

STIRRING THE LEES WITH JAMES MOLESWORTH

Château de St.-Cosme's New Vinsobres Sister Estate

A first look at Gigondas phenom Louis Barruol's Château de Rouanne in Vinsobres, and a preview of his full 2018 lineup from Château de St.-Cosme



Few estates have done as much as for the reputation of the Southern Rhône's Gigondas appellation as Château de St. Cosme. (Jon Wyand)

By James Molesworth

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Senior editor James Molesworth, Wine Spectator's lead taster for the wines of France's Rhône Valley, is back in the Southern Rhône for a preview of recent vintages of the region's top Châteauneuf-du-Papes and more.

Whenever I have visited Château de St.-Cosme, Louis Barruol has always shown me something new, from helicopter rides to classes on the geology of the Dentelles. This visit was no different, save for the location of his newest project: Vinsobres. This small AOC, just a 20-minute drive from his home base of Gigondas, isn't on consumers' lips yet, but it should be. Situated between 600 feet and 1,700 feet elevation, it is home to the northern most styled wines of the Southern Rhône, with Syrah performing arguably better here than anywhere else in the Southern Rhône Valley (the region's dominant Grenache and Mourvèdre grapes play their roles here as well). The Perrin family of Château de Beaucastel have made their claim here as well, as a hedge against the encroachment of climate change in Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

Barruol purchased Vinsobres' Château de Rouanne earlier this year, drawn by the estate's fairly large vineyard base (153 acres) and healthy 50-year-old Syrah and Grenache vines. So, with youthful energy, Barruol jumped on a quad bike and told me to keep up. As we wheeled around the property, Barruol stopped to point out differing soil types, with varying limestone and sandy marl mixes, as well as the parcels with the best old vines and other areas in need of some TLC.

Back at the winery, the cellar waits its first delivery of barrels, and the cement tanks have been cleaned up. It's a rudimentary cellar, but functional. Barruol finished the blend of the 2018 vintage, and then was able to control the viticulture and vinification after taking ownership this summer. His debut **2018 Château de Rouanne Vinsobres** is a 50/45/5 blend of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre, co-fermented with whole bunches, as is Barruol's typical preference. It's exuberant, with a range of violet, alder, bay and sage aromas backed by a fleshy core of dark plum and black cherry fruit. It's got a grippy edge and leans to the dark side of the spectrum, with a warm earth accent, but the herb and floral details give it detail and cut. It should retail in the mid-\$20 range, with 1,000 cases set to arrive in the U.S. shortly. Fans of Barruol's wines, and fans of gutsy Rhône wines in general, will want some bottles of this rock-solid value. I expect the '19 to show improvement, as Barruol controlled the process all the way through and is quickly getting a handle on the estate.

2018 was a difficult vintage here, as an extremely wet and humid spring brought enormous disease pressures. "A crazy year for mildew. The worst spring I've seen, and I've been here decades," says Barruol. "The key was to spray immediately after every rain, and there was a lot of rain. I typically use 1 kilogram of copper per hectare in a normal year, very low, even for organic growing practices. In '18 I used 2 kilos, also still low, but I did 10 times as many passes through the vineyard. I usually get [2.4 tons per acre] and managed to get [almost 2 tons per acre] in '18, which is amazing, because many growers lost 50 percent or more of their crop. The good news is that summer and through harvest was ideal, so if you had crop after the spring, you could make a very good wine."

Back at Château de St.-Cosme, Barruol has a very strong lineup of 2018s in the works, including his **2018 Vins de Pays Principaute d'Orange White Les Deux Albion**, a blend of Viognier, Marsanne and Picpoul that offers fun lime, green almond and green plum flavors, as well as his **2018 Côtes du Rhône White Le Poste**, made from old-vine Clairette on limestone soils, that delivers a wonderfully pure beam of white peach and verbena gilded with a macadamia nut note at the end.

For the reds, the **2018 Côtes du Rhône Les Deux Albion** is a blend of Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre, Carignane and Clairette, cofermented, delivering a mouthfilling ball of juicy, dark, wild and fun fruit and *garrigue* notes.

The **2018 Gigondas**, which contains the fruit from the Valbelle cuvée since 2016, is a bold plum- and currant-filled wine laced liberally with savory bay and olive notes, backed by a finish scored with singed alder and licorice root.

The **2018 Gigondas Le Claux** is more streamlined in feel, with plum and raspberry pâte de fruit lined with violet and red licorice notes. Polished overall, but there's a late tug of earth keeping it honest. The **2018 Gigondas Hominis Fides** throws out a huge blast of açai berry, blueberry and plum reduction flavors, backed by ensuing waves of sage, anise and apple wood. It has terrific energy through the finish to support its wide range.

Last was the **2018 Gigondas Le Poste**. Its blazingly pure blue, purple and black spectrum of fruit flavors is often enough to earn it top honors among the portfolio here, but it also has its terrific underpinning of chalky minerality, sage brush and *garrigue* nuance that help define this densely packed wine, working in both contrast and concert with the fruit the way shadows provide stark angles in a great black-and-white film.

While you're considering these exciting 2018s, keep in mind that Barruol also has an outstanding négociant label, St.-Cosme (no "Château"), which includes Côte-Rôtie, Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Condrieu cuvées.

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