

## Chapoutier shows 2012s, calls for Côte Rôtie classification

31 May 2013 by Jancis Robinson

Michel Chapoutier is one of those wine producers who, like Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon, just love to talk. This makes them perfect as quote machines for us wine writers. (In fact our colleague Linda Murphy said she had to put a cap on the number of Grahm quotes allowed when she was wine editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*.)

He was in London recently to present the latest vintage of his single-vineyard wines and was keen to stress it was not all about him, noisy as he is. 'What's important, especially in the vineyard, is the Tim', I thought he said gnomically, before realising he meant 'team'.

He loves being controversial and is in the interesting position of holding all sorts of extreme views yet being part of the establishment in his role as a member of the INAO and the official body representing the Rhône Valley wine producers. He should therefore be in a good position to see to fruition one of his pet projects, a proper, official classification of the grands crus of Côte Rôtie. As he points out, the soils, elevations and expositions are so varied, that in a way it's crazy that we have one single appellation for the whole of the 280 hectares of Côte Rôtie vineyard. But it would be funny to say the least to see this come about as a result of pressure from a producer so much better known for their Hermitage than their rather less convincing Côte Rôtie.

His most memorable statement, however, was his response to a provocative question from Marcel Orford-Williams, responsible for buying Rhône wines for the widely respected Wine Society. Chapoutier was asked whether he really thought the future of Châteauneuf could lie with Grenache when it makes such high-alcohol wines?

'Well, the southern Rhône is too warm for Syrah', Chapoutier observed, adding, 'Of course we don't want to reduce the alcohol by physical means. So how about adding back water lost by evaporation? If you harvest on the basis of the ripeness of tannins in Grenache you risk having wines at 15.5 or 16% alcohol. We experimented and found that alcohol reduction [by adding water] did actually result in better wines, but the INAO said "What will wine writers say?". But 17% wines just don't make sense.

'If you use reverse osmosis to reduce the alcohol, you sacrifice some of the aromas. When you concentrate, you concentrate everything - including less desirable aspects. It's better to add back water. But I'm the only one to actually talk about it. Lots of winemakers actually do it, but I think we should make it legal and bring it out in the open. It's the future of wine: we can't make Châteauneuf with 16% alcohol. We must have the courage to defend this point of view. I love to make a tasting of 2003s, adding a little water to them - they're much better.'

He's also very hot on the difference between the geological soil deep below the vines and 'pedological soil' immediately below the vine, pointing out that only about 10% of vine roots actually reach the geological soil 'that we're always on about', which is a fair point. He added, 'my personal conviction is that the complexity in a wine comes from the level of microbiological activity around the vine roots'. Hence his early adoption of biodynamic viticulture.

As for the 2012 Sélections Parcellaires, his top single-vineyard wines he was showing, as usual so much earlier than anyone else, he seemed less dogmatic than usual about the quality and character of the vintage. 'It was quite an interesting vintage that I find it difficult to take a position on. We had a cold February, a very dry March that imposed water stress. Then 18 very wet days in April, a cold June, a cold flowering that meant thinnish skins, fewer seeds and lowish tannins. There was light but regular rain in autumn. The key was not to hurry harvesting. Ripening was so slow and irregular that I even wondered whether to pick several times through the same vineyard, but I decided against this because I think different ripeness levels are a signature of terroir'.

All the wines shown were ready for bottling, apparently. He assured us they would not be filtered or fined. He is a great fan of Marsanne and likes to point out that its bitterness, often on the finish, preserves his whites for a long life even though the acidity is relatively low. He claims with Roussanne the reverse is the case. I found his 2012 white Rhônes a little less compelling than some previous vintages but I loved his Alsace Rieslings - and to judge from the trade prices we were shown, these can be great buys.

## NORTHERN RHÔNE

### **M Chapoutier, Les Granits 2012 St-Joseph** 16 Drink 2014-2018

100% Marsanne on granite. Low level of sulphur and as late as possible. They keep as much carbon dioxide as possible to protect whites. Lightly honeyed nose. Very broad almost fat palate with considerable gas dissolved in the wine. Even a slightly bitter note of coffee grounds. Not quite as luscious as some other vintages.

### **M Chapoutier, Ermitage Le Méal 2012 Hermitage** 16.5 Drink 2016-2023

Secondary sediment. Refined, stony nose. Fine 'green' notes on the nose. Muscular, almost oily finish with some alcohol.

### **M Chapoutier, Ermitage de l'Orée 2012 Hermitage** 17 Drink 2016-2026

Quaternary sediment. Broad, vegy nose. Really satisfies the back of the palate. Almost gingery. Full bodied with a satin texture though it is not massive. Neat.

### **M Chapoutier, Ermitage L'Ermite 2012 Hermitage** 17.5 Drink 2016-2030

Granite. Pre-phylloxera vineyard. Highest site and usually picked 10-14 days later than the other two Ermitages. Masses happening on the nose! Lots of interest already. And certainly a bitter note on the end.

### **M Chapoutier, Coteau de Chéry 2012 Condrieu** 16.5 Drink 2013-2015

Michel Chapoutier feels himself very lucky to be able to buy this prized land from an old school friend. Patchwork of schist and granite here. This site is granite. Energetic nose with just a hint of fermentation aromas. Very floral and entertaining. Lacks the savoury intensity of some but it's very pretty - floral rather than apricot mode.

### **M Chapoutier, Les Varonniers 2012 Crozes-Hermitage** 16.5 Drink 2016-2021

West facing but very similar granite soils to Hermitage. Mid crimson. Tight and dense and chewy. Like bone-dry cocoa powder. Grainy.

### **M Chapoutier, Les Granits 2012 St-Joseph** 17 Drink 2014-2019

More granite. South facing. Rich and sweet and much more fluid and more welcoming than Les Varonniers. Very easy to love, although there is agreeable freshness on the finish so it is not just about sweet flattering fruit.

### **M Chapoutier, Le Clos 2012 St-Joseph** 17.5 Drink 2014-2020

Bought and replanted 18 years ago. Clos near Tournon cemetery. Very savoury and direct. Pure fruit and pure open sunny north Rhône Syrah. Even smoother than Granits Rouge. Real lift and freshness on the finish after a very satisfying palate.

### **M Chapoutier, La Mordorée 2012 Côte Rôtie** 17 Drink 2015-2028

Gritty and dry on the end. Transparent and lively. Sinewy. At the junction of Côte Brune and Côte Blonde. No Viognier. Almost brutally dry on the finish. Not as magic as their Ermitages.

### **M Chapoutier, Ermitage Les Greffieux 2012 Hermitage** 18 Drink 2015-2030

Very solid and savoury on the nose. Wonderfully ripe and opulent. Fresh and open. Really very gorgeous. Real lift. Surprisingly open. Blend of roast beef and dry chocolate! Hugely rewarding.

### **M Chapoutier, Ermitage Le Méal 2012 Hermitage** 18 Drink 2020-2035

Much less nose than Greffieux. A really massive mouthful of tannin that dominates the fruit at present. Massive torso!

Quite a bit of alcohol on the end. All future here.

**M Chapoutier, Ermitage L'Ermite 2012 Hermitage** 18.5 Drink 2020-2040

Racy, sinewy, polished with refined ripe fruit underneath but very skilfully hidden. Long and juicy and so very different from Le Méal, for instance. Much less burly. Splits the difference between Méal and Greffieux. Wonderfully lifted nose. Savoury.

**M Chapoutier, Ermitage Le Pavillon 2012 Hermitage** 18.5 Drink 2020-2040

Dark crimson. Pavillon is stronger than L'Ermite but there is more minerality on L'Ermite. A bit richer and less precise than L'Ermite. Big and rich. Then grainy tannins. Sweet finish.

## SOUTHERN RHÔNE

**M Chapoutier, Croix de Bois 2012 Châteauneuf-du-Pape** 16.5 Drink 2014-2020

Four hectares of vines planted in 1910. Mid cherry red. Vegy, rich, very flattering nose with ripe red sweet fruit on the palate that comes to a pretty, neat conclusion. Really quite open and friendly.

**M Chapoutier, Barbe Rac 2012 Châteauneuf-du-Pape** 17 Drink 2018-2026

Four hectares of vines planted in 1901 and 1902. Dark crimson and briary. Masses of tannin on the end. Sweet, spicy fruit. Much, much more youthful than the Croix de Bois. Almost grating tannins at the moment.

## ALSACE

**Schieferkopf Par Michel Chapoutier, Lieu-Dit Berg Riesling 2012 Alsace** 18 Drink 2013-2020

Cambrian soils (rare though in Heathcote too). Clay. Great race and depth with lime and masses of both fruit and minerals. Masses of extract on the palate distracts from the high acidity. Very long and rich yet it finishes dry. Very exciting.

**Schieferkopf Par Michel Chapoutier, Lieu-Dit Fels Riesling 2012 Alsace** 17 Drink 2015-2025

Less aromatic than the Berg bottling – a bit fatter and softer. Some slight bitterness on the finish. Still quite chewy on the end. Very slightly dull on the end. More expensive than the other two bottlings because it is more difficult to work.

**Schieferkopf Par Michel Chapoutier, Lieu-Dit Buehl Riesling 2012 Alsace** 17.5 Drink 2016-2030

Lowest site so the topsoils are washed down. Big and bold with some sweetness in the background. Very concentrated. Some bitterness and impressive breadth. Muscular.