

Adventures in the southern Rhône

28 Feb 2013 by Jancis Robinson/FT

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One of my favourite wine trade stories is about Simon Loftus who used to run Adnams of Southwold. In one of his particularly beautiful wine lists he recounted how he tried to visit Jacques Reynaud (pictured), the idiosyncratic owner of the famous Châteauneuf-du-Pape property [Château Rayas](#). This was long before the era of email, and probably even predated the fax machine that Reynaud would never have used anyway. Loftus sent him a series of letters asking for an appointment and received no reply or acknowledgement. In the end he wrote to Reynaud saying firmly that he would be arriving at 3 pm on a certain date.

He got to the huddle of ramshackle buildings that constitute Château Rayas at 3 pm to find every window and door shuttered up. Knocking and calling resulted in a resounding silence. Frustrated and puzzled, he reluctantly climbed into his car and started to drive off down the dirt track back on to the main road, only to see in his rear-view mirror the unmistakable shape of the pebble-spectacled Jacques Reynaud furtively climbing out of a ditch.

Jacques Reynaud met his end in 1997, buying a new pair of shoes (I doubt very much he had more than one pair at any one time) in the nearby town of Courthézon. The place is now run by his nephew Emmanuel, who also owns the distinctive Château des Tours in nearby Vacqueyras and has instituted a very slight glasnost. I managed to visit once in the Uncle Jacques era and now go once a year to taste the latest vintage during my autumn week in the southern Rhône. Well, most years. There was the time I turned up at the agreed time to taste his 2009s to find no sign of anyone other than a monosyllabic winery worker round the back who told me that his boss was busy overseeing the particularly late 2010 harvest. The last thing a Reynaud would do is bother to cancel an appointment, those appointments being so very, very rare.

Emmanuel Reynaud's answering machine ends, 'don't bother to leave a message; I won't bother to listen to it'. I have to rely on the extreme, but perhaps very slightly self-interested, kindness of Rayas's longstanding UK importer O W Loeb, whose managing director Chris Davey told me recently, 'I fix two appointments per year - yours and mine. Maybe I am too soft on him, but I do all I can to make life easy for him. Years ago I made the mistake of going twice within 12 months and he looked at me as if I were mad.'

Rayas's US importer is [Martine Saunier](#) of San Francisco (who recently sold her import business in order to concentrate on her blossoming career as a wine documentary star). I asked Christian Pillsbury who used to work for her whether he ever managed to fix up appointments at Rayas for his customers and was told, 'I was much more willing to set up an appointment with [Lalou Bize-Leroy](#) the fiendishly reclusive owner of one of Burgundy's most sought-after domaines because it was possible. I never once was able to set up a sommelier with a tour of Rayas.'

So, you get the picture. A visit to Rayas is something special. But not just for its rarity. Needless to say, the many signs by the main roads around the little village of Châteauneuf-du-Pape make no mention of Rayas. You have to drive up an unpaved road towards another well-known and well-signposted property, skirt round the back of it and turn off on to an even rougher track, rather unexpectedly signposted with a particularly rusty, pockmarked sign pointing the way to 'Caves du Château Rayas'. Quite often there is a car lurking here, because Reynaud likes to apply groupage to his visitors. I generally find I am sharing my appointment with others - maybe sommeliers from the other side of France, or customers from the other side of the world - and the rendezvous is important enough for us all to arrive in good time.

It's fun to watch the faces of first-time visitors. They do their very best to hide their horror at the exceptionally primitive nature of what confronts them. The floors are bare earth and everything, but everything, is grey. The wines are kept in barrels so ancient that they have no colour at all, and look as though they'll fall apart at any moment. The rough stone walls are bare and all is festooned with cobwebs. Reynaud turns the tap on an ancient tank of the whites and wields the wine thief on the metal-hooped barrels so that we are able to taste the last vintage but one of the wines he produces, the most recent one usually still fermenting away. Into our small, rather grimy tasting glasses go samples of the ingredients destined for Château Rayas red and white, the other Châteauneuf made here Pignan, and the Côtes du Rhône red and white also vinified in these extraordinary cellars, Château de Fonsalette.

The greatest shock of all is how pure and fresh are the wines that come out of these dusty, cobwebby containers. They taste like the elixir of life, despite apparently having been raised in Miss Haversham's boudoir. Of course the cellars are extremely dark and there is not a flat surface in sight, so this is one of the few visits when I have to resort to a notebook of the paper sort. Finding words for these exceptional wines is always difficult; finding the bottles to buy even trickier. Importers tend to allocate rather than sell the wines and the best bet is generally the wine lists of Rhône-prone restaurants in France. If you could find them retail, a bottle of, say, Château Rayas 2007 red would cost more than £300 while Fonsalette might cost only about £45 - far more than any other wine that qualifies only for the modest Côtes du Rhône appellation.

If I'd had room I was going to compare and contrast the Rayas cellars to the pristine, cosseted nature of those of another Châteauneuf, much more recently anointed with cult status, Clos St-Jean on the outskirts of the village itself. Prada-dressed Vincent Maurel who put on an impressive tasting for me during my first-ever visit there last December could hardly be more different from Emmanuel Reynaud. One thing the establishments did have in common though: not a drop of water to drink.

MY FAVOURITE 2011 CHATEAUNEUFS

This is not an outstanding vintage but these were my favourites of the more than 300 reds and whites I tasted, all red except one.

Clos du Caillou, Les Quartz

M Chapoutier, Barbe Rac

Dom de la Charbonnière, Cuvée Mourre des Perdrix

Dom Giraud, Les Gallimardes

Dom de Marcoux, Vieilles Vignes

Mayard, La Crau de ma Mère

Clos des Papes Blanc

Dom du Père Caboché, Elisabeth Chambellan

Ch Rayas

Tardieu Laurent, Cuvée Spéciale

Dom des Trois Cellier, Privilège

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