

Cornas - an old but sorry tale

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Not every wine producer will agree with this statement but perhaps my main fault as a wine writer is that I am too positive about specific wines and wine regions. I try always to see their virtues, to accept them on their own terms, to sidle up to them and understand them rather than put them under the unforgiving spotlight that is currently more fashionable.

I have, however, met my match and it is Cornas, a reasonably famous red wine from the northern Rhône valley in southern France.

Cornas is made from Syrah, the grape that delivers so much pleasure in bottles labelled things like Shiraz, Hermitage and Côte Rôtie and is increasingly planted to bestow nobility on vineyards from the Languedoc to North and South America via Iberia, Italy and even Malta.

It is admittedly one of the cheaper wines of the northern Rhône. Lay & Wheeler of Colchester, whose copious price list I tend to rely on as a fair market barometer, ask less than £20 for a bottle of Jean- Luc Colombo's Cornas while his Hermitage is more than £30. Still, for nearly £20, you are entitled to expect some sort of pleasure from a wine.

A group of us who had Cornas in our cellars and just one idea about Cornas in our heads (that it needs long bottle ageing) assembled the other night to get to grips with this reconditte *appellation*. (Sad, was the verdict of our children on such a way to spend an evening.)

There was a fanatical fine wine collector who had bought Cornas as a matter of course along with his other, more expensive Rhône wines simply because he thought he ought to but had yet to drink it other than *sur place*. There was a fine wine trader who said only slightly smugly that he had never owned a bottle of Cornas in his life. And there was a fine wine importer who has been importing Cornas from two of the best- known producers for years.

The Collector, the Trader, the Importer and the Writer and various hangers- on set about tasting from our collective stock of Cornas, a total of 17 bottles, from decent producers and vintages spanning 1991 back to 1972, from which we planned to choose the best for dinner. Not a difficult task, you might think.

If I tell you that in the end we had to plunder our host the Collector's cellar to find something that was fun to drink, then you will grasp something of Cornas's inherent ability to please.

Of the 17 bottles, from several different cellars and sources, two were reduced and stinky (as Syrah so easily can be), 16 were tough (mostly as old boots), one was corked, one was metallic, one was volatile and another slightly oxidised.

Without any great enthusiasm we took to the dinner table the juiciest (and youngest) wine of the lot, Thierry Allemand's Chaillot 1991, an often under- estimated vintage for the northern Rhône, and 1985s from Jaboulet and, the supposed master of Cornas, Auguste Clape.

We hoped that, if Cornas is this wine for legendary ageing, perhaps the older vintages waiting for us on the sideboard would be more impressive. Alas, the Jaboulet 1976 and 1972 were waning under our very noses. And even Clape's 1978, from what is supposedly the northern Rhône's greatest vintage in modern times, reverberated impressively on the palate and was certainly substantial but exhibited all the charm of the Reverend Ian Paisley.

'Virile' is a favourite description of Cornas with Frenchmen. 'Obdurate', I would suggest is nearer the mark, or am I splitting hairs?

This seems such a shame when there are now so many delicious north Rhône reds available from Crozes- Hermitage and the better parts of St Joseph that cost a fraction of a good Cornas.

We had somehow ended up with three bottles of Noel Verset's 1985 Cornas. The first, direct from the Importer, was distinctly stinky. The second, a bottle which had a Kermit Lynch of Berkeley sticker on it and had crossed the Atlantic twice, was fresher. I took the third home and opened it a week later just to check whether we had been suffering from a collective grump/*folie de douleur*. We had not.

I know it is unsporting to devote all this space to picking on a single *appellation*, and I am quite prepared to be agreeably surprised when I taste the best 1998 Cornas in seven years or so. I would certainly happily buy young vintages from the convincing Thierry Allemand, a Cornas new boy with traditional ideas - either the old vine bottling (Reynard) or younger vine bottling (Chaillot). (Well under £200 a case from [Bibendum](#) of London NW1, Gauntleys of Nottingham, J&B of London SW1, The Wine Society of Stevenage and Raeburn of Edinburgh who have an impressive range of vintages).

But on the basis of the wines I have tasted, I am not convinced that the supposed young turk of the appellation, Jean- Luc Colombo, has the answers. His wines seem aggressively techno for this part of the world, while those of old master Clape seem positively antediluvian.

Here are some alternatives, all of them, thank the Lord, with perceptible fruit.

- Crozes Hermitage Cuvée Gaby, Domaine de Colombier Florent Viale £80 a case in bond, Bibendum of London NW1 or Alain Graillot's from Lay & Wheeler among others.
- A significant proportion of *négociant* Tardieu- Laurent's offerings, specifically the deeply serious 1997 St Joseph Vieilles Vignes at £18.50 from La Vigneronne of London SW7.
- Gangloff's beautifully feminine Côte Rôties £165-249 from Raeburn of Edinburgh - prices will rise.

Or, for that deep southern Rhône spice

- Ramillades Sablet 1998, Ch de Trignon £6.49 (or £11.98 for two) Majestic
- Côtes- du- Rhône 1998 Ch St- Maurice £4.49 Waitrose