

The Enchanting Rhone Valley

Philippe Guigal, Scholar of Northern Rhone

By W Peter Hoyne



The story of the Guigal family unfolds in the northern Rhone Valley of France, south of gastronomic capital of Lyon, within the small village of Ampuis. The winery “Maison Guigal” was founded at the base of the Cote-Rotie vineyards in this village. Etienne Guigal left home at the young age of 14 after the death of his father in 1924. Traveling to Ampuis, he earned wages picking apricots. Etienne became enamored with the steeply sloping Syrah vineyards of Côte-Rôtie planted by the Romans nearly 2400 years ago and secured a job with local vintner, Vidal Fleury. Over the course of 15 years, he was elevated to the esteemed position of cellar master. By 1946, he had established his own winery, Maison E. Guigal.

Along the way, Marcel’s son Philippe took a detour from studying organic chemistry and biochemistry in Lyon. Philippe explains “my plans from a very young age was to get an enologist diploma.” Philippe continued in securing degrees in enology from the University of Dijon and Bordeaux along with a Master of Science in Wine and Business.

Philippe’s meticulous attention to detail and quality approach to winemaking is nothing new. In 1946, during his grandfather’s time, making quality wine was not the aim of other producers in the Rhone Valley, as it was not the best way to run a profitable winery. “Quantity was much more fashionable at the time. So, my grandfather made choices that were considered illogical choices by producing quality wine. Also,” I deeply think that both my father and grandfather didn’t wait for me to produce outstanding wines. They always have been extremely quality focused and quality orientated. They definitely placed and sealed the quality base of our family winery.” Philippe proudly professes, “I have a tremendous respect for my grandfather and my father. I feel very fortunate to work with my dad every day. Even at my age, I learn every day from him. What we do now together with my dad is being more precise.”

2021 E. Guigal Cotes du Rhone Rosé



The Guigal family has been making serious dry rosé wines since the 1940's. The wine is irresistibly fresh, bursts with red fruits and yet is serious and totally satisfying.

In the glass the color is a brilliant deep salmon pink. The aromas are expressive out of the glass revealing fresh cut strawberries, red currant, citrus and a hint of raspberry and stone. This rosé is full bodied and is Grenache-based with a blend of Cinsault and Syrah. The palate is fruity, round, and the flavors are finely wounded throughout a mouthwatering feel. This rosé is intense and concentrated enough to drink with most cuisines or as an aperitif in the fall and winter.

2020 E Guigal Côtes du Rhône Blanc



Nearly 8% of the Rhône Valley production is white wine, although 25% of Guigal's production is white. They remain the largest producer of white wine in the Rhône Valley. Their "Northern Rhone mindset" allows them to craft distinctive whites that are unlike their counterparts. They source their grapes for this wine from growers in the Southern Rhone. Philippe Guigal has always had love affair with the aromatic profile and freshness of Viognier, which is why it dominates the blend in this wine.

The 2020 E Guigal Côtes du Rhône Blanc is composed of 60% Viognier, 15% Roussanne, 10% Marsanne, 8 % Clairette, 5% Bourboulenc, 2% and Grenache blanc, which is completely fermented in stainless steel tanks. The medium-straw yellow hue immediately entices you to discover what's inside the glass. Floral aromas of lemon curd, mango and some stone fruits bring you in for a closer look. There is a sudden burst of tropical fruits on the palate backed by some refreshing minerality that keeps this wine lively and energized. The modest price point of this wine makes it a go to at any time of the week.

2018 E Guigal Côtes du Rhône Rouge



This entry level Southern Rhone bottling from Guigal is composed of 50% Syrah, 40% Grenache and 10% Mourvèdre. It is sourced from various soils containing sediment, limestone, granite and pebbles. Guigal uses traditional winemaking methods in crafting this wine along with long soaking on the skins. It is aged for 1½ years in large oak vats “foudres” to minimize both oak extraction and oxidation.

This medium ruby wine opens with delicate floral aromas of spring flowers and rustic spices. The middle core is nicely textured with a ripe compote of red and blue fruits held together with savory spices and sandalwood. The silky tannins are ripe and carry through to a long finish. The purity of the Guigal style shines through.

2019 E Guigal Crozes-Hermitage



This large appellation in Northern Rhone consists of vineyards planted on the eastern slopes of the river and grown deep in warm pebbly soils. The majority of wines are red and predominately Syrah while there is a small percentage of white wine made from Marsanne and Rousanne. Given the relatively unknown status of these wines, they are remarkable values representing the terroir of the Northern Rhone.

The soils for Guigal’s 100% Syrah of Crozes-Hermitage are composed of limestone, clay and sandy gravel. The average age of these vineyards are 35 years of age. This wine is aged for 18 months in oak barrels. The dark garnet color reveals the quality and purity of flavor in this wine. This bottling flaunts a bouquet of field flowers, red orchard fruits and anise. The dark fruit in this wine oozes from the glass. Inside is a generous offering of framboise intermixed with dark cocoa and espresso. The core has an essence of delicate rocky minerality and freshness indicating it’s origin and sense of place. Philippe Guigal is a master craftsman that over delivers with every wine in his portfolio.

2019 E Guigal Gigondas



This village in southern Rhone is just 10 miles southwest of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The appellation of Gigondas dates back to the Roman era, and in Latin means pleasure. The town was a recreational site for Roman soldiers of the Empire's Second Legion. The wine was produced during this time. This region benefits from a warm, Mediterranean climate.

This is a Southern Rhone red blend of 70% Grenache, 20 % Syrah, and 10% Mourvèdre sourced from sloped vineyards of red clay, gravel and red clay. The wine spends two years in oak foudres with 50% new oak. This garnet colored, youthful wine is a mixture of ripe, mixed black fruits laced with elements of dried sage, bay, thyme and tilled earth. The minerality, spices and garrigue personality of this wine is obvious in the mid-palate. The rounded tannins and acidity are noticeable at this early stage of development, yet indicate its ability to age.

2018 E Guigal “Saintes Pierres De Nalys” Chateauneuf du Pape



Philippe Guigal’s talent in the southern Rhone region is on display in this wine. The terroir of Chateau de Nalys is claimed to be four centuries old dating back to the original founders in the 1700’s. There are nearly 100 acres of vineyards dedicated to red varietals. The wine has a dominant amount of Grenache (60%) along with 30% Syrah in this first vintage where Philippe Guigal maintained total control from start to finish. On opening, this grand vin reveals aromas of fresh baking spices and delicate rose petals. This finesse-driven wine offers up crème de cassis, baked cherry puree, sweet cedar and a dusting of cinnamon. These components will lead to a plush and lengthy mouth-feel. The acidity is persistent and well integrated while the tannins remain silky, round and finely grained.

2018 E Guigal Brune et Blonde Côte-Rôtie



Côte-Rôtie is situated in the northernmost region of the Rhone valley. The Syrah vines are planted on steep, terraced hillsides which catch and focus the sun's heat, giving the region its reputation and name: "roasted slope." A small percentage of the white Viognier grape is co-planted with the Syrah, and the two are harvested and fermented together, giving the wine more elegance and lightness. The Côte-Rôtie Brune et Blonde de Guigal refers to the fact that the grapes come from the two areas of Côte-Rôtie, the Côte Brune and Côte Blonde. The historical legend is that long ago a lord deeded the Côte Brune to his dark-haired daughter and the Côte Blonde to his blond daughter. The soils of the Côte Brune are indeed darker, containing more iron and some clay while the paler soils of the Côte Blonde have more sand and limestone.

Along with Guigal's three La La wines, this bottling showcases Guigal's stylistic achievement in the appellation of Cote Rotie. This Cote-Rotie bottling is a youngster at this early stage of development. Aromas of sweet incense and savory spices welcome you at the door. As you enter you are greeted with purple violets and dark macerated fruits that penetrate your palate. You reflect back on your first sip and notice complex undertones of crushed rocks, ground pepper and bay leaf along with a velvety mouth-feel that carries you to the lengthy finish. The wine remains fresh, harmonious and polished on the edges. This sophisticated and elegant wine ends as a symphony in your mouth.

I tasted this wine weekly for up to one month. It showed excellent pedigree each time, with everything coming together after four weeks of aeration. Congrats to the team at E Guigal for this superlative effort.