



The *Decanter* travel guide to

Southern Rhône

Had enough of the UK winter? Mary Doweey suggests a visit to the dramatically rugged landscapes of the southern Rhône, beautiful at any time of year

FACT FILE

Planted area:

48,000 hectares

Main grape varieties

White: Clairette, Grenache Blanc, Bourboulenc, Viognier, Roussanne, Marsanne

Red: Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre

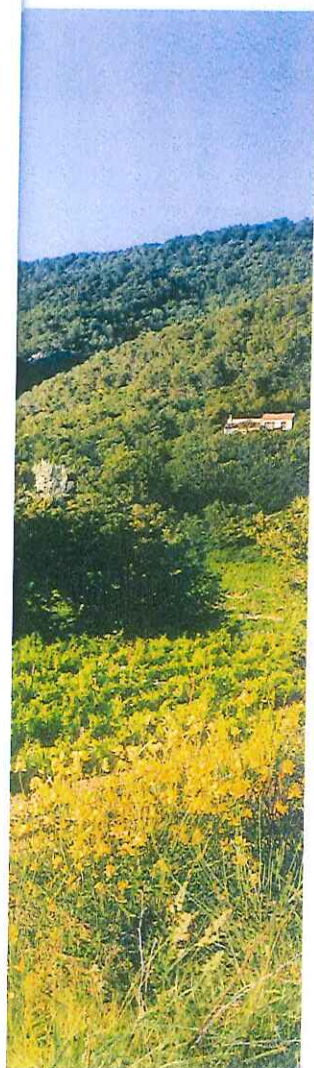
Main soil types: Galets (large, round stones), sand, clay, limestone

SPRING IS ARGUABLY the loveliest time of year to explore the Southern Rhône. It arrives ridiculously early, dusting the almond trees with delicate white blossom which stands out against the silver-grey foliage of the olives and the dark, bare stumps of the vines. A mesmerising study in black-and-white – except that the sky, scoured of clouds, is an even more vivid blue than in July.

Summer is equally glorious, though – after all,

this vast wine region lies within Provence – a place whose true identity unfolds in the heat of the sun. Sunflowers, lavender, screeching cicadas, a glass of rosé on a shaded terrace with views across vineyards to the sloping mass of Mont Ventoux or the jagged peaks of the Dentelles de Montmirail... Both are good places to escape the heat – as, for that matter, are wine cellars.

Autumn? Wine villages like Gigondas, Rasteau, Cairanne, Séguret and Sablet look their finest, their mellow stone houses cast in a golden light; their vineyards a blaze of bonfire colours. But the harvest, going full blast through September into October, makes exhausted producers pray that visitors will keep away. Better to wait a month or two. Even in winter, when woodsmoke scents the crisp air, the landscape is still ravishing and the sun still shines.



Above: the cellars of Château de Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape.
Top: the jagged peaks of the Dentelles de Montmirail

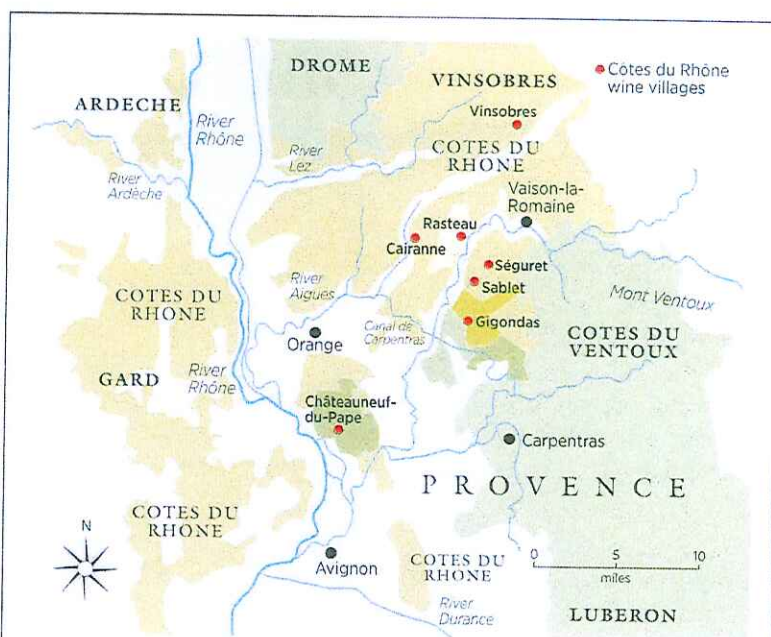
Left: the southern Rhône is home to several picturesque wine villages, as here in Séguret

*'300 days of sunshine a year
make this red wine country;
Grenache the most important'*

Together with Châteauneuf-du-Pape, well-known villages like those just mentioned lie at the heart of the Côtes du Rhône in a rhombus-shaped area stretched towards Orange, Avignon, Carpentras and Vaison-la-Romaine at the corners. This means that even in a couple of days it's easy to get to grips with the essentials, visit a variety of key estates and soak up this old Roman region's soul.

Terroir trademark

But if time allows, venture further – some of the most rewarding (and reasonably priced) wines today come from the outer fringe. Whether you travel east to the Ventoux, south-east to the Luberon, west to the Gard, north-west to the Ardèche or straight north to around Vinsobres, first-rate producers will stud the route.



Six of the best wine estates to visit

1 Château de Beaucastel CHATEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE

The Perrin family has long ensured that Beaucastel maintains a reputation as lofty and imposing as its cathedral-like cellar. Visits by appointment only.
www.beaucastel.com

2 Domaine de Beaucard CHATEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE & RASTEAU

Self-guided tours at the Châteauneuf base and winegrower's museum in Rasteau. A seventh-generation estate run by brothers Daniel and Frédéric Coulon, now biodynamic. www.beaucard.fr

3 Domaine du Grapillon d'Or GIGONDAS

A small family estate with polished, well-priced wine. Catch energetic, English-speaking winemaker Céline Chauvet in the cosy tasting room.
www.domainedugrapillondor.com

4 Domaine de Mourchon SEGURET

Dramatic views, a bijou winery and an intriguing story alongside reasonable wines. A dynamic family enterprise created by Walter McKinlay also makes estate olive oil, jams... even face cream.
www.domainedemourchon.com

5 Château Pesquie MORMOIRON

Flagship of the Ventoux appellation, run by the Chaudière family for over 30 years. Taste wines in an art-filled tasting room and enjoy the wine-related activities. www.chateaupesquie.com

6 Domaine de la Citadelle MENERBES

Former film producer Yves Rousset-Rouard and son Alexis have made La Citadelle the Luberon's foremost estate. Visit the museum of 1,200 corkscrews.
www.domaine-citadelle.com

Wine styles vary according to geography, naturally. But 300 days of sunshine a year make this mainly red wine country, with heat-loving Grenache the most important grape by far. Its heady, lavish nature – tending sometimes towards jamminess and high alcohol – needs the tempering effects of Syrah and Mourvèdre (and sometimes other grapes in minor roles) for colour, body and staying power.

Very old Grenache and Mourvèdre vines are highly prized here for the concentrated flavours in their sparse grapes. We've all seen pictures of them basking in the heat radiated back from stones the size of giant baked potatoes in the vineyards of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. But these galets are strewn

How to get there

By plane

to Nîmes, Marseille or Avignon (flight time 1.5–2 hours from various UK airports), then a 20- to 35-minute drive to the vineyards

By fast train (TGV)

to Avignon from London St Pancras (about 6 hours)



Above: these producers in (from top) Mormoiron, Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas are worth visiting (see box, p99)

'If any other part of France can offer a wider array of fresh produce, I'd like to hear about it'

over a much wider area than that occupied by the region's premier appellation. They are the southern Rhône's terroir trademark, stamped on opulent, spicy, warming wines even if sand, clay and limestone also play their part.

It's not an all-red story, though. If limited in number, the whites are more impressive than ever – some made from a host of grapes; some focused on a single variety (Roussanne especially); all marked by surprising freshness and minerality. There are more good rosés than you'd get through in half a lifetime of holidays – from serious, rather steeply priced Tavel down to simple charmers. Oh, and sweet wines, too – *vins doux naturels* like Muscat de Beaumes de Venise (try it with blue cheese as well as dessert) and Rasteau (the sweet red version is heaven with dark chocolate).

Fresh and wild

Which brings us to food – perhaps the most powerful lure of all. If any other part of France can offer a wider array of fresh produce, I'd like to hear about it. Every market stall piled with strawberries, cherries, apricots, peaches, nectarines, melons, figs, almonds and olives, screams the message that this is the fruit bowl of France – and the vegetable rack too, moving from asparagus in spring to a dozen kinds of mushrooms in autumn, with aubergines, peppers, pink garlic and flavour-packed tomatoes of every shape, size and colour in between. (This is no



Left: the landscape around Domaine de Mourchon in Ségueret and in Gigondas (top left) makes the southern Rhône a paradise for photographers

exaggeration: a Carpentras grower cultivates 50 varieties of the fruit.)

Tasty Mediterranean cuisine, using superb olive oil – that's what to expect, with vegetables, fish, lamb and duck more prominent than pork or beef. Local specialities include unctuous black olive tapenade, the crispy savoury bread known as *fougasse*, delicious goat's cheeses to drizzle with lavender honey, almond-rich nougat and – ritziest of all – black winter truffles.

Cottoning on to the fact that hunger may strike visitors at any time, some informal restaurants are now open all day – part of the slow embrace of wine tourism which sees more producers opening their doors and offering activities like vineyard cycle rides, walks and picnics. If only all the tourist offices would stay open longer too... especially now that they are packed with useful information, including details of 12 suggested wine routes. But then nothing's perfect. Although the southern Rhône certainly comes close... **D**

MARY DOWEY is a wine, food and travel writer who has a home in the southern Rhône. For more on hotels, restaurants, wine and food producers, shops and markets in the region, see her website www.provencefoodandwine.com