

BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

## Matt Walls: *Wines of the Rhône*

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What is a “Rhône style” wine? The Rhône region stretches over 250 km and produces distinctly different winemaking styles from north to south. This major grape-growing region in southeastern France is rich in history, which continues to evolve in the types of wine produced despite stringent rules for grape production and winemaking. In *Wines of the Rhône*, author Matt Walls provides a detailed, interesting, and insightful analysis of the region and its wine, based on personal travels and extensive research.

Walls is a freelance writer and contributing editor for *Decanter*, specializing in the Rhône region, where he is based. The book is part of the Infinite Ideas Classic Wine Library, currently comprising 22 books on wine-growing regions. Together, these books are designed to form a comprehensive guide to the world of wine for an intended audience of wine professionals and students, wine lovers, tourists, and arm-chair travelers.

The book is organized into three main parts: Part 1, a general description providing the necessary background to understand this complex region; Part 2, a description of the Southern Rhône region, which produces 95% of Rhône wine; and Part 3, a description of the Northern Rhône region, which, despite its smaller output, produces many of the best wines. Complementing the author’s descriptions of these regions are six maps, which orient the reader. There are 28 color and several black and white illustrations that depict important aspects of terroir. Interesting “asides” are provided in boxed descriptions that help the reader understand specific terms or concepts such as negociants, rotundone, and Syrah decline. A useful appendix provides vintage ratings and guidelines for the aging of wines. A glossary, a bibliography, and an index are also helpful.

The general description of the Rhône wine region in Part 1 includes a bird’s eye view to establish a sense of place, along with summaries of geology and soils, climate, winemaking history, grape growing and winemaking styles, and the appellation system. An edited version of an interview with geologist George Truc describes the geologic history of the Rhône Valley. Climate is one of the most important determinants of terroir, and the author correctly notes that it is rare to see identical weather in the

Northern and Southern Rhône, as a continental climate prevails in the North and a Mediterranean climate in the South.

But it is disappointing that a table comparing the climates of Lyon (North) and Orange (South) includes only average minimum and maximum monthly temperatures, total annual precipitation, and the number of days with precipitation. More important climate factors for grape growing are the monthly temperature and rainfall during the growing season and the length of that season. The relevance of the Mistral, a wind due to high pressure in the Bay of Biscay and low pressure in the Gulf of Genoa, cannot be overlooked, as it blows with speeds reaching up to 100 km per hour about one day out of three, mostly during winter and spring.

This region's rich wine-growing history is reviewed from the Roman era to the present. Three events are given special attention: the Roman era, the Papal era of influence, and the introduction of phylloxera. Commercial viticulture began in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC in the Rhône Valley with the growing and transport of grapes along the Rhône River. In the Middle Ages, the Popes encouraged winegrowing and established a papal seat in Avignon in 1309. Phylloxera, the root louse that became the scourge of European grapevines, was introduced in the early 1860s when an American sent a gift of vines to his French friend in the Lirac region of the Rhône. While the cause of the scourge was identified in 1868, it took decades to introduce solutions: grafting *Vitis vinifera* to "American" rootstock, which was resistant to the louse, or hybridization of the two species to develop resistant varieties.

The winemaking styles and grape-growing methods presented in Part 1 provide a sense of the many changes that have been occurring over the past few decades. Adoption of "green values" has been an economic boon because it has reduced the oversupply of grapes that the region had tended to produce. Organic farming was introduced in the 1950s, biodynamic in 1974, and "natural" farming more recently, all of which have generally resulted in decreased yields. However, the percentage of vineyards that are organic or biodynamic represented only 9% of the Rhône harvest in 2018. Co-operatives continue to have a large influence on wine production, particularly in the Southern Rhône, where they account for 62% of production.

The prevalence of all grape varieties grown in the Rhône is presented, along with important winemaking characteristics such as acidity and sugar content. In general, 80% of the grapes grown in the Rhône are red and 20% are white. Syrah, a variety recently shown to have originated in the Rhône Alpine region, is the only red grape permitted in the cru designated wines of the North. There it can be blended with up to 20% white varieties of Marsanne and Rousanne (except in Cornas where no white is allowed, or in Cote Rotie where only Viognier can be blended up to 20%). In the Southern Rhône, the predominant red varieties include Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvedre. Grenache is the second most planted red grape in all of France, second only to Merlot. It makes up 80% of the wines from the Chateaufort du Pape appellation. Its fruity flavor, high sugar content (high alcohol), and moderate to low acidity make it easy to drink even at a young age, but also make it good for blending with other varieties.

While white varieties are grown in lesser quantities, the author lists those grown, along with their important characteristics. Grenache Blanc, grown in the Southern Rhône, comprises 20% of all white grape plantings and serves as a blending grape.

Viognier, the third most planted white grape, with a delicious apricot bouquet and flavor, is the only white grape used in Condrieu. Marsanne makes one of the few moderate- to full-bodied white wines, and when used in white, Hermitage can produce an extraordinary wine. Rousanne, with its floral bouquet, is a great variety to complement others.

This first part of the book ends with a discussion of wine quality assessment, largely represented by the appellation system of the Rhône. The appellation d'origine contrôlée (AOC) regions of the Rhône constitute the second largest AOC in all of France. Its five levels generally represent a quality pyramid, with the lowest level comprising lower quality and greater volume, and the uppermost level of higher quality and lesser volume. The author describes each AOC in terms of size, number of communes, and allowed yields. The allowed yields for even the bottom appellations of the pyramid are surprisingly low at less than 51 hectoliters per hectare (about 3.5 tons/acre). Eight of the 17 "cru" (top-level AOC) are in the North. There is no designation of grand cru or premier cru, and the author examines the pros and cons of the absence of such designations. A keen understanding of the importance of climate, soil, and other characteristics also allows him to divide the North into 2 sections (zones) and the South into 10 sections. The reader is advised not to rely entirely on AOC designations for quality for several reasons, including the fact that some producers simply "opt out" of the system since they feel too many restrictions can stifle creativity. Some excellent producers may only bottle under the broad classification of Vins de France for that reason.

The remainder of the book (70%) is a tour de force of informative writing about the Rhône. The descriptions of the producers and terroir of the Southern Rhône (Part 2, 179 pages) and the Northern Rhône (Part 3, 83 pages) are both useful and enjoyable to read. Here, key historical and current individuals, terroir, producers, and domains are described. Insightful observations, such as that "the size of the sign outside the estate is in inverse proportion to the quality of the wine," are not uncommon. Each AOC is offered as a separate section, and within each section are useful facts, such as when the appellation was formed, the total area under vine, grape varieties permitted, average yield, and recent production types.

A listing of key producers with detailed descriptions of their wines is one of the most important offerings of this book for wine consumers. Such descriptions are the result of the author's on-site research and meetings with the people responsible for wine production. Also, the traveler or wine tourist will find recommendations for picturesque sites to visit and wines to purchase. While excellent descriptions of some of the topics covered in Part 1 can be found on the internet, there is no single source that offers as comprehensive a presentation of the wines of the Rhône as this one.

While I highly recommend this book as the most comprehensive, useful, and entertaining book currently available on the wines of the Rhône region, there are some deficiencies. First, as a grape grower myself, I am cautious about the value of biodynamic farming, and the author lists many of the key producers using biodynamic methods. While I do not doubt the author's assessment of the high quality of the wines of the biodynamic producers he lists, I do wonder if the quality is not related to some other factors, such as the producers being more attentive to the needs of the vines, balancing fruit and vine growth. Second, soil is often emphasized over climate in the book when describing important terroir factors of various producers. This is appropriate when the climate is similar, but otherwise, it is less clear. Fortunately, the author

does mention that “wines grown in close proximity on different soil types have more in common than those grown far away but on the same soils.”

Third, while the author’s command of the French language is superb and his use of French terms to describe winemaking, grape growing, and terroir-related items aids in developing a sense of place for the reader, he occasionally does not define terms in the text or glossary. Examples of such terms include “sans souffre,” “agriculture raisonnee,” and “cahier des charges.” Fourth, while the recommendations of wine producers and negociants made in the book are sound, a few important producers may have been omitted. I searched the inventories of one large U.S. and one small regional (mid-Atlantic) wine retailer to ascertain the number of Rhône wine producers (or negociants) in their inventories that were referenced in this book. Forty of the 100 wines of the large retailer and two of the 8 wines of the small retailer inventories were referenced, but several wines in the retailers’ inventories that have received high ratings from acclaimed experts were not included in the book. Fifth and finally, sometimes the descriptions of wines were beyond my ability to interpret them. For example, descriptors used for a Hermitage wine mention a nose of “hung game, forest floor, noble woods and a whiff of woodsmoke and firewood.” And “a mature Hermitage exhales the breath of Smaug.” (Perhaps Tolkien would be amused, but I am befuddled.)

These minor criticisms notwithstanding, this book provides a truly enjoyable and in-depth immersion into the Rhône Valley and its wines. *Wines of the Rhône* by Matt Walls will be a welcome addition to any wine library.

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## **Jeff Cox: *From Vines to Wines: The Complete Guide to Growing Grapes and Making Your Own Wine***

**Storey Publishing, North Adams, MA, 2015, 253 pp., ISBN 978-612124384, \$18.95.**

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It may surprise the reader to learn that this is the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of Jeff Cox’s guide to winemaking. Perhaps even more unexpected is the fact, proudly stated on the cover, that the book has sold over 200,000 copies. That is a lot of readers, and possibly a lot of homemade wine. In the early pages of his book, Cox asserts, “I’m writing this book to express my enthusiasm for the backyard vineyard and basement bodega”

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