

WINE News

*The Rhône Valley Is On a Roll
with a Series of Top-Notch
Vintages*



APRIL 4, 2022 FEATURES

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Everything's Coming Up Rhône

By Keith Mabry, Rhône Buyer



My recent excursion through the Rhône Valley after a nearly three-year absence reminded me just how impressive the current vintages are. The years 2015 through 2020 were so successful and diverse that seldom have we seen such an inspiring string of vintages in any other wine category.

Even so, there are always challenges. The biggest current hurdle for this region is the

2021 vintage, with an unprecedented amount of frost during budbreak and depressingly low yields. Further, a succession of rainstorms pummeled the harvest. Surely there will be gems to find, but I'll reserve judgment on this complicated vintage until we see the wines in bottle.

Besides, we have so much else on which to focus! We have so many recently arrived 2019s from both the north and south, and we even have some shortly arriving 2020s. It's all very exciting!

Our team of intrepid Rhônephiles has assembled a highlight reel of the wines you should not miss, starting with Domaine Sénéchaux, one of our favorite Direct Imports in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. We also look at Ferraton, the lesser-known Chapoutier estate in the Northern Rhône, and their recent 2018 releases. We have a bevy of new pre-arrivals, including greats from both the 2019 and 2020 vintages. And we finish with one of my favorite producers in the Northern Rhône—Domaine Durand—who has just returned to the California market after a brief disappearance. But, since I was just in Châteauneuf, let's start with few of my favorites from this region!



2019 Domaine Chante Cigale Châteauneuf-du-Pape \$34.99

93WE, 93DC, 92JD Alex Favier took over winemaking at his family estate at the ripe old age of 20! Almost two decades later, Alex has become one of the most

accomplished winemakers in the region, and we call ourselves fortunate to have had a direct relationship with them for nearly as long. With fruit from 45 parcels, his entry-level Châteauneuf is an assemblage of the highest order. Showing gorgeous blackcurrant, roasted plum, strawberry, and garrigue, this savory red has exquisite balance and an inviting style.



2016 Domaine Benedetti "Larmes Papales" Châteauneuf-du-Pape \$59.99

96JD, 95WA One tremendous new arrival from the 2016 vintage is Benedetti's "Larmes Papales," an unctuous and powerful Grenache with flavors of

Chambord, cassis, lavender oil, and chocolate. The old vines from which this comes have produced deeply concentrated fruit. The wine is long on the palate with a smooth and supple finish—a persistent beauty that will engage and delight for many years to come. Note that this will likely be one of the last of the 2016s we see as a new release.



2016 Domaine Durieu "Lieu-Dit Bois-Lauzon" Châteauneuf-du-Pape \$89.99

98JD Durieu is a great addition to our Direct Import portfolio with their generously rich Châteauneufs and meaty Plan de Dieu reds. This lieu-dit bottling,

from an old-vine parcel in Bois-Lauzon, is at a whole new level. Dense, rich, and nearly flawless, this wine is unyielding in its intensity, yet keeps focus and balance right at its side. This is also from 2016, one of the greatest vintages in the last decade, and makes for a singular opportunity to possess one of the best wines of this hallowed vintage.

Ferraton's Star Is On the Rise in Northern Rhône



The Ferraton estate was established in 1946 by Jean Orëns Ferraton, with vineyards in Hermitage, Crozes-Hermitage, and St-Joseph. Soon, Jean's son Michel joined the estate and began to make most of their wines while expanding their holdings, especially in Cornas. In 1998 Michel Ferraton welcomed his friend Michel

Chapoutier, godfather of the Rhône Valley, as an investor in 1998. Chapoutier remained a silent partner, but his outsized influence pushed the estate towards organic and biodynamic farming.

A sad accident in 2006 left Michel Ferraton's son unable to take over the estate, as he had done from his own father. To help the family, Chapoutier went from silent investor to owner, and bought the estate outright. To maintain Ferraton's independence from his own projects, Chapoutier brought on winemaker Damien Bresset, who has been making the wines ever since. Sometimes we refer to Ferraton as baby Chapoutier, and there is indeed influence, but the estates differentiate themselves with separate vineyards, wineries, and winemakers—and prices. Ferraton wines are considerably more wallet friendly!

Since 2015, Ferraton has been getting more and more critical attention as its winemaking game continues to reach new heights. We are

currently savoring the 2018 vintage while we eagerly await the 2019s, which can be **ordered on pre-arrival** for a projected fall delivery. Both vintages have a lot going for them, from the ripe lusciousness of the 2018s to the crystalline acidity of the 2019s. Below are a few of our fave 18s that we think will enchant you as much as they have us.

The **2018 Ferraton Père et Fils "Les Dionnières"**

Ermitage \$79.99 97JD, 95VN, 94WE comes from the lieu-dit of Dionnières, on sedimentary soils just above the village of Tain-l'Hermitage. Fewer than 200 cases on average are made, and it is one of the best expressions from this site. Brimming with flavors of blackberry, licorice, black olives, and spice, it is a succulent yet complex Hermitage. A worthy wine to watch evolve in the cellar for years to come.



On some level, the strides that Ferraton has made in Cornas are even more intriguing. The **2018 Ferraton Père et Fils "Lieu-Dit Les Eygats"**

Cornas \$49.99 93–95JD, 94VN, 93WA is an example of the opulence that can come from this region. The fruit is all from sloped granitic soils, contributing to a wine that offers flavors of wild blueberry, chocolate, anise, and a whisper of smoky bacon. This is a showstopper style that will drink beautifully now and grow even more as it ages and develops.



Dans Les Bois (Into the Woods) with Domaine Sénéchaux

Domaine Sénéchaux takes its name from the nearby Bois de Sénéchaux, a vineyard surrounded by woods, where most of the



holdings for this estate reside. A mix of sandy soils on the hillside and galets (rolled stones) in the lower part of the vineyards contributes to a diversity of flavors in the grapes and to the signature style of this domaine—that of elegance. The renowned Cazes family of Bordeaux's Lynch-Bages is behind this estate, and their approach

to winemaking frames the purity of fruit in both the blanc and rouge bottlings. The reds also benefit from an extremely fine tannic structure. With that Bordeaux influence they have done what seems unthinkable in the modern Rhône—they make only two wines! All the better for them to focus their attention.

The newly arrived **2017 Domaine des Sénéchaux Châteauneuf-du-Pape Rouge \$44.99 94JD, 93WA, 93WE** is a classic beauty. Perfume of red fruit, savory herbs, lavender, and lilacs emerges from the glass. This has a silky and refined structure in the characteristic Sénéchaux style, along with an abundance of fruit from the warm 2017 vintage. Blackberries, cherries, tobacco leaf, anise, and pepper are just a few of the aromas that surface over the sensual mouthfeel of this wine. Great purity abounds, and it should evolve gracefully for a decade or more.

We also received a small allotment of the

2010 Domaine des Sénéchaux Châteauneuf-du-Pape \$64.99 94WA, 94JD, 93WS. Every

time I get a chance to reach into the library of this producer, I jump at it. From another iconic vintage, 2010 has hit the sweet spot at just over a decade of age. This supple wine has evolved with all the beautiful black fruits and potpourri nuance one would expect. This has a long life ahead of it but is perfect for drinking now.

Considering whites make up less than 10% of the production in Châteauneuf, it is easy to see why they sometimes fall through the cracks—but this is a mistake! The **2020 Domaine des Sénéchaux Châteauneuf-du-Pape Blanc \$39.99 92JD** is filled with the nectar of Golden Delicious apple, pear, pineapple, and beeswax. The oily texture provides

weight, and the wine finds great balance in its subtle acidity. It's drinking great now, but you could cellar for several years for an even more intriguing white wine experience.



2019 Châteauneuf-du-Pape: A Monumental Vintage

By Alex Pross, Rhône Buyer

The 2019 Châteauneuf-du-Pape vintage is an outstanding one with so many fantastic wines, it can be a dizzying experience trying to choose from among all the wonderful gems. A very warm growing season produced wines of incredible depth, power, and concentration while being surprisingly well balanced. With a gloomy 2021 vintage on the horizon and a teeny tiny 2020 vintage, it would be wise to stock up on these stellar wines while the picking is great!

Domaine de la Janasse



Hélène & Aimé Sabon, owners of Domaine de la Janasse.

Domaine de la Janasse is currently fashioning some of the most exceptional Grenache-based CdPs around, and their 2019s are stunning. The **2019 Domaine de la Janasse “Tradition” Châteauneuf-du-Pape \$49.99 95WE**,



93JD, 93DC, 91JS is a wonderful introduction to the style and feel of what Domaine de la Janasse can produce. A big step up is the exceptional **2019 Domaine de la Janasse “Chapin” Châteauneuf-du-Pape \$69.99 98JD, 98WE, 95DC**, which represents one of the greatest values in all of the Rhône Valley, showcasing what heights Grenache is able to achieve in this 100% Grenache CdP.

Old vines are known to exhibit a vineyard's character,

and the **2019 Domaine de la Janasse “Vieilles Vignes” Châteauneuf-du-Pape \$99.99 98WE, 97DC, 97JD, 95WS, 92JS** displays a wealth of berry fruit, spicy notes, and firm tannins that signal this wine can age gracefully for many years to come—a cellar-worthy addition to the fine wine connoisseur's collection.

Clos Saint Jean

Clos Saint Jean has been a critics' darling for years, and their 2019s are so heralded that we're grateful to have the opportunity to offer these wines to you! The

2019 Clos Saint Jean Châteauneuf-du-Pape \$42.99 93JD, 93WS,

92-94WA springs from the glass with sexy red fruit aromas, subtle spice, and hints of molten rock and minerals. The two top cuvées of this lauded estate are always among the top wines of the vintage, and



The famous galet soils of Châteauneuf-du-Pape.



2019 is no exception. The **2019 Clos Saint Jean “Combe des Fous” Châteauneuf-du-Pape \$139.99 100JD, 96WS, 94-96WA** is literal perfection in the bottle with depth, complexity, and layers of fruit that scream from the glass.

A seemingly impossible task but the **2019 Clos Saint Jean “Deus Ex Machina” Châteauneuf-du-Pape \$149.99 100JD, 97WS, 95-97WA** may even be better than the Combe des Fous, with a stunning array of red fruits, spice and minerals pulsating throughout this big beastly wine!



Domaine de la Vieille Julienne

An amazing biodynamic, Demeter-certified domaine that has been on an upswing for the last 15+ years, Domaine de la Vieille Julienne is a reference-point producer of balanced and beautifully integrated wines. The entry-level Côtes-du-Rhône can stand toe-to-toe with a lot of other estates' Châteauneuf, and, at \$29.99, the **2019 Domaine de la Vieille Julienne “Lieu-Dit Clavin” Côtes-du-Rhône 91JD** is a steal! The **2019 Domaine de la Vieille Julienne “Les Trois Sources” Châteauneuf-du-Pape \$79.99 96JD, 94DC** has usually 10%+ of Syrah, Counoise, and Cinsault blended in with the Grenache, which gives this wine complexity and depth reminiscent of more classical Châteauneuf blends.

A similar blend to the “Les Trois Sources” the **2019 Domaine de la Vieille Julienne “Les Hauts Lieux” Châteauneuf-du-Pape \$109.99 98JD, 95DC** ramps up the power and richness with shimmering red fruit and mineral-laced notes that tickle the tongue. A monumental achievement and a wine made in scarce amounts (less than 3000 bottles), the **2019 Domaine de la Vieille Julienne “Réserve” Châteauneuf-du-Pape \$339.99 100JD, 96DC** is the holy grail for Rhône collectors. Deep, rich, powerful—this is often *the* wine to own from any great Châteauneuf-du-Pape vintage. It rivals Beaucastel's Hommage as CdP's finest wine.

Taking Everything for Granite

By John Majeski, SF Rhône Specialist

Let's try a little experiment. Close your eyes and picture yourself slowly lugging a 20-liter jug of water up a 60-degree rocky gradient to feed thirst-stricken grapevines—vines that depend heavily on the sacrifice of your soon-to-be sore back for their own survival! On the way up you note that some of the crumbling terraces supporting the granite-rich vineyards could use serious rebuilding. Welcome to labor-intensive viticulture in Cornas and much of the Northern Rhône, where maintaining, nurturing, and cultivating these precipitous vineyards can demand an almost super-heroic strength. Brothers Eric and Joël Durand are not decked out in flashy superhero costumes as they work their vines, but their winemaking skills, meticulous standards, and sheer dedication are evident in every bottle they produce.

Cornas is a Celtic word meaning *burnt earth*, and today its earthly treasure lies in the terraced amphitheater and vine-laden slopes of this small appellation on the west bank of the Rhône River. Unlike its more heralded cousins to the north, Cote-Rotie and Hermitage, Cornas was long considered a bucolic “country wine,” and, even after acquiring AOC status in 1938, its wine was often relegated to the local cooperative for local consumption. Few growers even considered bottling their wines until the 1950s, and most of these reflected a more traditionalist style than the younger generations who followed. The brothers Durand renovated an ancient site in 1991 that had been long abandoned during

the First World War, when so many young men from Cornas went off to fight, leaving few to tend the unyielding vineyards. Over the last two decades they expanded their holdings to include wines from neighboring St-Joseph and St-Péray. Taking a less-interventionist approach, Eric and Joël reconsidered the longtime use of smaller barrels in favor of some 600L casks that allowed for slower development of the precious hillside fruit.



Cornas: precarious conditions for winemakers; joyous conditions for grapes.



The **2019 Eric & Joël Durand “Les Coteaux” St-Joseph \$29.99 92WA, 92WS, 90-92JD** reflects the terroir-driven, poised, subtly tannin-inflected style for which they are known. It is both aromatically vibrant and delicious, capable of aging well for a dozen years or more. The Coteaux is a complex tangle of blackberries, damson plums, cherries, and licorice—supple and expansive with touches of black pepper on the lingering finish. Try this wine with a juicy, charbroiled ribeye steak.

The **2018 Eric & Joël Durand “Empreintes” Cornas \$44.99 94DC, 92-94WA, 93JD 92WS** unleashes a dense array of lush, exuberant black fruits that fill the glass with deep layers of violets, ripe blackcurrants, peppery spice, and lavender, imbued with a fresh cleansing acidity on the textured rich finish. A perfect pairing? Roasted, rosemary-crusted lamb or perhaps a savory black bean chili stew.

Not to be outpolished, the **2018 Eric & Joël Durand “Confidence” Cornas \$54.99 96JD, 94WA, 93DC, 93WS** is sourced entirely from the steep, grounded granitic soils that are a signature of the finest vineyards in Cornas. The wine is a depth-charge immersion on the palate, both cerebral and visceral; it entralls with purity and elegance. Enwreathed in black fruit aromas and flavors of blackberry, crushed plums, bacon sizzle, black olives, and damp, mineral earth, this wine is both voluminous and concentrated, with plenty of oomph to last a few decades. But honestly, it's so delicious now in its youth that please don't feel guilty if you uncork it tomorrow! Such exotic flavors could marry an Indian tandoori and live happily ever after.

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