

Villages wines capture Rhône style at low prices

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Finding a deal from one of the major French wine regions can be difficult.

One of the exceptions is Rhône, whose wines have turned up at really low prices. I picked up a few of the Rhône Villages (pronounced VEE-lahzh), made from grapes sourced from key villages (sub-regions) and generally considered mid-range, falling between the vaunted key designations of the Rhône Valley and the more general Côtes du Rhône.

The bargain villages were good values, depending upon whether you want fruitiness or Frenchness. They captured the earthiness and acidity of Rhône and the non-fruit characteristics that fans of the style love. But non-fruit and earthy character have fallen out of fashion among many wine drinkers looking for fruit and richness.

Rhône may be somewhat cursed by lack of performance of its historic grapes outside of

Rhône. That may explain the pricing. Other regions, such as Burgundy and Bordeaux, are buoyed by their varieties (pinot noir and chardonnay from Burgundy, and merlot and cabernet sauvignon from Bordeaux). Rhônes are mostly blends that can include a dozen varieties. Rhône's key grapes — syrah, grenache and mourvèdre — love the heat and depleted soils of Rhône but have a mixed popularity internationally.

Syrah got a boost, maybe, from the wave of cheap Australian versions that washed ashore in the 1990s. In recent years, syrah has waned as an international variety, just as a mysterious disease struck its vines, leading them to slowly wither.

Grenache has generated new interest as Spanish wines gain popularity. Spain's garnacha is the same grape as grenache.

Far juicier and fruitier is **Reserve de la Croix de Bonpas 2015**, a ridiculous deal for a French wine. Bonpas offers cranberry smells and a juicy palate with baking spice. This comes in an impressive bottle, making it great for parties. \$12. 1/2