Northern Rh□ne triumphs in 2009

7 Jan 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT

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The northern Rhône is currently one of the most exciting wine regions of France, and not just because the two last vintages were so very successful there.

Producers in Côte Rôtie seem to have come to terms with the sheer size of the dominant producer Guigal (responsible, for example, for a full 40 per cent of the entire production of Condrieu) and I sense a new energy and confidence chez the likes of Bonnefond, Clusel Roch, Gangloff, Stéphane Ogier, Jamet and Rostaing, even though Guigal continues to expand and is now busy rejuvenating the old house of Vidal Fleury, where Marcel Guigal's father Étienne began his career.

I also sensed during my visit there in late October that even chez Guigal, things are in gradual flux. Papa Marcel, who famously keeps warm in his vast cellars under Ampuis by wearing a flat tweed cap, is gently handing over to his 35-year-old son Philippe and his baseball cap. But the 2009 wines themselves, particularly Guigal's famous 'La La' Côte Roties - La Mouline, La Landonne and La Turque - seemed rather more refined and fresher than previous vintages at the same early stage in their life.

Certainly chaptalisation, adding sugar to ferment into additional alcohol in the final wines, is no longer the systematic practice it once was. Philippe told me that Guigal's stocks of sugar date from 1996 and that they had dipped into them only in 2002 and 2008.

Northern Rhône producers were generally thrilled with the dry summer of 2009 after the difficulties of ripening the grapes fully in 2008, with a south wind in September helping to concentrate the wines and September rain timed to encourage a final spurt of phenolic ripening. But Jean-Marc Jamet, whose fingers are seen above hovering over a map of his vineyards and who confesses to preferring difficult vintages because he thinks they allow him to show off his special skills more dramatically than perfect vintages do, told me that 2010 was even better - a little cooler than 2009 with 'perfect' sun and rain in terms of intensity and timing.

René Rostaing also noted high temperatures in the summer of 2009 and certainly this ripeness seems to have resulted in wines that are delightfully supple and well balanced, not plagued by the dry tannins that mar some of the southern Rhône reds. Yields were unusually high for the northern Rhône - up to the maximum of 40 hl/ha for Côte Rôtie - and according to the dapper Rostaing, 'you had to vinify the '09s looking for structure because they were a bit too *aimable*'. Accordingly he destemmed hardly any of the grapes, hoping to leech some tannin from the stems, comforted by the fact that 30 years ago this was common practice 'and they were excellent wines'.

Things are also in flux in the northern Rhône's most famous appellation of all, Hermitage. Arguably the best-known producer, Paul Jaboulet Aîné, was sold in 2006 by the Jaboulet family to the Frey family, who also own Ch La Lagune in Bordeaux and a share of Billecart-Salmon champagne. The Freys still seem to be getting to grips with the very special challenges of vinifying Syrah grapes from the various terroirs on the granite hill above Tain l'Hermitage and the other 2009 Jaboulet reds had more than a whiff of the Médoc about them when I tasted them in November. Perhaps the thought was that a good dose of oak would counteract any amiability.

Meanwhile their old rivals Chapoutier, now very much under the direction of gadfly biodynamic convert Michel Chapoutier, are doing bold and exciting things in their top, single-vineyard Sélections Parcellaires range, usually launched particularly early with a series of dramatic cask samples, but there can be a sizeable drop in quality down to their more mainstream négociant range.

The lodestar of the appellation is of course J L Chave ('from father to son since 1481') across the river in modest, and modestly lit, cellars under the main street of Mauves. Little has changed in the Hermitages of Chave as the reins have been handed from Gérard to 42-year-old Jean-Louis but the son is overseeing considerable and exciting change in the extremely variable St-Joseph appellation. For some time, wine lovers have tended to shrug helplessly at the over-extended boundaries of St-Joseph and expect to find a liquid that's a bit too extended itself behind a St-Joseph

label.

But producers such as Chave, Chapoutier, Pierre Gaillard and Monteillet are now seeking out the most promising terroirs in the appellation and bottling their produce separately, showing just how stunning the wines, white as well as red, can be. In fact I found Les Granits, St-Joseph, one of the most compelling of all of Chapoutier's 2009 whites.

The Chaves are engaged in a particularly long-term project to recuperate some of St-Joseph's finest potential vineyards, not least because of the proximity of some of these steep, south-east facing slopes to their home. Jean-Louis Chave pointed out that it can take 15 years to clear the ground, rebuild walls and plant vines in some of the best plots that were abandoned in the wake of the phylloxera louse at the end of the 19th century. While these Syrah vines mature, he has been selling their produce under his own eponymous négociant label.

'We're trying to bring something to St-Joseph. We think there should be delimited crus to indicate the best plots but we haven't even spoken about it to the INAO [the appellation authorities]. They're too democratic! It's a shame because there is more and more of a rapprochement between Crozes-Hermitage [the other more everyday appellation in the northern Rhône] and St-Joseph. But while Crozes can lack true authencity, in St-Joseph there are some really distinctive terroirs that deserve to be special crus. Where there's a stream down from the plateau to the Rhône, each valley has its own character.'

Just as Aubert de Villaine of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti is trying to have Burgundy's Côte de Nuits classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site like Bordeaux and St-Émilion, Jean-Louis Chave in his role as president of the Hermitage wine growers is trying to have the hill of Hermitage so classified. But he is apparently meeting some regrettable opposition from the négociants who fear this will require them to take down the hoardings with their names on the stone walls retaining the vineyards above Tain. Shame!

Meanwhile there are signs of escalating quality throughout the appellations of the northern Rhône with delicious examples of Condrieu, St-Péray and even Cornas now easy to find.

Some of my top-scoring 2009 North Rhônes:

Guigal, La Turque, Côte Rôtie
Jamet, Côte Brune, Côte Rôtie
René Rostaing, La Landonne, Côte Rôtie
J L Chave, Hermitage
Paul Jaboulet Ainé, La Chapelle, Hermitage

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