

A Wine from the Northern Rhone: Yves Cuilleron St. Joseph, "Les Serines,"



The wine I had the other night... (photo by Gerald Wright)

Hello

and welcome back to Wine in Easy English on what's for english dot com. I'm Gerald Wright. And, I know, I've been gone for a long time. And I'm really, really sorry about that. If you've been returning to this site and wondering what had happened, well, I apologize. But I am back.

From now on I hope to put out these podcasts a little more often, a little more frequently.

Today I'd like to talk about a wine I drank just the other night. I don't plan on doing this very often, because I'm not a wine reviewer. I'm not going **to rate wines** or give them points or recommend that you buy some particular bottle of wine. There are plenty of wine reviewers on the internet, and there's no need for another one. All I want to do is talk about wine - because I'm **enthusiastic** about wine. And I hope that I can help you talk about wine, too.

So the wine I had the other night was a 1998 [Yves Cuilleron](#) St. Joseph "Les Serines." Let me repeat that a bit more slowly. This wine has a name: "Les Serines." It's from the appellation of St. Joseph and was made by Yves Cuilleron in 1998. And, wow! was it ever a nice, nice wine. Maybe I've been drinking too many cheap wines these days. But this was **complex** and **compelling**; it had a great **nose** and such a nice, long, lingering **finish**.

To rate wine: to award points to wine; to give wine a score or rating

enthusiastic: to be eager or passionate about something.

complex: (in wine) to have a wide range of smells and tastes - which may change from the glass to the mouth or over time.

compelling: powerful, irresistible - you can't stay away from it.

nose: the aromas and bouquet (the smells) of wine.

finish: the way wine tastes after it moves down your throat.

But let me provide a bit more background and context to this wine first. So that you might learn a way to talk about wines that you've had recently.

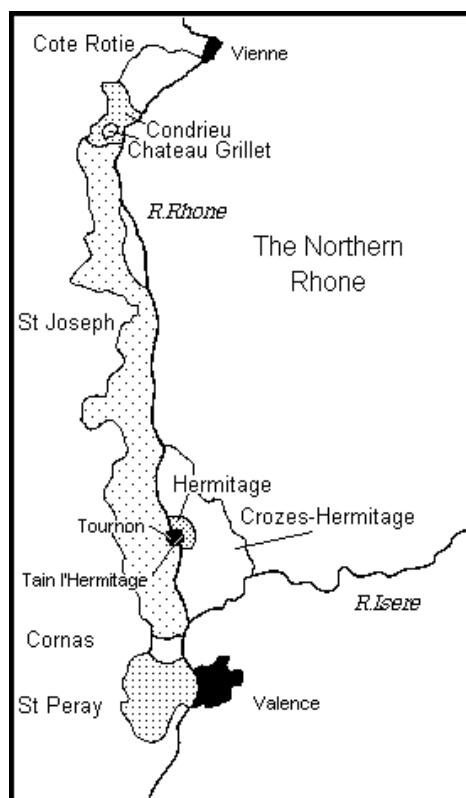
You've heard my French accent - so you've probably guessed that the wine is French. St. Joseph is an **appellation** in the Rhone Valley. That's in South-Eastern France. The Rhone River starts up in Switzerland and moves south through that south-eastern section of France to the Mediterranean sea.

You may have heard the term "Rhone," "Rhone wines," or "Rhone-style wines." You may have even seen wines from California or Australia that are made in a "Rhone style." (In fact, California winemakers who love Rhone wines are sometimes called Rhone Rangers! But I don't want to continue to far down that path!).

Anyway, the real Rhone wines are grown along or near the Rhone River. But you should know that there are two major wine-producing areas along the Rhone River. There's the Southern Rhone and the Northern Rhone. And they are quite different from each other - so you might want to remember that when you look for Rhone wines. Try to figure out if the Rhone wine you see in the shop is from the Southern Rhone or Northern Rhone.

Whether the wine is from the North or South, it'll probably be a red wine. Red wine production is huge in both regions; but there are some **distinctive**, white wines made there, too; just not in very large quantities. In the Southern Rhone, red wines are almost always blends - blends of Grenache, Cinsault, Syrah, Mourvedre and maybe a few more. But in the Northern Rhone, only one red grape is used. And it's Syrah. (But I should also mention that in the Northern Rhone - or in most of the districts of the Northern Rhone - winemakers are allowed to blend 10 or 15% of white grapes into their red wines. This has no effect on the color of the wines. Northern Rhone red wines may be some of the darkest wines you'll see anywhere. But the addition of white grapes does add to the complexity of the nose and taste of the wines.)

Terroir - the influence of climate, soil and vineyard location - is very important in the Rhone. The Southern Rhone has a Mediterranean climate - hot, dry summers - and that's why the wines are similar to other wines in Southern France - wines from **Provence** or the **Languedoc**. But the Northern Rhone has weather that's a lot more like the weather further north: the winters are harsh and cold. And even though the summers can be hot, strong winds whip through the Northern Rhone Valley. Those winds can bring down the temperatures - especially around harvest time. Even more important are the vineyards themselves. In the Northern Rhone the best vineyards are planted on **terraces** on very, very steep slopes - some of them look like cliffs. Some of these slopes are near the river. And there is a lot of **granite** in the soil - which gives the wines a mineral edge or a mineral character.



The Northern Rhone Valley

complex: (in wine) to have a wide range of smells and tastes - which may change from the glass to the mouth or over time.

compelling: powerful, irresistible - you can't stay away from it.

nose: the aromas and bouquet (the smells) of wine.

finish: the way wine tastes after it moves down your throat.

appellation: the name of a wine district - usually defined and protected by law.

distinctive: wines that stand out - that are unique or distinct from others.

Provence: district in Southern France

Languedoc: district in Southern France

terraces: a way of cultivating steep slopes.

granite: hard rock

Some of the appellations of the Northern Rhone that you may have heard of include Hermitage, Crozes-Hermitage, Cornas, Cote-Rotie and Condrieu. These districts can make wines as complex, as distinctive, as rare and as expensive as those in Bordeaux and Burgundy. Individual vineyards or estates are not officially **classified** or ranked as they are in Bordeaux or Burgundy, but you'll probably pay more for a Cote-Rotie or Hermitage than you'd pay for a Crozes-Hermitage or St. Joseph. Why the difference in price? Well, Hermitage is a tiny appellation with some of the steepest vineyards, and so it produces a small amount of very high quality wine. On the other hand, Crozes-Hermitage and St. Joseph have much more land used for vineyards. So even though all the red wine in the Northern Rhone is based on the Syrah grape, you'll find quite a lot of variety. And some of them can be quite affordable.



Terraced vineyard (photo by [jamesmelzer](#))

St. Joseph is one of the larger appellations in the Northern Rhone. In fact, the size of St. Joseph also makes it controversial. (controversial - that means that not everybody agrees on the quality of St. Joseph). In the 1970s, the boundaries of St. Joseph were widened, and the size of the district increased - **dramatically**. Many more vineyards in the area could now be **designated** as St. Joseph. St. Joseph now stretches along the Rhone River for over 40 kilometers - from Condrieu in the North to Cornas in the South. This means the vineyards of St. Joseph also vary quite a bit. Some of the vineyards - the better ones - are on steep hillsides but many are on rolling hills, **plateaux** or flat land. And for this reason, Robert Parker, calls St. Joseph the most confusing appellation in the Northern Rhone. He believes that because the vineyards vary, the quality of the terroir must vary, too. And so, regarding the red wines of St. Joseph, Parker says they "can vary from the mediocre to the charming and seductive."

(Mediocre means so-so or fair; "mediocre wine" is a so-so wine and not necessarily very good. Charming or seductive wines, on the other hand, tease you; they make you feel good. They might want to drink more; they are seductive.)

Parker also says this about Syrah from St. Joseph: "A good St-Joseph red should display a Burgundy-like black-cherry, raspberry, and occasionally cassis-scented nose with medium body, light **tannin** and **zingy** acidity. These are Rhone Valley's lightest reds, and are thus best drunk in their first 5-6 years of life."

Now, the St. Joseph, "Les Serines" that I drank was most definitely not a light-bodied red wine. I mean, if by "light-bodied" you're thinking of Beaujolais. It was not at all light-bodied in that way. And it was 11 years old - and still going strong.

The color was pretty dark - not purple, but a deep, dark red of a maturing wine.

classified: vineyard classification

dramatically: in a big way (like in a drama).

to designate: to classify or name a wine with the name of the appellation.

plateau: relatively flat land that is at a higher elevation. (pl: plateaux)

tannin: woody compounds in wine that come from grape skins, pips, or stems or from barrels.

zingy: lively, zesty

The nose at first had a lot of spiciness to it. Cloves, nutmeg - a bit of pepper. The fruit was a bit more like raisins than black cherry, but there was cassis in there as well. It was big in the mouth and on the finish I got that bacon fat character that you sometimes find in Syrah of northern Rhone. (I really like that bacon-fat character; this wine has complexity beyond simple fruit flavors.) The wine was big in the mouth and the finish lingered for a good long while. The wine was very smooth without **astringent** tannins. (Tannins come from the skins and grape pips - or sometimes the barrels; tannin refers to that woodiness that can make your mouth dry out. This wine was not tannic.) So the wine had this intense complexity of an older red wine, but it also did have a freshness to it. Three of us managed to finish it very quickly. I'd say we were seduced!

astringent: a dry (and slightly bitter) sensation in the mouth.

to intervene: to get in between two people or two things. (here: to get in between)

insecticide: Spray that kills insects

herbicide: Spray that kills weeds.



Above the Rhone River in the Cuilleron Vineyards (photo by [Miss Mary Taylor](#).)

What I've found out about Yves Cuilleron is this. His family has had vineyards for several generations. But he came back to wine a bit later after starting his career as a mechanic. I'm not sure if his family made their own wines in the past or if they just farmed the vineyards. But at some point Yves decided to get very serious about his family's vineyards - and now he makes red, white and rose wines from several appellations in the Northern Rhone. According to his web site, "Les Serines" is not the name of a single vineyard - but it's the word in the local dialect for "syrah." The wine comes from vineyards in both terraces and hills; vineyards with granite as well as sandy soils. (In other words, "Les Serines" is blended from a few vineyards rather than being a wine of a single location.)

Cuilleron appears to be one of those vigneron who lets nature make the wine rather than **intervening** with a heavy hand. He uses no **insecticides** or **herbicides**. He uses a small amount of organic fertilizer. He hand harvests the grapes. (Somehow I doubt mechanical harvesters would work in those steep vineyards in the northern Rhone!) He lets the wines ferment on their natural yeasts, and the age for about 18 months in barrels.

The website also says it's best to wait four or five years before drinking this wine and that it can age 15 years. 11 years of aging certainly worked for me.

So if you're out shopping for something interesting to try, look for wine from the Northern Rhone. And if you're looking for value, you may find it in St. Joseph.