

# Vintage report

# Southern Rhône 2016

Ideal growing conditions have delivered one of the best vintages of the past decade. Matt Walls takes a closer look at each appellation and recommends some exceptional wines

BEFORE ARRIVING IN the Rhône in October 2017 to taste the 2016 vintage, I had an inkling it was going to be special.

I've since tasted nearly 1,500 wines and it's clear this is a very good year in the northern Rhône – but truly great in the south.

Conditions were ideal in the southern Rhône – hot and dry, but without extremes, and a long growing season. The resulting wines have it all: ripeness, concentration, freshness, acidity and plenty of firm, ripe tannins.

Many of the whites had already been picked by the time welcome rain and cooler conditions arrived on 15 September. The harvest for red varieties began on 12 September and lasted into October. Those who waited until after the rain had several weeks of warm, dry weather and could pick each parcel and variety at perfect ripeness. For Jacky Bernard of Domaine la Ligière and president of AC Vacqueyras, 'it was an exceptional year: lovely quality, healthy, no rot, no degradation, no dried grapes'.

One potential challenge that producers face in hot, dry years with generous yields is achieving full ripeness, which can lead to green flavours and astringent tannins. This wasn't a problem in 2016. Rodolphe des Pins of Château de Montfaucon in Lirac was 'amazed by the softness of the tannins', and during harvest noted 'lots of berries, not much juice, but amazing balance'. This concentration has led to notably high acidity in the wines. This component, along with intensity of ripe, >

*'The wines have it all: ripeness, concentration, freshness, acidity and plenty of firm, ripe tannins'*

Matt Walls

Photograph: Mike Prior. With thanks to Hedonism Wines (www.hedonism.co.uk), Pierre Hourlier Wines (www.hourlierwines.co.uk) & Handford Wines (www.handford.net) for the loan of the bottles



## A selection of top southern Rhône

*Wines (red unless otherwise stated) are listed by appellation, from north to south, then by score, then alphabetically by producer. Prices, stockists and alcohols are given where possible. Full tasting notes on Decanter.com/premium*

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### Vinsobres

**Famille Perrin, Les Hauts de Julien** 94

£16.50 (ib) - £23.6 Big Red Wine, Farr Vintners, Goedhuis & Co, Tanners  
Concentrated palate of vibrant herbal black fruit, with integrated oak adding complexity and spice. Good tannic grip and fine acidity. A punchy beast. **Drink** 2019-2026

**Domaine de Montine** 92

£10.54 Christopher Piper  
**TOP VALUE** Blackberry, plum and spice nose. Fresh, textured palate. Excellent concentration and freshness with ripe acidity. **Drink** 2018-2021

**Domaine l'Ancienne Ecole, L'Essentiel** 92

**NEWCOMER** Bright black cherry and aniseed. Full-bodied, plush texture, raked up by sharp tannins. Saline finish. **Drink** 2019-2021 **Alc** 14%

### Rasteau

**Domaine la Soumade, Cuvée Confiance** 94

£17 Christopher Piper  
Violet, liquorice, blackberry and raspberry leaf. A smooth, seamless palate of real intensity, tannins are present and ripe but imperceptibly fine. Gently vibrant. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 14.4%

**Domaine la Collière, La Fontaine** 93

**TOP VALUE** Menthol, resin and oak with bright plum fruit. Fresh, not overextracted, with lovely acidity and fresh, sprightly tannins. Saline, snappy, balanced and fresh. **Drink** 2018-2022

### Cairanne

**Domaine des Amadiou, Vieilles Vignes** 94

£10 (ib) Stone Vine & Sun  
**TOP VALUE** Tapenade, rosemary and crème de mure nose. Concentrated but lifted berry fruit palate and a long finish. Yves-Jean Houser has a magic touch. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 14%

**Domaine Alary, La Brunote** 93

£15.75 H2Vin  
**TOP VALUE** Smoked herbs, fig and berry fruits. Concentrated palate with no heaviness. Vibrant juicy berry fruit, brisk acidity and textured, fine tannins. Enlivening. **Drink** 2018-2022 >



**Domaine les Hautes Cances, Tradition Blanc** 92

**TOP VALUE** Lifted meadow flower nose. Broad palate, good natural acidity and a refreshing apple crunch. Long, aniseed finish. Good concentration. **Drink** 2018-2020 **Alc** 13.5%

## Gigondas

**Château de St-Cosme, Hominis Fides** 98

High acidity, abundant but sinewy tannins and intense dark fruit. Almost over-extracted but has freshness from minerality. **Drink** 2021-2035

**Moulin de la Gardette, Ventabren** 98

**TOP VALUE** Concentrated but incredible vivacity. Refreshing, mineral, saline finish. Perfectly poised; seriously elegant. **Drink** 2020-2040

**Domaine du Grapillon d'Or, Excellence** 93

£32 **Montrachet Fine Wine**

Herbal savoury nose. Full, juicy palate and weighty, ripe tannins that give depth while keeping vibrancy of fruit. **Drink** 2018-2024

**Domaine d'Ouréa** 92

**NEWCOMER** Fresh, herbal, breezy nose. Juicy and unforced red fruits and a dry, savoury, neat finish. Lovely for early drinking. **Drink** 2018-2022

## Vacqueyras

**Domaine de Sang des Cailloux, Lopy** 94

£24.60-£29.50 **A&B Vintners, Christopher Piper**  
Gorgeous old-vine Grenache with Syrah adding structure and bite. Lovely ripe tannins, good acidity and freshness. **Drink** 2019-2025

**Roucas Tumba, Les Premices Blanc** 93

Lifted fennel and blossom nose. Full, textured, oily palate of pear and quince. Minerality to balance as acidity low. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 14%

**Domaine les Semelles de Vent, Vieilles Vignes** 92

**NEWCOMER** Captivating bramble and bark nose. Smooth, seamless palate with nothing overdone, ending dry and savoury. **Drink** 2018-2023

**Domaine le Clos des Cazaux, Les Clefs d'Or Blanc** 91

**TOP VALUE** Bright grapefruit nose. Broad and silky palate with good acidity and pithy citrus. Pure and well made. **Drink** 2018-2019

## Beaumes de Venise

**Domaine des Bernardins** 94

£24.40 **Christopher Piper**

**TOP VALUE** Nose of fresh pepper and herbal bitters. Full, lively palate with sculpted fruit and tannins. Saline finish. **Drink** 2019-2026 **Alc** 13.5%

fresh fruit and robust tannin structures will give the top wines impressive longevity.

The 2015 vintage in the southern Rhône was broadly very good, but some wines were overly rich and alcoholic. The 2016s are firmer, fresher, with better structure and balance. White wines are also marginally better this year thanks to their increased freshness and acidity, but this is emphatically a year for reds, particularly Grenache, while Mourvèdre and Carignan are juicy and concentrated.

## Vinsobres, Rasteau & Cairanne

Vinsobres was a pleasant surprise. This vintage has really played into producers' hands with a winning blend of freshness and power. If you're not yet familiar with the appellation, this is the year to expand your repertoire, especially as they offer such value.

The best wines of Rasteau demonstrate that it too enjoyed excellent conditions this year, but it lacks the consistency of Cairanne, with a number of wines let down by unbalanced alcohols or simply lacking complexity. The best wines however are very good.

Cairanne is one of the most exciting Rhône appellations. It had to hit peak form to achieve its recent promotion to cru level and it's still fighting fit. The 2016s are a joy; concentrated, fresh, balanced, and consistent in quality. Its whites are often among the southern Rhône's best, but this year it's the reds that excel.

**Above: harvesting Grenache grapes at Domaine Daniel et Denis Alary in Cairanne**



## Rhône vintages – how they rate

	North	South		North	South
2016	8	10	2008	5	4
2015	10	9	2007	7	9
2014	6	5	2006	8	8
2013	7	6	2005	9	9
2012	8	8	2004	6	7
2011	7	7	2003	7	6
2010	10	10	2002	3	2
2009	9	9	2001	8	9

## Gigondas, Vacqueyras & Beaumes-de-Venise

The 2015 vintage was exceptional in this eastern enclave, and the 2016 is at least as good, if not better. There are excellent wines in all three appellations, but it's Gigondas that has the edge, enjoying amazing freshness, purity and joie de vivre. The key to its success according to Jean-Baptiste Meunier at Moulin de la Gardette is that 'there was no excess'.

The quality in Vacqueyras is also very promising, despite some high alcohol levels. There are some lovely whites this year, and plantings of white varieties are increasing rapidly as they gain recognition. This is a dynamic appellation, with more and more small domaines being established as growers leave co-operative wineries and go it alone.

Beaumes de Venise is best known for its sweet whites, but don't overlook its reds. In 2016 they are intense, driving, full-bodied wines that represent good value for money.

## Châteauneuf-du-Pape

'Powerful, ripe, dense, but at the same time fresh, drinkable and balanced. It's an >

**Below: Jean-Baptiste Meunier's Moulin de la Gardette Gigondas is 'perfectly poised'**



**Domaine St-Amant, Grangeneuve** 93

Camphor and rosemary nose. Intense palate with high acidity and a saline finish. Fresh and vital; very drinkable. **Drink** 2019-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

## Châteauneuf-du-Pape

**Château Rayas** 100

Tasting of three main parts: Le Coeur is rich and broad with abundant acidity and fine tannins; Le Couchant adds aromatics, finesse and marked minerality; Le Levant is fuller in fruit and body. Suggests a long-ageing vintage potentially worthy of a perfect score. **Drink** 2026-2048

**Château de Beaucastel, Hommage à Jacques Perrin** 99

£250-£270 **Laithwaite's, Montrachet Fine Wine**

Tasting of Courrieux, a parcel of Mourvèdre planted in 1909 that makes up 70% of the blend. Violets, blueberry and cassis nose. Intense camphor and rosemary fruit and a saline finish. Sublime freshness, tannins dense but ripe. Potentially perfect. **Drink** 2027-2050 **Alc** 14%

**Château de Beaucastel, Vieilles Blanc** 98

£75-£90.59 **Laithwaite's, Montrachet Fine Wine**

100-year-old Roussanne. Quince, pineapple, apricot. Full, opulent texture, long and lingering. Powerful and regal. **Drink** 2020-2033 **Alc** 13.5%

**Clos des Papes** 98

£65.10 (ib)-£92.60 **A&B Vintners, Farr Vintners, Laithwaite's**

Already aromatically harmonious, bright and detailed. Deep yet fresh with a powerful tannic and acidic framework. Very long, with a sublime freshness. Effortlessly brilliant. **Drink** 2024-2040

**Château Rayas, Blanc** 97

Punchy grapefruit, quince and herbs. Full, silky texture and glycerol fatness teamed with an intense mineral drive. **Drink** 2020-2040 **Alc** 14%

**Domaine du Pegau, Cuvée Da Capo** 97

Violets, blueberries, raspberries, tobacco leaf. Has real life and lightness despite high alcohol. Ripe, lattice tannins. **Drink** 2020-2036 **Alc** 15.5%

**Domaine de la Janasse, Vieilles Vignes** 96

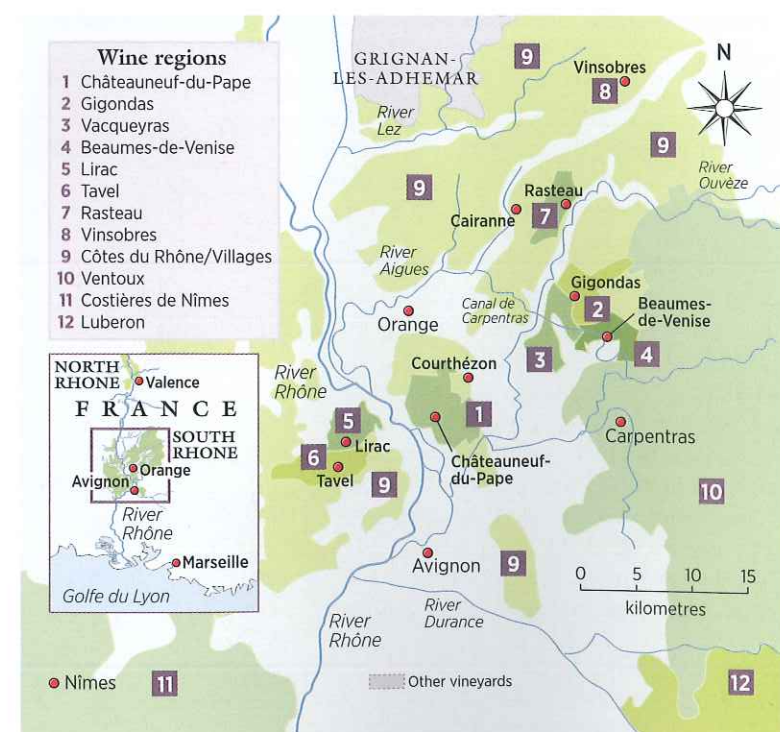
£70 **Enotria&Coe, Great Western Wine**

Brooding violets, liquorice and blueberries. Dense tannins and bright acidity. Time will bring great complexity. **Drink** 2025-2040 **Alc** 14.5%

**Domaine St-Préfert, Charles Giraud** 96

£61.59 **Laithwaite's**

Lifted violets, blueberries and liquorice. Precise acidity and ripe tannins. Ample but structured. Will be very good. **Drink** 2020-2032 >



Map: Maggie Nelson



**Domaine de la Vieille Julienne, Haut Lieu 95**

£43.75 (ib) H2Vin, WoodWinters  
Concentrated, intense, inky, fresh and lively. Big tannins but ageworthy, with a minty, mineral grip to finish. **Drink** 2020-2035

**Château la Nerthe, Clos Beauvenir Blanc 94**

£82.99 Champagnes & Châteaux  
Pear, fennel and honeysuckle nose. Not as oaky as previous years, and the light, fresh fruit really shines. Long finish. **Drink** 2018-2026 **Alc** 13%

**Guillaume Gonnet, La Muse 94**

**NEWCOMER** Flowing, full berry and plum fruit of inky density but no heaviness. Ample fine tannins. Promising. **Drink** 2019-2030 **Alc** 15.5%

**Château Sixtine, Manus Dei 93**

£19.99 Laithwaite's  
**MOST IMPROVED** Opulent, ripe plum and black cherry. Powerful but approachable. Fine tannins and bright acidity. **Drink** 2018-2024 **Alc** 15%

**Domaine Patrice Magni, Blanc 93**

**MOST IMPROVED** Nutty oak nose with candied pear, honeysuckle and pastry. Powerful, flowing and detailed. **Drink** 2018-2026 **Alc** 14.5%

**Lirac**

**Domaine de Montfaucon, Vin de Madame la Comtesse Blanc 93**

Pear fruit gilded in oak and vanilla cream. Full but fresh mineral, textural style – a great Clairette of strong character. **Drink** 2018-2026 **Alc** 13%

**Domaine des Carabiniers 93**

**TOP VALUE** Raspberry and tarragon nose. Unforced style with bright juicy red fruit and fine, subtle tannins. Ethereal. **Drink** 2018-2020

**Domaine Lafond Roc-Epine, Blanc 92**

£13-£15 Le Bon Vin, Nickolls & Perks, Oxford Wine Co  
**TOP VALUE** Lime blossom and aniseed aroma. Chalky texture and bright acidity that gives life and length to its rich pear fruit. **Drink** 2018-2020

**Domaine Maby, La Fermade Blanc 92**

**TOP VALUE** Pear, orange and florals. Nice freshness and balancing acidity – a drinkable and enjoyable Lirac. **Drink** 2018-2019 **Alc** 14.5%

**Tavel**

**Domaine de la Mordorée, Reine des Bois Rosé 95**

£16.67 Millésima  
Raspberry, herbs and bitters. Full yet vibrant with lovely acidity. Powerful and expressive, mineral, saline finish and real sense of place. One of the Rhône's great wines. **Drink** 2018-2026 ➤



*'Powerful, ripe, dense, but at the same time fresh, drinkable and balanced.'*

*It's an incredible vintage'*

Jean-Paul Daumen, Domaine de la Vieille Julienne, Châteauneuf-du-Pape

incredible vintage,' says Jean-Paul Daumen of Domaine de la Vieille Julienne, and this neatly sums up the vintage throughout the appellation. The wines have real concentration but without heaviness, remarkable density of ripe tannins and fairly high levels of acidity.

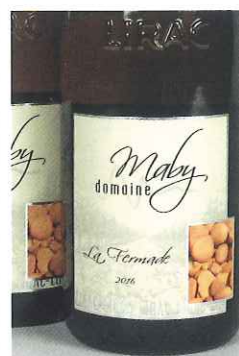
The Châteauneuf whites are more variable; there are some exceptional wines at the very best estates, but like the reds they will require many years before they show their best. Some, however, are overly heavy and alcoholic.

Problems with reds centre around excess oak, unbalanced alcohol, tough tannins and occasional overripeness but instances are rare: the standard is high across the board. Daumen compares his 2016s to his super 2001s; Vincent Avril at Clos des Papes invokes 2010 and 1990 – exceptional quality vintages.

**Lirac & Tavel**

If you value refreshment over opulence in whites, look to Lirac. The straight, mineral character of the west bank is very much in evidence this year, bringing detailed aromatics and pure drinkability. Lirac's reds, too, are not as uniformly good but often excellent in 2016 – this is an appellation on the up but still has some way to go before it reaches its potential. Those who weren't tempted to overextract have delivered wines with bright fruit, crunchy tannins and a fine, mineral freshness.

The dark rosés of Tavel are considerably better than the 2015s, with excellent aromas and real drinkability. Don't let the global trend for pale pink distract you – some of these are very serious wines indeed. ➤



Above: Domaine Maby, La Fermade Blanc offers great value

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## Côtes du Rhône Villages

**Domaine des Gravennes, Terre d'Histoire, Suze la Rousse 93**

**TOP VALUE MOST IMPROVED** An estate to watch. Open, expressive ripe berry fruits, juicy tannins and lively acidity. Beautifully fresh and elegant; real precision and class. **Drink** 2018-2021

**La Ferme du Mont, Les Echallas, Valréas 92**

Inky palate of mouthcoating black olive, lavender and blackberry fruit with fine tannins. Ripe acidity with well-judged noticeable oak. **Drink** 2018-2020

**Le Bois des Dentelles, Elisa, Plan de Dieu 91**

**NEWCOMER** Ripe, juicy, lifted blueberry and black cherry. Fruity acidity, a solid tannic base and a long finish. The best of Plan de Dieu. **Drink** 2018-2020

**Domaine Martin, Plan de Dieu 90**

**TOP VALUE** A large producer but reliable quality. Vivid spicy, peppery nose with fresh, intense dark berry and damson fruit. **Drink** 2018-2019 **Alc** 14.5%

## Côtes du Rhône

**Château de Fonsalette 95**

Cinsault gives orange, herbal bitters and pepper; the Grenache is minty; the Syrah contributes high acidity and firm tannins. **Drink** 2020-2030

**Château de Fonsalette, Blanc 94**

Expressive grapefruit, pear, nectarine and florals. Generous oily-textured palate, with bright acidity and a fresh mineral lift. **Drink** 2019-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

**Domaine de Gramenon, La Sagesse 93**

£25-£28.49 **H2Vin, Les Caves de Pyrene, Mission Wines** Full, deep and vibrant damson palate with ripe acidity and ample soft, ripe tannins. Beautiful Grenache to enjoy now. **Drink** 2018-2021

**Domaine de la Bastide 91**

**TOP VALUE** Fresh dark berry fruits. Tight and dynamic palate, with young, snappy tannins, and ripe acidity. **Drink** 2018-2019 **Alc** 13.5%

**Domaine de l'Amandine, Blanc 90**

POA **Tanners**

**TOP VALUE MOST IMPROVED** Generous yet elegant floral and almond notes with fine acidity. An estate on the up. **Drink** 2018-2019 **Alc** 13.5%

**Domaine du Seminaire, Les Saffres 90**

**MOST IMPROVED** Vibrant, peppery plum and damson with good length. Very drinkable, a smart every-day pick. **Drink** 2018-2019 **Alc** 14%

For full tasting notes and scores of these and more than 300 other 2016 Rhônes, plus the latest prices and stocksists, see [Decanter.com/premium](http://Decanter.com/premium)



Above: Jean-Pierre Verdeau and his daughter Mathilde of Domaine de l'Amandine

## Côtes du Rhône & Côtes du Rhône-Villages

I tasted more wines this year from the most basic appellation of AC Côtes du Rhône that scored 90 points or above than ever before – a testament to the vintage and to the increasing quality of winemaking in the region. Most are red, but there are also some whites at this level that really excelled.

The next rung up on the appellation ladder, AC Côtes du Rhône-Villages, is a mixed bag but there are some smart buys if you know where to look. Of the villages that can append their name to the appellation, Visan and Valréas lead the pack with vivid aromatics, balance and striking northern freshness. Two newly established names, Ste-Cécile and Suze la Rousse, are now firing on all cylinders despite some instances of overenthusiastic extraction. Though more mixed in quality, Plan de Dieu offers some agreeably punchy wines and Sablet expresses its characteristic elegance.

## Embarrassment of riches

Thanks to near-perfect vintage conditions, the 2016 fruit was superlative but some wines were let down by overextraction and excessive oak. Avoid these and there's an embarrassment of riches to choose from – volumes are good and prices are largely stable. The more accessible wines will drink well in their youth, but the best will be very long lived.

With such a large region, some areas tend to do better than others, but in 2016 there are no losers – each appellation clearly displays its own individual character. Highlights are the regal might of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, flowing Gigondas and joyous Cairanne.

This is one of the best vintages of the past few decades. Do not miss it! **D**

*'I tasted more wines in 2016 from the most basic appellation of AC Côtes du Rhône that scored 90 points or above than ever before'*

Matt Walls

Matt Walls is a consulting editor for *Decanter* and the DWWA Regional Chair for the Rhône

*mper*  
Marcelo Pelleriti  
WINES

Marcelo creates award winning wines in Valle de Uco, Argentina and in Pomerol, France. His two great passions in life are his love for making music and for making fine wines.

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