Rhone valley begins with the city of Vienne, roughly 15 miles south of the city of Lyon, and runs nearly 150 miles due south to Nimes, which lies north of the Mediterranean Sea. The first 40 miles of the region is called the Northern Rhone, then there is a fifty mile gap where only a couple of appellations exist. Then begins the Southern Rhone, which runs roughly 60 miles to Nimes. The north and the south regions have little in common except for the Rhone River; they have different climates and rely on different grapes. In the north, the vines cling to the steep hillsides that face the river or along the high rolling hills that define the end of the Central Massif. The climate is basically continental, meaning cold, wet winters and a short, hot summer. This is ideal for the Syrah grape, the variety producers rely on almost exclusively for red wines. In the Southern Rhone, the vineyards lie on soft rolling hills miles from the river, on deep beds of gravel, sand and clay that remain from the Alps and Central Massif weathering in the Ice Age. The climate is Mediterranean so they have mild winters and long, hot summers. This suits the Grenache grape well, but it needs help from a number of different varieties to craft truly interesting red wines.

When I started selling wine in the 1980s, the Northern Rhone was about the only place you could find Syrah except for Australia, where it is known as Shiraz. The legend goes that Syrah was carried from the Persian city of Shiraz back to France by knights after the crusades. Although it is a romantic story, DNA evidence paints a more realistic picture. According to **Wine Grapes - Robinson, Harding & Vouillamoz (2012)** Syrah is actually the offspring of Mondeuse Blanche and Dureza, two varieties found in the nearby Savoie Alps, pointing to a more local origin. On top of that, the first mention of Syrah in literature is not until 1781, which makes the tale of the knights harder to believe because the crusades were several hundred years earlier. Finally, the crusaders focused their conquest on the Holy Land, not Persia.

As a variety, Syrah is well suited to the difficult climate of the Northern Rhone. It buds late and ripens quickly, perfect for the short hot summer. The vine can be quite vigorous in fertile conditions producing simple wines, but in the thin top soils of the Northern Rhone yields are naturally restricted and that helps boost concentration. Once the clusters form, they are susceptible to moisture which can be a problem in wetter years due to botrytis bunch rot. However, when growers hit the sweet spot between ripe and overripe, and do not over extract the grapes during fermentation, the results can be pure magic. This quarter, I am delighted to present three exceptional examples which also look at Syrah through three different winemaking lenses.

## **2019 Rosiers Cote Rotie Drevon - \$69**

It seems appropriate to start with a Cote Rotie in this discussion of Northern Rhone Syrah. Not only is this the northernmost village in the region, but the wines are also the most famous of all in the Rhone- except Chateauneuf-du-Pape, which lies in the south.

We are proud to exclusively represent for Florida the wines of an up-and-comer, Maxime Gourdain, who took over from his uncle Louis Drevon in 2013. Maxime's grandfather and uncle began bottling wine under their label in 1980. Today, they own 23 acres of vines primarily on the Cote Brune section of Cote Rotie. Although Cote Rotie translates to "roasted slope" in reality the appellation is actually two slopes. The Cote Brune is made up primarily of dark shale, which give the wines power and color. The Cote Blonde, where the soils are primarily light granite, yield wines which are more delicate and perfumed. Most producers own vineyards in both areas and blend them to create their wines. In the case of Rosiers, 90% of their holdings are on the Cote Brune, in the famed Rosiers cru after which the domaine is named. Rosiers, which is also home to Guigal's La Turquie bottling, is also known for being the steepest vineyards in France.

When Maxime took over, he immediately began replanting vines and rebuilding the stone walls that create terraces on the steep slopes of the property. He shares all the work with one employee, so he has intimate knowledge of every vine. All of the grapes are hand harvested, destemmed and fermented in stainless steel tanks. Once dry, the wine is racked to small barriques where the wine is aged for 18 months. Gourdain uses 25% new barrels and the remaining are no more than five years old. As is typical in Cote Rotie, this wine is also co-fermented with 2% Viognier, a white variety, which helps to

darken the color through a process called co-pigmentation. You will want to decant this wine for up to an hour before serving and it offers an exotic nose of roasted hazelnuts, praline, cooked black plums and black cherries, black licorice, faint maple syrup and grilled meat. On the palate the tannins are forward, obvious and firm, with moderate acidity and some length. Good now, this wine really should be consumed between 2026 and 2032.

#### **2020 JL Chave St. Joseph Offerus - \$44**

Although this wine is a more affordable price point than the other selections, I am listing it next due to its geographical location between the others. The appellation of St. Joseph lies on the western side of the Rhone between Condrieu and Cornas. Unlike the other appellations of the Northern Rhone which are concentrated around a single town, both St. Joseph and Crozes Hermitage (see next) cover much larger areas. Both sit on a series of rolling hills above the river and quality can be variable depending on the exposition, soil, farming practices and intention of the producer. The secret is knowing which wineries have the best exposures that allow for Syrah to achieve full ripeness without going over the top.

Aside from Guigal, there is no greater estate in the Northern Rhone than Chave. The family has produced wine since 1481, and are known for their highly sought after Hermitage bottlings, red and white. The current generation is led by Jean-Louis Chave, who I would argue is the most important producer in the region. With such a long history, the family has also accumulated vineyards in other appellations of the Northern Rhone including several parcels in the sprawling St. Joseph appellation. For their Offerus bottling, the organic vineyards are located in the communities of Mauves, Tournon, and St. Jean de Muzols, specifically purchased because they face east. These eastern-facing vineyard sites receive sun in the morning and shade in the afternoon, allowing for full ripeness but the grapes also retain good acidity.

Winemaking at Chave is as classic as it gets. This wine is 100% Syrah and only half the grapes are destemmed before fermentation is started, in a mix of large oak tonneaux (500L) and stainless steel. After 30+ days on the skins, the wine is racked to a mix of used barriques and large foudres where it is aged for 18 months. None of the Chave wines are filtered or fined. You will want to decant this wine for up to an hour before serving to let the bouquet develop and the tannins resolve. Once you do it shows a rich nose of fresh black cherries and blackberries, black olive tapenade, old leather and dried sage, marjoram and thyme. On the palate it is quite dry and savory, with less power than the wine above but also a more evolved and layered sense of fruit and earth. Drink between 2025 and 2030.

#### **2020 Domaine Belle Crozes-Hermitage “Cuvee Louis” - \$55**

I visited this estate in 1993 during my first trip to the Rhone. It was a young domaine at the time, starting in 1990, but the family had been farming vineyards in the area for two generations and were one of the first to recognize the potential of the appellation. Louis Belle is the grandfather of the current winemaker, Phillippe, who first inherited some vineyards in 1933. Louis loved farming but did not enjoy winemaking, so he was one of the founders of the cooperative in nearby Tain l’Hermitage and sold their grapes to them. Louis’ son Albert, expanded their vineyard holdings and built the winery, encouraging his son Phillippe to attend winemaking school. Albert retired in 2003 and in 2006 Phillippe purchased another estate to expand to the current 70 acres under vine. They produce wine in three communes; Crozes Hermitage, St. Joseph and Hermitage.

Unlike the first two wines that are grown on the west side of the river, the appellation of Crozes-Hermitage lies on the east side on a series of rolling hills behind the great hill of Hermitage. In this appellation the soils are a mix of decomposed granite, rocks and gravel as well as limestone. In sites with the right exposition the combination of soils produces powerful yet very fresh wines.

Fitting as a wine to honor his grandfather, Phillippe makes this wine from a blend of their best single vineyard parcels. The Syrah vines used range in age from 20 to 100 years old and since 2014 they are certified organic. Like Chave, Belle uses up to 50% stem inclusion (whole cluster) during fermentation, and leaves the wines in contact with the cap for up to five weeks. Once dry the wine is racked to a mix of new (25%) and older barriques where it is aged for 16-18 months.

When you are ready to serve this wine, you will want to decant it for up to one hour. For years this has been one of my favorite northern Rhone wines, with notes of fresh blackberries and blueberries, dark chocolate, rosemary, bay leaf, black olives and bacon. On the palate there is impressive fruit intensity and richness, with firm, buffering tannins that will take a couple of years to resolve. Drink 2025-2035.