

THE GLORIES OF THE RHONE VALLEY

I have only been in the business of food and wine since 1965. In those halcyon days, New Zealand tourists at Wellington's "The Coachman" Restaurant used to ask me about the local wines. I had a stock reply; "they're Ok, but don't get any on your hands". My how times have changed! In those days Australian wines, with the noble exception of *Yalumba's* 'Galway Vintage', were not much cop. In fact, let's face it, the thin Bordeaux stuff wasn't much better. So it had to be Burgundy. Luckily my now great mate Chris Fielden turned up from France with marvellous *Chanson* Macon Blanc, Puligny Montrachet, Cote de Beaune and Nuits St. Georges, plus the odd expensive case of Gevrey Chambertin - so the well-heeled wine lovers were more than happy.

Nowadays customers assume that New Zealand wines are my all-time favourites. Some fit the bill (more about my favourite Marlborough vineyard and winery in March after I have revisited *Tindall Estate*), but then there is Australia - I was the first independent wine merchant to ship Oz wines into Blighty way back in 1978 BC (Before Chardonnay). I have written "The Glory Of Champagne" and after a recent hedonistic banquet in Reims with magnums of 1989 *Mumm R. de Lalou*, 2002 *Perrier Jouet Belle Epoque* and with the lobster 1999 *Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs*, the finest Champagne I have enjoyed in years - so it could be Bubbles!

But NO. My favourites are the marvellous wines of the Rhone. Amazing, Approachable and Affordable! Fulsome reds, voluptuous rosés and vastly improved flavoursome whites.

In the old days many producers specialised in sour, paracetamol plonk. The brewers loved it because it was cheap, shipped it in bulk and bottled in Blighty. No wonder I used to shudder when British Airways produced quarter bottles of North London "Cotes du Rhone" on the long-haul flights Downunder! It was enough to turn anyone teetotal.

The world of wine changed dramatically in the eighties, and not just in the New World. The plonk drinkers were drinking less and better and the Aussie winemakers were showing just what could be achieved in relatively hot climates; and we loved these wines with the peppery, spice-stuffed Shiraz flavours. It was time for the guys in the Rhone to upgrade equipment and no longer make wine "like my grandfather made".... And they did precisely that.

In 1985 I wrote about the Rhone in my first book "Enjoying Wine" - "Whatever you do, don't tell the rest of the world, because at the moment the world has not caught on to their relative value". Well, unfortunately they now have. But we ship our own wines direct from the growers and they are all brilliant!

The Valley is divided into very separate regions. The North, just south of Lyon, is all Syrah, and a few unique white varieties. Think of stellar names such as Hermitage, Crozes Hermitage and Condrieu. The South, just north of Aix en Provence is Grenache territory with Syrah and Mourvèdre as added flavourings. Here the great names are Chateauneuf du Pape and the satellite appellations Gigondas and Vacqueyras.

Our CROZES HERMITAGE BLANC DOMAINE HAUTS DE MERCUROL is a fascinating award-winning combination of Marsanne and Roussane with a healthy splash of Viognier. The CROZES HERMITAGE ROUGE DOMAINE MICHEL POINARD is a mighty concentrated 100% Syrah reeking of prunes, plums and gentle peppery spice, but still retains considerable elegance. A wine to savour on these cold, gloomy days – and a perfect accompaniment to our Grilled Steak Sandwiches.

The COTEAUX TRICASTIN DOMAINE DE LA GUIBERTE, one of the least expensive wines on the list, is a lovely mouthful of rounded Syrah and Grenache. VISAN DOMAINE BON RENCONTRE is a gloriously meaty, robust Grenache dominated blend.

And then we have my pride and joys: Yves Cheron's superb estate DOMAINE DU GRAND MONTMIRAIL which produces two marvellous wines: GIGONDAS 'CUVÉE VIELLE VIGNES' and VACQUEYRAS. Both wines are vinified in much the same way using about 65% Grenache, 25% Syrah and 10% Mourvèdre. They offer delicious mouthfuls of wine, with heaps of berries, spice and a finishing note of licorice.

This month the Stateside wine guru Robert Parker rated the Gigondas as 88-90/100 "Very Good", and the Vacqueyras as an "Outstanding" 90-92. These are amazing scores normally reserved for the stupidly priced international superstars – in other words, Class Growth Bordeaux. For instance this week I was offered a dozen (only one dozen mind you) of 1982 Lafite Rothschild, which received the same "Outstanding" Parker rating. It was a modest £45,000 for the case. I think I will stick to the Vacqueyras!

Whenever I am standing at my favourite "Club Corner" end of the Bar I seem to spend a great deal of time quizzically staring at my empty glass of Vacqueyras as though major evaporation had taken place whilst I wasn't looking! *Therefore to keep me happy it is always available on the "Exotica by the Glass" board ... as long as Yves still has stock!*