

Try Côtes du Rhône for everyday drinking

By Rich Mauro

Looking for good everyday wine at a fair price? Who isn't? There are a lot of wines from all over the world in the, let's say, \$8-\$15 price range, with tasty fruit and an easy drinking style? But if you want more – if you want a wine some character, maybe even a hint of *terroir* – it gets a lot tougher.

Here's where I suggest that you look to wines from the Rhône Valley, an area in France that has grown grapes for around 2,000 years. The region straddles the Rhône River from Avignon to Vienne in southeastern France and is home to some of the world's greatest wines, such as Hermitage, Côte-Rotie and Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and also some of its best values.

Specifically, I recommend that you try Côtes du Rhône, the basic level of quality wine from the Rhône Valley. While Côtes du Rhône doesn't reach the heights often achieved by its more famous siblings, it actually makes up nearly 80 percent of all Rhône Valley production and provides consumers a superior quality-to-price ratio.

With the growing interest in Rhone-style wines from Australia and California (although syrah – aka shiraz – and viognier dominate), another reason to try these wines is to get an idea of what they taste like from the source.

There are 21 different varieties allowed to be grown in the Rhône Valley. In reality, though, relatively few varieties dominate. Also, keep in mind that Côtes du Rhône wines are blends. To my palate, they are prime examples of how blending different grapes results in a more complete wine.

There are four primary grapes used in red Côtes du Rhône. Grenache, the most important grape in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, is also the dominant variety in Côtes du Rhône. Syrah, the grape used for Hermitage and Côte-Rotie, is also blended in significant amounts. Small portions of mourvèdre, cinsault and occasionally carignan and counoise also may be added.

The *terroir* of the Rhône Valley (alluvial deposits, especially clay, layered stone, and limestone, along with climatic conditions that feature extremes like cold winters, heavy rain and hot summers, all influenced by the strong winds known as the Mistral) yields wines with a unique character that can even be tasted in the Côtes du Rhône.

The typical red Côtes du Rhône flavor profile is characterized by bold, dark fruits (black cherry, currant, plum), with spicy/peppery seasoning. Grenache yields round, forward fruit and a soft texture, while syrah adds structure and tannin. The wines are very dry, with fresh acidity and often mineral, herb and smoky notes.

Similarly, among all of the allowable grapes, white Côtes du Rhône is usually made using some combination of roussane, viognier and marsanne, although dollops of clairette, grenache blanc and bourboulenc also are used.

White Côtes du Rhône wines, also quite dry, tend to display distinctive floral aromas and occasionally an intriguing stony character. Flavors of peach, honeysuckle and citrus are delivered in a rich, yet elegant, frame with a soft, creamy texture.

The wines of the Côtes du Rhône are classic food wines. The reds beg for just about any meat, but also tomato-based vegetable dishes like ratatouille, casseroles, pate and aged cheese. The whites are perfect for fish, white meats, Asian dishes and fresh cheeses.

Côtes du Rhône is a wine meant to be enjoyed young (while your Hermitage, Côte-Rotie and Châteauneuf-du-Pape rest in the cellar). Fortunately, the currently available 2003 and 2004 vintages produced many fine wines.

Quality, as with any wine, can vary. So don't hesitate to seek advice from your local wine merchant. By the way, these wines also make great choices in restaurants, especially by the glass. ■

