



THE Rhône REUNION

HOSPICE DU RHÔNE RETURNS TO PASO ROBLES IN FULL FORCE AFTER A FOUR-YEAR HIATUS by Michelle Ball

HOSPICE DU RHÔNE (HDR) IS BACK! This April, for the first time in four years, the (usually) biennial celebration of Rhône wines was held in Paso Robles, California, attended by more than 1,600 enthusiasts and professionals from all over the world. The three-day event included focused morning seminars, themed farm-to-table lunches, grand tastings, and elaborate winemakers' dinners that highlighted the many varietals in and stylistic approaches to Rhône (and Rhône-inspired) wines.

As media partner, *The SOMM Journal* was there to cover the educational seminars, which included an examination of the classic terroir of Hermitage and introductions to emerging wine regions in both the broader reaches of the Rhône Valley and the Pacific Northwest. HDR founding director and emcee John Alban kicked things off with a tribute to his longtime friend and HDR supporter Philippe Cambie, a renowned enologist and esteemed consultant who died last December. Described by Alban as "a gentle giant who loved the world of wine," Cambie served as an advisor to over 80 producers and had an immeasurable impact on the industry: "I've wondered if someone could quantify how much he single-handedly changed, for the better, the style and wines of Châteauneuf," Alban added. That weekend, we toasted to Cambie, a bon vivant who reminded all of us to live life to the fullest.



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Hospice du Rhône president Vicki Carroll (left) and founding director John Alban (right) with moderator Kelly McAuliffe (center).



Over 1,600 participants attended Hospice du Rhône this April.

SEMINAR 1:

“CAVE DE TAIN: A MAGICAL ASSEMBLAGE”

The first seminar took an in-depth look at the many profiles of Syrah produced from a single famed hillside, Hermitage, as demonstrated by Cave de Tain. As the producer’s ambassador, David Quillin, put it, the goal was to “explain what terroir means in Hermitage, because it’s one variety—Syrah—and one site, but the geological aspect and composition are very different from one [plot] to the other. All of those make up a small piece of the final blend.”

Moderator Kelly McAuliffe, who lives about an hour from the appellation, emphasized the importance of a “pilgrimage to Hermitage.” “When you get there, you have to hike it to feel it. The view is spectacular, and you can really see the different soils,” McAuliffe explained.

Attendees sampled wines from six different plots that were hand harvested

in 2015, then separately vinified and matured—each in barrels made by a different cooper—to accentuate the nuances of their site. They served as individual music notes for the winemaker who composed the final opus, Cave de Tain’s top cuvée, which we also tasted: the 2015 Hermitage Gambert de Loche. The dense Syrah evolved in the glass with threads of salty bacon, mineral, and Christmas spice wrapped around a core of rich, juicy black fruit that persisted on the finish.

The wine is named for the founder of Cave de Tain, Louis Gambert de Loche, who established the co-op in 1933 and was critical to shaping the Hermitage AOC. Over the years, the co-op expanded its reach and is now one of the biggest landowners on the celebrated hill, with 54 acres of estate vines covering different soils, elevations, and aspects.



Cave de Tain ambassador David Quillin and McAuliffe.

Although Quillin wouldn’t disclose the entire makeup of the final wine, he did reveal two of its critical components. Hermitage Hermite, representing 44% of the blend, is an extremely steep, terraced block that produced a rich and full-bodied expression with juicy and brambly black fruit, flecks of white pepper, and brisket, while Hermitage Meal (14%), one of the appellation’s most famous parcels, sees ample morning sunlight and yielded an elegant, nuanced wine with notes of sarsaparilla, anise, and cigar box capped by nervy freshness on the finish.

SEMINAR 2:

“HORSEPOWER VINEYARDS: THE HOOFBEAT OF TRADITION”



Winemaker Christophe Baron surprises moderator Jeb Dunnuck with an impromptu blind cheese tasting.

Muscular draft horses greeted us at the entrance to the second seminar, featuring Christophe Baron's Horsepower wines. During a visit to Walla Walla, Washington, in 1996, the Champenoise winemaker shared photos of the round stones distinguishing the soils of Châteauneuf-du-Pape to a friend, who responded, "Huh, I know where there are stones like this." The next day, they drove to a plot of land blanketed in rocks. "I said, 'This is it. I'm staying in the Walla Walla. I'm going to buy that land and plant Syrah,'" recalled Baron, who canceled the plans he'd had to leave the day after for the Willamette Valley in search of Pinot Noir property.

The next year, he planted Cayuse Vineyard in what would, in 2015, become The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater. The AVA is defined by a single soil series, which makes up 96% of the area: large basalt stones called Freewater cobbly loam that radiate heat. Renowned wine critic Jeb Dunnuck, who served as moderator, recalled his first experience driving to the region in 2005: "I distinctly remember thinking I had made a wrong turn." Surrounded by a sea of wheat fields and grain silos, it's not exactly what you'd think of when it comes to wine country. "So I can't stress enough how much courage, conviction, and belief in oneself it would have taken Christophe to purchase that plot and set out on this journey," Dunnuck continued.

While Baron has over a dozen different labels, curiosity and experimentation are the driving forces behind Horsepower, named for the draft horses who work his land. Presenting the wines was assistant vigneron Elizabeth Bourcier, who joined Baron in 2008, the same year he planted Horsepower's Sur Echaldas Vineyard—one of the highest-density plantings in the U.S. with 3-foot-by-3-foot spacing. The tasting, which highlighted the impact of such high-density biodynamic farming on flavor profile, included a vertical of Grenache (vintages 2012–2014) and Syrah (2015–2016) from Sur Echaldas and two other Horsepower vineyards, The Tribe and High Contrast.

Dunnuck argued that this AVA could be one of the most identifiable terroirs globally, noting "the meatiness and sense of iron" that he always finds in the wines. Indeed, the samples' profiles across the board reminded me of a delicatessen. Bourcier noted the distinct umami character that she finds in Sur Echaldas, which is grown in a lot more shade, and I too found it to embody that dense, brooding, salami character, while the wines from The Tribe displayed more freshness, with floral notes and undertones of light-roast coffee.



SEMINAR 3:

“VENTOUX: RED HOT 'CAUSE IT'S COOL”

Moderator Jeb Dunnuck opened Saturday morning's seminar by asking the audience: "Who can find Ventoux on a map?" Although the region has flown under the radar for years, Dunnuck argues that it's poised to excel for several reasons, most notably climate change: Once considered too cool for quality viticulture, it's proving to be more hospitable in a warming world. There's also been an industry shift from co-op wineries to family-run estates that has dramatically improved quality.

"Even though we are very much in the south of the Rhône Valley, because of our cooler climate, we are at the crossroad between the north and the south," explained Ventoux AOC president and third-generation Château Pesquie winemaker Frédéric Chaudière, whose grandparents took over the vineyard in 1971. Mont Ventoux, which juts from the plain at 6,300 feet in elevation, influences the terroir greatly while supporting a plethora of flora and fauna. Nicole Sierra-Rolet, co-proprietor of Chêne Bleu, described it as the "European Galapagos" and noted that the terrain "goes from desert to Mediterranean to Arctic in a very short area." In fact, the region is home to two of France's 16 UNESCO Biosphere Reserves.



The flight for the Ventoux seminar offered unique insight into a region that's little known in the U.S.

The wines, which are unfortunately difficult to find in the U.S., were calling cards for the unique character of this dynamic region. Five producers presented ten wines, ranging from Domaine de Fondrèche's racy, mineral-driven old-vine Roussanne to fresh and honeyed white blends with salivating acidity to vibrant reds made from Syrah and Grenache. Standouts included the Château Pesquie 2020 Quintessence Blanc, which married ripe yellow stone fruit and lemon peel with persistent minerality and lift; the Saint Jean du Barroux 2016 La Pierre Noire Rouge, a blend of mostly Grenache and Syrah that displayed an intriguing herbal-tea profile with notes of sweet bay leaf, dried raspberry, and hibiscus on a medium-bodied frame; and the Château Juvenal 2019 Perséides Rouge, which boasted fragrant notes of wild strawberry and chaparral that carried through on the palate with ripe, resolved tannins.



The Ventoux panelists.

SEMINAR 4:

“SYRAH TO ROCK THE WORLD: THE ROCKS DISTRICT OF MILTON-FREEWATER”

Diving deeper into the Walla Walla Valley, the final seminar consisted of a panel of six producers making Syrah from four vineyards in The Rocks District. To illustrate just how new this area is, moderator Elaine Chukan Brown, executive editor for *JancisRobinson.com*, pointed out that “Christophe is the great grandpappy of this region—and he’s only been there since the late ‘90s.”

Yet a recent influx of producers is evidence of its potential. When the AVA was first created in 2015, there were roughly 250 acres planted. That number has since doubled. Devyani Isabel Gupta, winemaker and viticulturist at Valdemar Estates, said that its owners specifically chose The Rocks District because it reminded them of their beloved estate in Rioja. “In my mind, that is quite a statement from one of the world’s great wineries to choose to cross the planet and invest in Walla Walla,” observed Brown.

Delmas Wines owner Steve Robertson, who instigated the AVA petition, acknowledged that producers in the area are still learning how to work with the terroir—but they’re doing so collectively. “It’s exciting to be a part of something like this that is emerging—you don’t often get to go to a place and steer a course that’s new in the world of wine,” he said.



The panel from The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater.

Billo Naravane, MW—who is both the winemaker for Delmas and the owner of Rasa Vineyards—admitted that one of their challenges is high pH, which can be over 4.0 after alcoholic fermentation. “Those are pretty scary numbers,” he said. “For those that are chemists, they will say those wines are not sustainable at that level. They will not age. However, we know that’s completely false because there are some beautiful wines that we taste from 15–20 years ago that are still holding on and still continue to develop.”

Tasting wines from six brands, each with a unique winemaking approach, I found the common thread to be the umami minerality that was apparent in Horsepower as well. The Force Majeure 2018 Syrah from SJR Vineyard stood out for its elegant mouthfeel, high-toned aromatics of blackberry and bay leaf, and persistent mocha finish. The Delmas 2018 Syrah (with 7% Viognier) from the same vineyard showed a similarly perfumed profile but with distinct sarsaparilla undertones. And the Valdemar 2019 Syrah, offering ample black fruit, was quite vibrant despite its broody richness. For Naravane, the connection between the wines was obvious in the glass: “That to me is terroir right there—I can’t provide you a better explanation of why terroir is real than this.” 