

THE *DECANTER* TRAVEL GUIDE TO

# Northern Rhône

Eight crus producing different styles of wine make this dramatic and easily navigable region a real tourism drawcard – especially with an influx of bars, restaurants and boutique hotels and wine shops. Matt Walls takes a trip

For a region with such dramatic scenery, the northern Rhône has been relatively slow to develop its wine tourism – as recently as 10 years ago it could still feel rather indifferent to the visiting wine lover. But there are a number of new initiatives now underway to address this, and the town of Tain L'Hermitage has spruced itself up considerably. The Rhône produces Syrah with unequalled range, complexity and emotional impact and there has never been a better time to visit its birthplace.

The Rhône is France's second largest appellation contrôlée wine region, but the northern Rhône makes less than 5% of Rhône Valley wines. It's easier to understand than the southern Rhône, with just eight crus to get to know. And just as the Rhône as a whole can usefully be split into a northern and southern area, so can the northern Rhône itself.

The southern section around the towns of Tain L'Hermitage and Tournon contains Hermitage and Crozes-Hermitage on the right bank, Cornas and St-Péray on the left. The northern section contains Côte-Rôtie, Condrieu and Château-Grillet. The long, thin appellation of St-Joseph runs up the left bank, connecting the two. The northern and southern zones make distinctly different styles of wine, so visit both to see how they differ.

You can cover the 50km that separates these two poles in less than an hour if you take the A7 motorway, but choose the sedate RN86 instead. The journey takes an extra 30 minutes, but you pass the stunning vineyards of St-Joseph. The best terroirs are plain to see; steep granite outcrops thrown suddenly skywards from the river, each vine clinging on for dear life to a single wooden stake. Stop at a farmer's fruit stall along the way to buy a tray of tender Bergeron apricots.

Each of these eight crus has its own >



## FACT FILE

**Planted area** 3,712ha

**Average yield** 40hl/ha

**Main grapes**

*Red:* Syrah

*White:* Viognier,

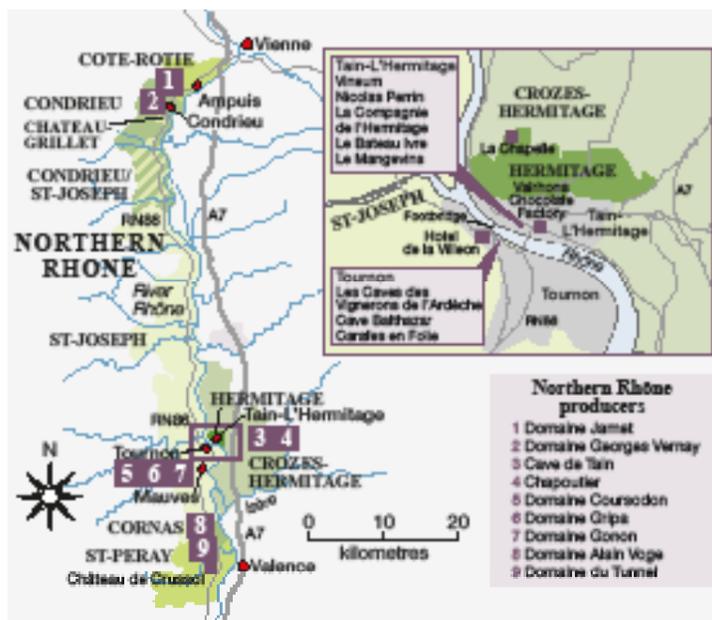
Marsanne, Roussanne

**Total production, 2015**

149,556hl

**Further info**

[www.rhone-wines.com](http://www.rhone-wines.com)



Maps: Maggie Nelson



Above: the view above Tournon looking over the Rhône river to Tain L'Hermitage and the famed hill

## MY PERFECT DAY IN TAIN L'HERMITAGE & TOURNON

### MORNING

After a relaxing Friday night in the elegant comforts of Hôtel de la Villeon\* ([www.hoteldelavilleon.com](http://www.hoteldelavilleon.com)) in Tournon, pay a visit to the Saturday food market to pick up a few local delicacies. Wander down to the riverfront via La Grande Rue and stop to browse in Les Caves des Vignerons de l'Ardèche (58 quai Farconnet, +33 4 75 08 08 29) and Cave Balthazar ([www.labalthazar.fr](http://www.labalthazar.fr)).

### LUNCH

Cross the river to Tain via the passerelle footbridge for a light lunch at Vineum. Its terrace overlooks the hill of Hermitage; there's no better place to treat yourself to a mature vintage of La Chapelle. Pick up some Hermitage to take home from the Nicolas Perrin boutique next door ([www.maison-nicolas-perrin.com](http://www.maison-nicolas-perrin.com)) and La

Compagnie de l'Hermitage ([www.hermite.fr](http://www.hermite.fr)) across the square.

### AFTERNOON

A pilgrimage to the Chapelle itself on top of the hill of Hermitage is a must. You'll see the extraordinary terroir for yourself and the views over the river to Tournon are majestic. Tain happens to be the home of the Valrhona chocolate factory ([www.valrhona.com](http://www.valrhona.com)), and no visit is complete without a visit to its Cité du Chocolat visitor centre and shop.

### EVENING

Pop back to the hotel to drop off your haul of goodies, then it's a 10-minute walk back to Tain for dinner; stop on the way for a quick glass at Carafes en Folie ([www.carafes-en-folie.com](http://www.carafes-en-folie.com)) in Tournon or Le Bateau Ivre in Tain (14 rue Joseph Peala,



La Chapelle on Hermitage hill

+33 6 48 13 56 34). For an evening meal, it has to be Le Mangevins\* (7 rue des Herbes, +33 4 75 08 00 79). It's run by a husband-and-wife team. Keiko's cooking has a refreshing sense of lightness and clarity, and Vincent is a welcoming host with a detailed knowledge of the local wine scene.

For more details on places marked with an asterisk (\*), turn to p131

Photographs: Per Karlsson - BKWine.com/Alamy Stock Photo; Mick Rock/Cephas



**Above: the ruined Château de Crussol in St-Péray, with great views over the vines**

**Right: M Chapoutier's Le Pavillon vineyard in Hermitage, and the stone house that has given the plot its name**



## GETTING THERE

*Grenoble Isère Airport is an hour's drive from both Ampuis and Tain L'Hermitage. Lyon St-Exupéry Airport is an hour's drive from Ampuis and 90 minutes' from Tain.*

distinct character and although big in reputation, most are small in area – Côte-Rôtie covers 291 hectares and Hermitage just 136ha. When you consider that Château Lafite-Rothschild in Bordeaux has 110ha under vine, this puts things into perspective.

## Tain L'Hermitage & Tournon

The majestic hill of Hermitage, facing due south at a kink in the Rhône, is so perfect a site it looks as if it was positioned there from above by some wine-loving deity. The town of Tain L'Hermitage sits at its base. It's surprising that a town connected to such a historic wine has remained so stubbornly unlovely for so long.

But things are changing, with more and more bars, restaurants and wine shops opening their doors. Exemplary co-operative Cave de Tain now has a wine tourism arm, Terre de Syrah ([www.vin-et-sens.com](http://www.vin-et-sens.com)), that organises tours and tastings. Paul Jaboulet Ainé has recently opened Vineum ([www.jaboulet.com](http://www.jaboulet.com)), a dependable bistrot-boutique. And Delas is opening a new €5m facility and visitor centre in 2017.

Tain is umbilically connected to the town of Tournon by bridge over the river. Tournon is slightly larger and prettier than Tain, but either makes a good base to explore Hermitage, Crozes-Hermitage and beyond. Chapoutier's boutique in Tain ([www.chapoutier.com](http://www.chapoutier.com)) is a good place to start.

## Cornas and St-Péray

The thrilling white wine appellation of St-Péray is a picturesque 30-minute drive from Tain. Once famous for its sparkling wines, the local Marsanne and Roussanne grapes are now more commonly destined for still wines.

Domaine du Tunnel makes wonderfully modern expressions of St-Péray and Cornas, and it has a small shop where you can taste and buy (20, rue de la République, +33 4 75 80 04 66). Drive or easily walk up to the ruined

Château de Crussol to get an instructive view of the vineyards.

You'll drive through the quiet village of Cornas on the way, home to some of the Rhône's most gruff, structured Syrahs. Pay a visit to Domaine Alain Voge, which makes excellent traditional wines and organises tours of the vineyards for groups ([www.alain-voge.com](http://www.alain-voge.com)). On your way back, go via the little village of Mauves, home to many of the big names of St-Joseph, such as Domaines Coursodon, Grippa and Gonon.

## Condrieu and Côte-Rôtie

At 50km north of Tain, it's not surprising the Syrahs of the northern section taste very different; more sylvan, spicy and floral in character. The wines of Domaine Jamet speak this northern dialect with a spellbinding fluency ([www.cote-rotie-jamet.com](http://www.cote-rotie-jamet.com)).

Neighbouring white appellation Condrieu produces a peerless expression of Viognier that can charm even those who usually avoid this explosively aromatic grape. The engaging Paul Amsellem of leading light Domaine Georges Vernay ([www.domaine-georges-vernay.fr](http://www.domaine-georges-vernay.fr)) never fails to bring the appellation alive. Drive to the top of the vineyards or cross the bridge at Condrieu to get a better view of the breathtaking terroir.

Most good producers are small, family



**Above: Paul Amsellem and Christine Vernay from Domaine Georges Vernay in Condrieu**

affairs, so it's always worth calling to organise an appointment before visiting. The best time to go is May to July, when you're likely to get good weather. In August many producers are on holiday, and in September they'll be concentrating on harvest. **D**

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

## YOUR NORTHERN RHONE ADDRESS BOOK



**Le Bistrot de Serine**

## HOTELS

### Hôtel de la Villeon

A stylish, refined, newly renovated 18th-century townhouse in the centre of Tournon. Attractive terraced gardens with views of Hermitage. [www.hoteldelavilleon.com](http://www.hoteldelavilleon.com)

### Hôtel Les 2 Coteaux

A pleasant, unpretentious hotel on the Rhône in the heart of Tain. Choose from views over Hermitage or rooms that open out over the river. [www.hotel-les-2-coteaux-26.com](http://www.hotel-les-2-coteaux-26.com)

### Dom de Clairefontaine

Near Condrieu. Quirky, characterful rooms in the original house, or larger, more modern rooms in the newer building. Both share the exquisite setting and gardens. Top restaurant. [www.domaine-de-clairefontaine.fr](http://www.domaine-de-clairefontaine.fr)

### Camping Ferme Le Simondon

Excellent campsite with gites high on the Ardèche plateau with amazing views over the Rhône Valley to Mont Blanc. Also has a swimming pool and restaurant. [www.restaurant-gite-camping-simondon.fr](http://www.restaurant-gite-camping-simondon.fr)

## RESTAURANTS

### Le Mangevins

Excellent restaurant run by husband and wife Vincent and Keiko Dollat. Well-sourced ingredients precisely prepared and no unnecessary frills. Fabulous wine list. 7 rue des Herbes, Tain L'Hermitage +33 4 75 08 00 79

### Auberge du Père Monnet

Good cooking on the river with a

shaded terrace. They own the wine shop next-door, Le Piège à Bouchons, which focuses on small producers and minimal intervention wines. 3 Place Petit Puits, La Roche de Glun +33 4 75 84 57 80

### Le Bistrot de Serine

Reliable, friendly bistrot and wine shop in the middle of Ampuis, with a good list of Côte-Rôtie and Condrieu. Shady garden at the rear. [www.bistrotdeserine.com](http://www.bistrotdeserine.com)

### La Ruche

An impressive new restaurant in St-Péray serving modern French dishes with unforced creativity. Excellent wine list concentrating on Cornas and St-Péray. [www.laruche-saintperay.com](http://www.laruche-saintperay.com)

### Beau Rivage

The dining room and terrace of this hotel restaurant are right on the river, making this an attractive lunch option when exploring Condrieu. [www.hotel-beaurivage.com](http://www.hotel-beaurivage.com)

### Le Quai

Smart, bustling riverside restaurant in Tain owned by local chef Michel Chabran. Well executed brasserie classics. [www.michelchabran.com/](http://www.michelchabran.com/) [le-quai-tain-l-hermitage](http://le-quai-tain-l-hermitage)

## SHOPS

### Cave aux Cinq Sens

Good-sized wine shop with all the classic names from the Rhône (and more). The setting is unromantic but the range is good. [www.caveauxcinqsens.com](http://www.caveauxcinqsens.com)