INTRODUCTION

The northern Rhône faces the twenty-first century with its tail apparently up. For so long the poor cousin of the grandee regions of Bordeaux, Burgundy, and Champagne, it is now an established source of fine wine, its dominant Syrah and Viognier varieties much in demand around the world. Vineyards are being revived from the ghosts of the past on its hillsides, often after many decades of abandonment. Prices for the wines are high, the sturdy economics of the area visible through tidied-up towns, restored houses, and smart cellar complexes.

Since the early 1970s, the transformation has been enormous—those were days when so few people bottled their own domaine wine that a sleuthing visit to the Post Office was obligatory to find out who those growers might be. There was no official information office, there were no maps, no signposts. There wasn't much export, and no press coverage apart from lyrical accounts of the annual wine fair opened by His Honour the Mayor.

This was also the period when vineyard care stood on the cusp between the ancient time-intensive practices of a generation that had lived through the Second World War and all its deprivations, and the new "cure in a sachet" methods proposed by ministries and chemical companies alike. It was also an age of innocence compared to today. Growers were happy to spend half a day explaining and talking to a young investigator. The veterans and the wise were modest and viewed their work as nothing specially elevated, their reasoning entrenched in the context of the long-term.

The 1980s were the decade spent indoors. Scales had started to fall off eyes, and with the vineyard safely under control from magic potions, attention could be turned to whizzy new machinery that made vinification easier. *Easier,* note, not better. The years 1982–85 forced growers' hands, anyway. The first of the hot late summer seasons in 1982 led to tear-away fermentations and the immediate risk of volatile wines—previously a humming background factor, not a front-row one. Cooling equipment that was more than a hose pipe of lukewarm water was required. Then new vats, then new techniques, and so on.

Some of these changes were advances. Destemming when stalks were not fully ripened, even though that judgment was more empyrical

> "Where is the truth? The truth is in the old bottles—before notoriety came along, with all the coverage and the modern methods."
>
> Gérard Chave, Hermitage

then than it is today, became more common, and so greatly helped the quality of many an uninspired *vigneron*. The outright cooling of cellars and a severe clampdown on temperature extremes developed from the practice of cooling individual vats. Old casks lined thick with tartrates were thrown out by the sensible. Chestnut gave way to oak.

But somewhere a line had to be drawn, and life became a touch too easy for some growers, who allowed a restlessness of spirit to sink into the cosy comfort of a cruise control sofa. Consequently, there are now only a few sages still present in the northern Rhône, and while there never were many, their number diminishes rather than grows.

The crossroads facing this region now is how to produce good-quality wine that is authentic and acceptable to a better- and better-informed public, one that is also bombarded with choice. The wine's price must therefore be competitive, even though its origins—noble as they may be—denote difficulty and obstruction. Scrabbling around an incline of 60° to produce a bottle of wine that sells for under 20 dollars is not likely to keep body and soul together for long.

While hillsides in 2004–05 were dotted with yellow machines clearing, digging, and opening up old sites, down in the cellars on the plains there is a collective apprehension about how to sell the wine if two or three bountiful vintages in a row came along. Only a few are spared such thoughts—the best names in the best places, a roster that includes Hermitage, Côte-Rôtie, and Cornas, and that excludes St-Joseph, Crozes-Hermitage, St-Péray, and even Condrieu.

Communication is likely to be one of the elements that allows the region to at least confirm its new footing in the world of wine. The northern Rhône is so different from the southern Rhône that its closest proxy in many ways is Burgundy. Its *terroir* is superb, the geology of millions of years ago providing a fascinating complex underlay for most of the vineyards. Indeed, its geology is more diverse than that of Burgundy—the clash of the Massif Central with the Alps and the presence of its powerful river in past and present shape bringing a wonderful array of shifts and surprises within a single hillside.

The hillsides themselves are proper slopes, not gently rolling ones. Stiff ledges that require *bon oeil, bon pied, bon dos*—good eye, good foot, good back—form the men and women who work them, and sculpt their outlooks into a gritty realism. It's easier to sit on a tractor than spend the day puffing up and sliding down the schist.

There is a single variety, too. As Burgundy has the Pinot Noir at the northern limit of its ripening, so the northern Rhône has the Syrah at the northern limit of its ripening.

Like Burgundy, plots are tiny. Men return to Cornas from successful careers elsewhere when they can take over the family's sole hectare of vines. Holding an *are* or two—100 or 200 square metres—at Hermitage is announced with pride and jealously guarded. A grower like Jean-Paul Jamet at Côte-Rôtie can talk of his eight hectares being made up of 25 plots on 17 different *lieux-dits,* or sites.

There is therefore much to explore, a world of charting and logging the realities and characteristics of the land, land that has held vineyards since Roman times. Still, local usage and description vary from person to the next. A stream has two or three different names, a vineyard a couple of sobriquets; some cartographers' names for places are not even known to the people who live and work there.

But back to the land and the people who work it. That is where the truth lies. In the corner of every bottle of wine there resides a piece of the maker's soul. That is what this book seeks to unravel.

THE NORTHERN RHÔNE IN HISTORY

In ancient times the northern Rhône vineyards of Côte-Rôtie and Hermitage were inextricably linked with the fortunes of Lyon and Vienne. The former, founded in 43 BC as Lugdunum, is where the Rhône meets the Saône, two important rivers forming a natural junction for the transport of goods towards Paris, the Alps, or the Mediterranean. For the Romans, Lyon was the hub of their road network in Transalpine Gaul, and a two-metre-wide road lined by walls ran from Lyon to the Narbonne region, tracking along the Rhône's right bank. Traces of this road exist between Cornas and Guilherand today.

Lyon and Vienne were rival cities in Roman times, with much of the local wealth and power centred at first on Vienne. The latter, the locus of the Allobroges people, became a full Roman colony under Caligula before AD 41 and was a flourishing base for Roman soldiers. In those days, its local wine, the *vinum picatum*, gained the attention of venerable Roman writers like Pliny the Elder. *Picatum* means "pitch," the wine holding tarry flavours according to scribes of the time. It was said to have been taken to Rome and appreciated there; whether the appreciation was purely for flavour is not certain, since wines were also critiqued for their potential medicinal powers in Roman times.

One assumes that the grapes for the *picatum* were grown on the hillsides around Vienne: as a colony, Vienne's seven hills were a natural good omen, and the cone of the Rhône valley heading south meant there were sun-filled hillsides for growing plants and vines.

Vienne stands on the east bank of the Rhône, and south of the town the eastern valley broadens out. The west side, however, is marked by steep hillsides, the granite outriders of the Massif Central. These press up against the river and are where today's Côte-Rôtie is situated. Sufficient Roman relics, including amphorae, mosaics, and vessels, have been found in this area to make it certain that there was a thriving local wine culture. This lasted until the feared disciplinarian Emperor Probus halted Lyon's monopoly on the sale of wine in Gaul in AD 280. By this time, the Roman grip on the region was in decline, with invasions from the Rhine and interventions between local tribes.

The legacy of the Roman age stands tall in the inspiring architecture of some of Vienne's buildings and monuments. As a lover of fine food, wine, and horse racing, I salute the Pyramide each time I am in Vienne. This pale stone obelisk stands as the reminder of the finish of furious chariot races gone by, just beyond the front door of Fernand Point's establishment, still a restaurant today, that was itself a temple for gastronomes in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Temple of Augustus and Livia, similar in style to the Maison Carrée in Nîmes, and the amphitheatre, not excavated until 1930 and holding up to 13,000 spectators, are other reminders of this belle époque. Across the river at St-Romain-en-Gal has been excavated since the 1970s a Gallo-Roman site that is thought to have been the working area of a town, with villas, workshops, and thermal baths. The recently established museum there has a thorough display of artefacts of the time, including mosaics.

Further down the river, at a beguiling curl in its course south, is the hill of Hermitage, its town of Tain known in Roman times as Tegna. The "Hermitage" tag on Tain is of course a clever piece of marketing frippery that is only around one hundred years old. Tegna's wine was mentioned in writing by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* and by Martial in his *Epigrams,* and while there is no Pyramide or theatre, there is a Taurobolium as the town's most authentic Roman relic.

The Taurobolium is a small, butty statue or altar that was used in the worship ceremonies to the god Mithras and that dates from AD 180. Mithraism was an active cult thought to have involved at most 2 per cent of the population, a male-only gathering of soldiers and minor functionaries who were placed in a hierarchy of seven grades, each one under the protection of the planets—Raven representing Mercury,

Nymphus for Venus, and Soldier for Mars, for instance (*The Oxford Classical Dictionary,* 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996). Whether bulls were ritually sacrificed on this very altar is debatable, but local legend has it that way. The Taurobolium's recent spring clean and move to the fore of the *place* in Tain is saluted.

The role of wine after the Roman era becomes less easy to track, with chroniclers only occasionally mentioning land units as apt for vines. It is unlikely that there was much transport and drinking of these wines outside the immediate region in the intervening centuries, until the emergence of the Church as the next powerful force around the ninth century AD.

With ecclesiastical and trade uses, wine production is thought to have become more organised from those times, with monasteries and religious orders cultivating specific plots. Taxes were in part levied in wine, and it became more integrated into local economies. By the sixteenth century, for instance, ownership had widened to include the monarchy with its vineyard at the Clos de Tournon, while the College at Tournon was another, slightly later example of an establishment vineyard owner in the region.

The religious combats of the sixteenth century weakened the Church's hold on local wine production and ownership, and gradually an aristocratic class started to own the most prestigious sites. The most precise records of this relate to the Hermitage hill, where noble families, several of them from the Ardèche, across the river, were present well before the Revolution of 1789.

The most potent influence on the northern Rhône emerged towards the end of the seventeenth century and came in the shape of the port of Bordeaux. As winemaking there developed, growers started to ship casks overseas to a variety of destinations—all to the north. It became evident to some that the addition of a robust wine like Hermitage to the sometimes reedy, thin wines of the Gironde would benefit *tout le monde,* and gradually an active trade in wine travelling from east to west sprang up.

For years, the history of this trade has been largely recounted from the Bordelais perspective. Ideally, one assumes, it was thought better not to make too much noise about this practice, although some labels are thought to have borne the word "Hermitagé" at a time in the nineteenth century when that brought some kudos to the château. Records from a cellar book and local Rhône archives have now come to light that shed much more light on just how extensive and regular was this connection. Only annoying kerfuffles like war with England got in the way of it, indeed.

The northern Rhône beneficiary was Hermitage. That was the sun, the other vineyards its satellites. Even Côte-Rôtie, with its gentler, more perfumed wine, was a subsidiary in this business, its economic progress correspondingly weaker. Hermitage also had a confirmed following of its own in countries like Britain and Russia, whose aristocrats were importing casks by the late seventeenth century.

The cellar book of the Tain vineyard owner and merchant Balthazar Macker records the sale of wines not just from Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie, but from Cornas, St-Péray, Mauves, Croze, Gervans, and Mercurol as well—the latter trio all part of the Crozes-Hermitage *appellation*. Starting in 1760, this record sets down the date of harvests and their quantities. Even the years 1845 to 1880 are quantified, and with an average yield of under 20 hectolitres per hectare, show that for most people, vine growing was only one option in making ends meet. Hence the prevalence of polyculture in all the areas beyond Hermitage—there wasn't similar, regular demand for their wines, production was uncertain, and money was needed through the year. Raising animals and growing cereal or fruit allowed a family to at least subsist.

The Rhône was the natural conduit for the transport of the wine, with routes south and north established; the southern route involved the Mediterranean port of Sète and also the Canal du Languedoc on the way to Bordeaux, a 40-to-60-day journey. The northern route encompassed the Saône, a brief trip along the

Canal du Centre and then the Loire, and out into the Atlantic—another near-two-month operation. A different version of this route was to ship the wine to Condrieu, then cart it by mule across Mont Pilat to St-Rambert-sur-Loire, just northwest of St-Étienne. Water transport was preferred over land because the land taxes were usually double, as each province picked up a share on the way through.

The classic system of transport was a barge towed alongside the river, and it is worth reflecting on just how complicated and costly an operation this was: the goods had to be valuable to justify any long-distance transport. Before steam, the average journey time from Arles to Lyon was six weeks. A large barge required 48 horses, 12 men to direct them, seven mariners, and two lads. Many of the mariners were drawn from Condrieu and the village opposite, Roches-de-Condrieu.

In 1829 a veritable revolution occurred, with the first steam-powered vessel, *Le Pionnier*, taking just three and a half days to travel from Arles to Lyon. By 1855 a further important step forward came with the opening of the Lyon-Avignon-Marseille railway line. By 1856 the railway ran through Lyon, allowing goods to stay on the same train rather than be transshipped if travelling by water. It is said that the Ampuis growers of Côte-Rôtie, however, stuck to water during the nineteenth century—mindful of their pennies, no doubt (C. Montez, *Le Monde du Négoce du Vin,* Université de Lyon, 1993).

Outside Hermitage, a few specific vineyards gained a following, led by enterprising owners in the nineteenth century. The *vin de Mure* was a Crozes-Hermitage made by the counts of Mure, owners at Hermitage as well; the Mercurol *blanc* of Charles Tardy, also a Crozes-Hermitage, was subtitled *Coteau des Pends* on its label at least as early as 1875. The *vin de Mauves* was recognised in literature as well, although domaine names did not accompany it. As Crozes was close to Hermitage, and Mauves was more distant—across the river and a little way south in the Ardèche—there may have been a natural, logistical reason for this lack of precise identity.

Most wine remained sold in cask, with local cafés the principal outlets. Working towns like Valence, Le Puy, and St-Étienne were large buyers, with only a few wines sent up to Lyon. St-Étienne was home to coal miners, and there was steady trade with them, the wine shipped by train as a rule. For Cornas, Valence was a natural customer, the journey flat and simple for a horse and cart.

Bottling was patchy outside Hermitage, Château-Grillet, and Côte-Rôtie until after the Second World War, and the lesser *appellations* depended on nearby merchants, the *négoce* trade, to spread the word and sell further afield. A village like St-Péray was always home to a collection of *négociants* who would buy the wine young from small cultivators. Condrieu lacked enough wine after the two world wars to justify a local merchant, and growers sold the year's wine to local restaurants and private customers by Christmas. It would then be recognised as the chef Fernand Point Condrieu or Viognier ahead of the grower's name.

Wine fairs open to the public also started up. More ceremonial events like Paris, London, and Brussels exhibitions, where medals and diplomas were awarded, had been attended by Rhône growers from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The Wine Tasting Fair of Tournon and Tain l'Hermitage started in 1928, a three-day December event that included fruits, honey, and the sale of vineyard products. One of the last named paraded under the ominous title of *produits insecticides arsenicaux*—no translation needed. Wine families showing at the 1930 edition included Coursodon and Gonon from Mauves, Michel from Cornas, and Delas and Paul Jaboulet Aîné. Antonin Coursodon and François Michel were both mayors of their villages, incidentally.

The first *appellations* in the Côtes du Rhône of 1940 were divided into three groups. There was a northern group, consisting of Côte-Rôtie, Château-Grillet, and Condrieu; a middle group, consisting of Cornas, St-Péray, Hermitage, and Crozes-Hermitage; and finally a southern Rhône group, made up of Tavel and

Châteauneuf-du-Pape. St-Joseph was added in 1956.

The dual attacks of phylloxera in the 1870s and two world wars that cost many young men their lives meant that the northern Rhône's hillside vineyards were progressively abandoned during the twentieth century. The only solid outpost was Hermitage, its area restricted by law as well as by geography. Côte-Rôtie, Cornas, and Condrieu all lived a precarious existence during the 1950s and 1960s, with the added pressure of land being sold to build houses, since little future could be seen in running a vineyard.

In the early 1970s unexpected sources lent a helping hand. First, Burgundy became very expensive, the growers pushing up prices after the mighty vintages of 1969 and 1971. But quality across Burgundy was bleakly uneven from one domaine to the next; the 1972s started life very high in acidity (only to blossom much later), and 1973, 1974, and 1975 were all pretty hopeless.

The other natural source for important red wines, Bordeaux, experienced the disastrous and much speculated vintage of 1972, when crop was bought by merchants before the wine had even been made. The subsequent washout brought down brokers in London and Bordeaux, and the modest 1973 vintage did little to haul the area out of its mess.

The Rhône was the next stop on the trail for susbstantial red wines, and the early 1970s saw demand rise across both the northern and southern Rhône, with even areas like Gigondas coming to the fore. From a modest base—less than Burgundy and four times less than Bordeaux—exports for the whole Rhône region jumped by over 52 per cent between 1971 and 1973. Britain's imports more than tripled, for instance; Germany's rose by more than 50 per cent. Switzerland, for long the main buyer of Rhône, also rose by 65 per cent.

Naturally, the rush petered out until resuming in 1979, fuelled by the wonderful 1978 vintage. It's worth noting that the United States never really participated in the Rhône's 1970s growth: the USA 1980 figure was 11 per cent below that of 1970, as against the four-times rise for Britain, two and a half times for Germany, and twelve times for the Netherlands, for instance.

With a commercial toehold of sorts established, and a cracking vintage to sell, the late 1970s heralded a more sustained advance by the region. Specialist importers like Robin Yapp in Britain and Kermit Lynch in the United States developed their businesses, and word started to filter out. The first edition of this book appeared in 1978 and was commented on by many importers as guiding them to domaines. More growers bottled some of their wine, and even domaine signposts and *appellation* pamphlets appeared—little details, but the area had been the Wild West before.

Two remaining influences awaited the area to secure its renown for our times. From the United States, Robert Parker started to applaud the wines of the Rhône in his *Wine Advocate* letter. One of the men he most applauded, calling him one of the best winemakers on the planet, was Marcel Guigal, whose family ran a mainly *négoce* business at Ampuis. Both Parker and Guigal are now known the world over, with Guigal the focus of attention on the northern Rhône wines. The Guigals—Marcel; his wife, Bernadette; and their son, Philippe—have become the largest vineyard owners at Côte-Rôtie, while one of Marcel Guigal's less known successes is the amount of white Rhône wine he sells. This represents over 20 per cent of all his wines, and the *appellation* of Condrieu has been a notable beneficiary, with Guigal buying small growers' wines for distribution under the house label.

Côte-Rôtie's advance since the 1980s can be traced back to Guigal and his international effect. Even in 1982, friends of Guigal could buy the select *La Mouline* and *La Landonne* wines by the case or more—the 1978s sold for under 90 francs a bottle at the time. Nowadays, single bottles of these wines have to be prised out, with other wines included in an order; prices are regularly £100 to £200 (US$175–US$350) a bottle

"I plant and prune, but it's nature that does a lot more than me."

Philippe Desbos, Domaine de Gouye, St-Joseph

according to the vintage. Meanwhile, small-domaine Côte-Rôties are distributed far and wide, even if their prices are nearer £20 (US$35) or more.

Spurred by the demand, Côte-Rôtie grew from 102 hectares in 1982 to 231 hectares in 2005. Not all the new plantings are on full, well-exposed slopes, but the figures show the scale of the advance. Condrieu is another *appellation* that has grown enormously—14 to 135 hectares between 1982 and 2005. Even more so there, quality has not followed hand in hand, but the changed economics have clearly been the prompt for such expansion.

With such a modest past, there never has been much grandeur about the Rhône. This is a region of hands-on workers, not delegators. The northern Rhône also breeds a singular tenacity of spirit and observation—people who are used to being on their own up a hillside, physically contending with the latest set of challenges posed by the nature around them. Their cellars add to this sense of intimacy and ruggedness; they have traditionally been small, cramped affairs, where the litres of wine taken from the hillside are personally handled.

The proximity of the *vigneron* to his or her land is a thread that I have witnessed weaken over the past thirty years. As the wines have sold better, the noble art of the *vigneron* has become more an act of commerce and less one of dedicated intuition that I encountered when I made my first visits in June 1973. This is no surprise, but it is cause for lament. The retirement of growers who know their soil and express no fashionable, explicitly articulated philosophy means that one more genuine link in the chain between human and planet has gone. The door opens to more victims of technology and wine school blight than it does to children of an earlier, more natural, less imposing time.

The men of the soil who have most inspired this region in the past 40 years have been Auguste Clape, Gérard Chave, and Georges Vernay. They are all now mostly retired. Their understanding of the vineyards and their bounteous common sense have meant that they never fell prey to whim. Nor did they stand rooted in an age gone by—they modified practices through a mix of observation, good listening, and accumulated experience. Never, though, did they chase extra yields for commercial reasons, never did their belief in the quality and integrity of their vineyards waver, even when housing developers were waving fat cheques at them and their few hillside colleagues. It is thanks to them that today the region's reputation is so solid.

THE NORTHERN RHÔNE TOWARDS 2015

The balancing act for the northern Rhône in the coming decade will be to ensure that prices do not outstrip quality, and so alienate a well-disposed clientele. The slump in Burgundy of the 1970s, when quantity got away from quality, and even in parts of the Rhône in the early 1980s, remind one that overcharging remains the great faux pas.

Of course, the debate acquires a wilful turn when one takes into account the provenance of the wines—high slopes that often demand manual labour. If one respects the principles of correct practice, and if methods even approach organic status, the costs escalate fast. In the words of Chapoutier's Albéric Mazoyer: "You should calculate 1,200 to 1,400 hours of work a year per hectare on a hillside vineyard. The product's price starts from there; if we can't sell it at that price, then we're in trouble, and of course it goes without saying that the wine must be good."

Planting a vineyard from scratch is no lightweight enterprise, and is another way of showing

the stark realities surrounding the price of a hillside wine. Jean-Michel Gérin of Côte-Rôtie estimates the cost of clearing and planting one hectare to be Euros 70,000 (£46,000/US$80,000). "And then it's four years before that hectare can make any Côte-Rôtie," he adds. As for the cost of buying a hectare of mature vineyard, that goes towards £150,000/US$270,000.

> "To achieve *grand vin*, you mustn't count—neither the efforts nor the work. You must keep your attention on the end oeuvre, and be patient."
>
> Marcel Guigal, Côte-Rôtie

Some *appellations* can handle the economic balancing act better than others. Hermitage is obviously the first contender. Production there rests in a tight circle of hands, and the wine's reputation is well established. Demand is steady, even though the white can be sadly difficult to sell, and prices are able to reflect the cost realities.

Even within Hermitage, though, a hierarchy of places clearly exists. The muscle and natural depth of the wine comes from the west end of the hill and tapers away the more one moves east. The rocky majesty of *Bessards* and the sun-filled sweep of *Méal* stand in contrast with the more regular slopes of *La Croix* or *Torras et les Garennes*, the last two set in with fruit trees and richer soil. Expect more *climat* identity to be associated by the keen drinkers of this great wine: a Hermitage from the western sites—meaning from the longest-established names like Chapoutier, Delas, and Chave—will always be the "truth" of the place. Were Paul Jaboulet Aîné to restrict their ambition to produce so much *La Chapelle* from sources all over the *appellation*, it too would be a faithful emblem of the heart of the hill.

Côte-Rôtie is more difficult. It's harder to identify a certainty of place among the growers there. There is a diversity of cuvées and styles and, tellingly, a diversity in the quality of the locations across the hills and the plateau. There are some very modernist wines as well, where technique dominates over *terroir*. Modernists would themselves argue that this makes the place a stimulating one, a sort of cultural crossroads. The consumer would reply that it is hard to know what to expect from different sources, and also that the quality is not always a given, with the final sting that prices are high by any international standard.

The Côte-Rôtie growers have taken sensible steps to plant a cuttings vineyard derived from the best old Serine woodstock, and as a group, most are no longer spraying insecticides from the helicopter hired to cover the vineyards. But a blind tasting of a large number of domaine wines often brings mixed results, a frustrating number of the wines having been created more in the cellar than in the vineyard.

High-quality sources like Gilles Barge, Clusel-Roch, Jean-Michel Gérin, the Jamet brothers, Patrick Jasmin, René Rostaing, and of course the omnipotent Marcel Guigal all fly the flag high and handsome, even though styles like Gérin and Guigal come from the more oaked school. Other growers are good in some years, less certain in others. If you do not work the best locations, you are always chasing the game, but there is also work to be done here.

Hope at Côte-Rôtie stems from a number of committed young growers who are gradually finding the sort of quality that will ensure the *appellation*'s well-being in the future. What has to follow is the consistency from one year to the next, above all in the wine that most matters—the classic or regular cuvée. It will not be good enough to produce 3,000 bottles of a full-bodied special wine, and sell a diluted regular Côte-Rôtie beside it.

Names to watch here include the Bernard brothers, the Bonnefond brothers, Duclaux (elder brother David from 2004 is sharing the presidency of the Syndicat des Vignerons with Christophe Bonnefond), the questing, talented

Jean-Michel Stéphan, and Stéphane Ogier, especially if he can relax his enthusiasm for extraction and new oak.

Vineyard sites that will become better known in the future, beyond the "regulars" like *Brune, Blonde*, and *Landonne,* are *Les Grandes Places* and *Côte Rozier*, with potential to come, running north to south, from *Montmain, Les Rochains, Moutonnes, Chavaroche, Lancement, Mollard,* and *Maison Rouge*.

An *appellation* with a greater question mark surrounding it is St-Joseph. It is said that St-Joseph sells well in France but is hard to shift outside. A few of the leading domaines sell correctly abroad, but the wine lacks an easy drinking profile such as that possessed by Crozes-Hermitage. It has become too expensive compared to Crozes, but a good part is hillside wine, while a good amount of Crozes comes from an easy-to-cultivate plain.

The likelihood is therefore that there will be two categories of St-Joseph: higher-priced wines from meticulous, high-profile domaines, and a low-priced category with little fancy cask ageing that will be aimed at supermarkets. For any young grower who lacks profile and experience, this is not the time to be the owner of a large Crédit Agricole loan—and an ordinary vineyard at St-Joseph.

Jean-Louis Chave of Hermitage and St-Joseph sees potential buying activity concerning the hills of St-Joseph in the coming years. "The next ten years will see the Drôme *vignerons* investing in St-Joseph," he states, "because they have more money than the Ardechois; they also understand that *terroir* means a lot more in St-Joseph than somewhere like the plain of *Les Chassis* at Crozes-Hermitage. They will come over here for the hillside locations."

This is echoed by Jacques Grange of Delas: "In the next 10 years, people will want to go more deeply into things. Demand for the wine from the best vineyards will be strong. It will be those with the best exposures, and the truth of some of the *lieux-dits* will come through. That will mean sorting out an area like the Hermitage hill, and so the tail end of an *appellation*—the east end of the Hermitage hill, for instance—will not be a popular source."

At St-Joseph the leading vineyard names for the future will include *Les Oliviers, Dardouille, St-Joseph, Vigne de l'Hospice, Ste-Épine,* and *Les Royes*. Both *Oliviers* and *Royes* are good *climats* for white wine, as well. All these lie in the southern zone of the *appellation*.

St-Joseph's other potential development in the coming years is the number and the quality of organic or biodynamic domaines. Already there are two former Co-opérateurs who have set up biodynamically, both of them providing accomplished wines—the Ferme des Sept Lunes and Domaine Monier. There are also growers who fall into the STGT category, whose cuvées retain the simplicity of appeal of good country wines.

Crozes-Hermitage is also an *appellation* where there is enormous room for a greater hierarchy of sites to be recognised. The granite areas of the northern sector are an immediate starting point, but pricing power will always be constrained by the mass market appeal of the fleshy, fruit-forward wines of the low-cost plain in the south. Even though the north possesses greater pedigree, the dilemma for growers there is how far they can push *terroir* while charging a fair, higher price for their wine as compared with the southern area.

The sites exist already. At Gervans, there has always been the sunny hillside of *Les Picaudières*, worked with a sometimes forgetful but willing hand by Raymond Roure in the 1970s. This is now split between Paul Jaboulet Aîné and M. Roure's cousin Robert Rousset. The site's Syrah is rich and wholesome, a wine of true dimension. Along the patchwork vineyards of the northern Crozes area are other sites for both Syrah and Marsanne in waiting, ironically not singled out by their growers as small gems. Around the corner of the Hermitage hill, the white wine site of the *Coteau des Pends*, a south-facing ridge at Mercurol, is likely to become better recognised.

Condrieu's name has been revived since the 1970s as the Viognier has become known and

accepted around the world, but it is still an *appellation* of varied quality. Viognier is capricious, and judging the correct moment to harvest it is a fine art: too late, and the wine becomes highly alcoholic, clumsy, and low in acidity; too early, and there is a fake freshness, indeed an austerity embedded in the wine.

The other *cause* surrounding Condrieu is cask use. The trend has become to use new oak with late-harvested crop to make sweet versions of the wine. The reality is that this "formula" suits anyone with young vines; the high levels of residual sugar can mask any lack of matter on the palate. There is a boudoir opulence to the wines, but also a lack of genuine length and grip.

With the polyculture mentality still ingrained in several domaines—fruit production leading the way—and with incomers from other trades, there is certainly some uneven vineyard care and winemaking at Condrieu. The rapid expansion of the vineyard—14 hectares in 1982, up to 135 hectares by 2005—has naturally led to inconsistencies in the wines. Nor are they straightforward to sell in today's competitive market. Expect consolidation of domaines at Condrieu—its price ensures that it's a struggle for smaller growers to place the wine once buyers become cautious or simply drink less.

For the following decade, the hope here must be that growers at Condrieu possess enough confidence to let the soil do the talking. More hands-off vinifications will allow the wine's innate complexity to be better expressed, with more nuance between one site and another. While the sanded granite known locally as *arzelle* remains a common theme, there are variations—harder rock, outcrops of clay and limestone, clear distinctions between exposure and altitude. The result should be crisper, less confected wines, providing growers hold their nerve and do not pander to the sweet 'n' easy market.

Cornas continues on its steady way. Plantation is occurring, with some of the very steep slopes levered back into production after lying overgrown since the wars of the twentieth century. There is a healthy mix of young and veteran, and tremendous respect for the patrimony of the place. Cornas is a village with the utmost wine heritage, and that breeds natural hope for the future.

> "*Terroir* is above all what counts; after it, the vinification just gives a little helping hand."
>
> Georges Vernay, Condrieu

I would single out Cornas as the northern Rhône *appellation* where winemaking has most improved in the past 20 years. There is much greater clarity of fruit and flavour than in the past, and in a vintage like 2000, Cornas stands well alongside the top two of Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie, at clearly inferior prices.

Issues exist, though. Density of plantation is one. The latest plantings in the northern zone of the *appellation* are a lot less than the old, 10,000-plants-per-hectare rule of thumb. At around 4,000 to 5,000 per hectare, the production of each plant is therefore increased to make up the permitted output, and this is not beneficial for the quality of the juice. A trend that has continued for 30 years at Cornas is therefore that growth in production intensity has outstripped growth of the vineyard area.

Another feature of Cornas, a mathematical one, is that the vineyard has become much younger in the past few years. In the 1970s, plenty of the plots had been planted postphylloxera or between the wars; many of these have now disappeared, and with old sites re-exploited, one-third of the total vineyard by 2005 was under 15 years old.

Down the road, St-Péray, the last of the main northern Rhône *appellations,* has been struggling to rejuvenate itself since the mid-1990s. Initiatives have been taken to broaden the sales network, with the Co-opérative de Tain, Paul Jaboulet Aîné, Chapoutier, and other merchants —even Tardieu-Laurent—intervening. The pity is that this is good white wine *terroir,* with mixes of clay and granite suited to the Marsanne and the Roussanne, too. There is an agreeable nerve in the wines that imparts good definition to

them, with the ability to age into greater variety and complexity of flavour and aroma.

And as for the tiniest name of all, Château-Grillet, well, welcome signs of life have emerged since the late 1990s. The wines possess greater core matter and show greater poise than they have done for some years. Despite rumours during the 1990s that the property might be sold, the Neyret-Gachet family has stayed the course, and one can salute its continued independence.

THE NORTHERN RHÔNE VINEYARDS

The prevailing influence on the northern Rhône is the granite rock of the Massif Central, a vast ridge whose eastern flank runs close to the appropriately rugged industrial towns of Roanne and St-Étienne in central France, and extends all the way west towards Cognac. In a vinous sense, the Massif influences both Beaujolais and the northern Rhône, stretching from north of Villefranche-sur-Saône down to south of Valence.

The Massif Central is extremely old, dating from Paleozoic times that started 545 million years ago. Attaching a precise date is very difficult, but some geologists veer towards the end of this Primary Era as it entered the next geological phase, called the Mesozoic—anything from 220 to 350 million years ago. The Massif Central's core granite has weathered and fissured over time, with the change of climate as France has moved north and moved between hot and cold seasons, encouraging the disintegration of rock towards soil over long periods of time.

Granite is composed of many minerals, some of which break down over time more easily than others. Mica, for instance, is more susceptible to chemical weathering than quartz, as are feldspars—compounds that contain potassium, sodium, and calcium. Across the northern Rhône lies this granite mass in its varying degrees of decomposition or rot (technical terms, thanks to the very instructive James E. Wilson, *Terroir,* Mitchell Beazley, London 1998).

On the west side of the Rhône from Côte-Rôtie, down to Cornas and St-Péray, the granite and its associated rocks have weathered at different speeds and under different local influences. Even within the *appellation* of Côte-Rôtie, there are two marked influences. The northern zone is schist—a layered, recrystallised rock with sometimes grey-blue tinges; it contains both white and black mica. Crisp and liable to splinter if firmly impacted, schist is the prevailing element running down to the *Côte Brune* at the centre of the *appellation*. The northern zone holds more slow-weathering iron oxide than the southern Côte-Rôtie areas, and this seems to bring more tension and nerve to the texture of the wines from here.

The southern zone of Côte-Rôtie, broadly starting at the *climat* called the *Côte Blonde,* is more decomposed, grainy, often sandy granite, with traces of the schist present but in much lesser quantity. Here there is gneiss, a rock of very similar composition to granite that weathers to form a light-coloured soil with quartz, weathered feldspars, and white mica present: hence the *blonde* description. The northern soil is darker to the eye, its air more rugged than the softer brown, seemingly warmer southern stone.

The south of Côte-Rôtie at Tupin and Semons marks the start of the development of the *arzelle* topsoil of Condrieu, the next *appellation* south, where the white vine Viognier is grown. The Viognier also performs better in the southern area of Côte-Rôtie than the northern.

As the Rhône runs down towards the Mediterranean, the theme of hillsides lining the west bank continues. One of the variables is how close or how far they stand from the river, with marked changes in shelter and wind flow. High plateau areas at spots like Chavanay, in the north of the St-Joseph *appellation*, are very windy, for instance, whereas some plots like *Montmain* at Côte-Rôtie and *Les Oliviers* at St-Joseph are veritable sun traps, their hill flanks running due west towards the Massif Central landmass.

The broad rule for hill vineyards applies here—namely, that the central slope is the best site, since it gathers the influence of the underlying rock, more naked higher up, with the

effects of long-term erosion and mineral-rich soils. It also receives the full effects of the sun. Lower down the slopes come the richer soils, the aggregation of many years of downward drift with the intrinsically richer soil of the plain near the river. That is why one can see flourishing vegetables like cardoons, tomatoes, and beans growing in a little private garden at the foot of the prime granite hill of *Bessards* at Hermitage.

The Massif also provides the natural siting for many a good vineyard because of the mass of rivulets and streams running off it and feeding the Rhône. This creates the underwritten theme of all the west bank *appellations*. Cornas is three kilometres (just under two miles) north to south yet has 11 streams running through it. They are all full after heavy rain, with just one or two providing year-round moisture. Nevertheless, they create a series of brief valleys and inlets, every one of which has a southward-facing slope, ideal for cultivation.

While Côte-Rôtie is a pretty compact *appellation*, Condrieu is more straggling. It runs over sixteen kilometres or ten miles north to south, so there are changes in the nature of the granite along that course. Around the small town of Condrieu, there are a couple of important, broad and steep slopes called *Vernon* and *Chéry*. These are marked by the *arzelle* top soil, about 40 cm (centimetres; 16 inches) deep, constituted of decomposed rock, mica, and some schist, with at times some clay underneath, as can be found at Georges Vernay's *Vernon* plot. These two hills rise quite close above the Rhône.

Further south at Malleval—still part of the Condrieu *appellation*, although outside the first decree of 1940—the granite is harder and younger. There are spots that lose the sun early here, too, in this windy inlet set back from the Rhône. This area accords the wine more mineral features than does the central Condrieu zone, where the flavours are usually rich and opulent.

Across Condrieu, there are shifts in the degree of warmth in the wine—the divide running alone fruit-floral lines on the bouquets, and rich white fruit versus dried fruit–nut flavours on the palate. Textures are warm and oily or can be more mineral, with a decisive edge, as well.

Like Côte-Rôtie, St-Joseph falls into a north-south divide. The northern area—Chavanay and Serrières, for instance—holds granite that is harder and younger than that of the southern area—villages like St-Jean-de-Muzols and Mauves. The midpoint comes on a line around Arras, where the climate becomes more markedly Mediterranean and signs of southern life like crickets and green oaks appear.

Syrah wines from the north of St-Joseph have a different feel and aspect than the southern Syrahs, as well. The former are often darker—black more than red in colour—and their flavours are marked by peppery black fruit. The southern areas provide more rounded wines, with often less strident tannins. The vineyards in the northern area were also incorporated later into the *appellation*, and their vines are generally younger than the southern spots, where specific sites have become more readily recognised over years of experience.

In the original southern area of St-Joseph, the granite changes between the hill behind the small town of Tournon and St-Jean-de-Muzols, the next *commune* north of the Doux River. The Tournon hill is firmer rock than the St-Jean slopes, while at the next main *commune* of Mauves, there are clear rock differences just one hundred metres apart. There, *Montagnon* has loess mixed in with its granite—what the locals can call *terres mortes* because it is so dusty, while *Paradis,* close by, is firm granite with alluvial stones.

Further south, the one main seam of limestone present at St-Joseph bears fruit in the notable white wines of the Domaine Courbis at Châteaubourg. For their Syrah the Courbis find that more spice and assertive tannins come from the limestone than from their more granite source at the next village of Glun.

The most important wine of the Ardèche, Cornas, comes from a compact zone of a little over one hundred hectares just two miles long. Here the soil differences include some limestone—the extension of the seam running up

"Vinification is a laugh; the character of wine is down to differences of exposure and soil."

Raymond Trollat, St-Joseph

from St-Péray and on to Châteaubourg—in the northern and northeastern spots. Indeed, there was a conscious decision to exclude the overtly limestone parts of the northern site of *Les Arlettes* from the *appellation* zone, while including those that held more granite. The limestone of *Les Arlettes* produces Syrah Côtes du Rhône, the granite Cornas.

Cornas wines show quite marked tannins and a wild side, or what can be termed rusticity or rawness, when young—in contrast with the savoury richness of the best central slopes, where the decomposed granite or gneiss can be tinged with spots of clay lower down the slopes. The gneiss of the central strip around the famed *Reynards climat* is seemingly less evolved than the sandy granite of the southern sector of Cornas, where the fast-draining soil brings the *appellation*'s most supple wines.

The granite disperses more across the straggly *appellation* of St-Péray, the end of the line for the northern Rhône. With a lot of intruding housing these days, some plots have disappeared altogether, while others amount to one man's small folly. There is a limestone theme from the hill of Crussol that dominates the town, while away to the west the granite incidence revives in the few sites cultivated along the road towards Le Puy. The westerly granite is less weathered than the sanded granite that runs along the boundary with Cornas.

By now, the reader will have granite emerging from his or her temples, but help is at hand. Ah, the Alps, those young intruders!

This is where the meeting point of Hermitage and Crozes-Hermitage, the two *appellations* on the east bank of the Rhône, brings forward the variety of rock and soil influences that is compelling when investigating the origins of any wine.

The clash between the shifts of the Alps, with their shedding of amounts of alluvial deposits—rolled glacier stones, dusty debris—and the sturdy righteousness of the Massif Central's granite is at the heart of these two wines. In the Mesozoic age, between 65 million and 245 million years ago, the Alps were still a sea, but what is today Italy was a landmass drifting towards northwest Europe. This is the period when limestones of the northern and southern Rhône were formed. By the Cenozoic age, up to 65 million years ago, the plate movement from Italy was halted by the Massif Central. Around 30 to 35 million years ago, in the Late Eocene to the Early Oligocene age, there sprang up the Alps, composed of great sedimentary deposits. Weathering and erosion followed, including the glacier formations starting from 1.64 million years ago.

Today's southern reaches near the Mediterranean were ocean, that legacy being the marine deposits found in the southern Rhône vineyards near the river. Subsequently in the Quaternary age, the time of the Great Ice Age, the definition of the rivers started to take more final shape in today's terms. The Ice Age was in fact several periods of alternating cold and warm periods, the latter bringing the conditions for man, plants, and animals to grow and develop. As the glaciers melted and rivers eroded the rock faces, great amounts of rock were removed and literally rolled down the young mountainsides, crumbling as they went. But as anyone who has played with stones on a beach knows, the ones there longest are the smoothest, the unceasing friction bringing them to a sleek, near-shiny patina.

That is why there are lots of rolled and rounded stones across the plain of *Les Chassis* at Crozes-Hermitage and also in places along the eastern stretches of the Hermitage *appellation*. These alluvial stones, or *galets,* are the residue of these former rivers eroding into the newly formed Alpine mountains. One of the main conduits was the Isère River. This flows from the direction of the Alps, through Grenoble, and into the Rhône immediately to the south of *Les Chassis,* the meeting of two important fluvial sources. (Reference and further reading

"You make good wine in the vineyards, not the cellar. The vinegrower constructs the quality and the winemaker converts it."

Michel Chapoutier, Hermitage

recommended from the excellent *Atlas of French Wines and Vineyards,* Hachette 2000.)

The Rhône has another surprise in store, namely that it changed course at some undefined moment a very long time ago. Once upon a time it flowed behind the main hill of Hermitage, whose strong granite rock is linked to that of Tournon opposite across the river. It is rare for such firm granite to be found on this eastern side of the Rhône—witness to the fact that the river subsequently eked out a turn in its route around the west end of the hill, not the east.

With a set of fixed differentials stemming from the geology and siting of the vineyards, the hand of man is another important annual variable. Vineyards can be set on a prime south-facing site, but in clambering around these hillsides, it's clear that some *vignerons* take their responsibilities more seriously than others. Alongside serious dry stone retaining walls, their ledges containing two or three plants across, are shambolic, roughly cast slopes, the vines gripping the loose soil and prone to erosion at the onset of any serious rain. The steady, experienced men raise their eyes heavenwards at such "plantation fever" practices, which can be found at Condrieu as well as on the hill of Hermitage, if you please—not just at the lesser *appellations*.

This sense of Klondyke brings a foreboding of what may afflict the Rhône in the future—too much wine that is sloppily produced from the start to the end of the process. Can one expect a poorly created vineyard to sequel into a natural, handcrafted wine? I think not.

On the surface, vineyard practices have moved along in an encouraging way since the 1980s. Indeed, vineyards are less ignored than they were in those days when technology gripped most domaines. The constraint is the hillside setting, of course. The steeper the slope, the harder and riskier it is to work the soil, with erosion a constant threat. At Côte-Rôtie, Vincent Gasse calculates over 1,000 hours are required to work a hectare during the year, set alongside tasks like spraying weedkiller, which would take 10 hours.

So soil can be worked between rows of vines, and grasses planted as well. Vineyard practices like growing grass between the rows get a lot of attention and sound ecologically correct, but as Jean-Louis Chave points out, "it's often there to restrict abundance and excess growth that is coming from clones in the first place!"

"Green harvesting has become very mediatised," he continues. "The first step to low yields is how you prune—if you prune short and you still have a lot of grapes, it means something's wrong with the vine—be it the woodstock and/or the clone. The other point about green harvesting is that it's very difficult to find the right moment to do it, and you're going against the vintage."

Spraying is less frequent in a lot of cases: the young are generally geared to thoughtful rather than mass prevention. A dry, windy spring can mean a reduction in treatments, rather than doing the same as usual. The Bordeaux copper mixture is applied, but the worst excesses of pesticides and insecticides have been banned at compact *appellations* like Côte-Rôtie, where some of them have been applied by helicopter in the past, involving groups of *vignerons* at a time.

Canopy management has also become much more widespread, although overproduction has forced growers' hands as well. Such is the bounty from many clonal varieties that an unbridled yield would come in with at least 60 to 70 hl/ha (hectolitres per hectare) instead of the 40 hl/ha or so most commonly permitted. Green harvesting and bunch dropping in August are now common practices, but much of this matter could be solved through more responsible pruning in the first place.

The issue of clones reappears when one also considers the creeping trend of lower-density

plantation on many vineyards. The old hillside custom was for 8,000 to 10,000 plants per hectare. Now many growers seek at all costs to limit the labour input on their vineyards, and prefer wire rather than wooden stake training and a density of maybe half. Some mechanical tilling is possible if the hill can be converted from ledges into a slope, and each plant has to carry more bunches to make up the maximum yield. A gain in margins, providing the wine is "good enough," is then assured.

THE NORTHERN RHÔNE VINES

SYRAH

The Syrah lies at the heart of the northern Rhône, a variety that finds a natural habitat in the temperate climes of this region. As with Pinot Noir in Burgundy, it grows here towards the northern extremes of its ripening, and it is a misconception to consider this as a hot-weather variety. Finesse, integration of flavours, and complexity are achievable if the wine is not subjected to excess heat day and night.

The Syrah's origins were the subject of lively and meandering debate in the 1970s, when the first edition of this book was written. Etymology brought forth reasoning that sources for the vine could range from Syracuse to Shiraz, the capital of Fars, in Iran.

The Iranian theory needed the answer of how the vine reached the Rhône Valley, and this came in the form of the Greeks of Phocaea, the founders of Marseille. Phocaea was on the west coast of Asia Minor, about 50 kilometres south of the Aegean island of Lesbos. According to Herodotus, the Phocaeans were the first Greeks to undertake distant sea journeys, and around 600 BC opened up the coasts of the Adriatic, France, and Spain: Marseille had been founded by them in 600 BC under the name of Massalia. Their arrival with vine cuttings was thought to have been after the year 546 BC, by when the Phocaeans were under Persian rule.

Massaliote coins, dating from 500–450 BC, have been found along the Rhône as far as the Alps, near the river's source in Switzerland. At that time wine was a fairly major element of trade, and old Greek amphorae have been found in both Marseille and Tain-l'Hermitage, about 240 kilometres (150 miles) further north.

Of course, the scientific work of Carole Meredith, former professor of viticulture and enology at the University of California, Davis, appears to have blown away such fanciful notions. Research she presented at the American Society of Oenology and Viticulture in 2001 indicated that the Syrah DNA pointed to a northern Rhône origin in less purely ancient times.

In conjunction with the Montpellier Agronomic and Wine School, Dr. Meredith pointed to the likely parents of the Syrah being the Dureza, which originated from the Ardèche region on the west bank of the Rhône, and the Mondeuse from Savoie, away to the east towards

From the second edition of *The Wines of the Rhône*, 1982

The belief is that the Syrah came originally from around Shiraz, which is today the capital of the state of Fars in Iran. About 850 kilometres (530 miles) from Tehran, and 50 kilometres (30 miles) from the ruins of Persepolis, Shiraz was, until recent Islamic developments, the wine-growing centre of Iran. At Persepolis, founded circa 518 BC, stone tablets have been found bearing inscriptions that mention wine and vintners. Such evidence would seem to suggest that the wine of Shiraz was already quite famous around that time. (William Culican, *The Medes and Persians,* Thames & Hudson, London 1965.). Furthermore, the likeness between the words "Syrah" and "Shiraz" is evident, and M. Paul Gauthier of Hermitage, a leading *négociant,* once found in a book published in 1860 six different spellings of the word "Syrah": Syra, Sirrah, Syras, Chira, Sirac, and Syrac. Their common denominator would appear to be the word "Shiraz."

the Alps. The Dureza N is the father, the Mondeuse *blanche* B the mother.

The Dureza is said to come from the north of the Ardèche, perhaps around Annonay; it is also called Petit Duret in parts of the Isère and the Drôme on the east side of the Rhône. It was much planted around St. Vallier, just north of Hermitage, in the vineyard reconstruction after phylloxera (P. Viala and V. Vermorel, Ampelographie of 1910, ed. Jeanne Laffitte).

Nevertheless, a question remains about the identity of the vine that made the *vinum picatum,* or tarry pitch wine of Vienne of Roman times, and potentially, about how the vine arrived in this part of France.

The Syrah performs well in the granite outcrops of the northern Rhône and is a hardy vine. Since the 1970s and the introduction of the first clones, its nature has changed. The *héritage,* or legacy, Syrah of olden times was known at Côte-Rôtie as the Sérine, at Hermitage the Petite Syrah. This of course is the vine of reference, the true local resident, but it now represents barely 10 per cent of all northern Rhône Syrah. In decades gone by, there was a diversity of old vines from this source in the vineyards, with minor nuances possible derived from each specific plant from which the cutting had been taken.

The traditional Syrah's leaf is well indented, the bunches are small, their berries small and egg-shaped. Its main blight is fruit failure or *coulure* after flowering, and growers in the old days would prune the plants long to try to ensure greater production. Oïdium and mildew are the most frequent problems requiring treatment.

Since the 1970s the advance of the clones has changed the nature of the plants and the wines of this region. The first steps came around 1970–71 with the development of the Grosse Syrah "of Gervans," named after the village within the Crozes-Hermitage *appellation*. As a productive source, this was taken forward.

With a thick, heavy leaf, large berries that had shoulder pads, more juice, and higher yields, the Grosse Syrah of Gervans set the standard for clones to come. Looking back, one can see that the popular 1970s clones of 99 and 100 dented quality: less sugar in the grapes, less colour and concentration, less spice and nuance of flavour—less *terroir*.

The clones developed in the 1980s were not much better. One was the 174, whose bunches were very tight, with rot a consequence. Its wines carried a homogenous black-currant aroma.

In the 1990s the fashionable clones were 747, 525, and 300; it is too early to say just how they will pan out, but the feature of large berries and less natural concentration within the berries continues. This means that ripening has to pro-

In the early 2000s, dark skies have gathered over the Syrah in the Rhône Valley. A degradation of the vine is occurring, a disease stemming from the southern Rhône or Languedoc—no one is really sure. This *dépérissement*—again, there is no formal name—is thought to have started around 1996–97 in the dry areas of the south.

The symptoms are the vine leaves turning red and the vine wood failing to mature. Within two or three years, the plant is dead.

At Côte-Rôtie, the first symptoms appeared in 2001, and the problem has grown each year since then. "It attacks vines around ten to twenty years old," says Gilbert Clusel. "At times, it can mean taking out half a plot at a time."

Jean-Louis Chave at Hermitage observes that it is the clone vines that have been hit. "Studies are being conducted to see if some clones are more prone than others, but it hasn't hit the old vines. Nor is there a confirmed link with the rootstock, the general 3309."

One of the problems is that growers do not know how the bug is transmitted or whether it spreads precisely from one plant to its neighbour. Because of the age of vine being attacked, the vineyards of St-Joseph and Crozes-Hermitage, heavily expanded in the past twenty years, are most at threat within the northern Rhône.