

Ep 167: The Grapes of the Southern Rhône with Stage 2 MW student Anna Spooner (Part 1)



Janina Doyle 00:00:07 Welcome to Eat Sleep Wine Repeat, a podcast for all you wine lovers, who, if you're like me, just cannot get enough of the good stuff. I'm Janina Doyle, your host, Brand Ambassador, Wine Educator, and Sommelier. So, stick with me as we dive deeper into this ever evolving, wonderful world of wine. And wherever you are listening to this, cheers to you!

Hello, wine friends, welcome back to another episode where I am chatting with Stage 2 Master of Wine student Anna Spooner who recently has moved to the Southern Rhône. And so, the main focus of this episode is on the grape varieties that you will find down there.

Châteauneuf-du-Pape alone has 13 permitted varieties. Most of us have heard of Grenache but what about Counoise or Terret Noir? But before we dive deeper into these grapes, the first half of this episode is talking a lot more about Anna's story, starting with Freixenet, one of the largest Cava producers and how that has influenced her.

We'll be talking about Winery Chateau Musar, we'll be talking about Basilisco, which is a winery with an incredibly inspiring woman who you definitely want to go and visit if you're in the Campania region.

We're talking about sustainability in vineyards. And Tablas Creek, incredible wineries in America with those Rhône varieties. So, I hope you find this episode inspiring, interesting and educational. Don't forget you can use my code "EATSLEEP10" for 10% off your first order with [Wickham's Wine](#), my incredible sponsor of this season.

And remember, they won the Decanter Retailer Awards best specialist retailer for South and regional France. So, this is the perfect time. to get some bottles of Rhône Valley wine in the house. Grab yourself that bottle, pour yourself that glass, and enjoy the episode.

Janina Doyle 00:02:10 You said that you were working for a food and drinks PR company. Is that the moment when you started learning and you fell in love with wine, or did you have another experience before?

Anna Spooner 00:02:19 When I worked for this agency, which was fabulous, Freixenet were a new client. And we went off to visit them just outside Barcelona in Penedès. And I just got this bug and I had some amazing other clients as well, but going to visit sort of big FMCG brands and going to meet the team at Hovis was not maybe as glamorous as suddenly I was in a bodega and having an amazing meal in Barcelona followed by a tour around an amazing bodega.

And I got to writing tasting notes for Freixenet because some of the tasting notes were originally in Spanish and I speak a bit of Spanish and so I was doing a bit of translating and a bit of consumerizing but with no qualifications. And the marketing director of Freixenet said, gosh, you're really quite good at this. She'd given me samples of wine to taste, and I was just sort of describing the experience of tasting the wine. And she said, "Have you ever done anything professional with wine?" I said, "No."

So, immediately the cog started turning, and yes, I did. So, I did my WSET levels two and three in, I think it was five months or something, straight after that. And the rest is history. It was wine from then.

Freixenet is a great brand, you know. There's so much stick. I had to write an article ages ago about wines that were the most influential wines in my life. And I put Freixenet as number one. I wouldn't be here.

Janina Doyle 00:03:42 Okay, that's interesting. I think the difficulty is, and I've talked about this on other podcasts, because Freixenet and Codorníu, account for what, maybe you actually know the percentage. How much of Cava? I don't know, 90%? The majority.

And so, then the smaller producers, even though they can produce some fantastic wines, they're so big and it's always going to rub up the wrong way other producers who are only about high quality because when we can find £5 Cava on the shelf, it has created brand Cava equals cheap champagne, even though there's so much more.

Anna Spooner 00:04:20 Yeah. And I was working with them at a time before they introduced Prosecco to their range. It was actually being discussed when I was working with them. And now, obviously, they have these incredibly successful Prosecco that you just see everywhere, but they were Spanish brands, so there was a lot of debate about do we go into Italy? And is this the right strategic move for us? Which I was really privileged, I should say, to be privy to those conversations.

But actually, what was the most interesting thing before they even got to the point where they said, should we go into Prosecco or should we try our hand at Prosecco? There was a huge conversation around how do we make Cava the next Prosecco? Because Prosecco was really booming at the time and it had managed to make itself – it somehow wasn't the cheap and cheerful brand. It had made itself affordable quality, mini luxury.

All of these taglines that we were using in the marketing team being like, why is Cava considered the cheap alternative, whereas Prosecco is the affordable luxury or the little pop of happiness or the midweek sparkling wine?

And so, I have fought the good fight for Cava generally as a category since day one in the wine trade. But as you said, Freixenet is great at what it does. And yeah, I mean, the battle to stay at £9.99 on the UK market is a tough one and staying under that price point. But you only have to spend £20 in Cava to get these unreal wines, as you well know, but I just think Cava, in general, has changed my life. It continues to change my life.

Janina Doyle 00:05:53 She's a fan! Okay. So, after you did your level two and your level three, you

actually started teaching because you were actually studying at West London..?

Anna Spooner 00:06:00 West London Wine School, yeah.

Janina Doyle 00:06:03 That one. So, you started teaching, which by the way, as well for anyone listening, Wine with Jimmy, and Jimmy, oh my God, is ridiculously insanely good. educator. He was on my podcast. He did two episodes back at the beginning of last year, 2023. I wrote them down, episode 123, and 124. But you were teaching with him, but you've also done a lot of journalism.

So, my question to you has been between the two, where is your passion? Is it telling the stories or is it actually educating people and getting them into the wine industry? What do you think you prefer?

Anna Spooner 00:06:37 That's such a good question. I don't know if the two have to be mutually exclusive. And that's a personal view because – and I say that's a personal view because Jimmy's a great storyteller. He's a wonderful example of how you can do both. He's an incredible teacher in the sense that he takes you on the journey.

And often that will involve photos of trips he's been on, which sometimes when you're stuck in a classroom in mid-winter can be a bit of a bitter pill to swallow. But actually, he does an amazing job of bringing you on this journey. But from my point of view, I have always been more of a storyteller. Never ever saw myself on the educational route.

And actually, when I was doing my WSET educator course, to get trained up as an educator to teach WSET. You know, I'd done my diploma, I'd completed all the levels as it were, the first things they said to me when I tried to do the educator course were, “We've seen your online tasting, this isn't that. Stop with the fluff.” Obviously, that's far ruder than how they phrased it. They were unbelievably professional and kind.

But there's certain ways of teaching that are a little bit more rigid, I suppose, is the thing. And I don't think you have to learn like that. And wine, I suspect, has slightly fallen into the trap of we need this very, very rigorous structure in order to get a qualification, in order to be educated. And whilst I fully believe in wine education, I just don't think that one size fits all style of learning is for everyone. And so, I'd say the answer is storyteller, but I think you can educate through stories better than a lot of the wine trade do.

Janina Doyle 00:08:12 Well, now you literally touched on the fact that you've been doing these online tastings and for everybody to know, you actually won, not just once, but two years running. Yeah, just there you go. Wipe those shoulders clean. The Decanter Online Wine Experience Awards, right? So, quite clearly, you were bringing a lot of the fluff, the fluff that we desire to know about the wine. So, what were you doing with these online wine tastings?

Anna Spooner 00:08:40 Yeah. So, I was with the Wine Society for five years as their, on their tasting and events team. And during lockdown, we couldn't travel to these incredible – the Wine Society do the most amazing events, the events team, their hats off to them. It's three days a week on the road. It's the length and breadth of the UK.

So, if you're not a Wine Society member, my goodness, join up and check out the tastings because chances are there'll be one near you, but during lockdown, the entire team, you know, what do we do? And we didn't know how savvy technically our members were going to be. So, we took a big risk and basically I had to persuade the business in a really, really scary time where we were closing our warehouse to restructure it because of lockdown measures and social distancing. And there I was going, "Please, can we have a Zoom account?"

And at first, I don't think I was really a business critical voice, but I got a Zoom account and we started the online program and people wanted to hear about wine. They wanted to taste wine. We set up a program whereby you didn't have to have samples to join in, so it comes back to that storytelling.

We were just inviting producers, many of whom you've had on this podcast. It was just crazy. And it blew up. We had one of our first events with Chateau Muser and I think we got something like 1,500 people online to join.

Janina Doyle 00:10:05 Oh, my God!

Anna Spooner 00:10:05 Yeah. It was crazy.

Janina Doyle 00:10:08 But how wonderful as well when you think about a Lebanese producer and you've got that amount of people, we know in the industry that Chateau Musar is legendary, but also equally very marmitey too. Very often I taste the wines and I'm like, "I'm not sure. No, I don't really want to like this."

It's that volatile acidity, but they're iconic. They're brilliant. And actually for anyone listening who's never tried Chateau Musar, it's a tick, isn't it? An absolute must. But also their wines, the quality for the price point, you can get, I don't know, maybe you can tell me what the Wine Society was selling at. Like maybe, am I guessing right, 2003 for like £30 or something, you know?

Anna Spooner 00:10:50 Exactly like that. Yeah. But I mean, to that point, hit the nail on the head there, we weren't expecting numbers like that. But also the other thing is that it was live. There were also people watching recordings afterwards and those numbers were tripling, quadrupling.

We put everything for free on YouTube. And again, you can go on the Wine Society's YouTube channel and there's just a whole host. Some of them were hosted by me and the team. And some of them hosted by me interviewing producers or interviewing journalists.

Decanter basically, they didn't invent the award. I suppose they did. It was a brand new award during 2021. For 2021 and 2022. So, the first year and the second year when I was with the business, we won it. And the team has just won it again.

So, the Wine Society has won it three times. It's my biggest, proudest career achievement, I think. I was worried about getting a Zoom account and, you know, "Please, sir, can we have a Zoom account and I know that nobody knows whether we're all gonna have jobs in six months and nobody knows what's gonna happen, but I'd really like a Zoom account." Yeah, to go from that to basically dominating this

Decanter Award is amazing.

Janina Doyle 00:11:57 Love that. And so you've left the Wine Society now, you're doing a lot of your own kind of freelance stuff and you are setting up some online videos to kind of keep the wine storytelling going, is that right?

Anna Spooner 00:12:09 Yeah, it's been a crazy move moving to the Southern Rhône, but I have always wanted to do something, just wasn't sure exactly what it looked like. And this year, I'll be launching a series of recorded videos.

So, a huge battle for anybody who watches wine content. It's basically going to be really easy to follow short format videos, but videos that you could also listen to on the tube, you know, without having to look too much and learning in that relaxed style that I'm really keen on. Basically, quite frankly, the sorts of people that listen to this podcast who would say, right, I just want to know a little bit more about this particular region, but I don't need to go and take huge exams with huge financial commitments.

Obviously, there's real merit in reading a textbook and finding out what the legal percentages of a certain grape variety are, but unless you fancy tricking a winemaker, which I've seen people do and saying, well, "Hello, that's over the allowed 70% of Grenache. Thank you very much." Unless you want to start doing that. Where do you really find the value? You know, using words like majority. Let's just keep it simple. If a wine is a majority of a blend, let's call it that. Let's not say it has to be minimum 70%. Nobody cares.

Janina Doyle 00:13:22 And also like yields, if we're going to talk about the 22 hectolitres per hectare, obviously, as you know, studying your Master of Wine and doing the diploma, many times we had to just memorize the amount of yields for every single Cru, etc. etc. But then it disappeared out of our heads straight afterwards, right?

Anna Spooner 00:13:42 Yeah. "I don't know. What are you talking about?" At the drop of a hat can tell you the yields of different...

Janina Doyle 00:13:47 Perfect. I have questions for you then!

Anna Spooner 00:13:51 No, I mean, exactly that is an area lower yielding than its neighbors for a particular reason? Yes, because actually it's got this really rough terrain where this particular producer is making low yields because the vines are really old. Yeah, interesting. I don't really want a number, maybe it's because I've got a bit of dyslexia and numbers make me feel a bit queasy.

Janina Doyle 00:14:12 I think they might make everyone feel a little bit queasy. But talking of having to memorize all this information, you are stage two now Master of Wine student, congrats. Yay!

Anna Spooner 00:14:24 Thanks!

Janina Doyle 00:14:25 First stage done. So, I imagine everyone listening, this is the pinnacle of learning and education about wine and it is an absolute massive undertaking. So, how are you finding it

at the moment? Has there been some surprises?

Anna Spooner 00:14:39 The main thing that I have to say is the surprise or the discovery or whatever you want to call it is the people. So, I wrote a piece for the Financial Times last year about the experience of it. They had a wine special in the FT Magazine. And I wrote a piece on that subject, kind of my experience of, oh, how do I pass? How do I become an MW was the title. But I touched on and continued to explore my feelings around the people.

It's too fast paced to say you discover a wine. You're tasting so much and there's millions of baby discoveries, but the big, big discovery is people. I'm now friends with people I never expected to be friends with in the most beautiful way. It's this tiny little bubble of insanity that not even my husband understands. And I'll tell him a story about somebody and he just looks at me so blankly and thinks, "Why on earth would I care?"

So, you lose all sense of perspective, but those people become essential to you. And somebody on one of our first days said, it was Will Lowe, MW, who's actually my mentor coincidentally, but when we were in Rust, which is where, if you're European, you tend to go for your first year of seminar for a week in Austria. And he said, "I've got a WhatsApp group with my study group. And even though we've all passed at various stages," they've all passed. He said, "We still talk to each other every day. I kind of thought, sure, whatever. It's true.

I'd hate to look at the data on my WhatsApp and see which is the biggest group, because I've got a university girlfriend's group that might just beat it, but definitely second would be my MW study group. We speak to them every single day. It's amazing.

Janina Doyle 00:16:19 There is something, isn't there, with wine and with people? And actually, interestingly enough, you talk about your writing, we've already talked about old vines a little bit with the lower yielding you meant you touched on that. We met on the old vine conference trip didn't we in Campania in Italy.

And you recently wrote an article and actually, you need to win the Jancis Robinson competition. You've been shortlisted last year. You were runner up the year before. But everybody, you can go to Jancis Robinson's page and you can read these amazing articles. You are a fantastic writer, but actually, can you just extract a little bit of the story of us meeting such an inspiring female winemaker who was so humble? And when I read your article, I agreed with every single part. She truly is a woman that is inspiring. You're in awe, right?

Anna Spooner 00:17:16 A 100%. I mean, she's amazing. And to give a bit of context, yeah, we were there to discover these old vines. And part of the reason, you've mentioned that, I've already mentioned them, and I'm not surprised because I think old vines for me is where all my passions in wine collide.

I'm a country girl at heart, so anything vineyard based is, I love wineries. They're interesting places, but put me in a vineyard where I'm happy. Put me in some boots and take me for a stroll and that makes me happy.

So, that's amazing. But the human element of old vines, this idea of preservation and looking back and forward at the same time, looking back to old history, but working out how to preserve it in a more modern and suitable way, I think, that's incredible.

So, the content itself is amazing, but Viviana is a force to be reckoned with. And I think a few reasons I liked her. One is imposter syndrome, but not in the way that you might think. I get awful imposter syndrome in the wine industry. I constantly feel – I step into a wine tasting and think, oh my gosh, do people really wanna listen to me talk about this? And luckily nobody answers that question, so I'm sure I wouldn't always like the answer.

And so, I get imposter syndrome. And here was this lady who openly said, "I'm not from a wine trade background. I've never really made wine before this job." And she basically met the owners who had this side project, had this incredible winery with very old vines. And it would have been a challenge for anyone taking that on. And she said, "Well, I'm gonna learn on the job." And she's not just learned on the job, she's excelled. And I think, actually, she's used what is my biggest fear, about me in the trade as her biggest strength.

So, she works with amazing winemakers to help her. She works with Simonit&Sirch to do their incredible work with the old vines and the special techniques they've developed for pruning. And so, we're talking about, you know, she's not afraid to say, I lean on others.

And the counter to that is that she then gives back amazing help. She's employed lots of women in the village who traditionally wouldn't have had work because it wasn't deemed appropriate or again, historically, if we want to use that word, she said there was a lot of issue with this woman coming in and working in the winery and being in charge. She basically turned what, for me, would have been the most intimidating, daunting situation on its head and has not just managed to do it, she's excelled.

So, honestly, if you've not tasted the wines, they're really small production, Basilicata and incredible, the vineyard we visited, Storico Vineyard...

Janina Doyle 00:20:14 Oh, my gosh! One of the most beautiful places I've ever been. It's hard to even describe because it's the viewpoint, you're kind of looking down but it's not super, super steep, but it makes me feel like it's a hobbit story.

You almost feel like you're going down around another corner and all the vines of which are kind of creepy and old and gnarly, but then they're right around, there's all these beautiful little flowers and the smell that wafts through. But then there are these mountains surrounding you, but they're kind of in the distance and you do, you feel like you're in a very different world, don't you?

Anna Spooner 00:20:54 Yeah, it was breathtaking. And you mentioned the flowers and things. I mean, I'm a complete sustainability freak. And I've never ever, ever seen a vineyard with so much biodiversity in it.

If it wasn't a vineyard, if you just removed these incredible vines, which by the way are in an amazing kind of teepee structure almost, farmed very differently to what you might think of traditional trellising

systems.

And if you took the vines away, it would still be incredible because this ecosystem that they've got was just amazing. But the vines are the cherry on top of the cake. They're just these beautiful teepees of pleasure. So, yeah, I was inspired by the whole trip, honestly, but that vineyard was...

Janina Doyle 00:21:34 Was special and her.

Anna Spooner 00:21:34 It was really special and her, exactly. The force.

Janina Doyle 00:21:39 But now the interesting thing is you said about sustainability, your article the year before, funny enough, which is going to link to the rest of this episode and next week's episode, you wrote about Tablas Creek in Paso Robles in California and this winery of actually, it's insane, their sustainability, biodiversity ethics.

So, you've written all about that, I'll put links to those articles actually, in the show notes for everyone to listen to. But what I found really interesting is that Tablas Creek are the champions for bringing all of the, well, the Châteauneuf-du-de-Pape grape varieties from the Southern Rhône across to California.

So, I just wondered, was it the sustainability that grabbed you? Because I know that you have a real love for Southern Rhône. Or were the grape varieties actually more of the story that got you there in the first place when you went to visit?

Anna Spooner 00:22:28 It's a great question. So Jason, he's second generation, right? So, Tablas Creek was founded by his father in partnership with Chateau Beaucastel from the Southern Rhône.

So, they had an amazing nursery and you just touched on the kind of Rhône inspiration. They put the flag. They were one of the pioneers, certainly, of this Rhône ranger movement, but I think you could probably argue in terms of plant material, the most committed. Yeah, so I even spoke to, when I was there, Jason about it. And they said, I probably shouldn't repeat this, actually. There were a lot of sneaking vines. Not under his watch, I don't think, but a lot of sneaking vines.

Janina Doyle 00:23:11 That's how we have certain, yeah...

Anna Spooner 00:23:13 Less officially.

Janina Doyle 00:23:14 The suitcase clones. The suitcase clones. The burgundy pinot that came in.

Anna Spooner 00:23:19 Exactly. So, they had such an influence on the Rhône varietals, particularly in that part of the world in Paso. But I would also argue in California, I think, their influence is vast.

So, yes, that was inspiring. I was actually there on a trip with Wines of California in general as a journalist. I was kind of dabbling before I settled into the education sphere. I was dabbling with a bit of journalism as well.

And Jason was a little bit amazing. He was fascinating. He knows how wonderful I think he is. I've written about him. He's done work with me for the Wine Society. He's done so much stuff for me to help with

me and my study group in the MW. He's amazing.

Interestingly, what I was saying about the generations is I feel like his father and Beau still tie up. Their focus was really this Rhône movement. But the feeling that you get there now is that's just the standard.

Rhône is what they are working with and what suits their soils. And it took them a long time to find that site, by the way, in a time when Paso was so unpopular and so, literally kind of wild west. Nobody was making wine there that was any good or there were, but you know what I mean? On a scale that's being done now.

And that was kind of already done. So yes, they talked about the fact that there's all these – I think it's got every single, not only just the 13 permitted grape varieties of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, but it's got all the variants as well. So, it's got your Grenache Gris as well as Blanc and Rouge. It's got all of your weird and wonderful stuff.

Now I've never even tried, living in the Southern Rhône, I've never tried single varieties of some of the stuff that I've tried there. Wines made from one variety in the Rhône are like two hectares of plantings, which is amazing. But Jason now is second in command. It would be so easy to just ride on those coattails and make a career on that alone. And actually, what he's done is this sustainability piece.

And I had a very similar kind of eye-opening moment. It was 2017 when I was there. So, it was a while ago and I feel a bit out of date. I need to get back there as soon as possible. But it was one of those vineyards again, where you go, I was there in the autumn, you see it, you experience things like the birds of prey that have boxes for flying near over your head, getting gophers and etc. And you just go, whoa, you're so pioneering and so far in advance.

What's great about his wines in particular is you've got so many price points. So, people can support and get involved. He just pioneered a premium bag in Box Rosé in the States. It was a real struggle for him. He didn't have the set up. They were doing them by hand initially to even see whether they would sell. I think he launched something like 100 of the five liters. Don't quote me on that. I told you I'm awful with numbers.

They sold out in 36 hours or something like that. Again, we're talking smallish quantities at first. He suddenly went, oh my goodness, we need to do more of this because he's just a guy that says, let's give it a try or let's do something a bit different.

So, actually, the Rhône is interesting. Of course it is. There's wines there that you can taste at their cellar door that you won't find in the rest of the world. But the really interesting piece for me is what the direction that Jason has taken the business. So, yeah, it's very inspiring. And yeah, Tablas Creek, if listeners haven't come across those wines before, just Google, because they are more available than you'd think and they have different tiers of quality so you can kind of buy a £15 Californian wine, which is pretty hard to do for quality stuff full stop, but they're amazing value for money.

Janina Doyle 00:26:58 And actually, you hit the nail on the head as well. Not only for everyone. Now you're supporting a business that deserves to be supported, but like they have, so one of the permitted

Châteauneuf-du-Pape varieties, Terret Noir. I mean, is that even how we pronounce it? Terret Noir?

Anyway, probably. But they do it 100% single variety. All I know about that variety is that it's red and it gives good acidity or like freshness. I don't really know anything more about that because it's typically a blending grape that's going to be a tiniest percentage in a Châteauneuf-du-Pape wine, if at all. I mean, some Châteauneuf-du-Pape wines are just 100% Grenache, aren't they? But it's amazing. Tablas Creek, it's not just that. They do quite a few of them that are 100% single varieties.

Anna Spooner 00:27:40 Yeah, I tried my first 100% Counoise when I was there and I was like, this is extraordinary. And likewise, you know, There are no rules. Certainly the Southern Rhône is a lot more flexible than many appellations in France, but there are still pretty decent rules and you can't make a hundred percent of most of these grape varieties because of the whole minimum 60% Grenache or 70 or 75, depending on what you're talking about or whatever. Well, it depends. It varies by appellation and they're a bit flexible with that rule. I can tell you now being on the ground, that one is probably a little abused.

But the idea that somebody not from the region is making these wines, it's great because we genuinely wouldn't have – there's a lot of wines that I wouldn't ever have tried before and I probably won't ever try again because they're not exported. So, it is you go to the cellar door, you try them and they're amazing. Yeah, but are they gonna be the next Cabernet Sauvignon? Of course, they're not.

First of all, much harder to grow, less commercially appealing. It's an uphill battle, but are they making them because they're interesting? Yeah, and that's amazing. Very, very cool.

Janina Doyle 00:28:44 Shall we talk about the main red and white grape varieties of, we don't just have to say Châteauneuf-du-Pape, the most famous Southern Rhône region, because actually they're permitted 13 or 18 if you consider the Noir, Blanc, Gris . But there are even more varieties like Marsanne is not allowed to be in a Châteauneuf-du-Pape, but Roussane can be. I mean, that's curious. Where would you like to start letting everybody know the wonderful reds and whites of the Southern Rhône?

Anna Spooner 00:29:15 It's worth noting that you've mentioned there are, I actually don't know this number, but there must be 24 or so primitive grape varieties. If you count all different styles, you know, we could talk about styles of wine in a second, but there are loads of varieties.

There are regulations about how much you can blend into a certain appellation. There were even pretty big rules. Gigondas weren't allowed to make white wine until this year. And I don't think many people know that. Vacqueyras could, Châteauneuf du Pape could.

Gigondas could only make white wine as of this year. This is the first vintage. I tried my first legal white Gigondas. Well, you can make a Côtes du Rhône, right, from grapes grown in Gigondas, but why would you? I think a lot of people were gearing up because the quality was there, but you couldn't sell it for the same price because you have to delist it almost and take it from a Crus down to a Côtes du Rhône.

But actually, there are rules and regulations, but what the Southern Rhône does give you is quite a lot of flexibility. And then that's within the actual Southern Rhône system. So, Côtes du Rhône, Côtes du

Rhône village Cru, which we can talk about in a second.

But then you have these things called satellites. And that's talking about things like Mont Ventoux, which actually has flip-flopped slightly from being included in others. It's not always grouped with the Rhône.

But you start to talk about that and you get into a whole other world. I mean, we could talk for hours just on the wines of Ventoux because there was such variety. The Merlot being grown there is very interesting. Some of my favorite wines coming from the Southern Rhône at the moment, which are increasingly popular in trend, are Vermentino or Rolle, as it's known in Provençal or in French certainly, but Provençal too.

And Vermentino, an Italian grape variety grown here. And it's very historic here as well. It's not something that's just popped up here from Italy. This is a very, very historic wine here, but it's becoming really popular and they're making amazing wines from that.

So, I'm going to give you the textbook, if you like it. I'll give you the textbook, but I think it's really worth noting that the entire region of the Southern Rhône is unbelievably dynamic. And depending on where your limitation of what is and isn't to be included in the word Southern Rhône, there are endless opportunities when you start to talk about those satellites and IGP wines, et cetera.

But the main ones really that you want to think about in Southern Rhône, for reds, it's that GSM blend, the Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre. And in terms of the styles of wine that they make, they're much better in my opinion here, and I say here very strongly as a trio, because there are parts of the world where, for example, really fine wine from single varietal Grenache is amazing. I read today, actually, in McLaren Vale it's now the most expensive grape by tonne, Grenache.

Janina Doyle 00:32:07 Well, that says something doesn't it?

Anna Spooner 00:32:08 Yeah. And I think that there's this incredible movement of people making Grenache in a more Pinot Noir style, which is very interesting.

Janina Doyle 00:32:16 Older vines, higher altitude, absolutely.

Anna Spooner 00:32:20 Yeah, it's happening a bit in Spain. It's definitely happening in California. A tiny bit in Chile as well. The thing is the Southern Rhône is probably a bit too warm to ever get that real Pinot style but you can get grape wines just made from Grenache.

But for anyone less familiar with the grape, it tends to produce high alcohol. That's because it naturally produces high sugars. It has a moderate acidity. I would never describe Grenache as a low acidity, but it's definitely not naturally as high.

It's red fruit generally, and again, that's a really general idea, but I think here, particularly where we are in the Southern Rhône, one of the things that Grenache does that I love is it gives you that amazing herbaceous character that I really don't think you can find anywhere else. And I hate using language that

other people don't understand. And I'm about to.

Janina Doyle 00:33:08 Are you going to say garrigue?

Anna Spooner 00:33:09 I am. Yeah. I walk my dogs every day.

Janina Doyle 00:33:11 Oh, she did it!

Anna Spooner 00:33:12 I know I did it. I walk my dogs every day. And I'll tell you what garrigue really is, because let's be honest, garrigue sounds pretentious. I walk my dogs every day in the vineyards behind our house. There is wild thyme. There is a kind of like cousin of lavender. There is also lavender. And then it's this kind of, it's not a verbena smell, but I'm not entirely sure what it is.

Janina Doyle 00:33:32 Juniper? Juniper. No?

Anna Spooner 00:33:11 Yeah, what, like a Génépi drink. That's what I think of when I think of Génépi. Génépi is a personal favorite beverage. No, yeah, it has got that kind of sweet, not anise, but yeah, that kind of something to it.

And I love it when the dogs run through that because they smell fantastic when they come back to me. So, when people are talking about garrigue, it is very much that dried herbal note. And you can avoid using pretentious terms like garrigue and just say dried herbs. But I think it's that very specific wild lavender, thyme.

Janina Doyle 00:34:10 It's floral, but it's still not quite just floral on its own. And it's dried herbs, but then maybe there's a minty, like this sweeter intensity. So, it's garrigue.

Anna Spooner 00:34:21 Yeah, I know. And it's horrible, isn't it? But there isn't anything to replace it, so the best we can do is describe it. And so, that's Grenache for you. And that's Grenache Rouge. And that's the big boy down here.

It's very much supported by Syrah and Mourvèdre. But before I go into those, what's really interesting about Grenache is, I read a study about people that tested to see, very much, much smarter than me, sciencey people who tested to see what the perfect set of parameters would be for a grape variety to be resistant to both drought and heat. And they kind of did modeling and they said, here's what the grape needs to have, et cetera, et cetera.

And Grenache comes out at 98% hit. There is no grape variety – So, a lot of people say, oh, but Mourvèdre is great because of drought resistance and it's kind of the next up and coming grape around here. And that's true. Lots of people are planting Mourvèdre, but they're planting it instead of Syrah, not instead of Grenache.

Syrah is going to struggle here with climate change, with the heat and the drought. Mourvèdre isn't. So, historically where it would have been a GSM blend, Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre, it's probably going to become a GMS, so swap those two.

But actually the reality is that Grenache still produces, yes at higher alcohols, but Grenache still produces incredible wines in the conditions here, which are high levels of drought and high water stress effectively and high temperatures.

And there is no, apparently according to this study, and I think it was by Agro Bordeaux. There is no better grape variety. I'll check that. I'll tell you what, I'll send you a link if I can find it, because it's a really good study. But it's basically said there is no better grape variety for these conditions.

Ancestors were onto something, let's put it like that. So, Grenache will continue in my view to dominate the Southern Rhône. But as I mentioned, Syrah and Mourvèdre, the two main supporters, will probably swap. So, the secondary becomes Mourvèdre, it is more drought tolerant. It tends to have a herbaceous note as well, but much darker.

My mum always says it reminds her of farmyards, and I can get that. It can be a little more earthy. It certainly can have a licorice feeling to it. But actually, Mourvèdre produced solo in places like California, where it's a bit more trendy. On a lighter touch, it's actually a very elegant and beautiful wine. So, don't be put off. And I think it's always got a bit of a bad rep that it's the rough and ready of the trio. And that's just not true. I think it's probably been a little bit under-loved in the region.

Janina Doyle 00:35:56 That's true. Yeah, it's not just maybe the salt and pepper. It's not maybe just the drums at the back of the band. I suppose it's the older the vines, if the winemakers are dealing with those yields that we talked about, then you can possibly control the slightly chunkier version that for instance, Monastrell down in Jumilla down in Spain. That's where you're going to see Mourvèdre known as Monastrell there as the beefy full-bodied style, right?

Anna Spooner 00:37:25 Yeah. And it might be, producers are experimenting around here with picking Mourvèdre earlier. What does that do? So, that's an interesting comment. But Syrah is going to struggle. There's no two ways about it.

There are certain regions that will be better than others. But for example, Châteauneuf-du-Pape is one of the warmest places in the whole of the Southern Rhône. And there's a reason why the best wines are usually, well, you can get some amazing 100% Châteauneuf-du-Pape. And Syrah struggles amongst other things.

Yeah, in Châteauneuf, sorry, 100% Grenache in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Because Syrah struggles and you don't need it as much and Grenache thrives. There are places where Syrah does slightly better. So when you start to get a touch of altitude, it tends to come into its own a bit.

Vinsobres is one of the Cru that sits slightly separately to some of the other crus of the Southern Rhône. And there's quite a lot of nice Syrah produced there. So, there are pockets of good Syrah, but it tends to, if you ask anybody what it does, it's like the backbone. It provides the structure and it provides a bit more tannin and a bit more acidity and also the darker fruits. Although, it can be red-fruited too. Structurally, it tends to be that support.

If you want to have a Bordeaux comparison, then the two I would compare would be Merlot being the

sort of fruity, friendly one. That's Grenache. And then you've got your structured, more lean style, which is Syrah, which is Cabernet. But I don't think that's the greatest comparison, but for anyone who wants a frame of reference and knows Bordeaux a bit better, that's one way of thinking about it.

Generally, those three are the main ones. So, there is a little bit of flex, but you've mentioned salt and pepper. And I do love that term because there is seasoning from other grapes. And particularly, when you move into Châteauneuf, which has a bit more flexibility on those grapes, yes, there is. But in reality, the reds are maybe a little more rigid.

The whites are where things get really quite flexible. I wouldn't say there's a cookie cutter version of a white in Southern Rhône. Historically, it's been Grenache Blanc based, again, the DNA, although the color of the grape is different, the DNA is still very suited to the climatic conditions. But for the reasons I kind of just described, Grenache is a little lower in acidity, and there is a huge consumer trend, not just in the Rhône, but globally for these fresh, lighter white wines.

And so, Grenache can do that, but not as well maybe as other grapes. So, I'm seeing everywhere an increase in some of those lighter, fresher grape varieties. So, the two that really hit me, maybe because I love them and I look for them, but they are everywhere, Bourboulenc and Clairette.

And those two varieties in particular are – I mean, there's a producer I love in Vacqueyras that makes 100% Clairette, Vacqueyras, and it's amazing. Clos des Cazaux – And he oaks. He's got one oaked, one un-oaked version. Really amazing. And there is definitely an appetite from blending more of those in. They give kind of a freshness, a salinity, and a sprightliness to the wines, which can sometimes be a little heavy.

White Southern Rhône has not always been popular, but equally you can also blend, depending on your appellation, you can blend Viognier, Marsanne, Roussanne, obviously we've just talked about the Marsanne-Roussanne Châteauneuf Conundrum. There's flexibility in both colors, but certainly the white grapes, I would say, there's less of this kind of classic GSM rule. You will often turn a bottle around in the Southern Rhône, by the way, they're pretty good at saying which grapes go into it.

They'll never tell you numbers, maybe that's why I like it. But they tend to tell you what's gone on. There are producers experimenting with all sorts. There's a lady who's planted a load of Gewürztraminer, making an IGP wine out of that.

An amazing producer I know who I won't name, I'll probably end up naming them later for something else, but they've sneakily planted some Chenin Blanc and called it Roussanne on, I think it's Roussanne, on the cadastre, on the mat.

Janina Doyle 00:41:21 How dare they?

Anna Spooner 00:41:22 Yes, naughty, naughty. It's great living in a place because you get all these inside scoops. So, it's actually Chenin that's going into that blend and it's amazing. It's a really beautiful blend and it's an IGP wine, but they declare some of the other bits.

So, there's a lot more experimentation, I'd say, going on with the whites. And I think that's because the consumer is less familiar with what to expect on the Rhône white. And because of that, there's this incredible dynamism and how fun let's, yeah, let's throw some illegal Chenin there or generally Grenache is Grenache, Viognier, Marsanne and Roussanne are the ones you will read about. And the ones that you will read about less but are increasingly popular are Clairette and Bourboulenc, which are those two that are bringing the freshness now.

Janina Doyle 00:42:08 You've kind of touched on the grapes. We should possibly look at this kind of style because it's not just red, white and rosé in the Southern Rhône, is there?

Anna Spooner 00:42:19 Yeah, the textbook answer is if you want to, again, the styles of the Rhône would be big red wines, big white wines, dark rosé from somewhere like Tavel and Vin Doux Naturels with Vin Doux Naturels with being the sweet fortified wines. But really, actually, the reality is more nuanced than that.

You've kind of got lighter styles of white being made that I've already touched on. Everybody always says, oh, but you've got Clairette de Die and sparkling wines. Very, very little of them.

Janina Doyle 00:42:50 It's in the Northern part.

Anna Spooner 00:42:51 Yeah, I mean, Northern Rhône producers would probably say, it's there, a lot of Southern Rhône producers have their finger in that pie. But the one thing that I would say is really sad is that Vin Doux Naturels and the Southern Rhône are really not doing that well. So they're incredible wines. Rasteau, for example, is a sweet red Vin Doux Naturels.

And what's a bit of a shame there is if you're into port, particularly your lighter ports, so your reserves, it's a really great French alternative. And I asked somebody the other day, who's your main target market for your VDNs, your Vin Doux Naturels? And they said, restaurants to make sauce. And that broke my heart. And that was a genuine answer. People are not buying these wines anymore. Not only are they a little touch of history, they're actually also really good quality and they take time. They're really hard to make.

Janina Doyle 00:43:39 Those Vin Doux Naturels from Rasteau, very often they are the Rancio aged style that's really nutty and there's the chocolatey, tobacco, smoked, coffee style, which are fantastic.

But in fact, I don't know the exact dates because we don't like numbers and dates, do we? But the Vin Doux Naturel Rasteau was actually, has had decades of being an appellation, whereas as just for red wine, I do know this actually since 2010 because I did actually write an article. I actually wrote about Rasteau, but considering that's what they're now going for as a region.

Anna Spooner 00:44:19 Yeah, in terms of the quality pyramid, it predated there's still dry wines. So, definitely. And things like Beaume de Venise.

Janina Doyle 00:44:28 Precisely, which is beautiful when you see if you don't like the Rancio, the oxidised style, then you have that beautiful, floral, fun, fruity, youthful, fortified sweet wine made from

Muscat. It smells and tastes like flowers. Who doesn't want that?

Anna Spooner 00:44:43 Exactly. And those are not common wines now, and I think that's a terrible shame. And people don't know the drinking occasion for them. And actually, again, everybody has Vin Doux Naturels with pudding. Well, no, actually, Muscat de Beaume de Venise was historically an aperitif wine here that you'd have with your game of pétanque before your dinner, and people still do that, but in smaller quantities.

Muscat de Beaume de Venise probably has a little bit more sway, I'd say globally, but also locally, but the red Vin Doux Naturels are really suffering a bit of a death. The main thing I'd say about the styles of wine is that everything in the Southern Rhône is definitely leaning towards the lightness of touch.

So, earlier picks, different types of pruning, all sorts of things are going into how do we reduce the alcohol and reduce the bigness. Terrible English from me there. But where historically you'd have gone right, Southern Rhône means big cuddle monster being hit over their head with a big Grenache bomb. That's just not actually as true as it used to be.

And especially, when you get into appellations like Gigondas, where you have got a bit of elevation, they are owning that now. They are saying, right, let's plant in the shaded areas. Let's plant higher and higher and higher. And the limits have kind of already been reached. But certainly, there's a push towards, how do we lighten up the style across the Southern Rhône.

And there's a producer down the road from me and I will name drop them because I know they're sold by a few places in the UK, but not a huge amount. And they're a lovely winery called La Borie, Château La Borie based in Suz-La-Rousse, which is where I am.

They are producing things like a Claret. So, not the great variety Clairette, how confusing. A Claret as in, and not Clairette de Die, oh God, it's all so confusing. A Claret as in the old fashioned light red.

Janina Doyle 00:46:35 Bordeaux-style.

Anna Spooner 00:46:37 Exactly. And they're doing a line from, basically, a GSM blend version of one of those. And it is stonking. You know, it's my real, real find recently. And I took some MW friends there the other day and everybody loved it. Like, this is so cool. Very light extraction so it kind of looks like, it doesn't quite look like a dark rosé, it's very much more on the pale red side.

And don't get me wrong, I tried it with my parents who've lived here for eight years and are very used to the traditional styles and they hated it.

Janina Doyle 00:47:12 It's not for everyone.

Anna Spooner 00:47:12 It confused them. And they were like, this is very different to everything we drink. And I was like, yeah, it certainly is.

Janina Doyle 00:47:21 So, this is for wine adventurers.

Anna Spooner 00:47:24 Yeah, exactly. And everybody thinks of the Rhône as this stuffy place with very little invention, and that's just not true.

Janina Doyle 00:47:30 What about Tavel? The fact that you just mentioned the producers doing like a really light red. Well, this is the 100% rosé Cru. It deserves so much more attention. What are they doing? Are they sticking with their style? Because of course, for anyone who doesn't know, Tavel is much darker in color. You're not going to see that ballet slipper, that light salmon color. This is darker, but it is a dry rosé with earthiness and ommpph. So, are they just behaving themselves and doing, in my opinion, the right thing and saying, we don't care, we're sticking, this is what we're known for, we make good rosé?

Anna Spooner 00:48:07 So, yes and no. I think what's interesting, well, what's interesting is that there's people doing not only – there's people doing both as well, by the way, I should say that. It's not like one size fits all again, it's not, okay, we're only going to put all of our eggs in the dark basket, or we're actually going to swap and follow trends and go to the pale.

But first things first, we're talking about Grenache dominant wines. And Grenache as a pale rosé is not always as appealing, should we say? Sorry, that was a horrible thing to say. Grenache as a pale rosé doesn't always naturally lend itself, 100% Grenache or high volumes of Grenache doesn't lend itself in the way that it does in Provence, for example, where you have it blended with things like Cinsault and sometimes something like Rolle or Vermentino, a white wine in there as well.

There's a reason that those Provence Rosés work. There's mechanics in what is a very lovely, easy drinking style in some cases, a very fine wine in others in Provence, but there's definitely a difference. They're not working with the same material.

So, I don't think for a second that anyone in Tavel is actually chasing a Provence wine in the same exact way. But I do think that there are people that have certainly lightened the color. But there are also people who've stuck to their guns. There are people who've changed their techniques.

So, Saignée was obviously very popular, i.e. bleeding off some red wine, or wine as it's fermenting into red wine midway through to increase the color of the red, which nobody wants to do anymore, and to produce a rosé, this Saignée style. Yes, some people are still doing that, but equally a lot more people are doing the direct press method, which can get a bit more control of the color. A bit of both is the answer. Tavel is, I mean, it depends which producers you go to, and Tavel's amazing anyway, but I think you could probably use Tavel as an example, actually, to represent the entirety of the Southern Rhône.

That's not just an exclusive, although Tavel's maybe the most interesting to talk about rosé because it is, like you say, the only Cru that only is allowed to make rosé. That's a bit of a unicorn in the wine world. What? A Cru that is rosé only? But what's interesting is that that's that same trend, i.e. combos, is certainly true of the entire Southern Rhône Valley.

So, I worked at a winery, Domaine de Mourchone, who produced two rosés on purpose. They have a wine called Soubois, which is literally their dark, almost Saignée method style rosé, made with Syrah,

dominance, oak aged, and then they have a light, they call it a poolside rosé, but it's a disservice.

And when you look at the two bottles next to each other, the bottles are different as well. The Soubois darker rosé is in a Bordeaux bottle. The other rosé, which is much paler, is in a more traditional Rhône bottle, but it is much, much paler. Two different price points, completely two different winemakings.

So, I think that's a good example. They're incredible wines as well. Soubois was, I can't remember which journalist it was. Oh, it's Elizabeth Gabay, sorry, MW, who does the Rosé Report. And about three years ago, put Soubois, I think, in her top five rosé of the year. You know, it's this gastro wine. It's like the Tavel of old.

Janina Doyle 00:51:22 Hopefully people, it's not just about Provence. I'm just like, I feel like one of our jobs in the wine world is to get people continue enjoying the whatever else is enjoying, but step away and experiment with different styles.

Anna Spooner 00:51:35 Yeah, and it's funny, isn't it, how I've just mentioned that Claret from the winery near me, the reds seem to be getting paler and paler and paler. And that is bordering into rosé territory. And yet people have the fear to do the opposite, which is to let the rosé get darker. You kind of just want to say, you know, at some point they meet in the middle.

At some point, it's hard to say which is which, but there's definitely a desire of consumers to move to paler red and nervousness about darkening up a rosé. I think we maybe just all need to reconsider drinking occasions slightly. We don't need to have only a rosé in an ice bucket when it hits 25 degrees C and we're all a little warm and we say, let's get the rosé on ice.

Actually, a really dark, beautiful Tavel or a beautiful dark Spanish rosé or, it doesn't have to be Tavel, but obviously I would love to trumpet the Southern Rhône rosé. But those are amazing. Slightly less chilled with food. Incredible.

Janina Doyle 00:52:34 There was this amazing rosé going back to California from Antica Terra. And I used to sell it, they're very expensive, everyone. So, I'm not recommending you run out to get it, but it was incredible. And I'm sure it was made from Pinot Noir,

Anyway, and I worked for a restaurant where we served steak and crab, norwegian king crab at the same time. So, it's very difficult to come up with ideal pairings because very often people just wanted one bottle of wine and you're like, oh, what do I do? So, I had a selection of rosés on the list that were very big rosés. And what I would often get people to do is that the rosé would be taken out of the fridge. And I'd recommend that they start with their Norwegian king crab and have the bottle of wine on the table just warming up.

So, by the time they got to their steak, now your rosé wine is actually becoming – you know, where does the rosé stop and where does the red wine start? And actually, when you change the temperature, you change the texture in your mouth and the feel and it actually was a really interesting experience. So, that was just a wine that just sticks in my head for the one that I used. But yeah, I'd love to try that with Tavel and I imagine it would be a lot better price point.

Anna Spooner 00:53:41 Yeah, that's the amazing thing as well, isn't it? The versatility of a Tavel rosé is that the price point is second to none. But I always found paella quite a hard dish to pair with because there's a lot going on.

Janina Doyle 00:53:54 Spice, chorizo, often fish. Very good point.

Anna Spooner 00:53:58 Yeah. And so, I found that it was particularly the Soubois is now my go-to. It's very uninspiring to me that I use this exactly the same wine whenever I make paella but it's really helpful to have a wine that you know works and the reason it works is it's still got some lovely freshness to it but the reality is because there are meats that need a bit more, et cetera, and the spice, blah, blah, blah sometimes a rosé is going to be better than a white.

Janina Doyle 00:54:22 Done. Tick. Everyone, now you understand.

Anna Spooner 00:54:24 Yeah.

Janina Doyle 00:54:28 Next week, part two, we continue the deep dive and it is 100% about the regions of Southern Rhône. We'll be comparing Gigondas with Chateauneuf-du-Pape, discussing what is Côtes du Rhône. And of course, Anna is going to be giving you tips, tricks, where to go, where to visit, where to stay.

So, this episode was just the warm up to get you ready for next week's. So, finishing off with a wine quote, like always, I have French writer Alexandre Dumas who said:

“Wine, the intellectual part of the meal.”

Right, that's it for this week. Do share this podcast with your wine loving friends. Subscribe, like and rate. And I'll see you here back next week. Until then, wine friends, cheers to you.