

Unearthing legends from Rhône

by Marie-Emmanuelle Febvret

Some wine dinners are an once-in-a-lifetime occasion to experience the soul of a region or the quintessence of a vintage. This one at Grand Hyatt in spring succeeded in combining both

On this page, a little bit of maths rapidly tells us that with 20 lucky few tasting 15 wines during dinner time at Grand Hyatt Hong Kong, there might have been about 300 glasses on that table at some point. The difficulty mostly resides in grasping the evolution of each wine after a little while and still be able to fully scrutinize every newcomer without getting lost!

This early March the Best Actress in a Leading Role category of the 86th Academy Award ceremony somehow gathered two of the most brilliant actresses of their generation: Cate Blanchett and Meryl Streep. Talk about a head scratcher. The Fine Wine Experience's last tasting dinner was undoubtedly cast in the same mold:

how can one designate a favourite when the theme was "Legendary Rhône of 1978 and 1990"? Once again Linden Wilkie and Mike Wu set up the most exciting evening of all, collecting no less than 20 wines of the widely illustrious '78 and '90 vintages. "It seems that the only one missing is 1961," Wilkie teased.

We started quietly, taming the first flight of 1978 including Rayas's Château de Fonsalette, and both Jaboulet's Côte Rôtie Les Jumelles and Crozes Hermitage. They all are very true to our expectations of wild character and delicate herbal notes, typical of that classic vintage. The first 1990 we then tried came from the lesser-known Marc Sorrel a small grower from Tain l'Hermitage. Linden once drove there, knocked on the closed door a few times, came back after a while and knocked again. When



opening the door the winemaker simply replied, "oh sorry I was in the vineyard". It seems that his Hermitage Le Gréal 1990 is as shy as him at start, then slowly developing grilled meat flavours, fleshy dark fruits and velvety tannins; all the archetypal facets of that hot year, perfectly performing in the bottle. Before stepping

into the big game, Linden and Mike chose the ultimate palate cleanser: Jean-Louis Chave Hermitage Blanc 1990. Sometimes in a tasting there is a wow moment; this time it happened before even sitting down for dinner. Chave is the Hermitage equivalent of Le Pin in Pomerol, Screaming Eagle in Napa or Coche-Dury in Meursault. One difference though: his whites are as spectacular as his reds. A blend of 80% Marsanne and 20% Roussanne, the two local star grape varieties in white, this pale gold wine makes you reach for your pen to seize all of its nuances from honeysuckle to ripe pear, evolving in apricot and mango while always keeping a dash of saltiness and creamy texture. Linden raises a good point: while white Burgundies are driven by acidity, Rhône whites are driven by glycerin, and this is undeniably the case here.

Time has now come to pour the reds from this valley where the Rhône River roams, from Switzerland to the Mediterranean. Its length implies so many changes in climate, subsoil and vegetation that we commonly split it in two around the city of Montélimar: Northern Rhône or Septentrional, and Southern Rhône or Meridional. If we begin against the tide, the South is characterized by long sunny days, olive groves on dry soils and sees Grenache as a backbone supplemented mostly by Syrah and Mourvèdre. The centerpiece of the region definitely is Châteauneuf-du-Pape where producers play around with the 13 authorized grape varieties to instill spiciness, smoothness, more or less tannins or aptitude to age. Château de Beaucastel quite uniquely uses all 13 varieties in its blend. The smoked duck breast that begins the night could not have been better to pair with 1978, 1990 Beaucastel and 1990 Beaucastel Hommage à Jacques Perrin – only made in exceptional years. Three words to respectively sum up these wines: elegance, happy medium and concentration. Then enters Château Rayas. Once again, the Grand Hyatt Chef Marco Ullrich



created a superb pairing with a pigeon salad of celery leaves, orange and black truffle sauce that is a true incarnation of Rayas in a plate. The leathery 1978 still unveil a floral bouquet prolonged by undergrowth notes, remarkable though a bit past its best.

However, with bottles that age one should always be reminded of

bottle variation and fine surprises may occur. Now, apprehending Rayas 1990 is a bit intimidating. Its pungent nose reminds of a perfume where dried herbs cohabit with jammy black cherries; succulent, fleshy and fondant, the legend is not overrated for one bit. Here lies the absolute epitome of Grenache, the kind of wine you drink with someone you treasure. Hopping from one myth to another, it is now time to immerse in the fabled Côte-Rôtie trio from Guigal, whose "La, La, La" sobriquet never fails to remind me of the Beatles' intro for Baby it's You. La Turque, La Landonne and La Mouline like three sisters, each possesses their very own charm though having that unmistakable common trait: their dramatic aging period of 42 months in new oak. La Landonne is a pure representation of Syrah, planted on the steep slopes of the

Superb liveliness, pungent spices and delicate dried herbs are

certainly the keywords on the night of tasting wines from the valley



Top of page, opening bottles that old is always a combination of nervousness and excitement: some corks might break or fall into the bottle, some wines might be flawed. The Fine Wine Experience team always impresses with its impeccable sourcing and quality.

Top of page, the 1978 vintage was a star of the past century, with a long summer producing opulent wines in their youth, enabling us to taste elegant, fragrant and still structured wines today. Above, a panoramic view of the ageless beauties that punctuated the evening.

Côte Brune. La Mouline, with its amphitheatre of 75-year-old terraced vines reflects the serenity of the 11% of Viognier that rise on the Côte Blonde. In between, combining the virility of the brune and the femininity of the blonde, lies La Turquie. We started with the 1978, though with no Turquie as the first vintage was

1985. La Mouline is flamboyant, cut grass aromas exude from the glass, followed by mouth filling, slightly overripe fruits. More discreet to begin with, La Landonne is very focused, a secret garden of fresh grass with lively acidity. The latter is a personal favourite, though the former enchanted the majority. In 1990, La Mouline combines fresh spices, licorice and dried plums. La Landonne is aerial, fragrant and meaty though still in its youth. As a true middleman, La Turquie, is all about fruit and grace, lingering of crisp raspberry acidity and subtle spices. What a magnificent trinity the Guigal family has fashioned there!

One of the domaines that truly put Syrah on the map decades ago is undeniably Jaboulet with its holy grail of Hermitage La Chapelle. Both 1978 and 1990 were awarded 100 points: '78



is pristine with a supple yet pronounced attack of chocolate, dark fruits and venison. Its mineral notes make a difference. The '90 echoes superbly with the lamb in rosemary crust; crimson colour, fragrant pot-pourri nose, dense and juicy, it expresses sheer splendor. The night ends with Chave, this time in red. A

metaphor in this Hermitage battle would see majestic Jaboulet as the logical man whom a woman should marry but somehow flirtatious Chave gets the girl. Chave's Syrah are coming from the best plots in Hermitage: tannic Bessards, fleshy Péléal or powerful Méal. The 1978 is a nectar of grilled meat flavours, smoky fragrances and velvety currants while the 1990 is hauntingly savoury: cassis, kirsh, tobacco leaves, game, crushed stones and a breathtaking nose that persists infinitely, like a choral singing a jolly melody. My neighbour turned to me and asked, "how can people turn grape juice into this?" Indeed.

There ended a truly enchanting evening of pure exquisiteness, journeying from one iconic treasure to another all within this 200 kilometre valley where the Rhône meanders. 🌸

A fantastic journey exploring 15 wines of the '78 and '90 vintages



Top, the youthful 1990 vintage: expressive, firm and rich with magnificent ripe fruit flavours that melt on the palate. Above, left, necessary breathing time wakes up the wines after decades spent in their glass gown; right, early into dinner the table is still quite clear of glasses. Adjoining page, tasting notes help with the recap of the dinner (hongkong.grand.hyatt.com).

