



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

Last quarter we focused on European classics for our selections, and to my surprise the wine that generated the most feedback was the Châteauneuf-du-Pape from André Brunel. As a passionate Rhône fan, I found the positive reception thrilling. This quarter we'll take a deeper look at the great wines of the Southern Rhône Valley of France with selections that spotlight the three most important villages in the region.

I began my research by opening Alexis Lichine's ***Encyclopedia of Wines and Spirits*** (1975). Space does not allow me to define how important Lichine was to the wine industry, so I encourage you to read his Wikipedia page at some point. Suffice to say my early career, which began the year he passed in 1989, was heavily influenced by several of his books. For our purposes I'll focus on this quote from the aforementioned book:

“The vineyards of the Côtes du Rhône extend for 140 miles from Lyon to Avignon, stretching precariously over sheer, high cliffs on both sides of the sun-baked river. Their touchstone is granite — the soil's dominant element. Drawing their character from the steep, sun-drenched granite cliffs they come from, the wines are not subtle; they are big, rough and heady, with strong, almost pungent perfume, and they are tamed only by long imprisonment in the bottle.”

At the time of that writing the Rhône Valley was very primitive by today's standards, with few trained winemakers. The wines were inexpensive, so there was little incentive to invest in farming or cellars. However, in 1987 Robert Parker published his first book, *Wines of the Rhône Valley and Provence*, which shone a bright spotlight on the best up-and-coming producers for U.S. consumers. I still remember customers walking into the wine shop where I worked and asking for the top-rated producers as if they were discovering a lost treasure. Then in 1993 I visited the region for and witnessed firsthand the quality revolution that was then in its infancy.

Today the wines of the Rhône are well known, but few recognize the region's amazing diversity, both north and south. This quarter we will focus only on the southern wines, which are based primarily on Grenache. The three villages featured are only a half hour apart by car, but the wines they produce are distinctively unique and the finest expressions of Grenache produced anywhere in the world.

Domaine de la Solitude Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2023 | \$75

The entire French system for wine classification began in Châteauneuf-du-Pape in the 1920s when Baron Le Roy de Boiseaumarié sought to establish some control over how the region's wines were labeled. It was common for producers from Bordeaux and Burgundy to come to the region, purchase barrels of wine, carry them home, and blend them into their weaker bottlings. Le Roy believed that if the wines were good enough to be blended into the much more expensive wines of those regions, they should also be recognized on their own. Working with other farmers in the region, they were the first to draw official production boundaries and to define which grape varieties could be used, minimum alcohol levels, and aging requirements. In 1929 the rules were adapted by the growers, setting the stage for the first Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) in 1936.

The defining characteristic of Châteauneuf-du-Pape is the rocky soils formed at the end of the Ice Age. Melting ice sheets created massive rivers that sheared rock and tumbled it for hundreds of miles. The result is a region covered with large, often bowling-ball-size round rocks that rest on top of a bed of sand and then limestone. These giant rocks, referred to as cailloux, absorb daytime sunshine and radiate it upward at night. This extra warmth enhances ripening of the grapes and lowers their acidity. The result is powerful wines, often over 15% alcohol, that are frequently low in acidity. Adding acid is not legal in most of Europe, so growers learned to farm a mix of grapes that contribute different attributes to the finished wine. Of the 13 grape varieties permitted in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, six are primarily for acidity, including three white varieties. However, many producers have abandoned this complex mix in favor of only a few varieties — namely Grenache,

Syrah and Mourvèdre. Thankfully, many enlightened producers are returning to at least some of these components as the climate warms.

Our feature estate has a very long history in the region, beginning in the 15th century. At that time the family of Matteo Barberini, also known as Pope Urban VIII, fled Rome after his passing. They settled in the area around Châteauneuf-du-Pape and began purchasing farmland. Two hundred years later one of the direct heirs, Paul Martin, documented the first sale of wine from the region in bottles bearing the name Châteauneuf-du-Pape. In a twist of fate Paul died young and the land and winery passed down through his daughters, which was very rare for the time. Today the estate is run by Florent Lançon, who oversees 90 acres of vineyards on the famed plateau of Les Crau. When I met with Florent a few months ago I was impressed with all aspects of the estate. The family farms organically and cultivates several of the 13 legal grape varieties, not just the popular Grenache and Syrah. They do this because their mission is wines with balance, and they feel many of the lesser-used varieties contribute elements to the final wine that are missing if they rely only on the popular grapes. I was very impressed during our tasting and feel this is a great example to start our study.

Decant this wine for at least a half hour and serve at cellar temperature (55°F). The nose delivers a warm and inviting combination of cherry liqueur, raspberry jam, dried black fig, dark chocolate, soy sauce and herbes de Provence. This wine shows impressive power but is held in check by tannins that form a relatively stiff frame at the finish. It is very good now but will reward some cellar time as well: 2026–2033.

2023 Domaine de Durban Gigondas | \$49

While Châteauneuf-du-Pape is currently the most famous wine region in the southern Rhône Valley, Gigondas and neighboring Beaumes-de-Venise were likely favorites when the Romans first brought the vine to the region. Unlike Châteauneuf-du-Pape, which lies between 60 and 425 feet above sea level, Gigondas sits at the base of the Dentelles de Montmirail. The vineyards start at the base around 575 feet and rise up the crags to almost 1,400 feet. The elevation allows growers to pick later but without the excessive ripeness that can plague lower areas like Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The soils are not round stones but weathered, fractured granite and sand with some limestone. With little water retention capacity, the vines in Gigondas produce fewer grapes that are more intensely flavored. It is little wonder Gigondas has become such a hot category for Rhône enthusiasts.

Our feature from Domaine de Durban began in 1967 when Jacques Leydier purchased a farm in the village of Beaumes-de-Venise that had fallen into disrepair. This property sits on the site of an old Roman ruin, suggested by the remains of fortifications around the estate. Originally the property was only 25 acres, roughly two-thirds planted to red grapes. Over nearly six decades the family has been strategic with purchases; they now produce 25,000 cases of wine from 275 acres. They not only craft their three AOP wines (see below), but are also the source for the Kermit Lynch Vacluse bottling, one of the great values of the region.

Today the estate is run by Jacques's grandsons Henri and Philippe, and everything at the property is done with respect for the past. I cannot find the exact date they acquired the 15 acres in Gigondas, but the vines were planted in 1974, so it was likely long ago. The blend is 70% Grenache and 30% Syrah, and all aging was done in large concrete tanks.

Decant this wine for up to an hour before serving and chill to cellar temperature. The nose is less liqueur-like than the Châteauneuf, with dark notes of blackberry and blueberry, followed by more obvious herbal qualities: fennel, bay leaf, rosemary and new leather. The palate is relatively compact, with ample fruit framed by somewhat obvious tannins and a little zip of acidity. This wine is lovely now, but I think the perfect drinking window will be 2027–2033.

2022 Sang de Cailloux Vacqueyras “Cuvée Flureto” | \$49

I intentionally placed this wine last despite Vacqueyras's geographical location almost directly between Châteauneuf and Gigondas. I selected this wine while dining at one of my favorite restaurants in Birmingham, AL — Chez Fon Fon — where I was stunned by how approachable it was for such a young age. I also visited the estate in 2000 and have been a fan ever since, so I want to give this wine its due (and apologize for the longer-than-usual write-up).

The commune of Vacqueyras sits a short distance northeast of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, with much of the appellation sharing the same round cailloux stones. Here elevation begins around 400 feet above sea level and rises to about 1,300 feet, similar to Gigondas. The highest point, called the Plateau de Garrigues, is relatively flat and shielded from wind by the Dentelles de Montmirail. Like Châteauneuf, the vines receive intense summer sun, but the nights are often about 5°F cooler, which produces wines with slightly less alcohol and better acidity.

Sang de Cailloux, which translates to “blood from the stones,” is owned by Serge Férigoule, a quiet genius who crafts the benchmark wines of this appellation. He joined the estate after graduating from winemaking school in 1979 and took a job with the owner, Monsieur Ricard. Ricard had no heirs who wanted the estate, so he partnered with Serge in 1982. When Ricard retired in 1990, Férigoule bought his shares and has run the property ever since. Coincidentally, 1990 was also the year Vacqueyras received Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée status.

There is no secret to the success of this domaine: the recipe mirrors that of the great wineries we promote. Serge farms using organic and biodynamic practices and has for years, although he only recently completed certification. His vineyard is relatively old and situated on the Plateau de Garrigues. Yields are naturally low and his wine intense, but with a very different flavor profile from the previous two selections.

Férigoule produces only three wines: a tiny amount of stunning white, an equally microscopic quantity of an old-vine red called Cuvée Lopy, and this — his Cuvée Traditionnelle. He rotates the cuvée names in successive years for his daughters. This year it is named Flureto; upcoming vintages will bear the names Doucinello and Azalaïs before the rotation restarts. The blend for this cuvée is 70% Grenache, 20% Syrah and 10% Mourvèdre & Cinsault. Cinsault is used to soften and add aromatics to reds dominated by more tannic varieties. Alcoholic fermentation takes place in concrete tanks, and the wine is then aged for eight months in large oak casks called foudres.

Decant this wine for a half hour or more before serving and, of course, serve at cellar temperature. This wine presents like the Châteauneuf-du-Pape, with notes of cherry and raspberry liqueur. The bouquet then opens to more exotic elements: pink peppercorns, allspice, fennel pollen and red licorice. The texture is firm and powerful, with obvious tannins holding the ample fruit in check. Drink this wine from 2026 to 2037.