



France, Northern Rhône: Fabulous 2015s and Sexy 2016s featuring Domaine J.L. Chave reviewed by Joe Czerwinski

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No doubt, 2015 in the Northern Rhône has been trumpeted as the latest "vintage of the century." And if one confines the search for analogs to the 21st century, that may very well be true.

Following an adequately wet winter, the spring and summer were warm and dry. There was some rain in July and August but not enough to cause any disease pressure, just enough to refresh the vines and prevent them from shutting down, as some did in 2003.

Across the board, it's a year of formidable concentration and ripeness.

For the region's white wines, that's not always a good thing. Many whites are flamboyantly broad and opulent but likely to be shorter-lived than the more classically proportioned 2016s, or even the crisp 2014s.

Of course, what makes a year a candidate for "vintage of the century" is how the red wines turn out. The real beneficiaries in 2015 were the red wines from cooler sites, which were able to achieve ripe tannins, and the wines from terroirs that normally give larger yields, which benefitted from the concentration effect of such tiny berries. As a result, numerous wines from Crozes-Hermitage and Saint-Joseph have overachieved in 2015, while wines from great sites have delivered what we've come to expect, albeit with an extra level of intensity.

At the risk of oversimplifying, the 2015 wines are defined more by the sunny weather and warmth than they are by individual terroirs, yet they have decent acidities and the tannin

structure to balance the ripeness. Several producers I spoke with compared it to a cross between 2009 and 2010, or to 1999.

In part, the contrast to that is what made tasting the 2016s (largely out of barrel) so exciting. The 2016s genuinely speak of their terroirs with more clarity and precision. In 2016, it's fairly easy to tell a Crozes-Hermitage from a Hermitage, a Côte Rôtie from a Saint Joseph. Yet the wines are silky, ripe and appealing—if without the extra level of concentration possessed by the 2015s. The exception is Hermitage, which was hit by a freak hailstorm in April 2016. While this occurred too early to damage any fruit, yields were reduced by as much as half. The whites and reds from this appellation are nearly as intense and concentrated as the wines from 2015.

Outside of Hermitage, the quantities in 2016 are larger, which should help reduce upward pricing pressure, and the wines are charming and forward. They'll be drinkable earlier, and the best wines are still terrific.

Finally, a number of producers were so excited by the quality of the just-picked 2017s that they invited me to taste those wines as well. As many of them hadn't even finished their malolactic fermentations, I declined to write reviews of any of them, but it does look like another promising vintage. We haven't seen a similar troika (in terms of quality) since the fabulous run of 1989-1990-1991.

Several years ago, a visit to Chave was an education in the lieux-dits of Hermitage. Today, the lessons include a look at numerous plots in Saint-Joseph as well. Jean-Louis has made the appellation where the winery is situated a pet project, and he wears his passion for it on his sleeve. It was interesting to taste through the 2015s and 2016s here, noting points of similarity and difference. Hermitage was hit by a freak hailstorm in April 2016, which had the effect of severely limiting yields in many of the parcels. The difference in concentration between 2015 and 2016 in Hermitage is correspondingly much less than in the other appellations. When I visited in early November 2017, Jean-Louis was just beginning to put together the blend for the 2015 Hermitage, which he admitted he's only just started to warm up to. "It took until the end of élevage for the wines to express their place," he said.

2016 Chave Hermitage Blanc

The 2016 Hermitage Blanc will surely be a marvel, given how good the various components look. Les Rocoules was characteristically rich and unctuous, as was the wine from Peleat. L'Hermite showed more dusty, stony notes and was round but briny and long. **(95-97 points)**

2015 Chave Saint Joseph

The 2015 Saint Joseph has some delicate florals but is marked more by ripeness and power. Dark fruit, black olive and even some tarry notes feature prominently in this medium to full-bodied wine that's supple, spicy and long on the finish. **(93 points)**

2016 Chave Saint Joseph

I tasted several parcels that will go into the 2016 Saint Joseph, rating them all in this range. All were distinctive in their own ways, from the perfumed, floral notes and elegance of Les Challoys to the almost jammy cherry flavors of Les Oliviers and the dark-fruited precision of Le Clos. **(92-94 points)**

2015 Chave Hermitage

After tasting several intermediate blends that will ultimately be combined in some proportion to create the 2015 Hermitage, I would not be surprised to see the final result achieve perfection. Although massively ripe and concentrated, there is still a feeling of balance and elegance in the wines that I fully expect to carry over into the final product. As the blending process isn't complete, Jean-Louis warned that it was too early to say if there would be a Cuvée Cathelin, which is typically an outstanding parcel that, for some reason, doesn't work in the rest of the blend. **(98-100 points)**

2016 Chave Hermitage

There's no doubt in my mind that the 2016 Hermitage will be profound. I tasted four different lieux-dits with Jean-Louis Chave, ranging from the slightly leathery, plummy and tannic Beaume to the silky Le Méal, textbook L'Hermite and soaring Les Bessards. **(96-99 points)**