

CHAVE HERMITAGE

ROBERSON WINE

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Tucked away in the tiny village of Mauves is one of the world's finest producers, with a history of vinifying Rhône wines that stretches back to 1481 and a track record for quality that is second to none. In a Decanter magazine article a few years ago, James Lawther MW describes JL Chave as *"arguably one of France's finest estates"* - as far as I'm concerned this is wrong. How could there possibly be an argument?

Originally, the Chave family were residents and vigneron in the appellation of St Joseph (where they have recently expanded their landholdings), but after a few hundred years the onset of phylloxera forced the family to supplement their earnings by trading fruit. In the process of doing this, the Chaves moved down to the village of Mauves where they established the cellars that are still used to this day. It was not long after relocating to Mauves that they bought their first plot of vines on the hill of Hermitage (just over the river), something that has been added to over the years and now stands at 15 hectares spread across 9 lieux-dits.

Today the domaine is run by Jean-Louis (a family tradition means that every second generation of Chaves name their first son Jean-Louis), although his recently retired father Gérard is still a presence at the winery. Although their respect for traditional methods is absolute, this is not a domaine that is trapped in a time warp. Jean-Louis studied business (he has an MBA) and winemaking (at UC Davis) in California and has a very global outlook - it's just that he agrees with his father that, for the most part, the traditional way of working is best although there have been developments in the way they work since JL joined his father in the winery.

While the viticulture is not certified as organic, the Chaves follow organic principles and in recent years this has become increasingly important at the domaine. During the 1980s the family were one of many that clubbed together to hire a helicopter for the purposes of spraying treatments on Hermitage, but this was stopped years ago. Jean-Louis Chave says *"The helicopter was great in the 1980s when there was a dearth of labour and economies of scale had to be strictly imposed but we now have the ability to treat independently which I consider more efficient and closer to our organic convictions"*, so the domaine is now largely worked by hand in a traditional manner. Harvest is usually among the latest in the appellation (*"only after the chestnuts start to fall"*) and all of their plots are vinified separately following fermentation in a combination of wooden and stainless steel tanks. After about a year, Gérard and JL set about the task of perfecting their blend, a painstaking process that will render some of what they produce superfluous to their requirements for the estate Hermitage. The final assemblage is then moved into barrel for anywhere from 14-24 months depending on the vintage, with a vast majority of old wood used (no more than 10% will be new). Throughout the élevage the application of sulphur is judicious and there is only ever limited fining done (if at all) as the Chaves are very conscious of minimising their interventions. Filtration is a big no-no and once the wine goes into bottle, both the red and the white will be fit to age and improve for decades. The Hermitage Rouge is always 100% Syrah, while the final blend of the white can vary but it is usually around 80% Marsanne and 20% Rousanne. The only difference with the vinification of the Hermitage Blanc is that fermentation takes place in (old) barrels.

Although we are not tasting either of them tonight, there are two other Hermitages in the Chave portfolio. Cuvée Cathelin is only made in the very best vintages and is usually taken from a specific parcel in Les Bressards. The other difference between Cathelin and the regular bottling is that it is aged in 100% new oak and it is so rare that it has become incredibly expensive, despite the Chaves insistence that it is intrinsically no better than the regular bottling. It started as an experiment introduced by JL in 1990 and the reason it is only made in top vintages is that only then do the Chaves feel the wine can handle all of that new wood. The other micro-cuvée is a sweet white 'Vin de Paille' that is made by leaving Marsanne and Roussanne to raisin on straw mats for 60 days after the harvest. The resulting wine is unctuous and incredibly complex.

While the Hermitages of Jaboulet and Chapoutier (not to mention other respected names like Marc Sorrel or Bernard Faurie) are highly sought after, it is the wines of Domaine Jean-Louis Chave that are often the most exciting to Rhône enthusiasts. Superb in both colours, these are truly artisanal wines of the very highest order.

Hermitage was, according to some historians, the first vineyard to be planted in the Rhône Valley (by the Greeks back in 600BC) and is without question one of the world's most important, impressive and imposing wine making terroirs. 18 south facing lieux-dits make a total of 130ha in size, so the entire appellation is only slightly larger than Château Lafite. Historically, Hermitage has always enjoyed an exalted reputation and even in Roman times (when the town of Tain was known as Tegna) it was held in high regard. The wine's legendary concentration led to it being blended into the Bordeaux of many a top château during the 18th century, when some of the region's most prized wines were advertised as being 'Hermitaged'.

The hill is historically a last vestige of the Massif Central, although it is the only part of the range that is on the eastern side of the river. Over thousands of years the river cut back through the hill, creating the valley as we see it today. It is this geological lineage that is responsible for the heavily granitic soils, with the western part of the hill having particularly high granite content and therefore being the home of the lieux-dits (like Bessards and Greffieux) that give the sturdiest expressions of Hermitage wines. Once you reach the eastern vineyards like La Croix, the soil is full of glacial deposits with lots of stones and high clay content. The various sites are distinctly different, both in terms of their soil make-up and the average temperature. It is for this reason that most producers, with Chave an arch-example, will blend wines from different parcels in order to find a harmonious balance. Michel Chapoutier has gained critical acclaim for his single vineyard bottlings from Le Meal, L'Ermite and Le Pavillon (from Les Bessards).