2001 red southern Rh□nes - delicious bargains for laying down

22 Nov 2004 by JR

It is difficult to think of anywhere in the world currently offering wine lovers better value in the £5-10/$8-18 per bottle price bracket than the southern Rhône Valley.

Names such as Côtes-du-Rhône and Côtes-du-Rhône Villages have long been a source of interesting, accessibly ripe reds with varying degrees of herbiness and spiciness - the sort of wines that are almost impossible not to like. But what makes this evocative part of the world, on the western fringes of Provence, so particularly interesting to fastidious drinkers at the moment is the quality of the principal current vintage 2001.

This vintage was really exceptional in the southern Rhône, by no means infallibly but generally offering expressive and charming wines. The more ambitious and expensive examples, particularly in the grander appellations such as Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas and Vacqueyras, need keeping for a good five years or more but in the lower reaches of straight Côtes-du-Rhône and Côtes-du-Rhône Villages there is great value to be had for drinking over the next few years.

There were also good wines from the 2000 and, especially, 1998 vintage in the southern Rhône but already prices of the best wines have risen quite substantially since then. This is the moment to identify rising stars, such as Jerome Bressy's super-concentrated Gourt de Mautens domaine in Rasteau was when his 1998s were offered by Raeburn Fine Wines of Edinburgh at £159 a dozen in bond. The 2001s are £189 and £198 for the red and white respectively.

One obvious candidate is Domaine Les Hautes Cances of Cairanne run by jolly ex-doctors Jean-Marie and Anne-Marie Astart who are lucky enough to work with very old vines and clever enough to encourage them to produce very low yields. Their Col du Débat vineyard rarely produces more than a third of the legal maximum and the 2001, their first all-organic vintage, is terrific, and UK importer OW Loeb of London SE1 is offering it at £12.93. Hautes Cances' massively ripe Cairanne Vieilles Vignes is made for the very long term and is available from O W Loeb at £10.97 per bottle, while the much more accessible Cairanne Tradition bottling is delicious for drinking now at £9.50. Their superior website cites Kysela, VA and Gordon's, MA as US importers.

Wine lovers in Britain can find several really excellent 2001 southern Rhônes selling at under six pounds a bottle. Marks & Spencer have the best buy in a particularly convincing Côtes-du-Rhône Villages 2001 from the Coteaux coop in Visan for just £4.99. Mainly hand-picked, old-vine Grenache, this is perfumed by about 10 per cent Syrah and really does taste of the region. Already attractive and gentle, it should provide interesting, easy drinking well into next year.

The north Rhône-based house of Chapoutier is distinguished by its commitment to biodynamic viticulture (and Braille labels). Its Côtes-du-Rhône 2001 (£5.99 Waitrose only in the UK) is still extremely youthful. Very chewy and not particularly charming at this stage, it is certainly not short of personality and would be a suitable and inexpensive candidate for cellaring over the next two or three years. The 40 per cent Syrah component gives it a very firm spine at the moment but the produce of 30-year-old bushvines, mainly Grenache, in the superior Côtes-du-Rhône villages of Sablet and Séguret are promising ingredients. Some of the 2001 southern Rhône reds have been allowed to ripen to excessive levels of alcohol but this one is hardly 13 per cent.

Château de Panery La Marquise 2001 Côtes-du-Rhône splits the difference between these two styles, having enough obvious fruit to be drinkable now but is so sufficiently concentrated and chewy that I suspect it will still drink well in a year or two's time - which is not bad for a wine on sale at Majestic for £5.99, or £5.49 if two bottles are bought. (Majestic's Côtes-du-Rhône Villages Sablet 2000 from Domaine de Piaugier at the same price lacks the freshness of the most successful 2001s.)

The southern Rhône's most famous names Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas are often less good value than well-made Côtes-du-Rhône Villages. Among the Rhônes on offer at Sainsbury's supermarkets in the UK for example, the plump and persistent La Chasse du Pape Grande Réserve 2001 Côtes-du-Rhône at £6.99, is a much better buy than either the Gigondas Payouse 1999 at £9.99 or any of their three Châteauneufs ranging in price from £11.99 to £24.99. Tesco's Finest Gigondas 2001 (sic) is a good example of how a sought-after name can mean slacker standards. The wine is rather light and soft compared to most of the Côtes-du-Rhône Villages recommended here and I would not pay its

regular price of £8.99. But it is a fair buy for easy current drinking (not keeping) at its special price of £6.99 throughout July. And the name of the coop that produced it, Les Vignerons des Dentelles, has a certain charm for those who treasure memories of the Dentelles de Montmirail, the rocky outcrop that dominates the Gigondas vineyards.

So good is the 2001 vintage in fact that I can thoroughly recommend Coteaux de Signac Côtes-du-Rhône Villages 2001, even at £7.19, the price asked by mail-order specialists Laithwaites. This is a delicious blend of Syrah and Grenache with about 20 per cent Carignan made by the very senior and very talented André Roux who used to run Château du Trignon with such aplomb. This was made at the Chusclan coop and won a gold medal at the 2002 Concours des Côtes-du-Rhône Villages.

The terrible flash floods of last summer and their after-effects mean that it is well worth stocking up on 2001 southern Rhônes for both drinking and cellaring as there will be slim pickings next year from the 2002 vintage.

To find a 2001 Côtes-du-Rhône Villages bargain in your area, key those expressions in to WineSearcher.

For my notes on tasting Southern Rhône Reds see purple pages.