

Southern Rhône Part 2 : 2017 & 2018 from Gigondas, Vacqueyras, Cairanne, and Rasteau

by Jeb Dunnuck September 26, 2019

This report is Part 2 of the Southern Rhône coverage and focuses on the appellations of Gigondas, Vacqueyras, Cairanne, and Rasteau. Readers can find coverage on the 2017 and 2018 vintages in Châteauneuf du Pape, Lirac, Côtes du Rhône, and other regions, as well as more in-depth vintage overviews, in the report Southern Rhône Part 1: The 2017s From bottle and 2018s From Barrel published in August.

To quickly summarize the two vintages reviewed here, **2017** is a terrific vintage throughout the Southern Rhône. The wines offer rich, powerful, incredibly Provençal styles that resemble more elegant examples of the 2009s or even fresher, more focused examples of the 2007s.

The defining features of the vintage were a cold spell in April that decimated yields for old vine Grenache (and Syrah and Mourvèdre to a lesser extent), followed by a hot, dry summer that received basically no rain from July to September. Harvest occurred under ideal conditions and estates were able to wait for full phenolic maturity.

The tiny yields (and small berries due to drought) were a critical factor in the vintage as the vines were able to better cope with the hydric stress experienced during the summer months compared to if there had been a larger crop load and a higher demand on the vines. This goes a long way towards explaining the concentration, phenolic ripeness, structure, and depth found in the wines.

In addition, the quality of the wines is relatively consistent, and all of the leading appellations were able to produce brilliant wines. While 2017 does not hit the heights of 2016 and 2010, it's a brilliant year that surpasses most recent vintages including 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015.

A step back, **2018** is nevertheless a good vintage that suffered due to an incredibly rainy winter and spring followed by a massive mildew outbreak in the spring and early summer. This was less of an issue for higher elevation, hillside regions such as Gigondas and Rasteau that see better airflow and cooler temperatures. It's also worth pointing out that the vintage improves as you move away from the Rhône River towards Mount Ventoux. Nevertheless, yields were down throughout the Southern Rhône in 2018 due to mildew.

The massive early season rainfall also resulted in larger berry sizes which are key to understanding the style of the wines.

The vintage turned hot and dry through July and August, with a rainstorm at the end of August helping to push along phenolic ripeness. September remained cool and dry, and helped keep freshness and elegance in the wines, as well as a sense of purity in the aromatics. These are soft, plump, charming wines that aren't going to be the longest-lived but will offer incredible pleasure right out of the gate.

I'll report more on the 2018s when I taste from bottle next year.

What You Need To Know

Both 2017 and 2018 are solid vintages for the Rhône Valley, with 2017 offering exciting, Provençal, sexy wines that have plenty of density and structure, and 2018 offering more forward, soft, elegant wines that are going to be ideal for near term drinking.

Appellations Reviewed in this Report

I've listed each of the appellations below as well as the top estates reviewed for each of the appellations.

CAIRANNE – Covering 2,300 acres to the west of Rasteau and north from Vacqueyras and Gigondas, Cairanne is a warmer region that has plenty of similarities to Rasteau with its vineyards on more gradual slopes and clay soils, with more silt and pebble soils as you get closer to the Aygues River. These fruit-loaded, ripe, sexy wines are mostly geared toward drinking in their first decade of life.

Top Wines in Cairanne: Domaine les Grands Bois, Domaine Alary, Brotte, Domaine Brusset, Domaine Constant-Duquesnoy

GIGONDAS – Gigondas was created in 1971 and sits at the base of the limestone cliffs known as the Dentelles de Montmirail. As Louis Barruol of Saint Cosme once told me, this is limestone territory, and the appellation covers 2,500 acres with vineyards spread from the higher altitude, cooler limestone soils at the base of the cliffs to the gradual slope and more clay soils stretching out from the village of Gigondas towards the L'Ouveze river. This is a cooler appellation, and harvest typically runs upward of one to two weeks later than Châteauneuf-du-Pape and the warmer appellations of Vacqueyras, Rasteau, and Cairanne. The traditional wines from this region possess ample savory, cedar, spice and dried garrigue characteristics as well as a structured, tannic feel on the palate. In general, most Gigondas will benefit from short-term cellaring and have 10-15 years of aging potential. Outside of Châteauneuf du Pape, Gigondas unquestionably leads the southern Rhône in the number of top estates and world-class wines.

Top Wines in Gigondas: Château De Montmirail, Château De Saint Cosme, Domaine Brusset, Domaine De Font Sane, Domaine De Longue Toque / Gabriel Meffre, Domaine Des Bosquets, Domaine Des Florets, Domaine Des Pasquiers, Domaine Du Cayron, Domaine Du Grand Bourjassot, Domaine Du Grand Montmirail, Domaine Du Grapillon D'Or, Domaine La Bouissière, Domaine Le Clos Des Cazaux, Domaine Les Pallieres, Domaine Paillère Et Pied-Gû, Domaine Raspail-Ay, Domaine Saint-Damien, Moulin De La Gardette, Notre Dame Des Pallieres, Pierre Amadieu

RASTEAU – Located on steep, south-facing slopes and mostly clay soils, Rasteau produces deep, concentrated wines that have distinct minerality to go with savory, chocolaty, earthy aromatics.

While most drink well on release, the best can easily keep for 10-15 years. It's worth pointing out that while the region was known in the past for making more rustic, alcoholic wines, that's no longer the case, and the wines today show much more polish, elegance, and balance. The top wines are a match for anything coming out of the Southern Rhône Valley today.

Top Wines in Rasteau: Domaine Beau Mistral, Domaine De Beurenard, Domaine Des Escaravailles, Domaine La Colliere, Domaine La Soumade, Domaine Les Aphillanthes, Domaine Les Grands Bois

VACQUEYRAS – The appellation of Vacqueyras lies to the west of Gigondas and covers 3,200 acres, mostly located on the Plateau de Garrigues just behind the village. This is a relatively homogeneous *terroir* consisting of rolled stones and pebbly, clay soils, and the appellation allows reds, whites, and rosés to be produced. As I've said in the past, the reds from Vacqueyras tend to share similarities with those from Châteauneuf-du-Pape (and Cairanne), yet rarely possess as much structure, concentration, or depth. Nevertheless, the top wines are gorgeous, with approachable, voluptuous, and sexy profiles that drink beautifully for upwards of a decade.

Top Wines in Vacqueyras: Domaine Chamfort, Domaine Des Amouriers, Domaine Du Pesquier, Domaine Font Sarade, Domaine La Fourmone, Domaine La Garrigue, Montirius

As always, thank you for reading,

Jeb