

The Northern Rhône Many of the vineyards of the Northern Rhône are situated on steep slopes next to the River Rhône between Vienne in the north and Valence in the south. Although they are responsible for only a small percentage of the total production of Rhône wines, these northern vineyards are home to many of the premium wines.

19

CLIMATE AND GRAPE GROWING

At this point along its course the Rhône Valley is quite narrow and steep. The vineyards are mainly planted close to the river where the best sites occupy steep slopes with a south-facing aspect. These sites often lie in lateral valleys that feed into the Rhône, valleys that also serve to protect the vines from the cold north winds known as the *mistral*, which can easily damage them. Vines are supported either by an individual stake or by a tepee-like arrangement of stakes. The climate is similar to that of Beaujolais: moderate and continental. Temperatures are noticeably cooler than in the Southern Rhône.

GRAPE VARIETIES AND WINEMAKING

The Northern Rhône is most closely associated with powerful red wines made from Syrah. However, although only a small amount of white wine is made it has a significant reputation thanks in large part to the popularity of Viognier among drinkers of premium wines.

Black Varieties

Syrah is the only black variety permitted in the Northern Rhône. At this latitude and with the cooling effect of the *mistral*, Syrah is at the very northern limit of where it can ripen successfully. Consequently the most prized sites for Syrah have southerly exposures and are on very steep slopes. This is particularly important in the cooler northern reaches of the region.



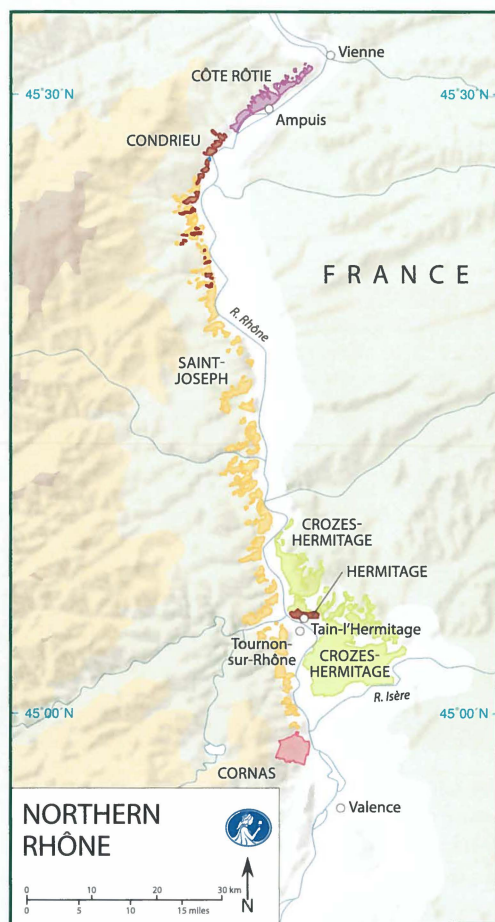
Tying vines onto stakes with raffia in the steep vineyards of Côte Rôtie. Each vine is individually staked.

The wines tend to be deeply coloured and have medium to high levels of tannin with black fruit, and sometimes black pepper or floral aromas. The use of oak is dependent on the winemaker; some use a high proportion of new oak for their best wines whereas others prefer to use older oak or larger barrels. Fermenting Syrah with white varieties has traditionally been practised in a number of the *crus*, but this technique is now rarely seen. The addition of the white grapes can help to stabilise the colour extraction from the red grapes; Viognier in particular can also add an extra aromatic intensity to the wine.



The vineyards of Hermitage rise up on well-exposed steep slopes behind the town of Tain.

KEY



White Varieties

Viognier makes full-bodied white wines with perfumed aromas of blossom and apricots, and flavours of stone fruits. The wines tend to have low acidity and high alcohol as the grapes do not develop their signature aromas until very late in the season when they have reached a very high level of sugar ripeness. The grapes need careful handling in the winery so that the wines do not develop an overtly oily character that can overwhelm the varietal aromas. New oak is increasingly being used but it too has to be handled carefully as oak flavours can easily overwhelm primary aromas. A small number of wines are made in an off-dry style from late-harvested grapes.

Marsanne and **Roussanne** are also grown in the Northern Rhône and are usually blended together. Marsanne has richness and weight whereas Roussanne offers acidity and a perfumed fruit characteristic. These wines do not have the aromatic intensity of Viognier but they can age well and develop complex hazelnut aromas.

REGIONS AND WINES

Most of the wines in the Northern Rhône come from one of the *cru* appellations, although theoretically generic

Côtes du Rhône can be made here too. Most of these *cru*s of the Northern Rhône are tiny, with only Saint-Joseph and Crozes-Hermitage covering a significant area.

Côte Rôtie

These vineyards around the town of Ampuis are the most northerly appellation of the Rhône valley. Côte Rôtie, which translates as 'roasted slope', gives some idea of their exposure to the sun. Only red wines are produced, although up to 20 per cent Viognier can be added. Its use is limited and, when it is used, it is unusual to include more than a small percentage. These wines are deeply coloured, full-bodied, spicy and the best have an aromatic, floral freshness and textural elegance that distinguishes them from Hermitage.

Condrieu

This is a white wine made solely from the Viognier grape. The area under vine has grown significantly in recent years and the best wines come from low-yielding old vines, grown on steep, well-exposed, terraced vineyards. Château-Grillet is a single property appellation within Condrieu that produces wines in a similar style.

Saint-Joseph

Saint-Joseph runs along the western bank of the Rhône from Condrieu in the north to Tournon in the south. The vast majority of the wines here are reds made from Syrah. Some white wines are made from Marsanne and Roussanne. The best wines generally come from the terraced vineyards near Tournon, which can have a flavour intensity and structure similar to Hermitage. Excellent wines are also produced just south of Condrieu. Large volumes of relatively light-bodied wines, often incorporating elements made using carbonic maceration, come from the more fertile, flatter sites on the valley floor and the plateau above the slopes. These wines can be among the lightest-bodied of the Northern Rhône, expressing the pepper-perfumed aspects of the Syrah grape.

Hermitage

Hermitage is located on a steep south-facing slope, behind the town of Tain-l'Hermitage. It is divided into a number of *lieux-dits*, named sites, which are not part of the appellation system. They vary in steepness and aspect, which gives wines of subtly different style and body. The best Hermitage has traditionally been a blend of wines from these different sites, but some producers have started to release wines made from specific *lieux-dits*. Red Hermitage is generally the fullest-bodied of the Northern Rhône red wines and ages well. Although up to 15 per cent of Roussanne and Marsanne may be fermented with Syrah, this is now rarely done and instead they are made into white wines that account for approximately a fifth of Hermitage's production.

Crozes-Hermitage

The most important appellation in terms of volume is Crozes-Hermitage, whose vineyards lie on mixed terrain around the hill of Hermitage. North of Hermitage the vineyards are on slopes whereas most of the vineyards to the south of Hermitage are on a flat plain. The red wines are made from Syrah (with the option of adding up to 15 per cent Marsanne or Roussanne). Their quality, style and price varies significantly depending on the location of the vineyards. Lighter wines are from the higher yielding flatter sites in the south. More concentrated, complex and tannic wines come from vines growing on the steeper slopes to the north. Some of the more

expensive wines may be aged in oak. However, overall the red wines of Crozes-Hermitage do not enjoy the same reputation as those from Hermitage and Côte Rôtie. Some white wines are also produced.

Cornas

This is the most southerly of the red wine *crus* and is by far the warmest. The vineyards lie on the sheltered, well-exposed sun-baked south-facing slopes of the many lateral valleys that exist here. Unlike the other appellations, Cornas must be made from 100 per cent Syrah. The wines are deeply coloured, full-bodied, and in a style and quality similar to Hermitage.