

Ep 168: The Regions of the Southern Rhône with Stage 2 MW student Anna Spooner (Part 2)



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. And welcome back to another episode where today we are focusing on the Southern Rhône region and digging deeper. So, this is part two with Stage two Master of Wine student Anna Spooner, who has actually moved to live in the Southern Rhône.

So, this specific episode, we're going to be focusing on Côtes du Rhône, Côtes du Rhône Villages, the Crus, what does that all mean? We'll be looking at the most famous Cru, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and how does that compare to Gigondas? We'll talk about a region called Ventoux, which is very interesting, quite up and coming and definitely a region to know about. And Anna is going to be talking about the lesser known areas, places where we can find value, where to visit.

Don't forget there's always a transcript to each episode, so if we're mentioning regions and you want to know how they're spelt, just go to my show notes and you'll find the link, or you can go to my website <https://eatsleepwinerepeat.co.uk/podcasts/>. And if you have not visited [Wickham's Wine](#) yet, the link is also in my show notes.

They are the sponsors of this season. And being Decanters' Best Specialist Retailer for South and Regional France, this is the time to grab yourself a Rhône Valley wine from them, pour it out and listen to the episode. Don't forget to use my code "EATSLEEP10" for 10% off your first order. Right, let's discuss these Villages and the Crus of the Southern Rhône.

Janina Doyle 00:02:06 What I'd love to do is just differentiate for anybody who thinks that the Rhône Valley is just the Rhône Valley. We are going to talk today about Southern Rhône. But could you just very quickly touch on why Northern Rhône is actually so different from the Southern Rhône so people understand why you're getting bigger flavours or why typically Southern Rhône is famous traditionally for bigger, heavy reds and whites?

Anna Spooner 00:02:30 I will do so in storytelling as opposed to stats.

Janina Doyle 00:02:35 Yes! Yes!

Anna Spooner 00:02:37 I'm not going to sit here and talk to you about how many grapes are permitted in each, but the really basic overview of grapes, first of all, is that in the Northern Rhône,

Syrah is the only real red grape that you can make Cru wine or equivalent of. In the South, I've already mentioned, Grenache dominates, but you also get Syrah and you get Mourvedre as well.

I would also say that one of the key things for me is not only that with the red wines, but the white wines, there's again, that level of flexibility is actually a little bit higher in Northern Rhône. You have Viognier for somewhere like Condrieu, but you also have Marsanne, Roussanne. We're not talking massive flexibility, but we're talking some flexibility.

In the South, I've already mentioned the grape varieties. So you can kind of get an idea already. The South has a bigger menu. You've got a lot more to choose from in the Southern Rhône. That doesn't necessarily mean you're going to use it. You might end up still making a wine that matches the grape varieties of the North, but the Southern has a bigger menu.

And so, the variation in the North, in fact, comes from more of the soils. Imagine it's like Burgundy, where you're planting Pinot Noir the whole time, so the main difference is going to be where are you planting it, and how are you planting it, and how are you making it, not which grape is going into it. Your raw materials, you've limited one factor.

So, in the north, things like aspect and soil type become really critical. You have things like granite outcrops in the Hermitage versus slightly down the hill of Crozes-Hermitage, you have more sand and clay. And things like that can bear a huge difference in the grape. And I'm not saying you can taste granite or you can taste sand and clay, but because of things like the water holding properties of those soils, nutrient efficiencies or deficiencies, all sorts of things, because of that classic terroir statement, that becomes very important in the North.

Not to say that it isn't important in the South, but the soils are very varied in the South, so each appellation is not maybe as generic. It's much bigger in the South. So, the North you can kind of think of as a very lovely, thin, long corridor of slopes and the South is a lot more varied.

I mean, again, if you throw in Mont Ventoux, we start to go into a crazy amount of very, very different terroir. If we've got time, we can talk about that in a bit. But for the Crus alone, you have the limestone outcrop, which is in the south of the Dentelles de Montmirail, which is a beautiful mountain. Great for hiking. If anybody's a big adventurer and explorer, it's a beautiful place for hiking, biking, rock climbing.

And those are limestones. So, you have your Gigondas, your Beaume-de-Venise in the foothills of Vacqueyras. And then kind of plopping along from that down in the valleys a bit more, you have Rasteau and Cairanne.

So, you've already got a differentiation there. You then go into this dogleg in the more plain by the river with alluvial soils where you start to find Chateauneuf de Pape, Tavel, Lirac, the new appellation Laudun, which is about this year. So, as of this vintage, you had it here first. New Cru.

Janina Doyle 00:05:56 That's going to be, am I right, the 10th? I think there's nine Crus.

Anna Spooner 00:06:01 This will be number 10 for the South. So, there's eight in the North and this will make it 10 in the South. It's worth saying in the South, that includes the two Vin Doux Naturel Appellations as well.

So, they have their own appellation. So, there's Beaumes-de-Venise for still dry wines. And then there's Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise for the Vin Doux Naturel. So, there's going to be 10 total Crus in the South. Well, there are now. It's this year. And the wine's made from the 2023 vintage, I believe.

And I must apologise because I've actually only heard it said a couple of times, Laudun. And I'm not totally convinced I actually know how to say it. Because it's not as maybe recognised or well known. So, it was a Côtes du Rhône Villages. So, the way that the promotion works is like a pyramid. You start at Côtes du Rhône, then you go to Côtes du Rhône Villages, then you go to Côtes du Rhône Villages with the name.

So, this was Côtes du Rhône Villages Laudun. And then you get all of the Côtes du Rhône blah, blah, blah removed and it goes just to the name because you're kind of deemed that you're good enough that you don't even need to be known. It's not Côtes du Rhône Villages Châteauneuf-du-Pape. There wouldn't be enough room on the label.

Janina Doyle 00:07:12 No.

Anna Spooner 00:07:15 So yeah, so there's that. But there's the two main differences from almost a visual, but actually the growing conditions point of view. If you leave soil out of it slightly because soil is variable across both. If you leave soil out of it, then really the main things are the slopes.

Everybody says the Southern Rhône is flat. That's clearly not true. I've just explained you can go hiking up some mountains, where Gigondas is grown. But if you work a harvest in the Southern Rhône, you're going to get a suntan. If you work a harvest in the Northern Rhône, you're going to get a bad back.

There's really steep slopes of the Northern Rhône. Those are defining places. Yes, okay, Crozes-Hermitage is slightly lower and St. Joseph is slightly more undulating, but overall slopes are important. But also with them being slightly more northerly, the weather really is different. There is more rain, the temperature is cooler – considerably cooler. And although it's not flat-flat down South, more undulating for sure, rather than steep.

And then the other thing really other than that is the North has less effect of Mistral, the big wind, although I'm sure in the North, some days they would argue they still get it. But in the South, my goodness, that is where the textbook is correct. They say, the Mistral wind. Actually, do you know what? There are days when I can't open my car door because the Mistral is blowing so much.

Janina Doyle 00:08:38 No!

Anna Spooner 00:08:38 Yeah, where I'm like, oh, push, push, push. So, it is real, yes. Don't think how much can a wind affect my wine? It's amazing. It's a doctor. It gets rid of disease, but my goodness, it makes the growing conditions hard work. Things have to be trained differently.

If you're training a vine differently, it will grow in a certain way. You have to have certain varieties that can withstand it. Grenache happens to have a very rigid fat trunk. There's a reason Grenache is ideal in the Southern Rhône. And I've already mentioned the temperature and the drought, but the

Mistral is another one. You can't put a flimsy, beautiful, slim, gorgeous vine here. It's going to blow over in a second. So, we have to have our incredible witch's fingers.

Janina Doyle 00:09:27 And you talked about the fact that the way the vines are trellised. So, actually, I think Châteauneuf-du-Pape, well, it's the most famous Cru anyway. It's the original Cru. But actually, when people Google maybe images of the Southern Rhône, I would imagine a lot of the time they will get an image of these bush vines, these big fat, gnarly bush vines and with the pudding stones.

And you get them across actually the Southern Rhône in different areas. So, actually, that might be a really good one just to talk about that so people can kind of maybe imagine what they would see.

Anna Spooner 00:10:03 Yeah. If you imagine the Northern Rhône as a big V and you have got granite, you've got sand, clay, you've got some limestone, you've got a real combination. But you can almost imagine that the rocks are much finer. It's sort of a slope where you'd walk down and slip.

In the Southern Rhône, Châteauneuf-du-Pape is a particularly good example of this because it's flatter. It's an, effectively an old riverbed. It's alluvial soil. By that I mean that it was part of the riverbed. It was actually part of a sea, some of it.

But the stones are round because of constant erosion, so water passes over them, which has softened them up. There's obviously no water there now. Very old soils and very nutrient deficient actually. That's a big challenge. Obviously those stones don't continue down, down, down. There are other soils underneath it and those are usually a combination of clay and all sorts of other things. But those pudding stones do do a job in that they reflect heat. Interestingly, pudding stones that were once so trendy to try and get these high alcohol wines of the 80s that everybody adores.

Janina Doyle 00:11:08 Are now a problem.

Anna Spooner 00:11:11 Are actually not as popular as you might think now. Now, here's the classic photo moment. So, you see the bush vines growing on the pudding stones. They're low to the ground. So, if you imagine, if the sunlight is hitting those pudding stones, reflecting up, because they're these lovely white big rocks, reflecting up, giving these grapes the glow up.

But then they also store the heat. So, in the night, you get this kind of constant warm energy helping the grapes to ripen. Grenache used to need that. And now with climate change, it's just not that necessary anymore.

So, I think it's worth flagging. Pudding stones does not equal best quality wine, but it certainly is the kind of core. It's the hallmark picture card moment of the Southern Rhône. And there are plenty of other places in the Southern Rhône that have those pudding stones. So, there's a Villages, Côtes du Rhône Villages, Plan de dieu, which is based around a few Villages like Travailon and a few others, and that's full of pudding stones. You drive down and you could be in Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

The soils underneath are slightly different and it's not got the same elevation to Cru, but it certainly can produce a similar style of wine and those do tend to be the higher alcohols. So, those pudding stones can often equal high alcohols, which you need to know how to manage them these days.

Janina Doyle 00:12:23 Do you think then that, let's say the other cru, Gigondas, which was very often named as, wasn't it, the poor man's Chateuneuf du Pape, it wasn't as big, it wasn't as bold. That's actually probably massively helping Gigondas now. I mean, I think they've got similar regulations, strict requirements that they have to follow. They're very similar. But actually, now I think they're harder to tell apart, aren't they?

Anna Spooner 00:12:45 Yeah. And actually, do you know what? Gigondas is probably, in my opinion, where you can find the best value for money in the premium wines of the Southern Rhône. Consistently high quality across most of the producers there. It's always played second fiddle. And I do think stylistically, there are some similarities to be found, but there are also some major differences.

So, the alcohol does tend to be lower, which is great. And obviously increasingly popular. They have a little more freshness. So, the elevations there can vary, but let's say 400 metres is a pretty good point of context. But they go all up these Dentelles de Montmirail slopes. So it kind of depends which producer and which vineyards.

But you are definitely talking about an elevation that is much higher than Chateauneuf. And I've mentioned it slightly already, I think they have some shading. So, the Dentelle actually provides a real shady area that is, again, historically not very popular. We want sunshine, sunshine, sunshine. And now people are seeking out those little parcels.

So, I think yes, quality wise, if you were going on quality alone, Gigondas, Châteauneuf du Pape, they're beating the same drum for sure. But I do think stylistically where Chateauneuf-du-Pape is struggling in terms of having to work harder to get freshness, Gigondas has the luxury of having nature provide some extra freshness for it because of that elevation, because of the shading.

So, Chateauneuf-du-Pape producers are amazing in general as a rule. So, they can do it. If anyone can do it, they can do it. They can invest. It can come down to things as simple as leaf shading, whether they cut the canopies, etc., to ensure that the Grenache doesn't get sunburned. So, there are plenty of techniques they can use, but I think increasingly with temperatures rising in the region, Gigondas is probably going to have the edge. Personal opinion.

Janina Doyle 00:14:40 Gigondas gets a big tick, but what about Vacqueyras? Because if somebody were to look at a map of the Southern Rhône, they would see that Vacqueyras is right next door to Gigondas.

And I guess I think in the past, that Cru still had a bit of a reputation for being a little bit more rustic. But I think presumably now again, with all producers sharing knowledge, learning, doing all these things in the vineyard, I mean, do you feel that that's still slightly...?

Anna Spooner 00:15:05 Really, if you're picking apart details here, because you can get people that make incredibly elegant Vacqueyras that you would think taste like Gigondas. But if you're really picking apart the details again of the raw materials, then Vacqueyras has lower elevation, so it tends to be a little warmer, but bear in mind that 100 metres is one degree Celsius.

So, even if we're talking about one or two degrees Celsius, that can make a difference in a growing season where things are warm. We've got lower elevation. We've also got slightly different soils. So, the soils in Gigondas are lighter. They tend to be limestone sand-based.

And Vacqueyras stops being as influenced by that limestone outcrop, the Dentelles de Montmirail. It's further set back from that outcrop. So, actually what you end up with there is, rustic is a challenging word, isn't it? It's a bit like when we were talking about garrigue earlier. What does rustic really mean? But what you do have for sure is a kind of density, a richness, at times that less elegant and finesse.

But I hate to use less elegant and finesse because that makes it sound like it's less good. It's just different. And if you do get the opportunity to taste them side by side, particularly from the same producer, I mentioned Clos des Cazaux earlier, you make the 100% Clairette white wine.

They have vineyards in both Gigondas and Vacqueyras. And I host tours in the Southern Rhône and I often take people to Clos des Cazaux because it's a great one to taste a range of wines grown a few hundred metres apart, but on different soils from a different Crus. And they're a beautiful producer for that example.

There's lots of producers who will say, oh, we make a Côtes du Rhône and we make a Châteauneuf and we make a Gigondas. It's like, yeah, but they're from very different parts of the region. Whereas this producer, it's an estate producer. They can see or drive very close distances to all their vineyards, but they are on that boundary and they recognise that boundary is real. The soil changes enough for them to say, yes, our wines are different because of the change in the soil and the change in the aspect and so.

Janina Doyle 00:17:13 I think those kinds of experiences with wine really open up your eyes. That's the geekiness in us. That's what we're looking for. But when we're trying to explain to consumers why you might go for one Cru rather than another, it's so wonderful for them, even if they struggle to describe the wine, it doesn't matter. They're going to see that, oh, this seems darker and more plush and this one seems brighter. And then, "Oh, the texture is different." It's fascinating.

Anna Spooner 00:17:45 And so, if you want it to be really basic in terms of drinking occasion, which I think can help sometimes get people into where do these wines sit. For me, Gigondas is quite an autumnal wine. You can use it when you're transitioning into winter. I'm really talking about broad brushstrokes generalisation here.

But when Vacqueyras moves into that winter wine, it tends to be something that you have with more like stews rather than leaner cuts of meat. And again, huge generalisations and it comes down to personal preference, but there is a difference.

Janina Doyle 00:18:26 Okay. And now you said you take people on tours. First of all, if somebody wanted to have a tour with you, if they went to your website, they could then just send you an email and say, Anna, take us out. Right?

Anna Spooner 00:18:28 I'll say I'd love to.

Janina Doyle 00:18:29 What's your website, by the way? I'm going to put the link in the show notes, but what is your website?

Anna Spooner 00:18:34 I like to keep things simple. It's literally just <https://www.annaspoonerwine.com/>— all one word.

Janina Doyle 00:18:40 I don't know if I'll remember that, but anyway, yeah, links below. Anyway, do you adapt the tours all the time to people's preferences or do you have some pretty defined routes that you love to take people out on?

Anna Spooner 00:18:53 No. So, what I do is I do a pre-tour interview. That sounds way more formal than it is.

Janina Doyle 00:18:59 Oh, gosh! I'm scared now. Okay.

Anna Spooner 00:19:03 No. We'll ask you a few questions over an email and some clients I do a zoom with if they're more comfortable. Sometimes it's a couple and they'll be on an email chain. I've had great groups before where it's actually easier rather than an awful email chain of 10 people replying. It's easier to just all jump on a zoom call at a time that suits.

It's much better for me to understand what you want out of an experience. It's certainly, and this is definitely not a negative, some people will love to go to a winery because of the views and they want to take a walk in the vineyards, which I obviously love doing, and they want to see the incredible sights or they want to be able to take that photo with the Mont Ventoux in the background or take a photo holding the pudding stones or whatever it looks like.

And that is fine. I'm really okay with that. I love doing that, too. But some people would actually much rather do, as I just mentioned, say, "I want to learn the difference between Vacqueyras and Gigondas by the end of this trip. Or I want to know what these grape varieties taste like, or I want to know who the up and coming producers are that none of my friends have heard of."

And there is no one size fits all for a tour. I remember going to Franschoek in South Africa for the first time and my friends that I was with said, "Can we go on the wine tram?" And I said, "Yeah, cool. It's an amazing experience." But I said, "As a wine professional, I would like to make my own tour." And luckily, you can pay people like me to do that for you.

So, you don't have to do the thinking. You can offload to me and tell me, and I can do the work and do the research. So, I've kind of basically designed my business based on what I want out of my wine tours, really.

Janina Doyle 00:20:53 Well, now I'm going to lead you into talking about Ventoux because you've mentioned this several times now. I don't know if I'm right or wrong, but I have a sneaky suspicion that this area is close to your heart. You seem to really have an affiliation with this area.

Anna Spooner 00:21:11 Yeah, I think probably because it's a place that less people know about. They might have seen it on the Tour de France. My husband's a very keen cyclist and we two have our love of Mont Ventoux from two very, very different directions.

Janina Doyle 00:21:28 I will go with your one. I prefer your one.

Anna Spooner 00:21:30 Yeah, I've certainly never biked up to the top of it, but he loves to. And it is an incredible place, full stop. It's beautiful. It looks like it's got snow on it all year round, but it's actually limestone, pure limestone at the top.

It is high, don't get me wrong, but everybody assumes it's really, really, really high and constantly gets snow on it. That's limestone. But the really amazing thing is it's got this kind of convection current, which pulls cool air down from the top and takes it down to the lower parts, which is where the vineyards are.

And that in itself is probably why I'm the most interested, not because I'm completely obsessed with climate change, but because I certainly want to promote and preserve this region. And I don't think with the current trends in the world of wine to lower alcohols, fresher styles, that this region can deliver consistently in the way that it has. I don't think that we can assume that every Chateauneuf-du-Pape from now on is going to be delicious because they are battling with 17% potential alcohol. Like, that's an impossible feat.

And so calling a spade a spade and recognizing that, hey, we might need to rethink what the Southern Rhône looks like and our expectations of it. And Ventoux for me is a region that's doing that. Vermentino I mentioned earlier. God, the wines that are made from Vermentino in Ventoux, I would never have thought they were from the Rhône Valley.

I love being here and going out for lunch in the summer. And I used to always go for Rosé because I'd always thought the whites around here were a little bit warm. I'm talking about eight, nine years ago. And I was like, oh, they're high alcohols and they're big and they over-oak them sometimes. And if they don't over-oak them, they're really from Viogniers, Marsanne, and Roussanne, et cetera. And that's just not true anymore.

Yes, you can get these amazing, rich, luscious winter wines from whites, but a Vermentino from Mont Ventoux, you could be on an Italian Riviera, you could be drinking – it's the sort of wine that would go in many ways with things like Muscadet style dishes. So seafoods and really like pastas or – It's a new frontier. In every respect, it's a new frontier.

Jancis Robinson actually said years ago now, so I'm obviously late to the party. But years ago, somebody asked her, "If there was one place in the world you could buy a vineyard, where would it be?" And she said, "Mont Ventoux."

I mean, she might've changed her mind by now, but I can understand in every respect, the beauty of it, the potential quality wine, as well as the quality wine being made there. And the other cool thing about Mont Ventoux is, because it is this satellite region, so it doesn't have all the same rules and regulations, you get a lot of IGP wines that have complete flexibility.

So, there's Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc being grown there, all sorts of things. I should say, Rolle (Vermentino) is traditional here. So, that's not zigging where others are zagging quite as much, whereas Sauvignon Blanc, probably, I would say, is a pretty enormous zig against a zag. But there are amazing wines that are using the local varieties and the traditional varieties too, but just making them in a really different style.

So, for anybody who's looking to experience a version of the Southern Rhône that sits outside of probably most people's comfort zone, but not in a scary way. There are things like orange wines and amazing natural wines, and there is that cool stuff going on, but also there's just really, really, really, really good quality stuff that doesn't fit in the parameters that we usually have for the Southern Rhône.

Janina Doyle 00:25:15 And what about pricing? Do you feel that you get really good value here? Or again, is it starting to go up?

Anna Spooner 00:25:22 No, you can. And the nice thing about Ventoux is you can find a bit of everything. For our wedding wine, my husband and I last year, not even a bag in box. Rack! Where you put the petrol pump into a plastic container.

Janina Doyle 00:25:34 Oh, wow!

Anna Spooner 00:25:35 We did rack. We decanted it into bottles and served it the next day. So, we did that. And it was something like € 4.95 a litre Ventoux white that we used. And that was a good quality wine in my opinion.

But likewise, there are wines that I've tried from Ventoux. Actually, I'm doing a tasting, week after next, at 67 Pall Mall with a great private client who wanted to explore exactly this topic. And we've got some amazing fine wines from Ventoux, but they are fine wines, bearing in mind, properly fine wines for around £32 UK retail.

But if you were to compare that quality level with even, I don't know, I would hate to say Burgundy because it's always, what can you even compare with Burgundy these days? But even comparing it with just some other fine wines of France, the Loire, let's say. You would certainly be expecting like £10 more. So, definitely value to be found in Ventoux. Definitely.

Janina Doyle 00:26:41 Do you have tips for anybody else searching for value in other parts of the Southern Rhône? Is it to find the satellite or do you have a favourite cru that is not Châteauneuf-du-Pape?

Anna Spooner 00:26:53 So, I mentioned Gigondas is great for a premium value, whatever you want to take of that sentence, which is awful. But in terms of if you want, if you want top of the top of the tree quality, but you don't want to pay a Châteauneuf price, go to Gigondas because that really does for me still represent value for money at the top quality tree.

But yeah, satellites are great. You also have to kind of seek out interesting producers more than anything in the Southern Rhône. So, there's a producer. His name has just escaped me. It's a couple from Burgundy who've moved down here and they're just basically playing around in a Côtes du Rhône appellation and making incredible wines. I'll remember it and send it to you, and maybe pop it in the notes.

Janina Doyle 00:27:37 Or it might come to you any second now.

Anna Spooner 00:27:39 It might come to me, it might come to me, I'm thinking. But also, you obviously having feet on the ground helps me with this, but Côtes du Rhône Villages and Côtes du

Rhône wines, if you are buying those from a producer that tends to make Cru wines, I think those are excellent value.

Now, there's two reasons for that. One is that if they're making wines and selling them for £25 a bottle in Vacqueyras, and then they're making a Côtes du Rhône for £8.95 a bottle, chances are the winemakers are probably making both because other than your big boys, the players in the Southern Rhône aren't huge. So, you're probably getting a top quality winemaker making both wines. So, that's a really good place to start.

The other reason it's often very good is I mentioned earlier about when people have vineyards next to each other. The Southern Rhône is a farmer's country. This isn't your Grand Chateau of Bordeaux. This isn't your small but very expensive mini micro plot in Burgundy.

These are inherited vineyards from the family. You might buy up a parcel from next door, but it's quite a kind of traditional region. And because of that, there's actually a really interesting strip of Côtes du Rhône vineyards that are – there's an amazing producer called Clos du Caillou, who makes Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and the owner was a big hunter three generations ago or whatever. And they had on their land forests for him to be able to hunt his wild boar, but they were planted forests and they decided not to rip them up to allow for this wild boar hunting.

And so, when the inspectors effectively came around to delineate Châteauneuf-du-Pape, they were like, okay, well, these vineyards are all making great wine because of this particular soil. But this is a forest, so this won't be included. Now that the forest has been taken down. They've worked out that actually it should have probably been Châteauneuf-du-Pape all along.

Janina Doyle 00:29:42 Interesting.

Anna Spooner 00:29:43 So, there are also these incredible – so, Clos du Caillou is the name of that producer. So, there are these incredible stories and they're not the only ones. There's almost like a band that runs next to Châteauneuf-du-Pape where it's Côtes du Rhône wine.

And I'm so frustrated because I visited them before Christmas with my arrogance thinking I'd buy some nice bottles for Christmas. And of course, they're all sold out. Because once you know the secret, once you know the tips.

Janina Doyle 00:30:11 Well then shh, don't be telling anyone else.

Anna Spooner 00:30:14 And again, you've got a similar story. So, you've got a winemaker who's making a £50, £60, £70 Châteauneuf-du-Pape, who will also be managing, if not actually making, a £12 Côtes du Rhône. So, it's funny. Rhône is a place where you can sniff out the truffles. No pun intended obviously.

Janina Doyle 00:30:38 I was going to say literally sniffing. Yeah exactly. Now tell me, because actually you also have done a harvest in one of the Villages, right, not in a Cru. So, where was that?

Anna Spooner 00:30:47 So that, I actually mentioned them earlier because they're the people that have the two Rosés side by side. So, it's a Côtes du Rhône Villages named Séguret. And again, if you're fancying a trip to the region, Séguret is just about the most beautiful place on the planet. It's always named one of the top most beautiful picturesque Villages in France.

It's set into the same kind of limestone outcrop that I mentioned where Gigondas, it's got Beaumes-de-Venise on one side, Gigondas on the other. You then have Vacqueyras down the bottom. That sort of peters off from the actual limestone, but the formation itself moves into these undulating, the Cru basically, so you've got like the Rasteau and Cairanne along. Séguret sits in a similar line to those built into, literally into the rock face, is this incredible artist commune Village called Séguret.

Janina Doyle 00:31:37 Wow!

Anna Spooner 00:31:38 And I felt blessed to have that as my commute every day. So, you drive up this winding track, you see the Village incredibly in the rock, and then you dip over the top of that into another valley.

And Séguret is a very, very small, well, Côtes du Rhône Villages Séguret, if you really want to give it its full title, is this tiny appellation that makes amazing wine, real bang for the buck stuff. And interestingly, I was having a chat with a few people and there's always politics when you're trying to get elevated to a Cru, because generally what happens in France is they don't take every producer along, so they'll have a quota and number is not my strong point, but something like 75% are allowed to go through, but the rest get downgraded to Côtes du Rhône.

So, you've worked your way up the tiers of the tree, but in the final leap to become a cru, you have to effectively have the approval of everyone because some people won't make it through. And it's all very political and its different regions have different rules and regulations, but a lot of people feel that that's maybe why Séguret hasn't been promoted yet.

There are some really famous vines there. Some amazing old vines, particularly at the producer I worked with, which was one of the reasons I loved it. And it's honestly this pocket of beauty. Yeah, Mourchon is the name. They make very, very bold GSM blends, but that are beautifully balanced. They make two whites, two Rosés, and they actually make a sweet wine, but it's not a VDM. They make a really light, gorgeous sweet wine.

Janina Doyle 00:33:15 Is it fortified?

Anna Spooner 00:33:16 It's not. No. So, that's what's interesting. It's actually just the sweet Viognier, if I remember correctly.

Janina Doyle 00:33:22 Oh, nice! Okay.

Anna Spooner 00:33:23 Yeah, it's lovely and it's just a bit of fun really. But I love that spot so much genuinely that we had our wedding service there as well, the following year or two years later.

Janina Doyle 00:33:35 Amazing! So, everyone can go and visit this winery. You can take them to the winery and people can get married. Well, not married there, they can have...

Anna Spooner 00:30:11 Yes. Yeah, you can stay there, you can get married there. You name it, you can do it there. Yeah, it's an incredible spot for the wines. The wines are amazing. And doing a harvest there was one of the highlights of my life, really.

Janina Doyle 00:33:53 No, honestly, now I'm like, please, I really want to get there. I'm now thinking, honestly, I'm like, God, I need to go to the Rhône Valley or Southern Rhône. Lots of people

listening are going to be thinking exactly the same thing now because you've got us so, so excited. So what's a good itinerary? What's a good plan to aim for? Like, where should we fly in? What's the minimum amount of days that someone could take off work. Cause let's be honest, we don't all have a month or a year or just move there. So, what do we fly into?

Anna Spooner 00:34:25 So, there's a few options. We used to be able to fly into Avignon, which is basically the town, the big wealthy city, sorry, of Southern Rhône. And it's worth visiting. So, whilst I'm on the point of Avignon, it's worth doing a stop off in Avignon, even just to do a morning or there's obviously the Pope's Palace, which is where Châteauneuf-du-Pape gets its name because the only time the Pope has not been based in the Vatican was when the papal was based in Avignon and the Pope's new home was Châteauneuf-du-Pape where he used to grow wine and have a lovely time.

So, it's just a hop, skip and a jump between Avignon and Châteauneuf-du-Pape. So, that's great. They might bring back those flights but assuming that they don't, you can get the TGV, which is the train down to Avignon. So, you can get on in London, change in Paris, you used to be able to do it all in a one-up, you can't now, please bring that back.

But you just have to change stations in Paris, which is lovely. You can break it up and have lunch maybe. A lunch in Paris. But you zoom down the TGV and it's a really beautiful train journey actually, because you basically go through all of Burgundy. You don't quite see Northern Rhône in quite the same way as if you drive, but it's still gorgeous.

But the easiest really is to fly to Marseille, because there's so many flights to Marseille. You can also probably just enjoy a bit of bouillabaisse or have some seafood. You can make a thing of the actual part of Marseille as well. But it's about an hour and 10, hour and 15 from Marseille up to the Rhône.

So, it's really not far. And from there, I would say you really want to spend, in my opinion, four days. Four days is great. Lots of people do a kind of fleeting visit. There's loads of river tours in the Rhône and they might only spend a day in the vineyards here, and I don't think that is enough, but if you're doing that, great. But I think four days would give you enough to do a bit of culture in Avignon.

If you want to dip into Provence, you can do something like go to Aix. It's really not far. I mean, I live a little bit further from Aix now because we've gone slightly further north because of my parents. But 40 minutes give or take to Aix en Provence. We'd go drink some of that style Rosé, come back, and try the Rhône stuff.

But the main thing I'd say is you can do vineyards. The food is really great and very, very good value. It's where dairy stops being as much of a big thing. So, you're gonna get more of those olive oil-based dishes, very Mediterranean, but quality is just exceptional and value for money, as I mentioned. So, food you wanna do, wine you wanna do.

I would, if you are physically able, certainly try to do a little bit of walking and exploring. There are some really nice bike rides. If you're so inclined, electric bikes are huge here. Hiking as well. And then I think because of that, that might affect the time of year to visit.

So, timing wise, May is great. June is great. And if you are visiting in June, you might get the lavender, which is beautiful. And if you miss the lavender, don't worry because you can get the

sunflowers later. There's always something beautiful as well as the gorgeous vines. It does get very, very hot though. So, if you're not someone that deals well with heat, do avoid July and August and maybe start coming back in late September and October, when the leaves of the vines change colour here is unbelievable.

Janina Doyle 00:37:45 Oh God, you are selling it. Are you on the Southern Rhône board? Did they pay you to do this?

Anna Spooner 00:37:52 There's a reason I chose to move here. I chose to move here for good reason. It's got the weather. It's got the outdoors lifestyle. Yeah, what I haven't mentioned is, we're recording this on the 5th of January, and it rained today and it shocked me. We've probably had five days of rain since October.

Janina Doyle 00:37:10 It offended you, didn't it? How dare it?

Anna Spooner 00:37:13 It offended me, yeah. And I do know we need rain, that's fine. But when it rains, it rains heavily and it will rain very heavily for a day or two days. But other than that, you should expect good weather for lots of the year. So, there's no wet season to avoid per se.

Janina Doyle 00:38:27 Love it. Honestly, I've got so excited about the thought of what I'm gonna do when I come visit. Is there actually one specific Village that is a perfect place to base yourself or does it not really matter?

Anna Spooner 00:38:37 I think it's worth it for anyone who's more familiar with visiting somewhere like Bordeaux that it's not really like that. So, the Villages are quite spread out. You will probably need a car or a tour guide. Or there are certain Villages where there's a high density of wineries.

For example, if you stayed in Gigondas, you could walk to several. If you stayed at Beaumes de Venise, some. But if you stayed even Vinsobres, it would be much harder. It's another Cru, but it'd be much harder. Châteauneuf-du-de-Pape is a fair place to base yourself. Avignon as well.

Vaison-La-Romaine is a lovely town. They have an amazing market, well two markets a week actually. Vaison is less well known, but it's bustling and you can go for dinner in the evenings. That's one thing I should really flag to people. The French around here, because it's very much an agricultural area, have lunch and a lot of restaurants will only be open at lunch and then early dinners.

Janina Doyle 00:39:35 Actually, that suits me. I've got to that age now where if I eat past 7.30, I'm not going to sleep.

Anna Spooner 00:39:42 Yeah, have a big lunch and relax for the afternoon. It's that simple, I think. So, if you are looking to then go out in the evening and go for dinner, you need to pick somewhere bigger like Aix, Avignon or Vaison. But really, if you wanted to get under the skin a bit, you could stay in one of the small Villages and use it as a base and any of them have beautiful views. You could just literally put a pin on the map in this part of the world and you'd be somewhere rather special.

Janina Doyle 00:40:10 Basically, go to booking.com, just literally see that area, put in the cheapest price and go, that'll do.

Anna Spooner 00:40:16 That will do.

Janina Doyle 00:40:17 Whatever's nine stars and less than £60, £70 a night, take it.

Anna Spooner 00:40:22 Great hotels, great rentals, and that's another good thing. But eating out and drinking out, just be aware, don't expect hustle and bustle. It's an agricultural area. So, it's not like the city of Bordeaux where you could go to a wine bar and stay there till 11pm. You would need to plan that sort of thing and certainly go somewhere a bit busier.

Janina Doyle 00:40:44 I love it. We all need places where we can just switch off and take it that little bit slower. It sounds to me like this is perfect for anyone wanting to wind down and just stimulate the senses.

Anna Spooner 00:40:55 All the senses can be stimulated here. I can assure you of that.

Janina Doyle 00:41:00 Love it. Anna, thank you so much.

Anna Spooner 00:41:01 Oh, thank you!

Janina Doyle 00:41:02 I'm really inspired genuinely to come to the Rhône Valley now. You've done a fabulous job of storytelling. I'm going to come and see you and come and walk the dogs with you.

Anna Spooner 00:41:13 Please do.

Janina Doyle 00:41:15 Oh, perfect. Right. Well, I'll look at the flights and I'll let you know.

Anna Spooner 00:41:18 Wonderful. Thank you so much for having me. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Janina Doyle 00:41:24 Oh, I loved it! I'll speak to you very soon. Take care.

Anna Spooner 00:41:24 Thank you. Bye bye.

Janina Doyle 00:41:30 Now taking you across to Italy for next week, join me as we delve into the captivating world of super Tuscan wines. So, I'm going to be exploring their origins, the pioneers behind it. I'm sure many of you have heard of Sassicaia. What about Tignanello, Ornellaia, and what about Masseto? So, we're going to be talking about all of these superstar wineries that have changed the Italian wine industry.

And as ever, I shall finish with a wine quote. Well, maybe this one's actually a little bit more like a social media caption, but nonetheless it says:

“Sipping on dreams and red wine.”

Well, I guarantee you we'll be doing that next week, but until then may this week be filled with positivity and inspiring moments and make you happy.

That's it. If you are enjoying these episodes, don't forget to like, share, subscribe, leave a review, especially if you're listening on Apple Podcasts, because you know that's the rule and it helps the podcast become more discoverable.

Go and see if you can find yourself a super Tuscan for next week. Maybe not as expensive as Sassicaia, but there are some good value ones out there. And I'll see you back here next Monday. Until then wine friends, cheers to you.