



Lawrason's Take on Vintages June 22 Release

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Unravelling the Rhône, South Africa, Canada and Other Wines of Interest



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This edition is written from Niagara where the entire WineAlign team is assembled all week to taste through 1,100 wines at the [National Wine Awards of Canada](#) – an amazing process of co-ordination and endurance. One result however has been my missing a VINTAGES press tasting opportunity, thus reviewing fewer wines from the June 22 release, and offering a shorter newsletter. But I have captured the Rhône, South Africa and Canadian features, and found other wines of interest from locales as far-flung as Australia, Alsace and Rioja.

Unravelling the Rhône

It struck me as odd that VINTAGES would highlight a Rhône release as summer dawns. Rosé, sure – but this batch is mostly reds, and in some cases they are quite burly and tannic. Some of the lighter, softer examples might be okay lightly chilled and quaffed on the deck, but how do you tell which will fit that bill (other than reading our reviews one by one). I got a chance to explore that idea last week during a Rhône Valley trade seminar that laid out wines from almost all of the appellations side by side. Sponsored by InterRhône, there was also a Rhône overview presented by Veronique Rivest of Montreal, a good friend, sommelier and writer who finished second in the World's Best Sommelier Competition in Tokyo in March of this year.

The overriding message was that the Rhône Valley is complicated, with 22 authorized grape varieties (eight are white) grown among 23 appellations and another 18 sub-regions with a village name attached. This does not include the overriding Cotes du Rhône appellation that accounts for almost 75% of the entire volume produced. And of course, every year the vintage conditions vary. So for those who want to dive deep the Rhône is almost as absorbing and complex as Burgundy.

Don't worry; I am not going to attempt to explain it all here. But I do want to pass on some general tips to help sort out which are likely to be the softer, rounder and easier/earlier reds and which will be the more linear, firm and tannic

(perhaps for longer ageing). The softer reds will have a dominant portion of grenache in the blend; the firmer reds will be based on syrah, and even firmer if there is a high proportion of the tannic mourvedre grape. The softer reds will also be from more sandy and or clay soils found on the valley floor and lower slopes (where grenache tends to flourish), while the firmer reds will be from stonier, higher elevation sites (where syrah is more often found).

In terms of appellations, all the 'northern Rhône' AOCs are on steep, granite based slopes that support syrah only. These include Cote Rôtie, Hermitage, Crozes-Hermitage, St. Joseph and Cornas. By and large they make firm, age-worthy often quite elegant (and expensive) reds. That's the easy part.



The southern Rhône is more complicated because all the grape varieties are used, and most often are blended. But grenache is usually the dominant grape – so southern Rhône wines are softer, rounder and higher in alcohol than those in the north. Within the south look to the lower, sandier appellations for the softest wines, led by Châteauneuf du Pape, then Lirac, Costieres de Nimes, Plan de Dieu, Gada gne (new), Cairanne, Rasteau, Visan and Grignan-les-Ahdemar. Two wines on the release stand out as very good value examples of this style. [Romain Duvernay 2010 Cairanne](#) (\$18.95) – a Wine of the Month – has classic Rhône plummy fruit and pepper, albeit in the more compact and structured style of the 2010 vintage. [Château Bizard Montagne 2010 De Raucoule](#) (\$20.95) is from the new Grignan-les-Adhemar appellation, formerly known as Coteaux du Triscatin at the northern edge of southern Rhône. This wine is particularly smooth, rich and almost velvety – a style I can't wait to try with a BBQ.

For wines with more firmness and complexity look to the hillside oriented appellations of Vacqueyras, Beaufort de Venise, Gigondas, Sablet, Seguret and perhaps Vinsobres. [Domaine Saint Gayan 2009 Gigondas](#) (\$30.95) is a very elegant, focused wine from a family that has been making wine on their property since 1709. [Montirius Garrigues Vacqueyras 2010](#) is also a biodynamic beauty from a great property in Vacqueyras, but to buy this wine you will have to go VINTAGES Shop Online.