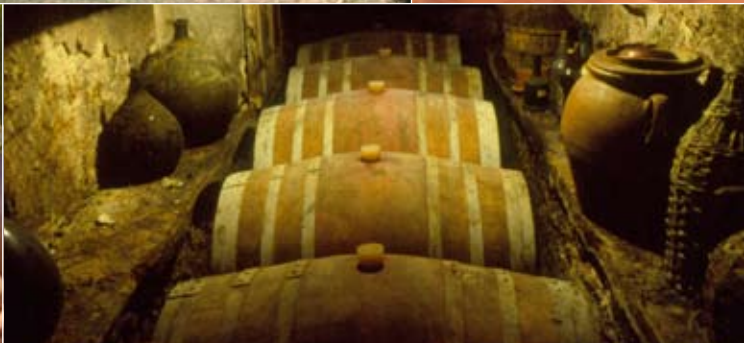


The Mercedes Wine Tour



The Road to Rhône

In the latest of his journeys to the world's great wine regions, sponsored by Mercedes-Benz, Nick Tarayan takes a sporty trip to the Rhône

I felt a little conspicuous in my brand new, 'Sunstone orange' Mercedes-Benz C-Class Sports Coupé as a customs official at Folkestone waved me over into a bay for checking. But, as it turned out, the officer was a car enthusiast and interested in the Merc rather than in questioning me. Lifting the bonnet is something you don't have to do that often with these cars and he and I both wondered how much they'd managed to pack under it. The engine was positively gleaming and proudly bore the word 'Kompressor' in red letters. It looked good and solid and that was all I really needed to know.

Moments later, I was away and driving onto the Shuttle for the 35-minute ride to Calais. And, once on the other side of the Channel, I made it effortlessly to Troyes, some 375 miles away, by 9pm. I found a fine, little hotel-restaurant a few minutes from the motorway – the Auberge du Lac at Mesnil Saint Père – and stopped for a delicious dinner and an overnight stay.

The following morning I set off at 8am for the remaining 240-mile drive to Lyon, where I was to meet a wine writer friend of mine at midday. And true to form, the

French autoroute proved as smooth as ever, delivering me to my destination in plenty of time.

Lyon is at the very northern tip of the Rhône Valley and provides the ideal launch pad to one of France's most important wine-growing regions. Responsible for more Appellation Contrôlée wine than any other area except Bordeaux, the Rhône produces robust, full-bodied, often spicy wines, using grapes including Syrah and Grenache. The region's big-hitters include the likes of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Hermitage and highly-fashionable Côte-Rôtie – names that stir the heart of any serious wine buff and that rival even the great names of Burgundy and Bordeaux.

From Lyon it was then just a 30-minute drive south to Condrieu, the fabled home of the peachy Viognier grape, where we would meet our first winemakers. We found Yves Cuilleron's winery at Chavanay, where he was waiting with fellow vigneron François Villard. These guys, together with a friend of theirs, Pierre Gaillard, are some of the most committed producers in the Rhône. Individually they produce some of the most stunning wines of Condrieu, Côte Rôtie, and St Joseph,

but in 1996, they also teamed up to create a business known as Les Vins de Vienne.

As the afternoon's tasting proved, Les Vins de Vienne include some stunning old-world-meets-new-world wines, made by blending wines from all over the Rhône Valley. What's more, the winemakers have also collaborated on vineyards at Seyssuel in the northernmost reaches of the valley above Vienne, where they produce two 'super Rhône's': the white Taburnum, which is 100 per cent Viognier, and Sotanium, which is made entirely from Syrah and could beat many a Côte Rôtie.

After the tasting, we returned to the glorious city of Lyon and the comfort of our truly hip hotel, Cour des Loges, in the old town. There are countless places to eat in Lyon – more two- and three-Michelin-starred restaurants than in London – but we stuck to simple fare after a long day and headed for Chez Alex (also known, confusingly, as Restaurant Chevallier), a typical little bistro with simple, earthy food. There was, after all, a week ahead of tasting and eating to consider.

The next morning heralded Bastille Day and we chose to mark it by visiting the





Impressions from the Rhône: beautiful vineyards, fine wines, historic cellars and charming locals are just a few of the diversions of this important French wine region – and all easily explorable by car



very beautiful Musée des Beaux-Arts, which is housed in a 17th century abbey, requisitioned, most appropriately, during the French Revolution. An extraordinary collection of paintings, including works by Picasso, Monet, Dégas, Bacon and Braque, rubs shoulders with the art of ancient Greece and rooms devoted to Art Deco.

Lunch had to be a relatively light affair as we'd promised ourselves a treat in the evening, so we headed for a big, buzzy brasserie in a disused station called L'Est. A dozen oysters and a veal cordon bleu each, washed down with some Côtes du Rhône Blanc, did the trick and set us up for a sunny afternoon's stroll through the pedestrianised centre of town. We marvelled at the fantastic window displays in Bernachon's, a temple to chocolate, on the Cours Franklin Roosevelt.

A siesta was needed before heading out to La Pyramide in Vienne: the restaurant originally opened by Fernand Point, the father of nouvelle cuisine, in 1923. Everyone in the restaurant seemed to be eating the house speciality, a truffled poulet de Bresse, which meant that we had no need to – we just had to inhale. It left us

free to order a combination of crayfish, lobster, foie gras, red mullet, turbot and milk-fed lamb, complemented by some excellent half bottles: whites from Hermitage and Condrieu, reds from Côte Rôtie and St Joseph.

The Rhône is very much split into north and south. While the Appellation Contrôlée laws permit the use of 21 different grape varieties throughout the valley, the northern villages tend to base their red wines on the Syrah grape, while the southern ones rely heavily on Grenache.

Aside from the grape varieties, the wines are also influenced by the region's five main soil types and its climate, which is characterised by seasons of rain, warm temperatures and broad strokes of sunshine. Admittedly, one could ascribe these virtues to many wine-growing areas, but there is one further major influence: the Mistral wind, which gusts up through the Avignon-Vienne tunnel created by the Cévennes mountains to the south and west, and the foothills of the Alps in the east.

The next stop in our voyage of discovery was at one of the most famous houses in the Rhône, Chapoutier. It owns almost 400 acres of prized vineyards, including the largest and most prestigious holdings in Hermitage. The biodynamic winemaking here is overseen by Michel Chapoutier, an immensely dedicated 37-year-old. From the simple, fresh, apricot-scented

Côtes du Rhône Blanc 2000 to the hugely sweet, meaty, violet-scented Ermitage Le Pavillon 1998, his wines proved delicious and, at the top end, challenging. The range was quite bewildering.

After a delicious lunch at Le Chaudron in Tournon, we later met up with another maverick winemaker, the great Jean-Luc Colombo. This man has so much energy that he has virtually rebuilt the vineyards of Cornas – the southernmost red wine producing cru in the northern Rhône. (We could have done with an off-roader Mercedes-Benz M-class for the tour around the vertiginous vineyards that he's uprooting and replanting year by year.) Indeed, he seems to know every pebble of this land, which is prime Syrah country: black wine with an earthy, mouth-filling structure.

Following dinner with Jean-Luc and his wife, Anne, we managed a rest at the charming, local Hotel-Restaurant Michel Chabran, before heading south for a 9am tasting at Domaine Gramenon near Vinsobres, where wines often tend to be more coarse and hot, but where these offered subtlety and finesse. Non-interventionist winemaking is the trick here – they largely let nature take its course – producing Grenache-based reds in the main, although the cuvée Sierra du Sud is vibrant Syrah. In particular, we found La Sage a beautifully spicy, balanced Grenache from 25-year-old vines.

Moving on, we were deep into Grenache country and a couple of hours later were driving on dirt roads through vineyards up to what looked like a cathedral. It was, in fact, a winery built from huge three- and six-tonne blocks of stone (the kind used to

The Main Grapes of the Rhône Valley

RED

Syrah, known as Shiraz in Australia, this is the main red grape of the northern Rhône. Intense, sweet and deep-coloured giving wines great structure. Aromas of blackberry and raspberry when young, developing a spicy, leathery character as it matures.

Grenache is the main grape of the South. Ultra-ripe and fruity and capable of giving high alcohol. Strawberry scented. Tolerant of heat and can be over-productive leading to diluted wines unless it is cut back. Old vines – which produce smaller yields – can make sensational wines.

Mourvèdre tends to be grown in the South as it needs lots of warmth and light. Doesn't like wind. Rich and full-bodied, its anti-oxidative qualities allow wines to mature for a long time. Jammy black fruits, herbs and spices.

WHITE

Viognier is the dreamy, peaches-and-cream grape famous for making Condrieu in the North. Hardy and can grow in poor, dry, stony soils. Aromatic, dry and exotic.

Marsanne gives powerful wines with average acidity. Floral, hazelnut aromas develop as it ages. Highly flavoured and alcoholic. A good workhorse grape which performs well in Crozes-Hermitage and St Joseph.

Rousanne is a finicky vine to grow and expends aromas of apples and herbs. It is normally blended with Marsanne to offer more finesse to a wine.

Grenache Blanc produces fairly full-bodied wines with low acidity and a long finish in the mouth. Like its red counterpart it is vigorous. Normally blended.





build the Pont du Gard), which keeps a constant temperature of 12°C, even though we were hitting 40°C outside.

Philippe Viret is a fourth-generation winemaker and, when we first met him, I thought he was quite mad. His vineyards have been planted using divining rods as indicators and the cathedral is built into a hillside, its position based on the angle of the sun and the stars, locating it on a magnetic force line. Everything is based on cosmoculture – something practised by the Maya and Inca tribes – which relies on the interaction between cosmic and metallic forces. All a lot of mumbo jumbo? At first we thought so, but then we tasted the wine. Wow – extraordinary stuff.

Just when we thought things couldn't get any better, it was lunchtime and we found ourselves sitting way up on the terrace of La Table du Comtat restaurant overlooking the vineyards of Séguret and Sablet with the Mont-Ventoux providing the backdrop. This is dreamy Provence and it became even dreamier when we checked into the hotel-restaurant-winery of Domaine de Cabasse, a lovely farmhouse in the valley below, where, of course, the domaine's own bottlings feature prominently on the wine list.

The afternoon and next morning were spent visiting another four producers in Rasteau, Sablet, Gigondas and Vacqueyras, before stopping for another delightful terrace-lunch at La Mère Germaine in what

is possibly the most well-known of all the southern crus, Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The vineyards which surround the town were re-established in the 14th century by the popes who were based in Avignon and, while the main production is red wine, there is a small quantity of extraordinary, honeyed, dry white made here too.

On a hot summer's afternoon it was a welcome relief to find the dark, cool cellars of Domaines Perrin at Château de Beaucastel, one of the most highly-prized of all Châteauneuf producers. The wildly effervescent Mike Rijken, who showed us round, has been with the château for over 20 years but his enthusiasm for the whole range of wines which the Perrin brothers produce – from simple vin de pays to the château's top cuvées – shows no sign of waning.

It was now our last evening and we felt a last burst of luxury was called for. Half an hour to the west of Avignon, on the road to the beautiful market town of Uzès, lies the Château de St Maximin. One wing has, so far, been painstakingly restored and filled with antiques and modern art. It is quite the most beautiful and peaceful of settings and provides a fabulous base for visiting Avignon, Tavel, Lirac and the southern end of the valley.

A final visit the next morning took us to the Côtes de Luberon to the east of Avignon. Domaine Favorot is owned and run by London restaurateurs François and Sally Favorot de Kerbrech of Mustard's in Smithfield. Their first vintage was in 1999 and the delicious Cuvée de General from that year has already won medals, including a silver at London's prestigious International Wine Challenge this year.

Throughout our tour, the Mercedes-Benz had been a complete dream. I was especially fascinated by what they call the

sequentronic shift, which allowed us to use six gears semi-manually on country roads (with no clutch) and go automatic in towns and on the autoroute. Kompressor, meanwhile, apparently means that the engine compresses the air before it enters the cylinder and thus increases power, which explains why the C200 was so responsive for a 2-litre car. Moreover, with the rear seats down, we had managed to pack in 15 cases of wine, plus all our luggage.

I felt that I was deserting the car by leaving it at Avignon's Motorail station, but getting it checked in some hours ahead of the journey allowed time to do a bit of shopping and indulge in a seven-course dinner at the two-Michelin-starred Christian Etienne in Avignon, before boarding at the station in the centre of the town at 10.30pm.

A painless journey in a sleeper compartment delivered us and the car to Calais early the next morning and, within minutes, we were back on the Shuttle for the home run.

The Rhône Valley is certainly one of the most exciting wine regions in the world and to be able to enjoy its charming hospitality, gorgeous restaurants and magnificent scenery within the comfort and style of the C-Class Sports Coupé was a real treat. The cellar is looking pretty healthy, too. **SM**

Stockists

Les Vins de Vienne, RS Wines 0117 963 1780
 Maison M Chapoutier, Mentzendorff 020 7840 3600
 Jean-Luc Colombo, Lay & Wheeler 0845 330 1855
 Château St Cosme, Gauntleys 0115 911 0555
 Château de Beaucastel, Berry Bros 0870 900 4300
 Domaine de la Mordorée, Bennetts 01386 840392

Mercedes-Benz C-Class Sports Coupé - C200 Kompressor

0-62.5MPH: 9.1 seconds (manual and sequentronic)
 Top Speed: 143mph (manual and sequentronic)
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 Price: From £20,295 (on the road)
 For more detail s visit www.mercedes-benz.co.uk



Where to stay

En route

Auberge du Lac, Lac d'Orient, Mesnil Saint Père

Tel: (00 33 325) 41 27 16 Fax: 41 57 59

Charming, family-run hotel a few minutes from the autoroute, near Troyes. Good food and a concise, well-chosen wine list. Simple rooms around £44.

Lyon

Cour des Loges, 6 Rue Boeuf

Tel: (00 33 472) 77 44 44

Web: www.courdesloges.com

Contemporary style, housed within a 14th-17th-century residence, set around a courtyard in Lyon's old town. £130 double-£340 large apartment.

Valence

Michel Chabran, 29 Avenue du 45e Parallèle,

Pont-de-L'Isère

Tel: (00 33 475) 84 60 09 Fax: 84 59 65

Comfortable rooms from £50. Excellent, seasonal menus from £30-£70.

Séguret/Sabllet

Domaine de Cabasse, St Joseph, Séguret

Tel: (00 33 490) 46 91 12 Fax: 46 94 01

Stay, eat and drink from their vineyards. An old farmhouse with romantic-sounding but noisy cicadas. Regular tastings. Rooms from £50.

Orange

Le Mas des Aigras, Quart St Christophe

Tel: (00 33 490) 34 81 01 Fax: 34 05 66

Another farm, minutes from the autoroute but nestling in sunflower fields and vineyards. Best choice in Orange. Rooms from £50. Menus from £17.

Avignon

La Mirande, 4 Place Amirande

Tel: (00 33 490) 85 93 93

Web: www.la-mirande.fr

Very beautiful and stylish hotel behind the Palais des Papes. Perfect for exploring the city. Michelin-starred restaurant. Rooms from £200. Menus from £27.

St Maximin (Uzès)

Château de St Maximin,

Rue du Château

Tel: (00 33 466) 03 44 16 Fax: 03 44 98

Complete luxury in a 12th-17th century château with six huge rooms and suites. Set menu of excellent food, £28. Suites from £80.

Where to eat

Lyon

Chez Alex (Restaurant Chevalier), 40

Rue Sergent Blandan

Tel: (00 33 478) 28 19 23

One of those simple, old-fashioned bistros which you long to find in French towns. Menus from £10 (weekday lunch) to £20. Short, decent wine list.

L'Est, Gare des Brotteaux

Tel: (00 33 437) 24 25 26

Electric trains run (at ceiling level) around this huge, modern brasserie with an open kitchen. Part of a small group of busy, buzzy brasseries, which have all been awarded Michelin's bib gourmand for value and quality. Great fun. Food around £16.

La Maison Borie, 3 Place

Antonin, Perrin,

Lyon-Gerland

Tel: (00 33 472) 76 20 20

Complex, hearty, delicious food from chef Manuel Viron, whose restaurant has just moved here from

Ampuis. His wife is the delightful hostess.

Vienne

La Pyramide, 14 Bvd Fernand-Point

Tel: (00 33 474) 53 01 96

Fabulous food by Patrick Henriroux in the style of Fernand Point, founder of both nouvelle cuisine and this restaurant. Three courses around £50, but double that with good wine. Reasonable room rates £78-£120 (NB: the only decent rooms in town).

Tournon

Le Chaudron, 7 Rue St Antoine, Tournon

Tel: (00 33 475) 08 17 90

Great value restaurant, where local winemakers meet. Ask owner, Marc Grillon, for advice on wines. Menus £13-£17.

Séguret

La Table du Comtat, Séguret

Tel: (00 33 490) 46 91 49 Fax: 46 94 27

Breathtaking views from the highest point in this historic, hilltop village. Light, airy restaurant serving good Provençale food. Rooms from £60. Menus from £20.

Châteauneuf-du-Pape

La Mère Germaine, 3 Rue Cdt Lemaître

Tel: (00 33 490) 83 54 37

A brasserie with large terrace overlooking vineyards. Good simple food with lunch menus from £16.

Avignon

Christian Etienne, 10 Rue de Mons

Tel: (00 33 490) 86 16 50

Two Michelin stars and a lovely setting next door to the Palais des Papes. Foie gras, John Dory, lamb, cheese and pud will set you back a bargain £33, while the lobster menu is £47. Kelly McAuliffe is the immensely knowledgeable and friendly American sommelier.

La Compagnie des Comptoirs, 83 Rue Joseph Vernet

Tel: (00 33 490) 85 99 04

The Pourcel brothers, who own the three-Michelin-starred Jardin des Sens in Montpellier, have opened two brasseries. The new Avignon branch is set in a courtyard surrounded by cloisters and has the hippest, trendiest bar in town. De-constructed gazpacho was a disaster but main courses good and desserts a triumph. Allow £25-£35 for food.

Eurotunnel:

www.eurotunnel.com

or 08705 35 35 35 for direct reservations

