

Roman heritage lives on in the hills of Hermitage

THE IMPOSING GRANITE HILL of Hermitage rises above a bend of the Rhône river at Tain l'Hermitage. The Hermitage appellation occupies a mere 152 hectares; however, for many centuries, the reputation of the red wine from the Syrah (Shiraz) vines of this appellation has far outweighed the volume of wine produced. For example, in the 18th and 19th centuries, prices for red Hermitage were higher than those of first-growth Bordeaux.

There are various legends concerning the origin of the name of this appellation: most references suggest that it derives from the word for a hermit (*ermite*).

The Romans were the first to recognise the viticultural potential of this site. There are many remains from the Roman occupation. For example, the city of Vienne just to the north is particularly rich in Roman architecture. There one can find the Temple d'Auguste et Livie (25 BC) and the Théâtre Romain (one of the largest amphitheatres in Roman France, restored in 1938).

The small town of Tain l'Hermitage is located on the left bank of the Rhône, 75 km due south of Lyon. At this point the river takes a left hand turn for just a few kilometres as it diverts from its southerly course to the Mediterranean: this has resulted in a steep south-facing slope, approximately 200 metres high, with excellent thermal properties. Although south-easterly and southerly aspects tend to predominate, some of the planted land at the top of the hill is relatively flat. The warmest sites are said to be at the western end of the hill.



The Crozes-Hermitage appellation comprises those vineyards not on the hill itself: it is a much larger vineyard area than Hermitage, forming an arc around the hill, mainly to the north and east, and a small amount of flat land squeezed between the base of the hill and the river.

Climatically, Hermitage is in a transition zone between the relatively maritime climate of the southern Rhône (typified by Chateaufort du Pape which has a continentality¹ of approximately 12.5°C) and the continental climate of the very northern part of the Rhône (typified by Lyon with a continentality of 18.4°C). Growing season day degrees² for Hermitage is 1451, with 1648 sunshine hours. The most comparable Australian regions based on these criteria are Frankland (WA) and Padthaway (SA). On the basis of MJT (estimated as 21.5°C), Hermitage is similar to the Barossa and McLaren Vale (SA) regions. Growing season rainfall (April to

October) and annual rainfall are very high at 625 mm and 904 mm respectively. The growing season rainfall is three times that of the Barossa: this amount of precipitation is equivalent to a Barossa vineyard receiving Riverland rates of irrigation.

Geologically, the hill is a combination of granite and quaternary delta deposits, with Pliocene clay on the eastern side. At the top are deposits of loess containing some calcareous material³. Soils are generally shallow, and quite variable according to location on the hill. 'Les Bessards', at the western end, is regarded as one of the best *climats*: it has a sandy gravel soil overlying granite. The soils of the lower slopes have higher clay contents. Soil erosion is a major problem, due to a combination of high rainfall, exposure and steep slopes. The stone terraces, which are a prominent feature, were constructed many centuries ago to counter erosion.

Only three varieties are permitted for the Hermitage appellation: Syrah, Marsanne and Roussanne. In the 1990s, approximately 80% of the area comprised Syrah with the remainder predominantly Marsanne. In the past, Roussanne was more important, but in the 20th century it was almost entirely replaced by the higher yielding, and less oidium-susceptible, Marsanne. The best white Hermitage is considered, by some, to be an equal blend of the two varieties. However, there can be a wide divergence of opinions on this matter: Paul Jaboulet uses between 35% and 50% of Roussanne in his Hermitage Blanc whereas Chapoutier dis-





Vineyards of the World HERMITAGE



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likes it and uses none at all⁴. All varieties will ripen, on average, in mid September. Both white and red varieties may be found on all parts of the hill.

For red Hermitage, Syrah is allowed to be vinified with up to 15% of white grapes, effectively Marsanne. In practice this rarely happens now because white Hermitage is in demand in its own right. By comparison, it is still a standard practice to add a small amount of Viognier to Syrah for the red wine of Côte Rôtie, produced just to the north of Hermitage. Marsanne is the main variety of white Crozes-Hermitage.

The majority of vines on the steep slopes are low-trained bush vines, generally with a single stake 1.4 metres high. Spacing is a 1.5 metre row × 1.0 metre vine. Pruning is to two-node spurs with two to four spurs per vine. Shoots are trained up and tied to the stake during the growing season, and topped at approximately 1.7 metres above the ground. Most of the operations must be carried out by hand due to the steepness of the slopes. On the flatter land, VSP trellising is more common: vines are unilaterally cordon-trained with spur pruning, and row spacing is wider.

The yield limit for appellation Hermitage is 5.8 t/ha. Enrichment with grape concentrate is permitted in some years so long as the resulting wine is not higher than 13.5% alcohol for red wine and 14% for white.

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REFERENCES

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- 2 Based on data from Valence, 17 km to the south of Hermitage, and corrected for altitude and site factors: Gladstones, J.S. (1992) *Viticulture and Environment (Winetitles)*.
- 3 Wilson, J.E. (1998) *Terroir (Mitchell Beazley)*.
- 4 Bulleid, N. (1998) Proceedings of ASVO Seminar on 'Emerging White Varieties', Canberra, November 1997 (*Winetitles*).