

2012 and 2011 Chateauneuf du Pape, Gigondas and Vacqueyras

By Josh Raynolds

Following the universal success of the 2010s in the southern Rhone Valley and the sometimes-as-stellar 2009s, 2011 was predestined to land in their shadows unless the vintage turned out perfectly. And it didn't. Follow that up with a very good and often outstanding vintage in 2012 and the die was cast for '11, which plays nicely into the hand of wine lovers who buy what's in the glass instead of the number on the label because this is a vintage that's sure to be offered at very thin margins. Couple that with the fact that many producers decided to forgo making special *cuvees* from their top sites or oldest vines, opting instead to blend their best fruit into their entry-level bottlings, and the stage is set for some serious values.

Things got off to a promising start in 2011, with conditions warm and dry into the spring. Unfortunately, the ongoing *coulure* problem (the failure of fruit to develop after flowering) ensured a short crop yet again, which understandably set growers on edge for the rest of the season. Weather turned cold in July, which slowed down the maturation and ratcheted tensions even higher, but warm, often hot conditions commenced in August and were only slowed down by early September rains, after which normal weather conditions prevailed all the way through late October. Quality is widely variable across the region, based on what I tasted last year and this November, so careful buying will be necessary (for the first time since 2008). That said, 2011 produced more consistently successful wines than '08, with generally deeper and more intense fruit character and less herbacity and acidity. As a rule the '11s are more harmonious, generous and round than their '08 counterparts and will provide plenty of immediate mass appeal.

In fact, Julien Barrot, of Domaine La Barroche in Chateauneuf-du-Pape, compares the texture and tannic structure of his 2011s to those of his '09s, pointing out that in both vintages he was able to harvest well into October and that in both years "fruit ripeness and tannins were in harmony." In his case the ripeness of 2011 means wines that check in at over 17% alcohol, at least in the Pure bottling. On the other hand, producers whose wines rely heavily on the late-ripening syrah and mourvedre, like Chateau de Beaucastel, made wines with ripe tannins at lower alcohol levels. Marc Perrin told me that given the recent short grenache crops, his ancestors were looking pretty smart for their relatively intensive planting of mourvedre. That thought was echoed by Vincent Avril as well, who opined that "the whole point of using all of the allowed grapes was to avoid falling prey to problems of monoculture."

Despite what the labels might say, always keep in mind that labeling laws in France allow for an over/under on the declared alcohol level of the wine. So plenty of 2011s, despite being labelled as carrying 14.5% alcohol, may actually clock in at as high as 16%--that's 32 proof, by the way--which hardly implies weak-kneed character. In short, this is by no means a vintage to shun, but it's also no 2010 or 2009, or, it appears, 2012, a year in which precious few producers swung and missed. If you choose carefully, plenty of delicious, fruit-forward and

accessible wines can be found, and market realities suggest that they'll be available at extremely attractive prices.

The classic, juicy 2012s. After the stress of 2011, growers caught a break, in terms of climate if not yield, in 2012. As I mentioned earlier, *coulure* reduced the grenache crop by as much as 60%, which is an economic disaster for a region that depends so heavily on the variety for the majority of its wines. Most producers I visited reported overall production to be off by as much as 50%, and Vincent Avril quipped sardonically that "maybe we need to come up with a new definition of "normal" for yields because this is getting to be sadly consistent." The upside was the fact that heavy rains at the end of 2011 (almost three times normal for the period) had replenished water tables--a very good thing as the months of June and July of 2012 were hot and extremely dry. Moreover, the 2011 growing season was followed by a brutally cold winter in which many old as well as young vines died, especially in the higher altitudes of Gigondas and Vacqueyras. The hot summer of '12 ensured optimal ripeness of the fruit, and rains returned in August to revive the vines, followed by the reliable *mistral*, which kept the vineyards dry through a harvest that lasted until late October.

So there are plenty of ripe, fleshy, powerful wines to be found from 2012, and overall quality is a step up from 2011, for sure. In fact, many producers told me that alcohol and pH levels often approach those of the opulent 2007s, but tannins are higher and, in most cases, so are acidity levels. It does not appear that the wines have quite the lushness of the '09s or the powerful tannic structure of the '10s, which, in the opinion of producers like Thierry Sabon of Clos du Mont-Olivet, Louis Barruol of Saint-Cosme and Isabel Ferrando of Saint-Prefert, makes the '12s "classic" and "balanced."

Final judgment on the 2012s will obviously be reserved for next year but, based on the fairly sizable number of "little" finished 2012 Rhones that I have tried at this point, it appears to be a vintage that will appeal to those who like to drink their wines on the young side or with a few years of bottle age. My hunch is that they're not built for long-term aging, like the 2010s and 2005s, but that they will have better legs than the 2007s and, perhaps, most 2009s.