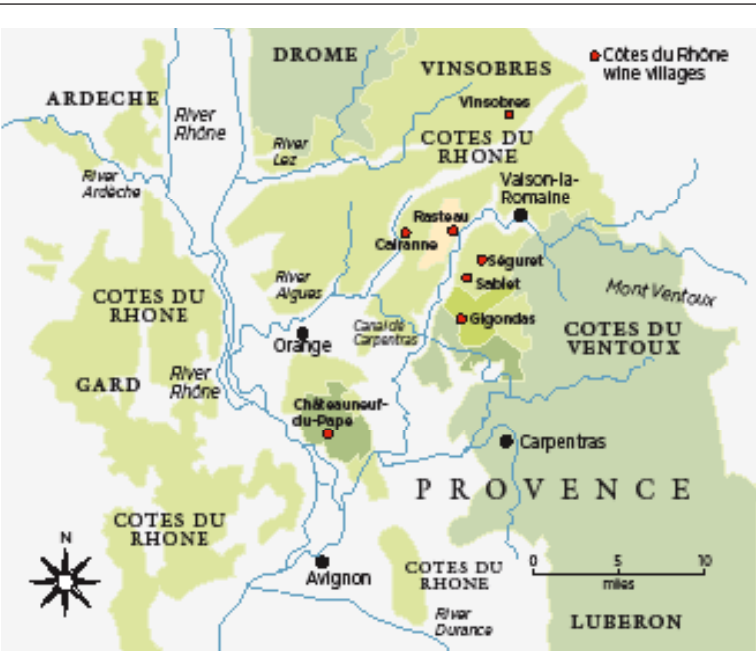




Above: the cellars of Château de Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Top: the jagged peaks of the Dentelles de Montmirail

Left: the southern Rhône is home to several picturesque wine villages, as here in Séguret



Six of the best wine estates to visit

- 1** Château de Beaucastel
CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE

The Perrin family has long ensured that Beaucastel maintains a reputation as lofty and imposing as its cathedral-like cellar. Visits by appointment only. www.beaucastel.com
- 2** Domaine de Beurenard
CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE & RASTEAU

Self-guided tours at the Châteauneuf base and winegrower's museum in Rasteau. A seventh-generation estate run by brothers Daniel and Frédéric Coulon, now biodynamic. www.beaurenard.fr
- 3** Domaine du Grapillon d'Or
GIGONDAS

A small family estate with polished, well-priced wine. Catch energetic, English-speaking winemaker Céline Chauvet in the cosy tasting room. www.domainedugrapillondor.com
- 4** Domaine de Mourchon
SEGURET

Dramatic views, a bijou winery and an intriguing story alongside reasonable wines. A dynamic family enterprise created by Walter McKinlay also makes estate olive oil, jams... even face cream. www.domainedemourchon.com
- 5** Château Pesquie
MORMOIRON

Flagship of the Ventoux appellation, run by the Chaudière family for over 30 years. Taste wines in an art-filled tasting room and enjoy the wine-related activities. www.chateapesquie.com
- 6** Domaine de la Citadelle
MÉNARBES

Former film producer Yves Rousset-Rouard and son Alexis have made La Citadelle the Luberon's foremost estate. Visit the museum of 1,200 corkscrews. www.domaine-citadelle.com



The *Decanter* travel guide to
Southern Rhône

Had enough of the UK winter? Mary Dowey suggests a visit to the dramatically rugged landscapes of the southern Rhône, beautiful at any time of year

FACT FILE
Planted area: 48,000 hectares
Main grape varieties
White: Clairette, Grenache Blanc, Bourboulenc, Viognier, Roussanne, Marsanne
Red: Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre
Main soil types: Galets (large, round stones), sand, clay, limestone

SPRING IS ARGUABLY the loveliest time of year to explore the Southern Rhône. It arrives ridiculously early, dusting the almond trees with delicate white blossom which stands out against the silver-grey foliage of the olives and the dark, bare stumps of the vines. A mesmerising study in black-and-white – except that the sky, scoured of clouds, is an even more vivid blue than in July. Summer is equally glorious, though – after all,

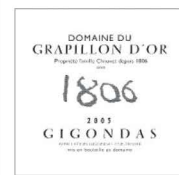
this vast wine region lies within Provence – a place whose true identity unfolds in the heat of the sun. Sunflowers, lavender, screeching cicadas, a glass of rosé on a shaded terrace with views across vineyards to the sloping mass of Mont Ventoux or the jagged peaks of the Dentelles de Montmirail... Both are good places to escape the heat – as, for that matter, are wine cellars. Autumn? Wine villages like Gigondas, Rasteau, Cairanne, Séguret and Sablet look their finest, their mellow stone houses cast in a golden light; their vineyards a blaze of bonfire colours. But the harvest, going full blast through September into October, makes exhausted producers pray that visitors will keep away. Better to wait a month or two. Even in winter, when woodsmoke scents the crisp air, the landscape is still ravishing and the sun still shines.

‘300 days of sunshine a year make this red wine country; Grenache the most important’

Together with Châteauneuf-du-Pape, well-known villages like those just mentioned lie at the heart of the Côtes du Rhône in a rhombus-shaped area stretched towards Orange, Avignon, Carpentras and Vaison-la-Romaine at the corners. This means that even in a couple of days it's easy to get to grips with the essentials, visit a variety of key estates and soak up this old Roman region's soul. Terroir trademark But if time allows, venture further – some of the most rewarding (and reasonably priced) wines today come from the outer fringe. Whether you travel east to the Ventoux, south-east to the Luberon, west to the Gard, north-west to the Ardèche or straight north to around Vinsobres, first-rate producers will stud the route.

Wine styles vary according to geography, naturally. But 300 days of sunshine a year make this mainly red wine country, with heat-loving Grenache the most important grape by far. Its heady, lavish nature – tending sometimes towards jamminess and high alcohol – needs the tempering effects of Syrah and Mourvèdre (and sometimes other grapes in minor roles) for colour, body and staying power. Very old Grenache and Mourvèdre vines are highly prized here for the concentrated flavours in their sparse grapes. We've all seen pictures of them basking in the heat radiated back from stones the size of giant baked potatoes in the vineyards of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. But these galets are strewn

How to get there
By plane to Nîmes, Marseille or Avignon (flight time 1.5–2 hours from various UK airports), then a 20- to 35-minute drive to the vineyards
By fast train (TGV) to Avignon from London St Pancras (about 6 hours)



Above: these producers in (from top) Mornoliron, Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas are worth visiting (see box, p99)

‘If any other part of France can offer a wider array of fresh produce, I’d like to hear about it’

over a much wider area than that occupied by the region’s premier appellation. They are the southern Rhône’s terroir trademark, stamped on opulent, spicy, warming wines even if sand, clay and limestone also play their part.

It’s not an all-red story, though. If limited in number, the whites are more impressive than ever – some made from a host of grapes; some focused on a single variety (Roussanne especially); all marked by surprising freshness and minerality. There are more good rosés than you’d get through in half a lifetime of holidays – from serious, rather steeply priced Tavel down to simple charmers. Oh, and sweet wines, too – *vins doux naturels* like Muscat de Beaumes de Venise (try it with blue cheese as well as dessert) and Rasteau (the sweet red version is heaven with dark chocolate).

Fresh and wild

Which brings us to food – perhaps the most powerful lure of all. If any other part of France can offer a wider array of fresh produce, I’d like to hear about it. Every market stall piled with strawberries, cherries, apricots, peaches, nectarines, melons, figs, almonds and olives, screams the message that this is the fruit bowl of France – and the vegetable rack too, moving from asparagus in spring to a dozen kinds of mushrooms in autumn, with aubergines, peppers, pink garlic and flavour-packed tomatoes of every shape, size and colour in between. (This is no



Left: the landscape around Domaine de Mourchon in Séguret and in Gigondas (top left) makes the southern Rhône a paradise for photographers

exaggeration: a Carpentras grower cultivates 50 varieties of the fruit.)

Tasty Mediterranean cuisine, using superb olive oil – that’s what to expect, with vegetables, fish, lamb and duck more prominent than pork or beef. Local specialities include unctuous black olive tapenade, the crispy savoury bread known as *fougasse*, delicious goat’s cheeses to drizzle with lavender honey, almond-rich nougat and – ritziest of all – black winter truffles.

Cottoning on to the fact that hunger may strike visitors at any time, some informal restaurants are now open all day – part of the slow embrace of wine tourism which sees more producers opening their doors and offering activities like vineyard cycle rides, walks and picnics. If only all the tourist offices would stay open longer too... especially now that they are packed with useful information, including details of 12 suggested wine routes. But then nothing’s perfect. Although the southern Rhône certainly comes close... **D**

MARY DOWEY is a wine, food and travel writer who has a home in the southern Rhône. For more on hotels, restaurants, wine and food producers, shops and markets in the region, see her website www.provencefoodandwine.com



Above: the seasonal truffle menus are famous at Restaurant Christian Etienne in Avignon

Southern Rhône

WHERE TO STAY, SHOP, EAT AND RELAX
Roman ruins, artisanal food, charming B&Bs and gourmet restaurants

HOTELS & RESTAURANTS Auberge du Vin



Wine and Spirit Education Trust-accredited wine educator Linda Field’s restored farmhouse is just outside Carpentras, with views across vines to Mont Ventoux. Choose between B&B and gites. www.aubergeduvin.com

Hotel Crillon Le Brave

A cluster of houses in a hilltop village near Mont Ventoux, Crillon is luxurious yet unpretentious, with unique views. Smart décor, decent food and an inspiring wine list. www.crillonlebrave.com

Les Florets

After walking in the Dentelles, collapse afterwards into Les Florets, the Bernard family’s attractive hotel-restaurant. Provençal food executed with panache. www.hotel-lesflorets.com

Le Clos des Grenadiers

Florence Paumel runs one of the loveliest B&Bs in Châteauneuf-du-Pape and also represents the

seventh generation at the Mourre du Tendre estate. There are two guest rooms, each with a private terrace. www.closdesgrenadiers.fr

Restaurant Christian Etienne

Bang in the centre of Avignon by the Palais des Papes. Christian Etienne’s culinary skill makes this a memorable place, famous for seasonal truffle and tomato menus. www.christian-etienne.fr

Le Grand Pré

Roaix may seem an unlikely spot for a Michelin-starred restaurant, but Raoul Reichrath cooks innovative food and his wife Flora is a wizard with wines. There’s also a new bistro beside the main restaurant. www.legrandpre.com

Le Dolium



The Beaumes-de-Venise wine co-op houses this fab modern restaurant. Pascal and Claire Poulain give Provençal cooking an engaging twist. Prices aren’t silly either. www.dolium-restaurant.com

SHOPS

Fromagerie du Comtat



Named best cheese specialist in France in 2009, Claudine Vigier in Carpentras supplies top restaurants, sourcing her wares directly from

artisan producers. Tastings are held for groups. **+33 (0)4 90 60 00 17**

Jef Challier

Besides creating superb chocolates in 32 fascinating flavours, wine enthusiast Jef Challier in Valréas matches different styles to local wines. He also makes extraordinary ice creams: black olive or truffle, anyone? **+33 (0)4 90 35 05 22**

Le Vin Devant Soi

A big addition to Avignon. Stéphane Gilbert and Laurent Mersier work with passionate producers and an Enomatic machine makes 32 wines available to taste for a small charge. www.levindevantsoi.fr

TOURIST TRAIL Pont du Gard & other Roman masterpieces



The massive first-century aqueduct near Remoulins is the best-known of various awe-inspiring Roman ruins. Equally worthwhile: the amphitheatre and Maison Carrée in Nîmes; theatre and triumphal arch in Orange.

Palais des Papes

The fortress-like Avignon palace where the popes lived in the 14th century may be spartan inside but it’s worth visiting to glimpse the power of the medieval papacy.

Dentelles de Montmirail

Whether a serious hiker or Sunday stroller, gaze upon vine-carpeted valleys from up in the craggy Dentelles. Above Gigondas, access is easy, with a choice of marked trails.

For more information, visit www.provenceguide.com and www.rhone-wines-tourism.com