

France, Southern Rhône: The Elegant and Lively 2015s and Heavenly 2016s

October 19, 2017 by Jeb Dunnuck

The Southern Rhône has two solid vintages in the pipeline; the elegant and lively 2015s and the deeper, richer, truly profound 2016s.

2015 – Looking first at the 2015s, there's been entirely too much hype regarding the greatness of this vintage. While 2015 is indeed a more successful vintage than 2012, 2013 and 2014, it pales in comparison to past great vintages such as 2001, 2005, 2007, and 2010. Nevertheless, there's still plenty to love in the vintage and the wines are fresh, elegant and streamlined, with nicely integrated acidity and balanced profiles. While they lack the sheer depth of fruit found in the 2016s, they have a vibrancy that makes them already appealing, yet the majority will evolve gracefully. I called the vintage a beefed up 2006 last year, and that comparison still holds to a degree. A mix of 2004 and 2005 seems closer when trying to pinpoint the style. Quality was consistent throughout the Southern Rhône, and in general, the estates with clay soils fared the best. I found too many wines from sandy soils that lacked depth and richness. While quality is relatively high and consistent, truly great wines are few and far between.

Looking at the weather, the vintage was extremely sunny, as well as hot, which in some cases caused the vines to shut down and delayed phenolic ripeness going into harvest. Storms late in August and then again in September also complicated and pushed harvest back into late September and October. The heat stress through the summer followed by rains early in harvest resulted in surprisingly elegant wines that have notable tannin and freshness, yet more moderate concentration and mid-palate depth.

In short, this is a good, at times outstanding, vintage that produced a bevy of high-quality wines, yet few superstars.

2016 – The 2016s are on another level. The vintage started with a mild spring resulting in a large even crop set. This was followed by a dry, hot summer featuring numerous days over 95° Fahrenheit and less than 3 inches of total precipitation. However, while hot and dry, the driving characteristic of this vintage was the incredibly cool nights which helped maintain acidity in the grapes as well as resulted in terrific aromatics and freshness in the final wines. Harvest occurred from the middle of September through the early part of October. The large crop, even, hot daytime temperatures, little precipitation and cool night resulted in a beautiful vintage that comes closest in style to 1990, or even a hypothetical mix of 2010 and 2007. The wines are beautifully concentrated and structured – on par with 2010 – yet have a more open, sexy, voluptuous style due to the larger yields. The tannin quality is beautiful, the wines have notable freshness and purity, their alcohol is integrated, and quality is incredibly high across all the regions. In fact, the biggest surprise was the consistency of the vintage, which is even more homogenous than 2015. This is truly an extraordinary vintage.

A Word on Drink Windows:

One of the most common questions I'm asked is when to drink the wines. I struggle with this as there's no "wrong" time to open a bottle. Today, even the most serious, age-worthy wines offer pleasure in their youth due to better vineyard management and winemaking techniques. In addition, one person's mature is another person's over the hill. Nevertheless, I list a rough guideline below for the wines from the Southern Rhône:

Gigondas: The more limestone soils and cooler climate of Gigondas result in wines that have more pronounced tannin than other appellations in the Southern Rhône. As such, most are best with at least 2-4 years of cellaring and will continue to drink well for a decade or more after that. As with Châteauneuf du Pape, after 20 years after the vintage, a few wines can certainly hold, but they're not improving.

2016 Domaine Les Teyssonnières Gigondas 90-92

I loved the 2016 Gigondas from Franck Alexandre and this Grenache dominated beauty comes primarily from sandy soils and is brought up all in concrete tanks. Offering perfumed notes of ripe cherries, strawberries, spice, and garrigue, it has a classic, medium-bodied, elegant style on the palate and is already impossible to resist. Drink it anytime over the coming decade.

2015 Domaine Les Teyssonnières Gigondas 89

The 2015 Gigondas is also solid, yet lacks the purity and opulence found in the 2016. Strawberries, flowers, and hints of framboise all emerge from the glass and this classic 2015 carries the pretty, elegant, graceful style of the wines from this estate. It will keep through 2025.