

GLOBAL WARMING, BY THE GLASS

Increasingly hot, dry weather is affecting reds from the southern Rhône – and, no matter your politics, it can leave a less-than-perfect taste behind

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If I had needed further proof that global warming is fact versus liberal propaganda, I don't any more. I have just tasted climate change and, like Al Gore, I'm not a fan.

More specifically, I've just come from sampling 11 reds from the southern Rhône set for release today in Ontario. They are big, in some cases exceeding 15-per-cent alcohol, a sign the grapes had ripened or desiccated excessively under the increasingly intense Rhône Valley sun.

Worse for me than the booziness was the general absence of that classic essence known as garrigue, the medley of aromatic Mediterranean shrubs such as lavender and thyme that magically seem to suggest themselves in many southern French reds. Too much heat and drought stress and that prized quality can vanish.

As some Rhône winemakers have observed, the vines are starting to go wonky. On days when temperatures exceed 30 C, stomata on leaves close down to conserve water, shutting off photosynthesis, says Antonio Busalacchi, who directs the University of Maryland Earth System Interdisciplinary Center and is an advanced sommelier with a vineyard consulting firm, www.vinoveritasllc.com. "Our research shows that the number of such days is likely to triple by mid-century," he told me. He added that by century's end, the southern Rhône could move from a region at the top of the quality-dry-wine spectrum to one best suited for unfortified dessert wines. Barring interventions, such as shifting to vine types better adapted to withstand stress, he said, "wines will lose their traditional character."

Château de Nages JT Costières de Nîmes 2012 (France) SCORE: 92 PRICE: \$24.95

A blend of 86-per-cent syrah with 14-per-cent mourvedre, this is substantial red, with intense blackberry and plum fruit and a smoked-meat character lifted by cracked pepper. Classic Rhône syrah flavour at a not-unreasonable price.

La Ferme du Mont Première Côte Côtes du Rhône 2012 (France) SCORE: 90 PRICE: \$14.95

An outstanding bargain, here's a basic-level Côtes du Rhône with the complexity one might expect of more hallowed appellations in the southern Rhône. Aged in concrete rather than wood, it's medium-fullbodied and richly fruited with cassis and raspberry and a polished, supple texture, delivering lovely savoury notes of licorice, herbs and pepper. Various prices in Alta.

Pierre Amadieu Gigondas Romane Machotte 2012 (France) SCORE: 90 PRICE: \$27.95

Chewy yet firm, the Romane Machotte 2012 from Amadieu is leathery and spicy, with notes of pepper and licorice adding complexity to the ripe, full-bodied fruit.

Domaine de la Vieille Julienne les Trois Sources Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2012 (France) SCORE: 90 PRICE: \$79.95

A shrinking violet this is not, with respect both to flavour and price. Superripe and luscious, it's impressive enough and packs a punch of sweet fruit rendered complex by underbrush and licorice. Think of raisins that had fallen onto a forest floor next to a bag of allsorts. Could that be piquant spice or minerality in the background, or is it merely the medicinal quality of 15.5-per-cent alcohol? I'm guessing the alcohol.

Domaine Les Aphillanthes Plan de Dieu Cuvée des Galets Côtes du Rhône Villages 2011 (France) SCORE: 89
PRICE: \$23.95

It's instantly apparent this was picked ripe, both because of the 15-per-cent alcohol and the raisin-like flavour. On the plus side, there's good balance coming from the pepper-fennel savouriness, but ultimately this comes across as though it wants to be an Italian Amarone, and I suspect most French winemakers would not consider that flattery. Various prices in Alta.

Ortas Prestige Rasteau 2010 (France) SCORE: 88 PRICE: \$19.95

There's good structure here, with dense blackberry fruit balanced by bitter espresso and set against sticky tannins. But there's more of a fall-foliage, decaying-leaf quality to this red than the Rhône's classically more inviting fresh-herb character. \$25.04 in Man., \$22.90 in Que.

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Domaine Duseigneur Antarès Lirac 2011 (France) SCORE: 88 PRICE: \$18.95

Alcohol-bomb alert: This measures 15.5-per-cent, so pace your pours accordingly. A sweet core of cherry liqueur meets a subtle medicinal taste that reminds me of Red Bull (or one of those energy drinks I mistakenly bought under the influence – of fatigue). It's got decent complexity, satisfyingly astringent backbone and chewy texture, but it's not my brand of pick-me-up.

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