



UP NEXT

Why You Should Consider Opulent White Wines from the Rhône Valley

These deeply satisfying wines show that greatness is about more than acidity levels



By Matt Walls | August 25, 2021



Fall is a magical time of year. Golden sunlight shines almost horizontal through the orchards, the heady scent of ripe fruit filling the warm air. Yellow pears hang from the branches, their skin rough to the touch, but with translucent creamy flesh within.

Succulent ripe pears don't have high acidity. Do they taste clumsily unbalanced? Of course not, they're delicious.

Think of the white wines of the Southern Rhône like that juicy pear, with its appropriately pear-like acidity. There have been countless articles published lately extolling the delights of sharp and citrusy high-acid wines, but when it comes to sheer pleasure, low-acid wines have a lot to offer.

Opulence is luxurious

Esteemed British wine critic Jancis Robinson MW once said, "Wine's first obligation is to refresh." But arguably wine's first obligation is to satisfy. And the white wines of the Rhône **satisfy deeply**.

The whites of the Northern Rhône have acidity that is more peach-like in character. Their flavors often lean toward other stone fruits like apricot, too, particularly in Condrieu in the northern reaches of the appellation, the original source of Viognier.

Not only do the wines of the northern region of Condrieu have low acidity, they also have silky, opulent textures that coat the mouth. So how do **low-acid wines** like this stay fresh and balanced? Freshness and acidity are not synonymous. Some degree of acidity is required, but these wines also find freshness through vibrant, captivating aromatics of stone fruits and jasmine.

The other appellations of the Northern Rhône, such as Saint-Joseph and Hermitage, use the grapes Marsanne and Roussanne for their whites, whose acidities are never particularly high. Some winemakers play with nips of positive bitterness, which helps to bring shape and texture.

Bastien Tardieu, who makes wines at his family's négociant business [Tardieu-Laurent](#), is a particular fan of Northern Rhône Roussanne, "because it produces wines with lots of density and sap," he says. Flavor intensity can provide a sense of impact even if acidities are low.

Down south

Though winemakers use this trio of grapes in the warmer Southern Rhône as well, Grenache Blanc is the cornerstone here. "When it's harvested at perfect maturity," says Tardieu, "it produces an archetypal southern wine, with notes of liquorice, anise, and fennel. These are aromas I like a lot, and go perfectly with Provençal cuisine."

Most Southern Rhône white varieties aren't powerfully aromatic, so they're an easy match with food. Eric Bonnet of [La Bastide Saint Dominique](#) in Provence says, "I would match these with white fish carpaccio, or marinated prawn kebabs with wok-cooked vegetables."

Alongside Marsanne, Roussanne, and [Viognier](#), the other important grape in the Southern Rhône is Clairette. If anything, it has a softer texture than all the others, that's cloud-like, pillowy, and mild in character. It's a particular favorite of Bonnet, who loves it for its freshness and delicacy.

There's a whole smorgasbord of grapes that winemakers use in the south. They may not be terribly common, but a splash of higher-acid grapes such as Bourboulenc, Picpoul Blanc, and Picardan adds some zest to the blend. Where and how the grapes are grown also makes a difference.

Growing conditions

The granite slopes of Condrieu in the north seem to inject a certain tension into the wines, not to mention a salinity that works in a similar way to acidity, providing a counterpoint to its innate richness.

In the south, limestone can bring a sense of energy to reds and whites alike. Stéphane Usseglio of [Domaine Usseglio Raymond](#) in [Châteauneuf-du-Pape](#) favors growing his whites on sand, which delivers "a real [minerality](#) and a nice

freshness,” he says. When it comes to retaining enough acidity in his wines, “[organic](#) and [biodynamic](#) work are undeniably assets,” he continues, “as well as the date of the harvest.”

It’s this sensation of minerality that the best terroirs provide that help these wines to age. Red wines grown on the hill of Hermitage can last for decades; its whites can last just as long if not longer, taking on a mind-bending complexity as they develop.

Rhône wines work best at the dinner table, and their generous, luxuriant style can make a meal feel like a banquet.

High-acid wines might be fashionable right now, and their jolting angularity can be enlivening. But oranges are not the only fruit.

3 white Rhône to try:



Rotem & Mounir Saouma Inopia Blanc Cotes du Rhone Villages 2016 (\$30)

This has the fullness on the palate of a classic white Côtes-du-Rhône, but instead of bringing to mind fruit flavors, instead it’s flowers and smoke that rise from the glass. A very stylish wine.

[Available at Wine.com](#)