



STAFF TRAINING MODULE

## *Rhone Valley*

---

Southern France's Rhône Valley is one of the most prominent areas for red wine production in the country. Over 100 million gallons of wine are produced in the region annually, spanning the spectrum of quality from the inexpensive bistro fare of Côtes-du-Rhône to the powerful and emblematic wines of appellations like Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Côte-Rôtie, and Hermitage.





## The Region

In total, more than two dozen AOCs lie along the Rhône river's path, but they may be conveniently grouped into two categories: the appellations of the Southern Rhône and those of the North. The two regions produce red wines that are distinct from one another, but the appellations within each region generally fall into a similar profile of style. White wines from either region are rare; collectively, 95% of the valley's vineyards are planted with red varieties.

From its headwaters in Switzerland, the Rhône river flows southward through France toward the Mediterranean coastline; the waterway has been an important vein of trade for over two millennia, and today it connects the cities of Lyon, Vienne, Valence and Avignon with the sea. Winemaking along the Rhône river has an equally long history, dating to the era of the Roman Empire: Pliny the Elder's description of the resin-flavored *vinum picatum* produced in the hillsides near Vienne is preserved in the writer's *Natural History*. Over a thousand years later, Pope Clement V moved the Roman Catholic papal seat from Rome to Avignon, and legend suggests that a knight returning from the Crusades built a small chapel on hill overlooking the river. The "Castle of the Popes" and the small pilgrim's chapel today stand as respective and enduring symbols for two of the Rhône Valley's greatest wines, Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Hermitage.



## The Grapes

**Syrah** is the dominant red grape of the Northern Rhône Valley, and it is used as a minor blending component in the red wines of the Southern Rhône Valley. Typically, Syrah varietal wines are characterized by savory pepper, smoke, grilled meat, olive, and lavender aromas; they often show bitter black and raspberry fruits, fresh acidity, and silky tannins. The wines are medium-full bodied, and producers may or may not include new oak barrels in the production process. Traditionally, the overtly sweet, toasty flavors of new oak would be out of place in the Rhône Valley.

**Grenache** is the chief red grape of the Southern Rhône Valley, and it is a majority component in most of the blended red wines of the area. It is rarely encountered in the Northern Rhône. Grenache ripens easily; it produces heady wines with ripe to dried red fruit characteristics, herbal tones that mimic the region's scrub of wild thyme and rosemary, and feral, rustic notes of leather and saddle. Grenache is higher in alcohol, and lower in tannin and tartness than Syrah. Like Syrah, producers rarely use new oak for Grenache, aging it in large old oak or cement vessels instead.

**Viognier** is aromatically intense, floral, peachy, and luxurious on the palate. These wines may see a small percentage of new oak, but too much wood overwhelms the grape's exotic profile.

**Marsanne and Roussanne** often blended, deliver medium- to full-bodied, waxy-textured white wines with aromas reminiscent of apricot, almond, and parsnip.

**Grenache Blanc** is the white variant of Grenache and a usual component in white blends of the Southern Rhône. Grenache Blanc is prone to flavors of oxidation: nut and bruised apple.



## *Northern Rhône Valley*

**The Northern Rhône Valley** is dwarfed by its neighbor to the south in terms of sheer size of production. Defined growing areas are typically much smaller in the north, and a substantial number of the region's better vineyards are planted on steep, terraced granite hillsides rising sharply from the river valley below

While the Southern Rhône Valley enjoys a fully Mediterranean climate, the Northern Rhône Valley experiences a more continental climate marked by drastic seasonal changes and a shorter growing season. Nonetheless, it still bears a warmer climate than Bordeaux or Burgundy, and the region's winegrowers can successfully cultivate the indigenous Syrah grape. All Northern Rhône reds are produced from Syrah; however, some appellations allow a small percentage of white grapes to be included in the cuvée.





## *Major Northern Rhône AOCs*

### *Hermitage*

Long considered the region's premier AOC, the southwest-facing hill of Hermitage rises above the town of Tain l'Hermitage and is dominated by the holdings of larger firms like M. Chapoutier and Paul Jaboulet Aine. White and red wine are produced.

### *Crozes-Hermitage*

As the Northern Rhône's largest and most ordinary appellation, Crozes-Hermitage includes flatter land flanking the hill of Hermitage. White and red wine are produced.

### *Côte-Rôtie*

On the "roasted slope" just south of Vienne, Syrah may be co-fermented with a small amount of the white Viognier grape. E. Guigal is the AOC's most famous name. Red wine only.



### *Saint-Joseph*

Wines of variable quality, from the routine to the sublime, emerge from this larger AOC on the western bank of the river. Along with Crozes-Hermitage, St-Joseph is considered a good introduction to the region, and it may be an excellent value.

### *Cornas*

Once considered backward and rustic, this small appellation is producing many exciting, tiny production wines. The wines must be 100% Syrah. Red wine only.

### *Condrieu*

White wines from the Viognier grape. Château Grillet is a monopole AOC of only 4 hectares located entirely within the confines of Condrieu.



# Northern Rhône

## GUILD OF SOMMELIERS

Côte-Rôtie  
Condrieu ● Château Grillet

- Côte-Rôtie
- Condrieu
- St-Joseph
- Crozes-Hermitage
- Hermitage
- Cornas
- St-Péray
- Clairette de Die
- Châtillon-en-Diois

St-Joseph

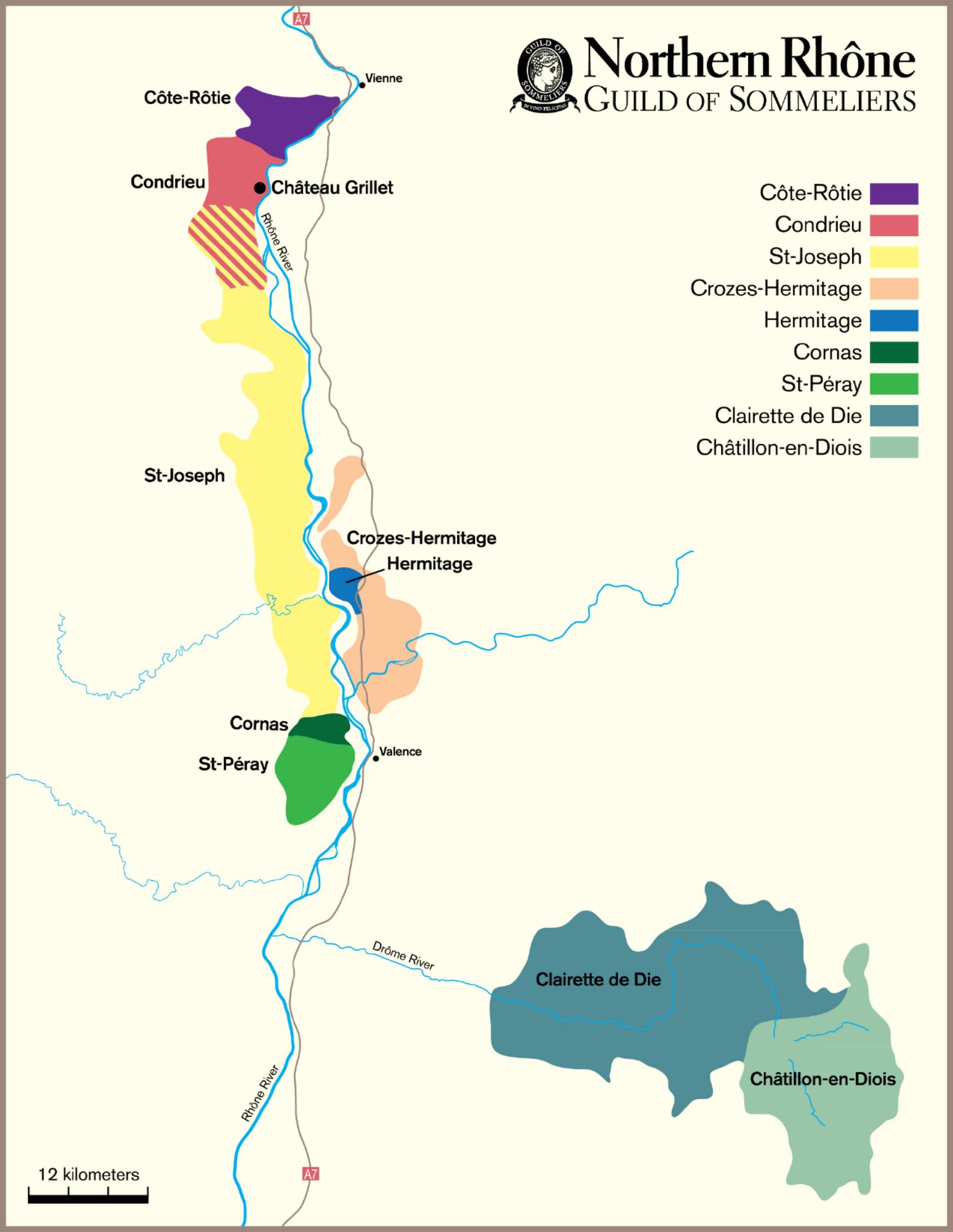
Crozes-Hermitage  
Hermitage

Cornas  
St-Péray ● Valence

Clairette de Die

Châtillon-en-Diois

12 kilometers





## *Southern Rhône Valley*

As the Rhône river passes Montélimar, the valley flattens and widens. The Southern Rhône Valley is windswept, arid, and warm; it is covered with large swaths of vineyard and garrigue—a Mediterranean scrub of lavender, rosemary, thyme, and other shrubbery.

The Southern Rhône Valley produces nearly 95% of the entire region's wines, and nearly all of it is red. Blends are common, and Grenache is usually the dominant component. Basic examples of the style are produced as Côtes du Rhône AOC, the region's largest appellation. Good quality examples may carry the name of an AOC like Gigondas or Vacqueyras; however, the Southern Rhône's premier appellation is Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The AOC, which takes its name from a castle constructed by Pope John XXII in the early 14th century, authorizes over a dozen red and white varieties for its wines, but in practice most reds from the appellation are composed of Grenache, with lesser amounts of Mourvèdre, Syrah, Counoise and Cinsault.

In addition to red and white wine, the Southern Rhône Valley produces rosés and fortified wines from Muscat and Grenache.

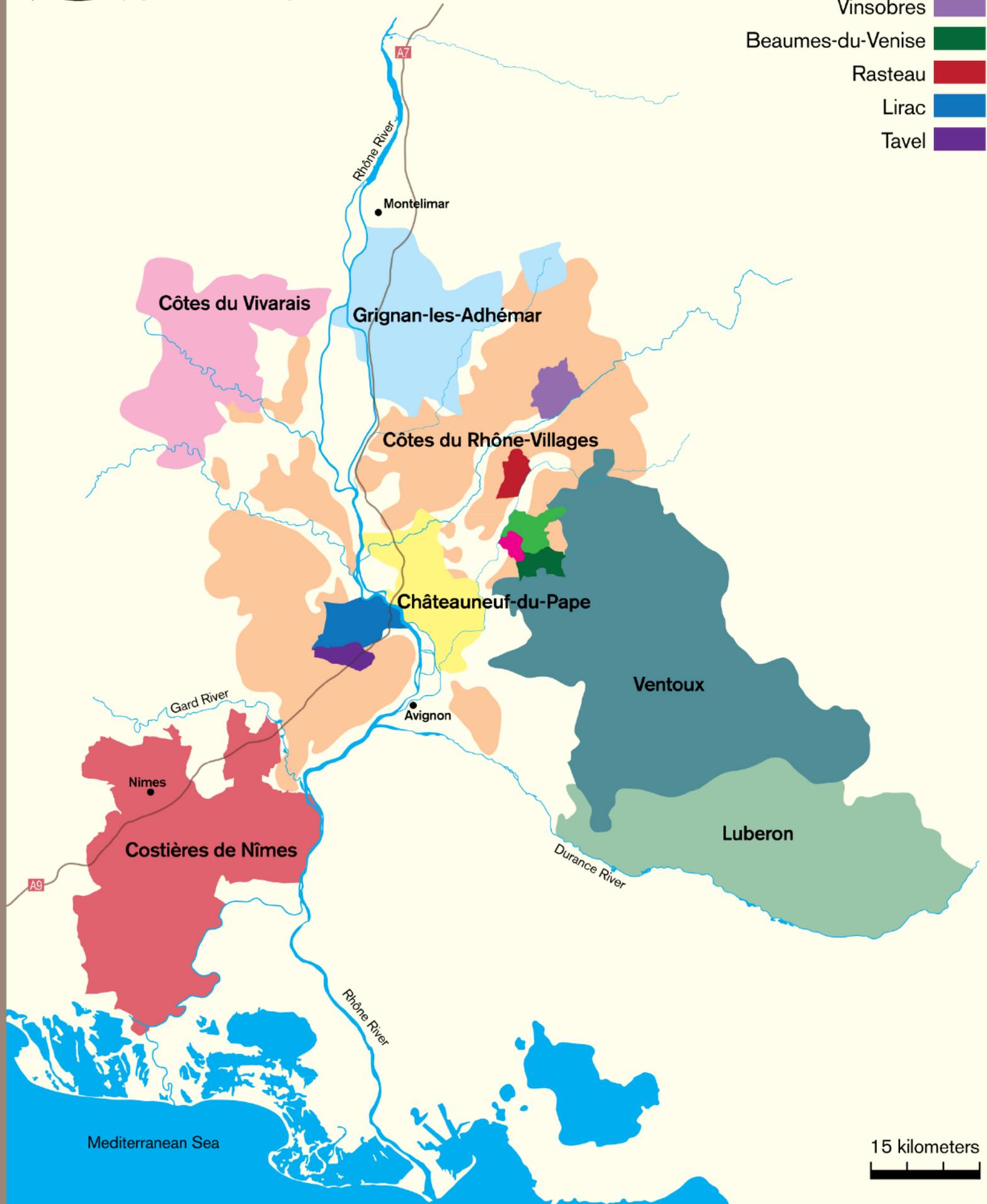




# Southern Rhône

## GUILD OF SOMMELIERS

- Gigondas
- Vacqueyras
- Vinsobres
- Beaumes-du-Venise
- Rasteau
- Lirac
- Tavel





## *Major Southern Rhône AOCs*

### *Côtes du Rhône*

Basic quality wines produced throughout the Rhône Valley. Most wines in this category are produced in the Southern Rhône. Red, White and Rosé Wines

### *Côtes du Rhône-Villages*

Superior wines from a delimited area within the larger Côtes du Rhône boundaries. Producers in 17 villages within this AOC may append the village name to the AOC on the label. Red, White and Rosé Wine

### *Tavel*

Tavel AOC is the Southern Rhône's best area for dry rosé production. Rosé Only.



### *Châteauneuf-du-Pape*

The reds of the Southern Rhône's most prestigious AOC can be powerful, warming, and complex; however, in hot vintages the reds may suffer from an excess of alcohol, appearing jammy and raisinated. Red and White Wine.

### *Gigondas*

Once part of the Côtes du Rhône-Villages AOC, the wines of this village received their own AOC in 1971. The wines are similar to those of Châteauneuf-du-Pape but often slightly lighter in body. Red and Rosé Wine.

### *Vacqueyras*

Like Gigondas, Vacqueyras was once a part of the Côtes du Rhône-Villages AOC, but the village's reputation for quality resulted in a promotion for the village to AOC status in 1990. Red, White and Rosé Wine.

### *Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise*

This sweet, floral fortified Muscat makes an excellent aperitif or dessert selection.



## *Selling Rhône Wines*

Northern Rhône Syrah is a great accompaniment to savory dishes that feature aromatic herbs and spices—black pepper, spices, rosemary and thyme—but it doesn't work as well with spices that add heat. Lamb, earthy and exotic dishes often marry well with the style.

Southern Rhône reds can be big, burly, concentrated wines, and they are not for the faint of heart! Try suggesting a powerful Châteauneuf-du-Pape to a guest who enjoys richer Zinfandel or other high alcohol New World wines but is interested in exploring an earthier Old World style.

Young Rhône reds may often provide a more pleasurable drinking experience than Bordeaux wines of an equivalent age.

Don't forget about rosé! As guests gear up for spring and summer, a glass of Tavel (or Provence) rosé is a really satisfying, food-friendly way to begin a meal.

Rhône whites are not often on guests' radar. The oily texture, lower acidity, and perfumed aromas of Viognier can be a pleasant find for guests who are tired of California Chardonnay but not quite ready for the acidity and nerve of a northern French white wine like Sancerre or Chablis. Take the opportunity to introduce an unfamiliar guest to a little-known appellation like Condrieu and they may score some points with their more wine-savvy friends!

## *Review questions*

1. What grape variety is typically the dominant component in red blends produced in the Southern Rhône Valley?
2. What style of wine is released under the Condrieu AOC?
3. What AOC surrounds the castle that once served as a palace for the Roman Catholic Popes of Avignon?
4. What is the basic appellation for red, white, and rosé wines produced throughout the Rhône Valley?
5. What is the primary grape variety in the Northern Rhône Valley?
6. Where is Hermitage AOC located?