

## Regional profile

# Hermitage

Tourism investment means this famous northern Rhône hill is now alive to the sound of wine lovers paying homage to its structured, meaty Syrahs. Matt Walls reports

WE WERE HUNGRY, our baby son was wailing, and now the car was beached on a hump in the road directly outside Jean-Louis Chave's house. I was beginning to regret the idea of a family picnic on the hill of Hermitage.

Parts of the northern Rhône are inaccessible to tourists; dirt tracks, steep slopes and tightly terraced vineyards make a stunning landscape,

but not one that's easy to explore. But as interest in the region builds, M Chapoutier, Paul Jaboulet Aîné, Delas and Cave de Tain have invested millions of euros in tourist facilities on and around Hermitage. This most regal of northern Rhône appellations is finally opening itself up to the world.

The wines of the Rhône were well known in Roman times when they were called Vins de Vienne, but Michel Chapoutier, owner of négociant house M Chapoutier, goes even further. He claims that winemaking on this

site dates back to 4BC, and describes the hill as 'one of the oldest vineyards in France'.

The name 'Hermitage', however, only appears in the 17th century. It refers to a knight, Henri Gaspard de Sterimberg, who lived as a hermit on top of the hill after returning from the Albigensian Crusade. Since then the fortunes of Hermitage have been buoyed by a long list of admirers including Louis XIII, Thomas Jefferson and Alexandre Dumas.

In the late 18th and 19th centuries, the wines played an unusual role in the history of Bordeaux: Hermitage would be added to the wines to strengthen them and improve their ability to age. This wasn't a clandestine practice; sometimes 'Bordeaux hermitagé' was even advertised on the bottles.

The early 20th century was less kind. Land prices dropped and in the 1950s some

**Below: looking across the Rhône river at the town of Tain l'Hermitage and its famous hillside vineyards**

*'Hermitage is the perfect illustration that the most interesting vineyards are in geological chaos'*

**Michel Chapoutier**

apartments were even built on the vineyards. Chave, whose domaine traces its roots back to 1481, explains 'the interest for the grand vin was gone... the *art de vivre* was lost'. But in the 1980s 'the British came back... and then in the 1990s, the Americans started to come'.

The Rhône River flows north to south. The greatest terroirs are dotted down the west bank, except for monumental Hermitage, sitting proudly across the water. What makes this terroir so exceptional is clear to see. It sits at a sudden kink in the Rhône, giving it full >

## Hermitage at a glance

**AC established**  
1937

**Area under vine**  
136 hectares

**Annual production**  
3,824hl (2014)

**Soils**  
Granite, alluvial deposits, clay limestone, loess

**Grapes**  
76% red (mainly Syrah); 24% white (mainly Marsanne and Roussanne)

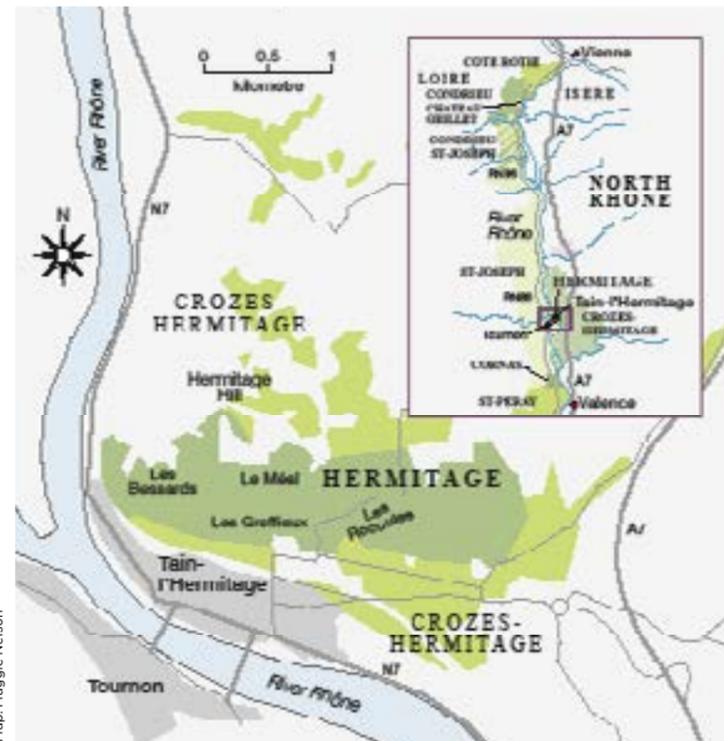
**Yields**  
28hl/ha average

**Wine exports**  
42%

**Producers**  
19 wineries, 1 co-op

**Recent vintages**  
2010, 2015 (excellent);  
2012, 2013 (good)





Map: Maggie Nelson

south exposure. Rising suddenly and steeply, it angles the vines to the sun, encourages rainwater run-off and protects the vines from the rampaging north wind.

The other quality factor is the multiplicity of soils. To Chapoutier, 'Hermitage is the perfect illustration that the most interesting vineyards are in geological chaos.' Some of the best terroir is granite-based, but this is only found on the western flank, around 25% of the total. The majority is alluvial deposits of various types and a little loess. Diverse soils bring varied characteristics to the wines.

### Understanding the hill

The hill is divided into around 20 lieux-dits (named sites), such as Les Bessards, Le Méal and Les Greffieux. Traditionally these were blended, but now many producers bottle each separately. Tasting each separate section of the hill is fascinating and instructive, but a perfectly balanced blend delivers a more complete expression of Hermitage in all its glory. 'What is Hermitage?' asks Chave. 'Bessards is Bessards, Méal is Méal, but it takes a little bit of everything to express Hermitage.'



Photographs: Nanda Gonzague; Mick Rock/Cephas



*'Bessards is Bessards, Méal is Méal, but it takes a little bit of everything to express Hermitage'* Jean-Louis Chave (above)

## Six names to look out for

### Domaine JL Chave

With holdings of 14ha, JL Chave is the largest family-owned grower-producer in Hermitage. Jean-Louis Chave makes still reds and whites plus sweet whites, and a sought-after alternative red blend called Cuvée Cathelin in certain vintages. As the custodian of such an ancient and revered domaine, he is remarkably down-to-earth, and more concerned with taking care of his estate than globe-trotting. 'I don't want to be a brand,' he explains. 'I want people to be interested in Hermitage – not Chave.' His wines are timeless, authentic and complete expressions of this great northern Rhône terroir.

### M Chapoutier

When a young Michel Chapoutier took over the family business in 1990, it was in the doldrums. He quickly turned it around and now this négociant house is one of the biggest names in the Rhône. Chapoutier owns 34ha in Hermitage – 25% of the appellation's vineyards, more than anyone else – and it's all farmed biodynamically. Though he does produce some blended Hermitage, he is

best known for his single-vineyard wines known as the Sélections Parcelaires, which are regularly among the best of the appellation.

### Domaine Marc Sorrel

Established in 1928, this estate is an excellent source of fine, balanced Hermitage. Sorrel's standard red and white Hermitages are good, but his special cuvées deserve particular mention. His top red, Le Gréal – a blend of Les Greffieux and Le Méal (hence the name) – is firmly structured yet elegant. His single-vineyard white, Les Rocoules, is mostly Marsanne with about 5% Roussanne, and in good years such as 2014 it combines freshness and richness to wonderful effect.

### Domaine Bernard Faurie

Every few years, the softly spoken Faurie regretfully explains that he's going to retire – but he just can't seem to quit! Thank goodness for that, as his wines represent some of the most elegant expressions of Hermitage. Faurie's holdings add up to a particularly strong hand: Le Méal, Les Bessards and

Les Greffieux. A light touch in the cellar produces reds of incredible finesse as well as a pure, crystalline white.

### Domaine du Colombier

The Viale family has been growing grapes in the region for nearly 100 years. It used to sell its crop to négociants, but in 1992 started making and bottling its own wine. Florent Viale produces a red and a white Hermitage from the family's holding of 1.5ha in the eastern part of the hill. Larger barrels and limited new oak make for wonderfully drinkable, elegant and vibrant wines. A reliable performer.

### Cave de Tain

With 22ha, this local cooperative is the second biggest landholder in Hermitage after M Chapoutier (see left). Thankfully it is a quality-minded outfit with a long-term vision – arguably one of the best co-ops in France. Hermitage bottlings to look out for are the red Grand Classique, the white Au Coeur des Siècles, and the vin de paille. An investment of €11m in 2014 will only see it go from strength to strength.

Red, white or sweet, Hermitage's terroir produces incredibly long-lived wines – 100 years is not unheard of. Recent top vintages include 2015, 2010, 2009 and 2005. If you can find any well-stored 1990, 1978 or 1961, so much the better. Compared to other great classics, Hermitage is relatively affordable, but Chapoutier predicts this won't last forever:

'It will be the most expensive wine in France once more,' he declares; 'this terroir is unique.'

And as increasing numbers of tourists are welcomed to Hermitage, more people will be able to experience this legendary site first-hand. Cave de Tain has even set up signposted, self-guided walking tours of the hill. It's a much better option than taking your car. **D**

*Matt Walls is a freelance writer and author with a special interest in the Rhône. He also blogs at [www.mattwalls.co.uk](http://www.mattwalls.co.uk)*

## A dozen to try from Hermitage



**Paul Jaboulet Aîné, La Chapelle Blanc 2014** 96  
£108 (in bond) **Fine & Rare**  
100% old-vine Marsanne from the lieu-dit Maison Blanche. Gorgeous nose of vanilla pod, mango and white chocolate. Very full and intense with a flowing texture. Long, straight and piercing with a beam of bright acidity pointing the way. Powerful yet light on its feet. **Drink** 2018-2040 **Alcohol** 13.5%

**Domaine Belle, Blanc 2013** 94  
£40 (2012) **Robert Rolls**  
60% Marsanne, 40% Roussanne. Captivating aromas of buttery poached pear, citrus and almond. Full in body, silky and rounded; soft but not flabby. Generous new oak provides spice on the long finish. Complex already, and will improve. **Drink** 2017-2028 **Alc** 13.5%



**M Chapoutier, Le Pavillon 2010** 99  
£200(ib)-£353.33 **Fine & Rare, Millésima, Seckford Wine**  
From the lieu-dit Les Bessards. Soy, plum sauce and duck jus notes – there's a sense of exoticism among the dense black fruit. Ultra-fine tannins and a saline minerality contribute to its supreme elegance. Full-bodied and rich but no heaviness. Highly polished and seductive. **Drink** 2017-2045 **Alc** 13.5%

**Domaine JL Chave 2012** 97  
£169-£298 **A&B Vintners, Albany Vintners, Hedonism, The Wine Society**  
Authentic berry fruits inlaid with spice and bonfire smoke. Medium-bodied, but piercingly intense, with dramatic grain, textural relief and a mineral edge. A fresh and lively vintage rather than a

concentrated one; a nonetheless soulful and timeless expression of Hermitage. **Drink** 2018-2045 **Alc** 14%



**Ferraton Père & Fils, Le Méal 2013** 96  
£70 **Berry Bros & Rudd, L'Assemblage**  
Stylistically similar to Chapoutier, who has worked closely with this biodynamic company since 1998. Savoury, animal aromas, then massive fruit on the palate. Concentrated and very ripe but retains freshness. Polished and delicious. **Drink** 2018-2045 **Alc** 13%

**Delas, Les Bessards 2013** 95  
£82.67(ib)-£116.67 **Crump Richmond Shaw, Millésima**  
Melting, creamy forest fruits swaddled gently in oak. An elegant, mid-bodied Hermitage that is straight and focused in style, and highly drinkable. Wonderfully svelte tannins and unmistakably granite-born. **Drink** 2017-2030 **Alc** 14%



**Domaine du Colombier 2013** 95  
£60 **Lay & Wheeler**  
A very spicy wine, with star anise among the red and blackberry fruits. Medium-bodied and fresh, with a piercing beam of acidity and nicely serrated tannins. Well balanced, not overly weighty, with intriguing detail and vibrancy. **Drink** 2017-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

**Domaine Marc Sorrel, Le Gréal 2013** 95  
£58(ib)-£87 **Atlas Fine Wine, Lay & Wheeler**  
92% Syrah, 8% Marsanne; 60-year-old vines on average. Deep and brooding blackberry with a touch of camphor and liquorice. Serious concentration and

plenty of ripe tannin, this is a powerful wine that makes a real impression. Very long. **Drink** 2021-2040 **Alc** 13.5%

**Domaine Fayolle Fils et Fille, Les Dionnières 2013** 94  
N/A UK [www.fayolle-filsetfille.fr](http://www.fayolle-filsetfille.fr)  
Fresh woody herbs on this high-toned Syrah, with spice and some menthol lift. Touch reductive. Serious concentration and guts. Good balance, no excess oak, dry and savoury. A powerful, regal wine that combines richness and elegance. **Drink** 2017-2030 **Alc** 13%



**Domaine Yann Chave 2013** 94  
£78.13(ib) **Adnams, Christopher Keiller, L'Assemblage, Salut Wines**  
Very dark, with liquorice, black pepper, smoked meat and oak spice. Some ripe opulence to the fruit. Majestic, open, clearly depicted, massive but not heavy. Impressive combination of freshness and concentration. Hard to resist. **Drink** 2018-2040 **Alc** 13.5%

**Maison Nicolas Perrin 2013** 94  
£55 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Liberty Wines**  
A new négociant house from Nicolas Jaboulet together with the Perrins of Château de Beaucastel. Rich, intense fruits inlaid with cinnamon and clove oak. Good weight, richness and fruit purity. Lots of ripe tannins. Fresh, long, mineral finish. **Drink** 2017-2028 **Alc** 13%

**Cave de Tain, Grand Classique 2010** 93  
£29.99 **All About Wine, Premier Cru**  
A little closed still. Meeaty, bloody, iron-rich aromas with dried leaves and red fruits within the blackness. Full in body and fruit, velvet tannins and a long, mineral finish. **Drink** 2018-2040 **Alc** 13%

*For full details of UK stockists, see p94*