

Wine and the Mistral Wind

Written by Terry Connor

Tuesday, 15 January 2013 13:08

Let's start off the year with a blast. No, not a party – but a big blast of cold air called the Mistral Wind. Since I am not a meteorologist, I defer to the experts who explain the Mistral Wind to be a strong, cold and usually dry regional wind in France, coming from the northwest and accelerating as it passes through the mostly southern Rhone Valley. This might seem like a puzzle to anyone who pauses to wonder how the grapes and vines survive in the Rhone Valley when exposed to such fierce winds. Let's take a look and see what happens in the cycle of one growing season. The wind blows during the winter and spring. There are times when the wind blows fifty kilometers per hour during the day and is calm at night. This phenomenon can go on for more than a week at a time. When it does, our friends in France simply continue to work in the vineyards. You would think that they'd get out of harm's way. No. This is simply a fact of life in the area and they live with it. Later on in the summer, the wind continues, however, this time with a beneficial effect. Allow me to explain the benefits by consulting Karen MacNeil, who writes in her book *The Wine Bible* that the Southern Rhone is part of the sunny, herb-scented, lavender-strewn, olive-growing Mediterranean. Hot days are pierced by Le Mistral, the savage, cold wind that blows down from the Alps and through the Rhone River Valley, gathering speed and ferocity as it goes. Though you can barely stand up when the mistral is blowing hard, it nonetheless is the grape grower's friend. During the growing season it cools down the vines, helping the grapes to retain acidity. Even more important, near harvest time, Le Mistral acts like a giant blow-dryer, making sure that the grapes are free from humidity and mold. Many wine makers believe that Le Mistral causes substantial evaporation, which then concentrates the sugar and acid inside the grapes. When the wind finally slows down, what follows is the sunshine that enables the grapes to achieve the great ripeness that is essential for making the intensely flavored wines of the Rhone region. I have experienced this wind and it is totally amazing to me that the fruit on the vine survives.

Who would ever have thought that a wind so damaging, and at times downright dangerous, would be an integral part of a wine producing process? My guess is that it was a little known phenomenon prior to the 1960's, when travel to the Rhone Valley became popular. Only a few references existed. One is a painting by Vincent Van Gogh called "Starry Night." This painting portrays his impression of the weather, with a strong reference to swirling wind and stars. The second reference is a painting by Claude Monet, called *Antibes 1888*. The painting depicts a tree that's been trained to grow in a permanent leaning position in the direction of the Mistral Wind. (I can never find an Art History Major when I need one.) The painting has significance today because if you were to travel in the Rhone, you would see some of the grapevines pruned and trained in the direction of the wind.

One of the most delightful books that I have ever read is "A Year in Provence" by Peter Mayle. This is a true account of a British Gentleman who decided to try living in France. Mr. Mayle refers to the Mistral when he writes about his home and the homes of his neighbors as being constructed facing the South. The north facing of any home had no windows. This design protected the occupants from the effects of the harsh wind.

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Here in the Lowcountry we are very fortunate to be able to purchase wines from the Southern Rhone. They are all in plentiful supply. The primary grapes from the Rhone are Grenache, Syrah, Mourvedre, and Cinsaut. The wine Appellations from the Southern Rhone are Chateauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas, Vacqueyras, and Tavel. (Tavel is mostly Rose.) Travel to this area is a real treat if you are able to avoid the wind. Most of the wineries are receptive to visitors.

Cheers. Watch out for the wind.

WINESPEAK

Joseph Phelps Winery in California used to produce a wine called Le Mistral. It was produced in the Rhone Style and was a commercial success. Phelps wanted to go in a different direction and did not want to delete Le Mistral. He found a home for it at Ventana Vineyards in the Central Coast area called Arroyo Seco. The wine is still a success and is produced as close as possible in the original Rhone style. The only difference would be the flavor from the different soil. If you locate a bottle, it should be around \$30.