

20

The Southern Rhône The vineyard area of the Southern Rhône is much greater than that of the Northern Rhône and it produces an impressive range of wines, from high-volume and inexpensive to premium. Production is dominated by red wine, although there are some high-quality white and rosé wines too.

CLIMATE AND GRAPE GROWING

The Rhône valley opens out south of Valence and the vineyards are planted on much flatter terrain than those of the Northern Rhône. Many, but by no means all, of the best sites have very stony soils that absorb the sun's heat and warm the vineyard, aiding ripening. In some sites, particularly in areas of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, these stones or *galets* completely cover the soil surface. The climate in the south is different too. It is Mediterranean, with mild winters and warm dry summers when drought can be a problem. In this part of the Rhône the north winds known as the *mistral* gain speed and can cause extensive damage to vineyards. There are fewer slopes to protect the vines from the wind, meaning windbreaks have to be planted. For the most part, Grenache is bush-trained low to the ground to offer protection from the wind and to benefit from the warmth of the soil. Syrah is more easily damaged in the wind and it benefits from the support offered by trellising systems.

GRAPE VARIETIES AND WINEMAKING

Instead of the wines being made from just one or two different varieties, as is the case in the north, Southern

Rhône wines are often complex blends. In certain circumstances wines are made from a dozen or more grape varieties.

Black Varieties

Grenache dominates most of the red wines of the Southern Rhône and is by far the most widely planted variety. The warm summers mean that Grenache can ripen fully here, producing wines with concentrated spiced red fruit flavours. However, in hot years the fruit flavours can become baked and jammy. **Syrah** and **Mourvèdre** play a supporting role to Grenache. Syrah provides blends with extra colour and tannin but it can struggle in the hottest sites. Mourvèdre, on the other hand, is at the northern limit of where it can ripen successfully and thrives in these locations. It is deeply coloured and very high in tannins. When it is fully ripe it can develop dense black fruit flavours as well as gamey and meaty aromas that are highly prized by many top producers, especially in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. **Cinsault** can also perform a supporting role in red wine blends providing red fruit flavours rather than tannin or colour, but it is best known as a blending partner to Grenache in the production of fresh, fruity rosés.

It is not only the range of grape varieties used that varies, but also the winemaking methods. Consequently, it is almost impossible to describe a typical Southern Rhône red, although all winemakers must find a way of managing potentially high tannins and high alcohol levels in order to produce a balanced wine. Techniques vary from cold pre-fermentation maceration and storage in stainless steel to warm extractive fermentations in traditional open fermenters and maturation in large old oak vessels. Usually winemakers will make up their blends from wines that have been fermented using different techniques. New oak is used by some, although a number of traditional producers believe it overwhelms the flavours of Grenache. The styles of the wines vary from light- to medium-bodied fresh, fruity wines with low tannins to highly tannic full-bodied reds with flavours of spice, meat and/or earth.

White Varieties

The cultivation of white grapes remains a minority concern in the Southern Rhône. There is no Southern Rhône equivalent to Condrieu or Viognier. Clairette, Grenache Blanc and Bourboulenc are the notable additions to the Northern Rhône trio of Viognier,

The vineyards of the Southern Rhône are not restricted to a narrow valley as they are in the north and many are planted on flat open terrain.



Marsanne and Roussanne, which are also grown here. The best whites are usually richly textured and full-bodied, high in alcohol, with low to medium acidity and subtle fruity aromas. New oak is rarely used.

REGIONS AND WINES

In the Southern Rhône, production is divided between the regional and village appellations and the *crus*.

Generic Appellations

Côtes du Rhône accounts for more than half of the entire production of appellation wines in the Southern Rhône, most of which is red wine. Most are medium-bodied, fruity but simple wines. Fruity rosés and white wines are made under this appellation too.

Within the Côtes du Rhône, a number of villages are entitled to call their red and, in some cases, white and rosé wines **Côtes du Rhône Villages**. To qualify, more stringent minimum alcohol levels and maximum yields must be observed and a greater percentage of the blend must be made from Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre. There are a number of individual villages that can add their name on the label if 100 per cent of the wine comes from the named village, for example, Côtes du Rhône Villages Cairanne. These are the best wines outside of the *crus*, and have more body, structure and spiced red fruit flavours than generic Côtes du Rhône. All of these named villages have the option to apply for *cru* status.

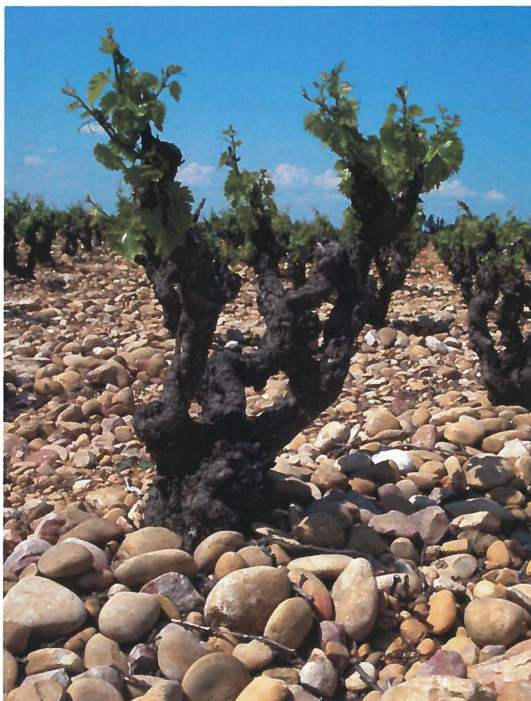
Châteauneuf-du-Pape

Situated on the east bank of the Rhône, Châteauneuf-du-Pape is by far the largest of all the *crus* in the Rhône valley. It has a particular place in French wine history, because it was the first area to have *Appellation contrôlée* status.

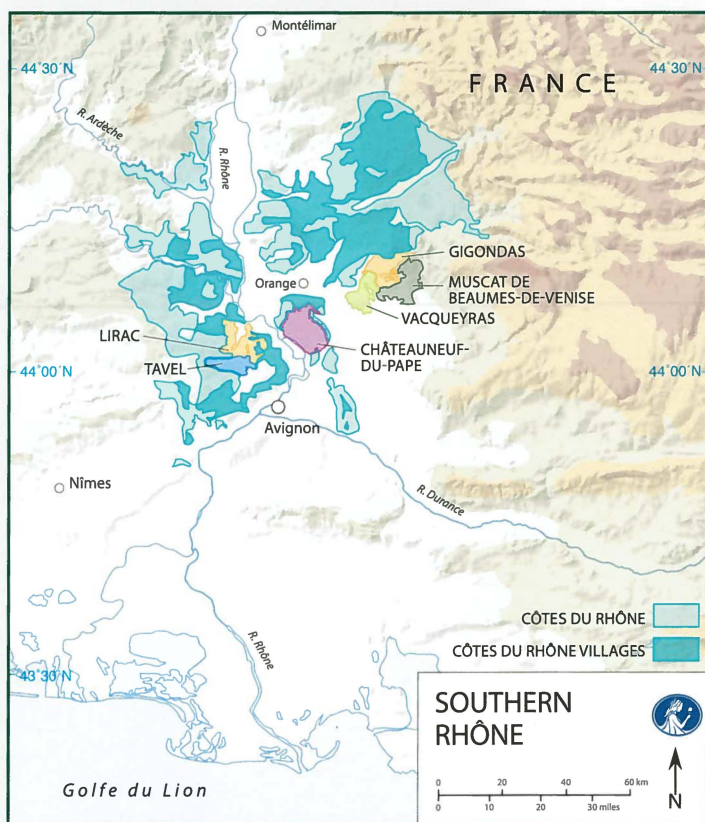
The vineyard area is notably flat, although small variations in aspect can have a marked impact on how well Syrah and Mourvèdre perform. The appellation's size and the associated wide range of soil types, aspects and the large number of grape varieties winemakers can choose from (13 in total) means that there is a lot of diversity among the red wines for which the appellation is most famous. Grenache dominates as elsewhere in the Southern Rhône. Some very successful Châteauneufs are 100 per cent Grenache, while others make far greater use of the gamey, meaty quality of Mourvèdre. The best wines are all full-bodied and richly textured with concentrated spiced red fruit flavours that balance the characteristic high alcohol. Unfortunately, the very factors that offer consumers such interest and variety also mean there is a lot of mediocre Châteauneuf that is rather dilute and unbalanced by the high alcohol. A small quantity of white Châteauneuf-du-Pape is made.

Tavel and Lirac

These are the only two Southern *crus* that are on the west bank of the Rhône. They are most famous for the production of rosé. The rosés, made mainly from



An old bush vine in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The large stones, or *galets*, are clearly visible covering the soil surface.



KEY



A vineyard in Gigondas. The red wines from this *cru* are often similar in style to the more famous Châteauneuf-du-Pape.



Grenache and Cinsault, are full-bodied compared with Provence rosés, intensely flavoured and capable of developing greater complexity when aged in bottle (for more information see section *Provence* in Chapter 21). Only rosés can be made in Tavel. Lirac also produces top quality red and white wines in the style of Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

Other Villages Promoted to Crus

Other Southern Rhône villages that lie in and around the hills to the east of Châteauneuf have been promoted to *cru* status. **Gigondas** and **Vacqueyras** are the two most

long-standing *crus*. They make red wines, usually Grenache-led blends, in a similar full-bodied, spicy style to Châteauneuf-du-Pape and many of the wines are as good as those that come from the more famous appellation. However, given the global success of Châteauneuf-du-Pape these *crus* are likely to remain in the shadow of their more famous neighbour. Some *crus* also permit rosé and white wine production. Beaumes de Venise has a separate AC for its fortified Muscats called Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise. See Chapter 45 *Fortified Muscats* for more details.