

St-Péray

It once rivalled Champagne, but after its name was blighted, St-Péray slipped into the abyss. But now it's back and the still whites are shining, says Matt Walls



THE FORTUNES OF all wine regions wax and wane, but the story of St-Péray, the most southerly appellation of the northern Rhône, is more turbulent than most.

Making traditional-method sparkling wines as early as 1829, St-Péray soon rivalled Champagne in quality and price. In the late 1800s it was devastated by phylloxera; but as it tried to recover, larcenous négociants put paid to its good name by passing off inferior wines. By the end of the 20th century it had slipped into obscurity – but St-Péray is rising again, and this time it's the still whites in the ascendant.

The town of St-Péray sits on the west bank of the Rhône in a picturesque valley created by a tributary called the Mialan. One side of the valley is granite, the other is a limestone outcrop with the ruined 12th-century Château de Crussol on top. Vines grow on both soils: limestone imparts freshness and tension; granite brings ripeness and salinity. At just 89ha under vine, it's a small appellation, but a growing one.

St-Péray only produces white wines, using Marsanne, Roussanne or both. Marsanne brings stone fruits, body and structure. Roussanne is less common as it's sensitive

to disease and can ripen suddenly, but it contributes aromas of pear, floral notes and freshness. Most producers blend the two or use pure Marsanne, particularly for sparkling wines.

Despite the paucity of St-Péray mousseux nowadays, there is a diversity of style. Even the lightest have an unusual breadth on the palate. More concentrated examples, with long lees ageing, can be remarkably full-bodied, rich and flavoursome for a sparkling wine. Today's St-Péray mousseux doesn't have the finesse of good Champagne, but it does have a distinctive and characterful style. Quality-minded producers such as Rémy Nodin are spearheading a gradual recovery.

The still wines, however, are now world class. They vary from medium-bodied, fresh and floral in style to full-bodied and opulent. What characterises St-Péray in the context of other northern Rhône Marsanne-Roussanne wines is a certain softness on the palate. Crucially this

must be balanced – often by both acidity (never high in St-Péray) and light tannins, minerality and a pleasing bitterness. Otherwise the wines can be flabby.

Since St-Péray has hit its stride again, some have pushed an ambitious, concentrated style. When it works, the wines can impress and work well with rich dishes. But if overdone they lack drinkability and refreshment – even more so with prolonged oak ageing. Those who focus on tension and freshness tend to produce a more precise and articulate expression of the terroir.

Cooler years, such as 2014, often give good results as they preserve the all-important acidity and freshness. Warmer years have traditionally been less successful, but I was impressed with the consistent quality from the hot 2015 vintage. These will be best drunk young, but St-Péray isn't a wine for long ageing in any case – and 2016 is looking even stronger. The future is looking bright again for this phoenix of the northern Rhône.

Matt Walls is the DWWA Regional Chair for Rhône. These wines were the best of those tasted blind in Tain l'Hermitage in June 2017

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Domaine du Biguet, Brut NV 90
£19.95 Yapp Bros

Pure Marsanne grown on granite, 24 months on lees. Lightly vegetal, fennel fronds and celery, floral too. Dry but not austere at 5g/l RS, it's well balanced and there's rich flavour underneath. Fresh, very drinkable and characterful. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 12.5%**



Maison M Chapoutier, La Muse de RW 2012 89
£20.59 BI Wines

Pure Marsanne grown on granite and clay limestone. Lees ageing for 36 months gives a rich, toasty style, with juicy apricot fruit and soft fizz. Majors on flamboyance over finesse; brash but fun. **Drink 2017-2022 Alc 13%**



Domaine du Tunnel - Stéphane Robert, Pur Blanc 2015 95
£36.80 Lay & Wheeler

From Marsanne vines that are over 100 years old. Full-bodied but fresh, with mouth-coating fruit and piercing aromas. Kept taut by salinity rather than acidity; beautifully balanced and very long. **Drink 2017-2022 Alc 13.5%**



Pic & Chapoutier 2016 92
£21.10 Stannary Street Wine Co

A collaboration between Michel Chapoutier and chef Anne-Sophie Pic has yielded a pure Marsanne that's as athletic as an Olympic fencer. A subtle tannic structure and bitter taster make it a refreshing aperitif but also good with food. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 12.5%**



Domaine Alain Voge, Harmonie 2016 91
£18.50 Georges Barbier

Voge makes a range of St-Péray; this is the unoaked organic Marsanne cuvée. It's a gentle, unfurced, meadow-scented expression. Great purity and elegance on the palate, with a long, textural finish. **Drink 2017-2019 Alc 13.5%**



Fayolle Fils & Fille, Montis 2015 91
£26.38 (2014) Christopher Keiller, Thorman Hunt

Pure Marsanne from two sites (one granite, one limestone) bought from a local grower and sculpted by this admirable estate in its signature precise style. Refreshing bitter twist on the finish. **Drink 2017-2019 Alc 13.5%**



Domaine Guy Farge, Grain de Silex 2016 94
£22 (2015) Chez Stephan

Beautiful aromatics: floral with fennel and aniseed. Roussanne style. Soft on the palate, with a very long, gently perfumed finish. Like a gentle caress. Textbook stuff: Guy Farge has raised his game. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 13%**



Cave de Tain, Fleur de Roc 2015 93
N/A UK www.cavedetain.com

Hand-selected old vines, mostly Marsanne. Wonderful lifted aromatics of peach, apricot and nougat. Fresh and lively; ends lightly on its toes. Uplifted, saline, perfumed, satisfying. Fine, long finish. **Drink 2017-2019 Alc 13.5%**



Domaine Bernard Grippa, Les Figuiers 2015 93
£24.17 Millésima

Consistently one of the best producers in St-Péray; Les Figuiers is Grippa's top cuvée. A rich year (layers of apricot and beeswax) but vibrant, with well-judged oak adding pastry notes to the fruit. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 14%**



François Villard, Version Longue 2015 91
£20.83 Millésima

Villard makes two cuvées. This is 100% Marsanne with long oak ageing, which gives some beeswax aromas over the stone fruit and a touch of fine, structural tannin. Finishes whip-smart. **Drink 2017-2019 Alc 13.5%**



Rémy Nodin, La Beylesse 2016 91
N/A UK www.remy-nodin.fr

Pure Marsanne on clay-limestone soils. Apricot and peach skins along with some nougat, this wine favours impact over finesse. It's a concentrated style; full, rounded and silky, flavoursome and long-lasting. An estate to watch. **Drink 2017-2019 Alc 13.5%**



Vins Jean-Luc Colombo, La Belle de Mai 2016 91
£24.50 Hedonism, Hennings, Penistone Wine Cellars,

Planet of the Grapes, Surrey Wine Cellar
60% Roussanne, 40% Marsanne. Fermented and aged in barriques (15% new). Intense apricot backed by smart oak. Bold and ripe but not overdone. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 13.5%**



Famille Pierre Gaillard 2015 93
£13.99 The Big Red Wine Co

Majority Marsanne. Bay leaf and pine needles on the nose, almost peppery – very lively and inviting aromatics. A squeeze of citrus over the rich apricot fruit; very long and perfectly balanced. Good tension in the wine; this is very well done. **Drink 2017-2019 Alc 13%**



Domaine du Tunnel - Stéphane Robert, Cuvée Prestige 2015 92
£26.60 Lay & Wheeler

80% Marsanne, 20% Roussanne from some of the best granite slopes of the appellation. Apricot fruit and tingling salinity that gives freshness and length. Needs food, but won't fail to impress. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 13.5%**



Maison M Chapoutier, Lieu-dit Hongrie 2016 92
£28.75 (2014) The Drink Shop

Biodynamic Marsanne on clay-limestone over granite. Intense, with concentrated, honeyed pear and apricot fruit. It has tension despite the low acidity. A wine to impress rather than refresh. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 13.5%**



Domaine de la Sarbèche 2014 90
N/A UK +33 6 59 5114 29

First vintage by a new organic estate founded by 26 year-old Cyril Milochvetich. Intense, dry, mineral style that majors on texture rather than fruit. 50% Marsanne, 50% Roussanne blend. Sour apple and camomile on the nose. A promising debut. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 13%**



Maison M Chapoutier, Les Tanneurs 2016 90
£16.25 (2015) Winedirect

100% Marsanne, grown on limestone and granite. Fresh pear and fennel. Rounded, fruity style, but well balanced; clean, pure and fresh. Long finish, with a touch of minerality. Subtle tension; classic. **Drink 2017-2019 Alc 12.5%**



Vins Jean-Luc Colombo, Colombo & Fille 2015 90
£25 Bon Coeur, Christopher Keiller, Halifax Wine Co,

Penistone Wine, Planet of the Grapes, Polygon Wines
Laure Colombo is one of the most dynamic names in St-Péray. This Roussanne-Marsanne blend is full bodied but minerally fresh with integrated oak. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 13.5%**