

A Beginner's Guide To

French wine:

the varietals of the Rhone Valley

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When the subject of French wine comes up, do you:

- Pretend you're a beer drinker
- Wish you'd paid more attention in high school French class
- Head for the restroom

If you've always been intimidated by French wine, you're in luck. Crossing Vineyards and Winery is introducing a new series of classes, French Wine for Beginners, inspired by its private European wine tour planned for May, 2008.

As part of its popular

International Travel program, Crossing will host a spring trip to The Northern and Southern Rhône Valleys, which will begin in Paris and include a cooking class at the Paul Bocuse Institute in Lyon, as well wine visits to Condrieu and Châteauneuf-du-Pape, famous appellations in the Côtes du Rhône.

The first class in Crossing's "Beginner's" series will focus on the wines of The Rhône Valley and will be held at the winery in Washington Crossing on Wednesday April 23 at 7:30 p.m. For those planning to take

spicy and offer complexities that can rival the more well-known wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy. The rich, earthy whites compare favorably with the world's best Chardonnays. Even at today's dismal dollar-Euro ratio, Rhône wines can offer a great value to knowledgeable consumers.

The Varietals

The Northern Rhône's best vineyards lie close to the Rhône River on steep, south facing slopes. The only red grape variety grown here is Syrah, which makes a deeply colored red wine with flavors of jammy raspberry fruit and peppery spice. Three white grapes varietals can be grown: Viognier, Marsanne and Roussanne. The Northern Rhône resembles Burgundy with its small estates that often sell their grapes to large brokers (négociants) who process wine from many different vineyards and areas of the Rhône Valley.

In contrast, vines in the Southern Rhône are scattered over a huge expanse of land planted to 13 grape varieties on diverse soils that yield a wide variety of styles and flavors.

The predominant grape of the Southern Rhône is red Grenache. Pure Grenache wine would be excessively high in alcohol and low in acidity and tannins. For this reason, Southern Rhône wines are typically blends of the 13 varietals including Mourvèdre, Syrah and Cinsault. White blends are predominantly made with Roussanne and Marsanne.

The Appellations

Côtes du Rhône

Wines with the appellation Côtes du Rhône can contain grapes from anywhere in the Rhône Valley's 110,000 acres. 90% of the Rhône's production is Côtes du Rhône, and only one quarter of that is estate bottled.

Côtes du Rhône Villages

Within the Côtes du Rhône appellation, 16 villages covering 12,500 acres produce wines of generally higher quality than basic Côtes du Rhône.

The region is generally divided into two sub-regions, the Northern and Southern Rhône Valleys, which have distinct viticultural traditions.

The Northern Rhône Valley

Some of the best known appellations in this region are:



Photo by Jennifer Marsh

Côte-Rôtie

These vineyards are planted with 90% Syrah and 10% Viognier. Côte-Rôtie's 500 acres yield a concentrated, complex wine with a perfumy bouquet.

Condrieu

This area is known for its excellent Viognier, an interesting white wine with peach, apricot and tropical fruit flavors.

Crozes Hermitage

This area is considered the largest producer in the North with 2550 acres under vine.

The Southern Rhône Valley

Some of the best known appellations in this region are:



Photo by Jennifer Marsh

the trip to France and those who wish they were, Marika Vida-Arnold, Sommelier at The Ritz Carlton Hotel in Philadelphia, will provide an overview of the area's geography, varietals and appellations. The \$35 charge includes wine and cheese tasting.

Included below are some facts and figures on The Rhône Valley that will give wannabe wine experts a better feel for this famous area in France.

The Region

The Côtes du Rhône extends for about 140 miles from Lyon in the north to Avignon in the south.

The Rhône Valley produces some of the finest and most distinctive wines in the world. Rhône wines are mainly red and rosé, with whites comprising only about two percent of the production.

The reds are bold, rich and

Châteauneuf-du-Pape

This most famous of the Southern Rhône appellations has an interesting history. When Clement V became Pope, he made the city of Avignon his residence. From 1309 until 1377 it was the Papal Seat. A summer castle built north of Avignon was called Châteauneuf-du-Pape i.e. New Castle of the Pope. The embossed symbol on an estate bottled Châteauneuf-du-Pape shows the papal crown and the crossed keys of St. Peter.

Of Châteauneuf-du-Pape's 8000 acres only about 50 well run estates can claim credit for the region's reputation for high quality. The diversity of terroirs, grape varieties and winemaking styles make it difficult to describe a "typical wine" from Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The aging potential ranges from 5-20 years.

Tavel

Tavel is the only appellation in France that produces rosés exclusively. Tavel's 2300 acres yield dry, full bodied rosés with strawberry flavors and hints of provencal herbs.

Muscat de Beaufort de Venise

This region is famous for its sweet, tropical fruit flavored Muscat de Beaufort de Venise. The wine is enjoyed with dessert or as dessert and should be consumed within five years of the vintage date.

Between the Northern and Southern Rhône lies a region called Clairette de Die, which is known for its sweet sparkling wines. The traditional Clairette blend consists of 75% white muscat and 25% white clairette, which lightens the muscat's sweetness and gives the wine its delicacy and finesse. The method for making authentic Clairette is based on partial fermentation in vats followed by further fermentation in the bottle.

To learn more about the wines of The Rhône Valley, call Crossing Vineyards for details on its French Wine for Beginners Series starting on Wednesday, April 23 at 7:30 p.m. Call 215-493-6500, ext. 19, or visit the Web site: www.crossingvineyards.com.

Christine Carroll is a columnist for Wines and Vines Magazine in San Rafael California and one of the principals of Crossing Vineyards and Winery. She is an officer of the Pennsylvania Winery Association's Board of Directors, Penn State University's Enology Program Advisory Committee and is the Secretary of the Bucks County Wine Trail. You can contact her at info@crossingvineyards.com.