Recommending wines from the Rhône Valley can be as tricky as navigating the enormous river that winds through this famous region. There are a large number of grape varieties and styles to keep in mind and, oddly enough, little connection between the two major regions.

The two dominant red grapes of the region, Syrah and Grenache could not be more different. Syrah, the grape of the Northern Rhône, typically creates big, muscular wines with high acidity and gripping tannins. Grenache, on the other hand, is a lazy lap dog of a grape with moderate acidity, soft tannins and easy fruit flavors.

Northern Rhône Reds
The most tempting way to explain the style of these Syrah-based reds wines is to invoke the near-ubiquitous Australian Shiraz. However, unless a consumer is drinking exceptionally lean Shiraz, he is unlikely to see the parallel between his fruit-forward, easy-drinking Aussie wines and the tannic, low-fruit wines from the Northern Rhone. Bordeaux, with its more restrained fruit, powerful structure and in-your-face tannins, turns out to be a better way to explain the Northern Rhône style to newcomers.

Cornas, St Joseph and Crozes-Hermitage
These are very large appellations that cover a broad range of terroirs and quality levels. At the low-end, they are simple, pleasant wines, a perfect accompaniment to barbecue. Some single-vineyard wines, however, such as Jaboulet’s Crozes-Hermitage Domaine de Thalabert, can rival Hermitage for complexity and ability to age (though, thankfully, not in price.) Crozes-Hermitage tends to make the lightest wines, while some Cornas can be so dense as to be unapproachable in their youth.

Côte-Rôtie and Hermitage
These tiny communes are the heavy-hitters of the Rhone valley. They are universally expensive and made to age. At their best, they show a powerful structure with forthright tannins, high acidity and aromas of game and raw meat. Due to the frequent inclusion of a small percentage of Viognier grapes in the blend, Côte-Rôtie tends to be more perfumed while Hermitage is often denser.
Rhône Whites
The one thing that all Rhône whites have in common is low acidity. If someone is a fan of racy Rieslings and Sauvignon Blancs, he will likely find Rhône whites to be lacking in that vital zest. On the other hand, they tend to score high with New World Chardonnay drinkers for their mouth-coating weight. Fans of the exotically perfumed Viognier will find its most unique (and expensive) expression in Condrieu, a small stony appellation squeezed between Côte-Rôtie and St. Joseph. The rest of the white wines in the Rhône Valley, based on the Marsanne and Roussanne grapes, are not quite as aromatically intense as Viognier but often come across as quite powerful due to their high alcohol and particularly full body.

Chateauneuf-du-Pape and Friends
Almost all of the wines from the Southern Rhône are based on Grenache, with varying amounts of a number of other heat-hardy grapes, including Mourvèdre, Syrah and various supporting characters. While Chateauneuf-du-Pape unquestionably produces the best wines of the Southern Rhône, its fame is such that there are plenty of producers who are merely coasting on the reputation of the appellation, turning out substandard offerings with hefty pricetags. On the other hand, for a wine from one of the less well-known towns such as Vacqueyras, Costières de Nîmes, Gigondas or Cairanne to make it to these towns such as Vacqueyras, Costières de Nîmes, Gigondas or Cairanne to make it to these shores, it has to rise well above its numerous peers to catch the attention of an importer. These are the appellations to look for to value.

Vintages Variable
And then there’s the vintage question. Though usually more consistent than either Burgundy or Bordeaux, Rhone has hit some hard spots in recent years. 2002 saw floods that wiped out entire vineyards, halved yields and impaired ripening of the grapes. Many of the reds come across as a bit hard and mean.

Early tastings of the 2003 red wines showed excellent promise. Syrah and Grenache are naturally tolerant of heat and drought and suffered little from last year’s famous heat wave. The whites are another question. Many of the native white grapes of the Rhone, including Viognier and Marsanne are naturally low in acidity in a normal year. The record-breaking heat wave of 03 reduced the acidity to distressingly low levels. Of course, most producers acidified their wines but the results are generally unimpressive.

REDS

Jaboulet Crozes-Hermitage, Domaine de Thalabert 2001
True syrah flavors unencumbered by oak in a friendly, elegant style. Develops enormous complexity with age.
Case price $235
Imported by Frederick Wildman & Sons

Vidal-Fleury Vacqueyras 2000
Bright cherry and raspberry fruit and just a bit of grip from some brambly tannins.
Available through W.J. Deutsch
Case price $136

Delas Frères St. Joseph, Francois de Tournon 1999
With beautiful notes of secondary development and a long finish, it could be mistaken for an Hermitage.
Available through Maison Marques & Domaines Stil Peerless 800 382 3820

Guigal Côtes-du-Rhône 2001
With upfront fruit and a tangy finish, this is a sure-fire crowd pleaser.
Case price $112
Available through Ex Cellars Wine Agency

Domaine Sainte-Anne Côtes-du-Rhône Villages, St. Gervais Les Mourillons 2000
This 100% Syrah wine now has a cult following among sommeliers. Stylistically, it lies somewhere between an Australian Shiraz and a wine from the Northern Rhone.
Case price $224
Available through Douglas Polaner Selections

Chapoutier Hermitage, La Sizeranne 2001
This wine delivers smoky notes of game and plums on top of an intense, rich palate. Worth laying down for a dozen years though surprisingly approachable now.
Case price $816
Available through Paterno Imports

Cave de Tain l’Hermitage Hermitage, Gambert de Loche 2000
Meaty and aromatic, with more than a touch of Brett on the nose. This seductive wine is not quite in the league of Chapoutier but ready to drink now and a relative bargain at this price.
Case price $360
Available through Diageo Chateau & Estates

WHITES

Domaine La Rémyéenne, Côtes-du-Rhône Villages “Chevreuseuls” 2003
All of the wines from this rising star deliver far more than they promise. This cuvée offers particularly good value.
Case price $96-104
Available through Daniel Johnnes Wines

Vinsobres, Domaine Chamue Arnaud 2001
The tiny hamlet of Vinsobres has been receiving and increasing amount of attention for its serious Grenache-based wines, including this one from one of its star producers.
Case price $128
Available through Daniel Johnnes Wines

Campuget Costieres de Nimes Prestige Rouge 2003
Aromas of cherries, leather, smoke and earth; a sensational value.
Case price $84
Available through Robert Kacher Collection

Domaine Sainte-Anne Côtes-du-Rhône Villages “Chevrefeuils” 2003
A wide variety of producers offer an increasing amount of attention for its serious Grenache-based wines, including this one from one of its star producers.
Case price $128
Available through Daniel Johnnes Wines

Jaboulet Crozes-Hermitage, Mule Blanche 2001
Nicely crisp for a Rhone white with surprising concentration and a unique, spicy character.
Case price $216
Available through Frederick Wildman & Sons

Jaboulet Hermitage, Chevalier de Streimberg 2000
Big, fat, rich and complex. This famous vineyard lives up to its reputation, and then some.
Case price $555
Available through Frederick Wildman & Sons

Chateau Valcombe Prestige Costieres de Nimes 2002
A bold and bold wine with concentrated fruit and soft, pleasing mouthfeel.
Case price $126
Available through Robert Kacher Collection

Guigal, Côtes-du-Rhône Blanc 2002
A blend of Marsanne and Roussanne yields an uncomplicated wine with pretty white flowers on the nose and palate. Fabulous value.
Case price $104
Available through Ex Cellars Wine Agency

Chateau d’Aqueria Tavel Rosé 2003
With a seductive nose of strawberries and cherries, this is a perfect transition from summer whites to winter reds.
Case price $139
Available through Kobrand Corporation

Domaine de Durban Muscat de Beaumes de Venise 2002
Delicate apricot and peach aromas make this a perfect aperitif; also an excellent accompaniment for foie gras terrine at half the price of Sauternes.
Case price $212
Available through Kermit Lynch Wine Merchants