

Focus on the Southern Rhone, 31<sup>st</sup> Oct 2009

Last year, after tasting the 2007 southern Rhône, especially the top wines from Gigondas, Vacqueyras, Côtes du Rhône, and the most hallowed appellation of the south, Châteauneuf du Pape, I stated it was “the vintage of a lifetime.” I also suggested it was a hypothetical blend of a very hot yet opulent, powerful, sumptuous year such as 1990 and a cooler, drought and Mistral-affected vintage such as 2001. Tasting the 2007s out of bottle has confirmed my thoughts – **this is a truly historic and profoundly great vintage**. As the following tasting notes and commentary suggest, this may be the most compelling vintage of any viticultural region I have ever tasted. I say that because the quality of a vintage is not only measured by what the reference point estates produce, but also by how well the generic appellations fare. I have never tasted better Côtes du Rhône, Gigondas, or sumptuous, rich, complex Vacqueyras than the 2007s. Moreover, the profoundly concentrated, vividly aromatic, and remarkably fresh, yet substantial, full-bodied, and flawless 2007 Châteauneuf du Pape I tasted in the southern Rhône in late August and September were unforgettable.

It is important to recognize how much has transpired in the Châteauneuf du Pape appellation over the last two decades. When I first began tasting Châteauneuf du Pape seriously in 1978, there were no more than 8-10 estates making world-class wines. Today, there are 60-75 doing so, and several new estates arrive with each new vintage. I have been doing this for a long time, and the fathers and mothers I used to meet and taste with, are now replaced by their sons and daughters. This young generation has recognized the extraordinary *terroirs* and fabulous Mediterranean climate enjoyed by this area. They also possess a more worldly view concerning the competition they confront. Consequently, they have raised the bar of quality dramatically. Moreover, Châteauneuf du Pape has more young women dominating the wine scene than any other viticultural region in the world. The number of women who make sensational wines is remarkable, and may be the highest number of any French appellation.

What has made 2007 so special? The great vintages of Châteauneuf du Pape are like great vintages anywhere in the world. Full phenolic maturity is achieved over a long period of time, not retarded or rushed by excessive heat, but built slowly and incrementally. The factors in Châteauneuf du Pape that can change maturity include excessive heat (which afflicted vintages such as 2003, 2000, and 1990), as well as how many days the Mistral winds blow, and whether the nights in August and September were cool. 2007 had more days of Mistral during September than any other year except 2001, 1990, and 1978, three other years which produced superb wines. It was also a drought year, but some of the most stunning statistics are that while the average daytime temperature was well above average, the average night-time temperature, when the grapes have a chance to recover and develop aromatics, was among the lowest of any vintage measured in Châteauneuf du Pape, particularly for the month of September. This month also had a record number days of Mistral. This weather scenario has produced a vintage with extraordinary depth of fruit, yet also laser-like precision, brightness, and exceptional purity. In short, it was a hotter than normal year overall, but it was also a much cooler than normal year in terms of night-time temperatures. Moreover, despite being hotter than normal, the year rarely had any days over 30 degrees Celsius. For example, in 2003, during the critical months of July and August, there were 55 days where the

temperature exceeded 30 degrees Celsius. In 2001, there were 37 days, in 1998, 39 days, and in 2007, there were only 24 days, again dramatically less than in any other vintage. Moreover, in the month of September, 2007, there were *no* days above 30 degrees Celsius, which was the first top vintage since 2001 where this occurred. The other characteristic is that 2007 set an all-time record for hours of sunshine during the course of the year. I could go on and on with more details that contributed to the most extraordinary vintage I have ever tasted. It was also a record year in terms of the lack of rain in both August (none) and September (just over 2 inches). In contrast, 3+ inches fell in both 2001 and 2000, 4.5 inches fell in 1998, and nearly 3 inches fell in 1990. Only 1989 had less rain in the month of September than 2007.

Of course, numbers alone add up to nothing. But when you combine (1) all these climatic characteristics with (2) a young generation pushing the envelope of quality, in addition to (3) the extraordinary investments that have obviously been made in the wineries, and (4) the brilliant work of oenologists such as Philippe Cambie, who almost single-handedly has turned around the fortunes of many moribund estates, everything I tasted makes sense.

The 2007s are just hitting retailers' shelves, but they will disappear quickly. In three decades of visiting Châteauneuf du Pape, I have never seen so many domaines, even in the worst economic recession of modern times, that are completely sold out of 2007s. Even the handful that have not yet been bottled or shipped, have seen their wines completely reserved or allocated, and the demand for this vintage was obvious on every stop I made during my recent trip. In particular, Belgians, Danes, Dutch, and Swiss buyers were everywhere, picking up cases of 2007 Châteauneuf du Papes. To the extent they are still available, these wines will disappear fast – even in these hard economic times. If you love southern Rhône wines, which are the most underrated great wines of the world, you need to move fast, or forever hold your peace. But remember, there will always be another great vintage, and at the time of this writing, 2009 was looking fantastic.

The 2008 southern Rhône vintage is reminiscent of 1999. While challenging in many cases, the good estates and serious *vignerons* who performed a heavy triage because of mildew in late summer, have produced good to very good wines. As in every challenging vintage, there are some outstanding efforts. To reiterate, the good news is that 2009 is looking like a potentially superb vintage. Even if you miss out on the 2007 vintage, 2009 may come close to rivaling that stupendous year, but the quality cannot be ascertained until the wines have finished their malolactic fermentation in late spring, 2010.

All of the wines were tasted between mid-August and late September, 2009, in both blind and non-blind conditions at the domaines, in centralized tastings, and in follow-up tastings in the United States if the bottled wines were available.

—Robert Parker