It had been three years since my last visit to our producers in the Rhône Valley, and it was exciting and invigorating to catch up with so many of them recently. I was there in June, and everything was humming along beautifully, though fear of a prolonged drought was at the top of everyone’s mind. This, of course, is before July saw one of the hottest summers on record all over Europe. Extreme weather events occurred throughout France, including unprecedented wildfires in Bordeaux. There was even a tornado and hailstorm that struck one of the premier vineyards in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, stripping all the leaves and fruit right off the vines.

For most of the Rhône, though, the rains came at just the right time and brought crucial relief. We expect the 2022 vintage to be a rich and ripe one; many are hoping it will look like 2015 or 2017. Time will tell as harvest is just beginning, but spirits remain high.

All said, we still have a lot of time to wait before we see much of the 2021 or 2022 vintages begin to arrive on our doorsteps. In the meantime, there are plenty of great wines in the bottle now, ranging from the exuberant and fruit-filled 2019s to the structured and balanced 2020s. These were great vintages in both the north and south, and we have an array of stunning bottles at unbelievable prices from our direct import producers.

Our Rhône team brings you our best and brightest in these pages. Let’s begin with some of my top picks featured on our shelves right now.

### SEPTEMBER 12, 2022 FEATURES

1. **2 Fondrèche / Clos de la Bonette**
   - 2019s from Châteauneuf-du-Pape
   - Guy Farge

### FEATURED WINES

- **2018 Domaine de Galuval "Inspiration" Rasteau** $24.99
  - 97DC
  - Galuval has been around for almost a century straddling the two Cru appellations of Rasteau and Cairanne. Inspiration is a top selection from their Rasteau holdings, and it has a deep, intense profile: bold flavors of blackberry, dried blueberry, spices, and grilled meats. A high percentage of Mourvèdre gives it power and structure. Some might equate this to a Châteauneuf-du-Pape! A magnificent wine that transcends its price.

- **2017 Domaine des Sénéchaux Châteauneuf-du-Pape** $44.99
  - 94JD 93-94VN
  - Sénéchaux is owned by the Cazes family of Bordeaux’s Lynch-Bages. Their restrained, terroir-driven style makes for one of my favorite CdPs. They only make one red and one white, meaning all the best fruit goes into these estate cuvées. The 2017 rouge has great concentration with flavors of blackberries, tobacco leaf, anise, and pepper, and an elegant mouthfeel. Drinks beautifully now and has many fine years ahead of it.

- **2020 Domaine Roche "Marcel Roche" Cairanne** $19.99 91-93JD
  - This trip was my first visit to Romaine Roche’s vineyards. Recently certified organic, Romaine has dialed into what makes great Cairanne: old-vine fruit, great terroir, and a hands-off approach. The Marcel Roche (an homage to his father) is 100% Grenache selected from his oldest vineyards in the lieu-dit of Les Garrigues. This wine is beautifully layered with gorgeous intensity. It’s a lot of wine for under $20!
Domaine de Fondrèche: Making All the Right Moves

Tucked in the southeastern Rhône Valley, Domaine de Fondrèche was established in the early 90s by Nanou Barthelemy and her son Sébastien Vincenti. Nanou fell in love with the property, a special vineyard planted on a plateau over silex and calcareous soils in the shadow of Mont Ventoux. Sébastien worked at the property from its inception but took over winemaking duties in 2008. Every year, they strive to raise the profile of the winery and the surrounding Ventoux appellation. Thanks to their hard work, they’ve become one of its top producers. Using a mix of stainless steel tanks, concrete eggs, and oak foudre, they make clean and precise wines that show off the very special terroirs that make up the estate.

Just below the plateau lie the sandier cooler soils, which are perfect for their white and rosé. The 2021 Domaine de Fondrèche Ventoux Blanc $16.99 is an absolute super star of a white. This blend of Grenache Blanc, Rolle, Clairette, and Roussanne grapes ranked as one of my favorite whites when I visited Rhône this summer. It displays an explosion of aromas, ranging from citrus to tropical tones. This is an engaging and delightful white that I immediately doubled down on (meaning I ordered more!) when I tasted it with Sebastien. All brought up in stainless steel and concrete tanks, it is fresh, engaging, and makes for an enticing example of whites from the Southern Rhône.

Another distinguishing factor at Fondrèche is the old plantings of Syrah established in the mid-50s. It turned out to be the Serine clone, a sub-variety that makes some of Hermitage’s and Côte-Rôtie’s most sought-after wines. It’s no surprise that many of Fondrèche’s reds have a high percentage of Syrah in them. They have begun a massale selection of these old vines to perpetuate more of this very special clone.

It’s this coveted Syrah that makes up the exceptional the 2020 Domaine de Fondrèche ”Persia” Ventoux Rouge $24.99 93JD. The wine is 90% Syrah and 10% Grenache, and it shows powerful structure; gorgeous, saturated fruit; and layers of cherries, chocolate, and coffee. This is top-class Syrah that rivals great bottles from Cornas—at a fraction of the price. It should evolve beautifully for a decade, but it provides so much pleasure now.

Clos de la Bonnette: With Strife Comes Greatness!

Clos de la Bonnette is truly a magical place. The ancient terraced slopes overlook one of the tributaries to the Rhône and are surrounded by dense forest. It is breathtaking to stand at the top of their hill and gaze across the canyon.

Those beautiful but precarious Condrieu slopes come at a cost though: they are difficult to work—and even more so when farming organically. A severe frost in 2021 wiped out all their declassified Viognier crop and cut their overall production in half. With some fortune, though, 2020 was a major success.

We are pleased that the new 2020 Clos de la Bonnette ”Légende Bonetta” Condrieu $59.99 96DC has just arrived. I have been buying these wines since their 2014 releases, and I could tell from the start that vigneron Isabelle Guiller was making something extra special. The 2020 “Légende” is a new benchmark with its expansive richness. There are intense flavors of pear, mango, and jasmine that linger and hold your attention on the palate. Though all raised in barrel, there is no new wood here—just purity. With all of that power, there is still balance; the underlying acidity and phenolic weight bring great composure. The only downside to this wine is that there is always precious little to be had—though that makes it that much more special. What a remarkable Viognier!

Recently, Isabelle was able to add a small parcel of vineyards in Côte-Rôtie to their holdings. Her son, Vincent, is focusing on making the reds now and has crafted an absolutely beautiful wine with his 2019 Clos de la Bonnette ”Cuvée Prenelle” Côte-Rôtie $69.99 94DC. All from a small plot in the Côteaux de Tupin lieu-dit and from the Serine clone of Syrah. This is fine and elegant Côte-Rôtie with notes of black fruit, baking spices, fennel, bay, and a fleshy mid-palate. Ultra-fine tannins make this some gorgeous drinking right now, but it should evolve gracefully for a decade or longer.

I like to visit Bonnette on the final days of my trip through the Rhône. They always put the exclamation point on my visits and never disappoint—and this vintage is certainly no exception.
Châteauneuf-du-Pape has had a very impressive run of good-to-great vintages from pretty much 1998 on, with the exception of a very few middling vintages here and there. The 2019 vintage looks to clearly be one of the best of the last 25 years—if not possibly the greatest. Deep and concentrated, with impeccable structure, firm tannins, and good acidity—these wines are built to age but have enough forward fruit that they can be enjoyed in their youth as well.

What really separates Châteauneuf-du-Pape from other famous red wine regions is pricing. Almost nowhere else in the world can you purchase top, world-class producers for under $100 a bottle in droves like you can from this humble Rhône appellation. In the 2019 vintage you have the rare opportunity to stock up on these beauties before they’re all gone!

**Under $50 Must-Buys**

Even better, you can look at the list of impressive 2019 Châteauneuf-du-Papes and see numerous stunning wines for under $50 a bottle with critical acclaim from a myriad of wine writers!

Exhibit A: the 2019 Domaine Saint Préfert "Classique" Châteauneuf-du-Pape $39.99 93JD 93VN 93WS 92WA is a classically structured and irresistible offering that blows the mind for under $40.

The 2019 Clos Saint-Jean Châteauneuf-du-Pape $42.99 93WS 93JD 92-94WA ratchets up the fruit level as well as spice notes in a harmonious entry-level offering from famed producer Clos Saint Jean.

Not to be outdone, the 2019 Clos du Mont-Olivet Châteauneuf-du-Pape $44.99 94JS 93VN 93WS 92JD 92WA is universally loved by all the critics, and, with its prefect balance and layered fruit notes, it is easily one of my favorite wines in the 2019 vintage.

A producer to keep your eye on is Domaine Beaurenard. The 2019 Domaine Beaurenard Châteauneuf-du-Pape $49.99 95JD 93WS 92JS 92VN has shimmering red fruits and amazing spice and mineral notes—a flat-out stunning wine.

One of three gorgeous cuvées from this Charbonnière, the 2019 Domaine de la Charbonnière "Mourre des Perdrix" Châteauneuf-du-Pape $49.99 95JD 95JS 93DC 92WA shows off both the subtlety and structure that perfectly complements intense berry fruit nuances.

We finish our under $50 must-buys with a choice the 2019 Domaine Grand Veneur "Les Origines" Châteauneuf-du-Pape $49.99 95WA 94JD 94VN 93WS is a loaded wine with tons of rich fruit. Succulent oak and spice notes make this high-octane red a fan favorite.

**$50 to $100 Treasures**

As we climb the price ladder we ascend the quality ladder—a wonderful thing about Châteauneuf-du-Pape is that for a few dollars more you get startlingly good wines! The 2019 Bosquet des Papes "Chante le Merle" Châteauneuf-du-Pape Vieilles Vignes $59.99 96WA 95JD 95WS comes from old vines, which give this brilliant wine shimmering red fruit, cherry compote notes, and subtle red licorice notes, all beautifully wrapped in snappy tannins and bright acidity.

Quite possibly the greatest Vieux Donjon ever made, the 2019 Le Vieux Donjon Châteauneuf-du-Pape $64.99 99JD 98DC 96WS 95VN gives you the rare opportunity to own a reference-point offering from a top-flight producer in a great vintage where they hit a homerun!

The 2019 Domaine de la Mordorée "La Reine des Bois" Châteauneuf-du-Pape $69.99 98JD 95VN 95WA 94WS 94JS 94WE is loved by everyone and for good reason. Dark and rich with amazing concentration and spice, this is a regal bottle of wine.

A top-flight offering, the 2019 Domaine Pierre Usseglio "Cuvee Mon Aïeul" Châteauneuf-du-Pape $89.99 98JD 98WE 96WA is truly a spectacular wine that showcases the greatness of the 2019 vintage while also demonstrating why Pierre Usseglio is considered to be in the handful of top producers of Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

While other producers make multiple cuvées and experiment with other new wines Clos des Papes makes one wine from their impressive holdings, and, year-in-and-year-out, it is one of the top three to five wines of the vintage. The 2019 Clos des Papes Châteauneuf-du-Pape $99.99 98DC 98JD 97WS 97WA evokes memories of prior great vintages like 2009, 2010, and 2016 with depth, structure, purity of fruit, and proven ageability that only a handful of Châteauneuf producers are capable of achieving. Anyone on the lookout for a cellarable gem that is guaranteed to reward 20 years from now should stock up on this amazing offering.

Châteauneuf-du-Pape never ceases to amaze me with the incredible quality and affordability of wonderful, seductive offerings. Fans of Bordeaux and Napa owe it to themselves to discover what Rhône enthusiasts already know: these are some of the greatest wines in the world, and you need to own them!
Every vine tells a story of origins, and in the long history of our fascination with the grape, most such tales are cloaked in conjecture and shrouded in the myths of time. None more so than Syrah, a noble grape whose origin was long debated to be either Persia, ancient Greece, or somewhere in between, perhaps Albania. Now, grape varieties, like people, are born of two parents, and the wish for Persian dispersion lost out when DNA analysis in 1998 proved Syrah’s undisputed parentage as an improbable tryst between Mondeuse Blanche, a white Savoie grape, and Dureza, an obscure, almost-extinct black grape native to the forested Ardèche region. They likely met in a monastic hodgepodge of vines beneath the pristine skies of the French Alps. And their vigorous, rambunctiously strapping offspring, Syrah, soon found its way to the steep, terraced slopes of the Northern Rhône Valley, and eventually from there to Australia and the rest of the New World.

Now that we’ve taken a deep dive into origins, we must come up for air if we are to taste! And what better place to explore the Syrah grape than the evocative wines of Northern Rhône virtuoso Guy Farge and his gifted son Thomas, who recently took over the winemaking. Thomas has demonstrated his adept hand, even when faced with a challenging vintage that saw two immoderate heatwaves and scant rainfall. The 2019 Thomas Farge “Cote du Pouly” St-Joseph $49.99 is a stunning selection of premium fruit from the finest parcel, aged in both large older barrels and tank. It is packed with profuse aromas of ripe, dark plum, black cherry fruit, and floral elements with real finesse and freshness abounding in the densely concentrated palate. It’s a magnificent, superbly balanced St-Joseph to linger over while enjoying a heaping platter of late summer short ribs.

The 2019 Guy Farge “Passion de Terrasses” St-Joseph $39.99, from well-terraced, 100-year-old sites in and around the domaine, possesses ripe aromatics and more textural pepper spice, garrigue, and bacon fat on the palate, with focused tannins and good depth. It should improve for another dozen years and will pair well with a savory wild mushroom tart or aged hard cheeses.

As for a personal favorite, open the 2019 Guy Farge “Harmonie” Cornas $44.99 and let your senses delight in the rich, evocative aromas of violets, lavender, sweet spice, and blackberry, tinged with a slight touch of char and fresh-tilled earth on the palate. This lovely wine checks every box and is ready to drink out of the gate. An unabashed winner that will score points with everything from grilled sausages to those aforementioned short ribs.

Last on our menu, the 2019 Guy Farge “Reynard” Cornas $89.99. I tasted this over four days, and each visit opened up new vistas on my oenological reference chart, causing me to either scratch through or embellish one note and add anew. The Reynard lieu-dit possesses one of the most cherished, steepest terroirs in Cornas, full of decomposed granite that has to be lightly trod to prevent further erosion around the 50-year-old vines. A matrix of rich aromas and flavors: blackberry, wildflowers, meaty undertones, and succulent spice, giving depth and character to the silky, polished fruit. Deeply brooding, it’s a wine that demands deliberation and thought, almost as if the wine is questioning you, the drinker, with every sip. Lift your glass!

Thomas Farge at the top of his family’s steep vineyards in Cornas.