THE RHÔNE VALLEY

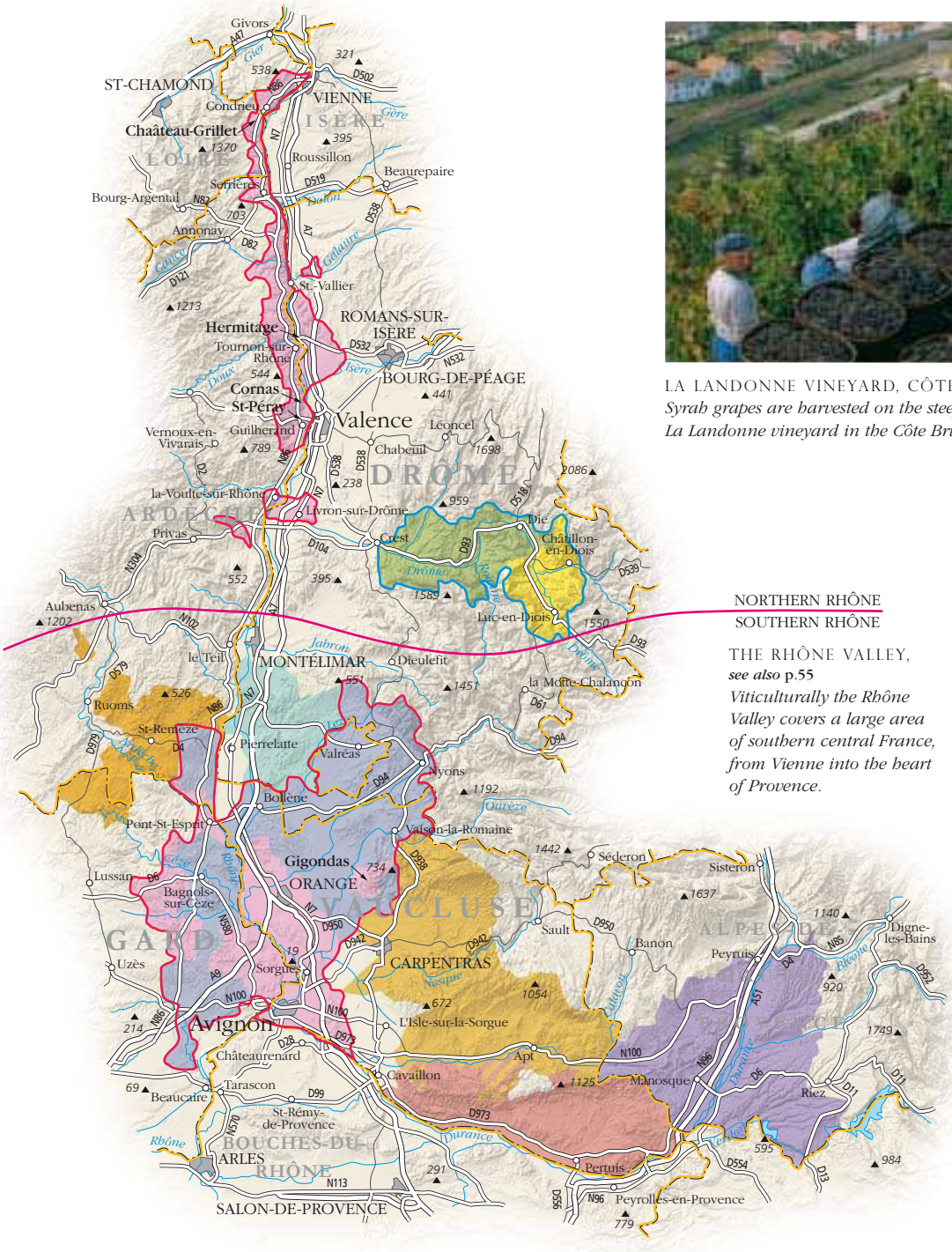
Famous for its full, fiery, and spicy-rich red wines, the Rhône Valley also produces small quantities of rosé and white, and even some sparkling and fortified wines. Although essentially red-wine country, and great red-wine country at that, the Rhône has experienced a kind of revolution in white-wine production. There has been a growing number of exotic, world-class white wines in various appellations since the late 1980s, when just a few began to emerge in Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

STRETCHING FROM VIENNE TO AVIGNON, the Côtes-du-Rhône appellation occupies a 125-mile (200-kilometer) length of the Rhône River. Beyond this great region other Rhône wines exist, and some are not even French. The banks of this mighty European river are clad with vines all the way from the Valais vineyards of Visp in Switzerland, just 30 miles (50 kilometers) from the Rhône's glacial origins in the Alps, to the *vin de pays* vineyards of the Bouches-du-Rhône, set amid the Rhône delta just west of Marseilles, where the river finally and sluggishly runs into the Mediterranean.

Only a tiny patch of vineyards in the very north of this region is in fact located within the Rhône *département* (which is a geographic misnomer as it actually accounts for 70 percent of Burgundy's output). Comparing the contrasting characters of Rhône



LA LANDONNE VINEYARD, CÔTE RÔTIE
Syrah grapes are harvested on the steep slopes of Guigal's top-performing La Landonne vineyard in the Côte Brune area of Côte Rôtie, above Ampuis.





CÔTE BRUNE ON THE CÔTE RÔTIE, NORTHERN RHÔNE
The Côte Brune is an area of the Côte Rôtie where the rust color of the soil is visible evidence of iron-rich elements in its granitic sandy soil.

and Burgundy wines produced within the one *département* can have a humbling effect on all those who glibly talk about regional styles. For example, what could be further apart than a rich, classic Condrieu and a fresh, light Mâcon, or an intense, ink-black Côte Rôtie and a quaffing, cherry-colored Beaujolais? Yet all of these wines are produced in the same *département* and could thus be described as coming from the same region.

BEAUMES-DE-VENISE, SOUTHERN RHÔNE
Home to one of the most elegant and consistent fortified Muscat wines in the world, Beaumes-de-Venise also produces a soft, peppery red wine under the Côtes-du-Rhône-Villages appellation.

RECENT RHÔNE VINTAGES

2003 Another classic region turned upside-down by the dramatic heat wave, with unprecedented high sugar and low acidity levels that provided the potential for great red wines only from those skilled enough to cope with the challenge. There will be many more flashes of brilliance that will have the critics raving about big, black monsters, only to find the wines will shed their fruit relatively quickly to end up with the alcohol showing through. The northern Rhône probably has the edge over the south, but where the wines are properly balanced, the greatest reds from all over the region will probably be a match for the best Rhônes from any vintage in living memory. There will always be exceptions, but generally you can forget the whites and rosés.

2002 A washout, literally.

2001 Some good northern reds, particularly in Côte-Rôtie, but September rain meant that many lack finesse, leaving them overall average at best. Much better, potentially long-lived reds in the south.

2000 A brilliant year for reds in both the northern and southern Rhône, with the wines showing excellent color and tannin structure, and lush fruit. The whites, however, are fat and blowsy.

1999 Soft, juicy, well-colored reds in the Northern Rhône have the edge over the southern reds, although those in the south who picked late have made wines to rival their northern cousins.

A REGION DIVIDED

In terms of grape varieties, the Rhône divides neatly into two—the Syrah-dominated north and the Grenache-influenced south—although there are those who confuse the issue by separating the southernmost section of the northern district and calling it the Middle Rhône. The north and south differ not only in terrain and climate, but also contrast socially, culturally, and gastronomically.



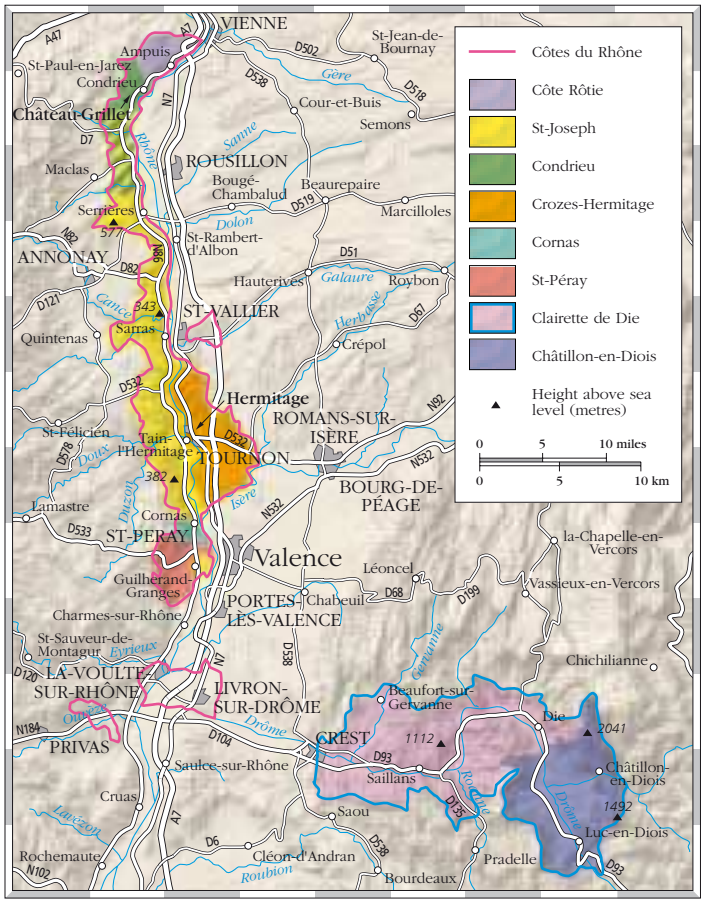
THE NORTHERN RHÔNE

The Northern Rhône is dominated by the ink-black wines of Syrah, the Rhône's only truly classic black grape. A small amount of white wine is also produced and, in the south of the district, at St.-Péray and Die, sparkling wines are made.

THE NORTHERN RHÔNE might be the gateway to the south, but it has more in common with its northern neighbor, Burgundy, than it does with the rest of the Rhône, even though its wines cannot be compared with those from any other area. Indeed, it would be perfectly valid to isolate the north as a totally separate region called the Rhône, which would, therefore, allow the Southern Rhône to be more accurately defined as a high-quality extension of the Midi.

THE QUALITY OF THE NORTHERN RHÔNE

The ink-black classic wines of Hermitage and Côte Rôtie stand shoulder to shoulder with the *crus classés* of Bordeaux in terms of pure quality, and the greatest Hermitage and Côte Rôtie deserve the respect given to *premiers crus* such as Latour, Mouton, or Lafite. Cornas can be even bigger and blacker than Hermitage or Côte Rôtie, and the top growers can rival the best of wines from its better-known neighbors. While the fine, dry white wines of Condrieu and (potentially) Château Grillet are unique in character, the presence of such a style in this part of France is not as surprising as that of the sparkling white wines of St.-Péray and Die, particularly the latter, which Francophiles would describe as a superior sort of Asti!



FACTORS AFFECTING TASTE AND QUALITY

LOCATION

The narrow strip of vineyards that belong to the Northern Rhône commences at Vienne, just south of Lyon, and extends southward to Valence.

CLIMATE

The general effect of the Mediterranean is certainly felt in the Northern Rhône, but its climate has a distinctly continental influence. This results in the pattern of warmer summers and colder winters, which is closer to the climate of southern Burgundy, to the north, than to that of the Southern Rhône. The climatic factor that the area does have in common with the southern half of the Rhône is the Mistral, a bitterly cold wind that can reach up to 90 miles (145 kilometers) per hour and is capable of denuding a vine of its leaves, shoots, and fruit. As a result, many Mistral-prone vineyards are protected by poplar and cypress trees. The wind can, however, have a welcome drying effect in humid harvest conditions. The average summertime temperature is just two degrees Fahrenheit lower than in the south.

ASPECT

The countryside is generally less harsh than that of the southern Rhône, with cherry, peach, chestnut, and other deciduous trees in evidence. The valley vineyards are cut far more steeply into the hillsides than they are in areas farther south.

SOIL

The Northern Rhône's soil is generally light and dry, granitic and schistous. More specifically, it is made up of: granitic-sandy soil on the Côte-Rôtie (calcareous-sandy on the Côte Blonde and ruddy, iron-rich sand on the Côte Brune); granitic-sandy soil at Hermitage and Condrieu with a fine overlay of decomposed flint, chalk, and mica, known locally as *arzelle*; heavier soil in Crozes-Hermitage with patches of clay; granitic sand with some clay between St.-Joseph and St.-Péray, getting stonier toward the southern end of the region, with occasional outcrops of limestone; and limestone and clay over a solid rock base in the area that surrounds Die.

VITICULTURE AND VINIFICATION

Unlike the Southern Rhône, most Northern Rhône wines are produced entirely or predominantly from a single grape variety, the Syrah, despite the long list of grapes that are occasionally used (*see* Secondary varieties, *below*). Viticultural operations are labor-intensive in the northern stretch of the district and, due to the cost, the vineyards were once under the threat of total abandonment. Since that threat we pay much more for Côte Rôtie, but at least it has remained available. Vinification techniques are very traditional and, when wines are aged in wood, there is less emphasis on new oak than is given in Bordeaux or Burgundy, although chestnut casks are sometimes used.

GRAPE VARIETIES

Primary varieties: Syrah, Viognier
Secondary varieties: Aligoté, Bourboulenc, Calitor, Camarèse, Carignan, Chardonnay, Cinsault, Clairette, Counoise, Gamay, Grenache, Marsanne, Mauzac, Mourvèdre, Muscardin, Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains, Pascal Blanc, Picardan, Picpoul, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Noir, Roussanne, Terret Noir, Ugni Blanc, Vaccarèse



THE NORTHERN RHÔNE,
see also p.213
At the heart of this region the towns of Tain and Tournon face each other across the river.

AMPUIS UNDER SNOW
These southeast-facing vineyards of Côte Rôtie form a dramatic stretch of scenery on the west bank of the Rhône, 5 miles (9 kilometers) south of Vienne.

THE APPELLATIONS OF

THE NORTHERN RHÔNE

CHÂTEAU GRILLET AOC

Château Grillet has remained under the same family ownership (Neyret-Gachet) since 1830, and is one of only two single-estate appellations in France, the other being Romanée-Conti. Although it is often described as one of the world's great white wines, this is a legacy from more than a century ago. Château Grillet has not achieved anything like its full potential for at least the last few decades. There is no doubt that its sun-blessed terraces could produce Viognier of a singularly outstanding quality, but there is no inkling the proprietors can be bothered to pursue such a course. Who could blame them when Château Grillet could charge two or three times the price of Condrieu? But the price of some of the best Condrieu are now snapping at its heels, and unless there is a dramatic increase in quality, Château Grillet will drop in price. In today's more transparent market, fine wine consumers are no longer willing to drink labels.

WHITE This is, potentially, a wine of great finesse and complex character, but not one to keep in bottle as long as some would have you believe.

Viognier

3–7 years

CHÂTILLON-EN-DIOIS AOC

This wine was raised to full AOC status in 1974, although it is hard to comprehend what merited such an elevation then or now.

RED Light in color and body, thin in fruit, with little discernible character.

Gamay, plus up to 25% Syrah and Pinot Noir

WHITE Sold as pure varietal wines, the light and fresh, gently aromatic Aligoté is as good as the richer, fuller, and rather angular Chardonnay.

Aligoté, Chardonnay

ROSÉ I have not encountered any.

Gamay, plus up to 25% Syrah and Pinot Noir

Didier Cornillon (Clos de Beylière)

CLAIRETTE DE DIE AOC

This dry sparkling wine is being phased out in favor of Crémant de Die from 1999 in what must be a classic example of Gallic logic—removing the name Clairette from an appellation of a wine that must be made from 100 percent Clairette grapes, yet retaining it for one (*see below*) that does not have to contain any!
See also Crémant de Die AOC

CLAIRETTE DE DIE MÉTHODE DIOISE ANCESTRALE AOC

Formerly sold as Clairette de Die Tradition, this wine may contain Clairette, but it is not the primary grape. What makes it so different, however, is that it is produced from one fermentation only, as opposed to the two required by Crémant de Die, the old Clairette de Die Mousseux, and most other sparkling wines.

In the *Méthode Dioise Ancestrale*, the wine first undergoes a long, cold part-fermentation in bulk and when bottled must contain a minimum of 55 grams of residual sugar per liter and no *liqueur de tirage*. Fermentation continues inside the bottle, but when disgorged the wine must still retain at least 35 grams of residual sugar per liter. The wine undergoes *transvasage* (meaning it is filtered into a fresh bottle) and is corked without any addition of a *liqueur d'expédition*.

SPARKLING WHITE A very fresh, deliciously fruity, gently sparkling wine of at least *demi-sec* sweetness, with a ripe, peachy flavor.

At least 75% Muscat à Petits Grains (this went up in 1993 from a minimum of 50%), plus Clairette

Upon purchase

Buffardel Frères • *C. V. du Diois* (Clairdie, Clairdissime)

CONDRIEU AOC



This is the greatest white-wine appellation in the entire Rhône Valley, with more up-and-coming young talent among its producers than anywhere else in the world. Initially the trend was to produce sweet and medium-sweet wines, but Condrieu has tended to be a distinctly dry wine for a couple of decades now. When the vintage permits, late-harvested sweeter wines are produced, and these styles are very much part of Condrieu's recent revival as one of the undisputed great white wines of the world.

WHITE These pale-gold-colored wines are essentially dry, but can have such an exotic perfume that you might easily think they are sweet when you first breathe in their heavenly aroma. The bouquet is fine, floral, and fruity, with heady, opulent aromas that can include may-blossom, honeysuckle, violets, roses, peaches, lime, and apricot, and in especially rich vintages there can also be some youthful honey wafting through. The fruit on the palate is always very perfumed and can give the impression of sweetness, even when completely dry. A great Condrieu has a beguiling balance of fatness, freshness, and finesse that produces an elegant, peachy-apricoty coolness of fruit on the finish. Do not be fooled into cellaring these wines—the dry ones in any case—as their greatest asset is the freshness and purity of fruit, which can only be lost over the years.

Viognier

4–8 years

Yves Cuilleron (Les Ayguets) • *Delas* (Clos Boucher) • *E. Guigal* (La Doriane) • *Vignobles du Monteillet* (Les Grandes Chaillées) • *Alain Paret* (Lys de Volan) • *André Perret* (Clos Chanson) • *Georges Vernay* • *François Villard* (Le Grand Vallon)

CORNAS AOC

The sun-trap vineyards of Cornas produce the best value of all the Rhône's quality red wines, but you have to buy it as soon as it is released as it is always sold far too young, so there is none left when it starts to show its true potential.

RED Ink-black, full-bodied, strong-flavored, pure Syrah wines with lots of blackcurrant and blackberry fruit, lacking only a little finesse if compared to a great Hermitage or Côte Rôtie.

Syrah

7–20 years

Thierry Allemand • *Auguste Clape* • *Jean-Luc Colombo* • *Courbis* (Les Eygats) • *Eric & Joël Durand* • *Patrick Lesec* • *Paul Jaboulet Aîné* • *Tardieu-Laurent* (Vieilles Vignes)

CÔTE RÔTIE AOC

The terraces and low walls of the "burnt" or "roasted" slopes of Côte Rôtie must be tended by hand, but the reward is a wine of great class that vies with Hermitage as the world's finest example of Syrah.

RED A garnet-colored wine of full body, fire, and power, made fragrant by the addition of Viognier grapes. The result is a long-living and complex wine with nuances of violets and spices, and great finesse.

Syrah, plus up to 20% Viognier

10–25 years

Patrick & Christophe Bonnefond • *Clusel-Roch* ◉ • *Cuilleron-Gaillard-Villard* (Les Essartailles) • *Delas* (Seigneur de Maugiron) • *Jean-Michel Gerin* (Champin le Seigneur) • *E. Guigal* • *Paul Jaboulet Aîné* • *Joseph Jamet* • *Patrick Jasmin* • *Michel Ogier* • *René Rostaing* • *Vidal-Fleury* (La Chatilonne) • *François Villard* (La Brocarde)

COTEAUX DE DIE AOC

This new appellation was created in 1993 to soak up wines from excess Clairette grape production that were formerly sold under previous sparkling-wine appellations.

WHITE Perhaps it is unfair to prejudge a wine that has had so little time to establish itself, but it is hard to imagine a quality wine made from this grape. In effect, Coteaux de Die is the still-wine version of Crémant de Die. It is easy to see why such a bland dry wine needs bubbles to lift it, yet so few make the transition successfully.

Clairette

Upon purchase

Jean-Claude Raspail

CÔTES DU RHÔNE AOC

Although generic to the entire region, relatively little Côtes du Rhône is made in this district, where the only difference in technical criteria is that Syrah may replace Grenache as the principal red wine variety.

CRÉMANT DE DIE AOC

This dry sparkling wine was introduced in 1993 to replace Clairette de Die Mousseux, which

was phased out by January 1999. Like the old Clairette de Die Mousseux appellation, Crémant de Die must be made by the traditional method, but whereas the former could include up to 25 percent Muscat à Petit Grains, the latter must be made entirely from Clairette.

SPARKLING WHITE It is too early to make a definitive pronouncement, but it looks as if Crémant de Die will be every bit as neutral and lackluster as Clairette de Die.

Clairette

1–3 years

Carod

CROZES-ERMITAGE AOC

See **Crozes-Hermitage AOC**

CROZES-HERMITAGE AOC

Crozes-Hermitage is produced from a relatively large area surrounding Tain, hence the quality is very variable, but a good Crozes-Hermitage will always be a great bargain.

RED These well-colored, full-bodied wines are similar to Hermitage, but they are generally less intense and have a certain smoky-rustic-raspberry flavor that only deepens into blackcurrant in the hottest years. The finest wines do, however, have surprising finesse, and make fabulous bargains.

Syrah, plus up to 15% Roussanne and Marsanne

6–12 years
8–20 years for top wines and great years

WHITE These dry white wines are improving and gradually acquiring more freshness, fruit, and acidity.

Roussanne, Marsanne

1–3 years

Chapoutier Ⓑ (Les Varonnières) • *Yann Chave* (Tête de Cuvée) • *Les Chenets* • *C. V. des Clairmonts* (Pionniers) • *du Colombier* (Gaby) • *Combier* Ⓞ (Clos des Grives) • *Alain Graillot* • *Paul Jaboulet Aîné* (Thalabert) • *des Remizières*[1] (Emilie)

ERMITAGE AOC

See **Hermitage AOC**

HERMITAGE AOC

One of the great classic French red wines, produced entirely from Syrah grapes in virtually all cases, although a small amount of Marsanne and Roussanne may be added. The vines are grown on a magnificent south-facing slope overlooking Tain.

RED These wines have a deep and sustained color, a very full body, and lovely, plummy, lip-smacking, spicy, silky, violety, blackcurrant fruit. A truly great Hermitage has boundless finesse, despite the weighty flavor.

Syrah, plus up to 15% Roussanne and Marsanne

12–30 years

WHITE These big, rich, dry white wines have a full, round, hazelnut and dried-apricot flavor. The wines have improved recently but are generally no more than curiosities.

Roussanne, Marsanne

6–12 years

M Chapoutier[1] Ⓑ (Ermite, Méal, L'Orée, Pavillon) • *Jean-Louis Chave*[1] • *Emmanuel Darnaud* • *Delas* (Les Bassards) • *Alain Graillot* • *E. Guigal* (Ex Voto) • *Paul Jaboulet Aîné* (La Chapelle) • *des Remizières*[1] (Emilie) • *Marc Sorrel* (Gréal) • *Tardieu-Laurent* (Vieilles Vignes)

[1]Particularly recommended for white as well as red.

HERMITAGE VIN DE PAILLE AOC

In the first edition of this book (1988), I wrote "In 1974 Gérard Chave made the last *vin de paille* of Hermitage, a wine that is now confined to the Jura vineyards of eastern France. Monsieur Chave declares he made the wine for 'amusement.' Considering its success, it is extraordinary that some enterprising grower has not taken advantage of this appellation."

Chapoutier has since made several vintages of Hermitage *vin de paille* on a commercial basis—or as near commercial as you can get with this style of wine—and other producers include Michel Ferraton, Jean-Louis Grippat, and Guigal. Even the local *coopérative* has churned some out. At one time all Hermitage *blanc* was, in effect, *vin de paille*, a style that dates back in this locality to at least 1760. Marc Chapoutier apparently drank the last wine of that vintage in 1964 when it was 204 years old. The traditional *vin de paille* method in Hermitage is not as intensive as the one revived relatively recently in Alsace, in which the grapes are dried out over straw beds until more than 90 percent of the original juice has evaporated before they are pressed, as even Chave's legendary 1974 was made from grapes bearing as much as a third of their original juice, but some of the results have been equally stunning. Despite decades between production, this wine still has its own AOC.

WHITE Some *vins de paille* are rich and raisiny whereas others—the best—have a crisp, vivid freshness about them, with intense floral-citrous aromas and a huge, long, honeyed aftertaste. After his famed 1974 vintage, Chave made a 1986 and at least a couple more vintages since. His *vin de paille* is reputed to be the greatest, but is practically unobtainable and certainly not available on the open market. This wine is made in the most commercial quantity, yet this still amounts to hardly anything, since the wine is hard to find and very expensive. Jean-Louis Grippat made a *vin de paille* in 1985 and 1986, neither of which I have had the privilege to taste, but John Livingstone-Learmonth describes them as "not quite like late-harvest Gewurztraminer" in his seminal work *The Wines of the Rhône*.

Roussanne, Marsanne

Up to 30 years

Chapoutier Ⓑ

L'ERMITAGE AOC

See **Hermitage AOC**

L'HERMITAGE AOC

See **Hermitage AOC**

ST.-JOSEPH AOC



MORE GREEN NORTHERN RHÔNE

In addition to the producers recommended in this directory that are either biodynamic or organic, there are also the following. No negative inference of quality should be taken from the fact that they are not featured among the other producers. There are a number that have been recommended in other editions, and still make some fine wines, but have been culled out to make room for others.

`Biodynamic`
Ferme des Sept Lunes (Bogy)
Monier (St.-Desirat)

`Organic`
Achard-Vincent (Sainte-Croix)
Barou (Charnas)
Bégot (Serves-sur-Rhône)
du Coulet (Cornas)
C. V. de Die Jaillance (Die)
Giniès (Piégon)
Lattard (Autichamp)
des Treilles (Montbrison-sur-Lez)

At last, some truly exciting wines are being produced under this appellation. St.-Joseph has now replaced Cornas as the bargain-seeker's treasure trove.

RED The best wines are dark, medium- to full-bodied, with intense blackberry and blackcurrant fruit aromas and plenty of soft fruit, whereas mediocre St.-Joseph remains much lighter-bodied with a pepperiness more reminiscent of the Southern Rhône.

Syrah, plus up to 10% Marsanne and Roussanne

3–8 years

WHITE At their best, clean, rich, and citrous-resinous dry wines.

Marsanne, Roussanne

1–3 years

Chapoutier Ⓑ (Les Granits) • *Chave* • *Courbis*[1] (Les Roys) • *Pierre Coursodon* (Le Paradis Saint-Pierre) • *Yves Cuilleron* • *Pierre Gaillard* • *Gonan*[1] (Les Oliviers) • *E. Guigal* (Vignes de la Hospices) • *Vignobles du Monteilet* (Fortior) • *Tardieu-Laurent* (Vieilles Vignes) • *François Villard* (Reflet)

[1]Particularly recommended for white as well as red

ST.-PÉRAY AOC

This white-wine-only village appellation is curiously out of step with the rest of the area.

WHITE Firm and fruity, with good acidity for a wine from the south of the region, but unfortunately it usually lacks charm. Even the best growers within this region, recommended below, struggle to produce anything of interest.

Marsanne, Roussanne

1–3 years

J.-F. Chaboud • *Bernard Gripa* • *Jean Lionnet* • *Alain Voge*

ST.-PÉRAY MOUSSEUX AOC

This is a traditional method sparkling wine made from the wrong grapes grown on the wrong soil. The growers would be advised to rip the whole lot up and replant with black grapes for a red Côtes du Rhône.

SPARKLING WHITE An overrated, dry sparkling wine with a coarse *mousse*.

Marsanne, Roussanne