

France, Southern Rhône: The Elegant and Lively 2015s and Heavenly 2016s

October 19, 2017 by Jeb Dunnuck

The Southern Rhône has two solid vintages in the pipeline; the elegant and lively 2015s and the deeper, richer, truly profound 2016s.

2015 – Looking first at the 2015s, there's been entirely too much hype regarding the greatness of this vintage. While 2015 is indeed a more successful vintage than 2012, 2013 and 2014, it pales in comparison to past great vintages such as 2001, 2005, 2007, and 2010. Nevertheless, there's still plenty to love in the vintage and the wines are fresh, elegant and streamlined, with nicely integrated acidity and balanced profiles. While they lack the sheer depth of fruit found in the 2016s, they have a vibrancy that makes them already appealing, yet the majority will evolve gracefully. I called the vintage a beefed up 2006 last year, and that comparison still holds to a degree. A mix of 2004 and 2005 seems closer when trying to pinpoint the style. Quality was consistent throughout the Southern Rhône, and in general, the estates with clay soils fared the best. I found too many wines from sandy soils that lacked depth and richness. While quality is relatively high and consistent, truly great wines are few and far between. Looking at the weather, the vintage was extremely sunny, as well as hot, which in some cases caused the vines to shut down and delayed phenolic ripeness going into harvest. Storms late in August and then again in September also complicated and pushed harvest back into late September and October. The heat stress through the summer followed by rains early in harvest resulted in surprisingly elegant wines that have notable tannin and freshness, yet more moderate concentration and mid-palate depth. In short, this is a good, at times outstanding, vintage that produced a bevy of high-quality wines, yet few superstars.

2016 – The 2016s are on another level. The vintage started with a mild spring resulting in a large even crop set. This was followed by a dry, hot summer featuring numerous days over 95° Fahrenheit and less than 3 inches of total precipitation. However, while hot and dry, the driving characteristic of this vintage was the incredibly cool nights which helped maintain acidity in the grapes as well as resulted in terrific aromatics and freshness in the final wines. Harvest occurred from the middle of September through the early part of October. The large crop, even, hot daytime temperatures, little precipitation and cool night resulted in a beautiful vintage that comes closest in style to 1990, or even a hypothetical mix of 2010 and 2007. The wines are beautifully concentrated and structured – on par with 2010 – yet have a more open, sexy, voluptuous style due to the larger yields. The tannin quality is beautiful, the wines have notable freshness and purity, their alcohol is integrated, and quality is incredibly high across all the regions. In fact, the biggest surprise was the consistency of the vintage, which is even more homogenous than 2015. This is truly an extraordinary vintage.

A Word on Drink Windows:

One of the most common questions I'm asked is when to drink the wines. I struggle with this as there's no "wrong" time to open a bottle. Today, even the most serious, age-worthy wines

offer pleasure in their youth due to better vineyard management and winemaking techniques. In addition, one person's mature is another person's over the hill. Nevertheless, I list a rough guideline below for the wines from the Southern Rhône:

Gigondas: The more limestone soils and cooler climate of Gigondas result in wines that have

more pronounced tannin than other appellations in the Southern Rhône. As such, most are best with at least 2-4 years of cellaring and will continue to drink well for a decade or more after that. As with Châteauneuf du Pape, after 20 years after the vintage, a few wines can certainly hold, but they're not improving.

TASTING NOTES

2016 Château de Saint Cosme Gigondas 90-92

Looking first at the base 2016 Gigondas, it's certainly going to be another outstanding wine from Barruol. Based on 70% Grenache and the rest close to an even split of Syrah and Mourvèdre, it offers classic St Cosme notes of dark fruits, tapenade, pepper and smoked earth.

It has plenty of tannin and will need 2-3 years of cellaring and shine for a decade or more.

2016 Château de Saint Cosme Gigondas Hominis Fides 98-100

Leading off the special cuvees and from the sandiest parcel of the estate, the 2016 Gigondas Hominis Fides (100% Grenache) has perfection written all over it! Just as fine, elegant and seamless as it gets, yet also with blockbuster depth and richness, it boasts incredible notes of

black raspberries, loamy/sandy soils nuances, game, and camphor. Don't miss it!

2016 Château de Saint Cosme Gigondas Le Claux 99-100

The 2016 Gigondas Le Claux has slightly more mid-palate depth compared to the Hominis Fides, yet is also more tannic and structure. Damp clay, forest floor, currants spice and huge minerality all soar from the glass and this full-bodied beauty has an unctuous texture that's currently hiding serious amounts of tannin. Forget bottles for 4-5 years and enjoy over the following 15+.

2016 Château de Saint Cosme Gigondas Le Poste 97-99

Coming from Barruol's favorite vineyard located on just up the hill from the domaine, the 2016

Gigondas Le Poste is another huge wine, and probably the richness, ripest example of this cuvee I've tasted. Possessing almost overflowing amounts of blackberry fruits, graphite, spring

flowers and huge minerality, it offers awesome purity, full-bodied richness, and a great, great

finish. I can't wait to taste this from bottle.

2016 Château de Saint Cosme Gigondas Valbelle 95-97

Coming from sandy, limestone soils near the Hominis Fides lieu-dit, the 2016 Gigondas Valbelle is 90% Grenache and 10% Syrah brought up in 20% new barrels. This beauty offers more classic dark fruits, camphor, Asian spices, and graphite as well as a full-bodied, expansive, ripe, yet perfectly balanced style on the palate. My money is on this being the finest example of this cuvee to date.

2015 Château de Saint Cosme Gigondas 94

A wine readers need to snatch up is the 2015 Gigondas as it way over-delivers and is up with the finest examples of the classic Gigondas made. Based on 70% Grenache, 15% Mourvèdre, 14% Syrah and a splash of Cinsault, aged in 15% new barrels, it boasts terrific notes of sweet cassis and black raspberry fruits, garrigue, toasted spices and pepper. With full-bodied richness, beautiful sweetness of fruit and an opulent, sexy texture, it will drink nicely for 10-15 years.

2015 Château de Saint Cosme Gigondas Hominis Fides 97

The 2015 Gigondas Hominis Fides is another gorgeous wine. This cuvee comes from the lieudit of the same name which is located just down from the estate, just across the road from the le Claux vineyard. The soils here are sandier and more limestone-based, and the cuvee is from very old vine Grenache that was fermented with 100% whole clusters in oak tanks and aged in 20% new barrels. It offers gorgeous black raspberry and cassis fruits intermixed with notions of ground pepper, crushed flowers, graphite and loads of sandy/loamy/dried soils nuances. With full-bodied richness, gorgeous tannin quality and a texture that just glides over the palate, it's going to benefit from 2-4 years of cellaring and keep for two decades. There's just 100 cases produced.

2015 Château de Saint Cosme Gigondas Le Claux 99

I loved the 2015 Gigondas Le Claux from barrel (really loved it), and this beauty doesn't disappoint from bottle. Checking in as 100% Grenache (100% whole clusters and aged in 20% new barrels) from a site located just across the street from the Hominis Fides vineyard, it offers a heavenly bouquet of blackberries, blueberries, camphor, graphite, and licorice. Sensationally concentrated, rich and opulent, with low acidity, gorgeous purity, and a blockbuster finish, it stays light on its feet and graceful. It's the greatest vintage of this cuvée to date, and you should buy as much as you can.

2015 Château de Saint Cosme Gigondas Le Poste 98

My favorite vintage for this cuvee to date, the 2015 Gigondas Le Poste shows the more pure, elegant and finesse-driven side to the estate, as well as the vintage. From a terraced vineyard

just up the hill from the estate and from 100% old vine Grenache fermented without destemming and aged in 20% new barrels, its deep purple color is followed by perfumed notes

of black cherries, graphite, leafy herbs, gravely/damp earth like minerality and spring flowers.

So pure, fine and seamless, yet with a stacked mid-palate and a huge finish, it's a tour de force

that's up with some of the greatest Gigondas ever produced. Like the other cuvees, hide bottles for 2-3 years and enjoy over the following two decades.

2015 Château de Saint Cosme Gigondas Valbelle 96

There are 500 cases of the 2015 Gigondas Valbelle and it's another winner from this estate based on the normal 90/10 split of Grenache and Syrah. Fermented without destemming and

aged in 20% new barrels, this beauty boasts a huge nose of smoked meats, pepper, camphor and layered black raspberry and cassis-like fruit. Full-bodied, opulent and powerful, with a big

mid-palate and building tannin, it too will benefit from short-term cellaring and keep for two decades. All of these 2015s from Barruol are up near the top of the vintage and well worth the

extra effort to track down.