RHÔNE

Second only to Bordeaux, the AOCs of the Rhône cover 73,500 hectares of vines and produce 377 million bottles of wine. Although the vineyards to the south of Montélimar dominate production (95%) there is a pleasing symmetry in terms of the named *Village Crus*, with both North and South having eight, the latter bolstered by the recent promotion of Vinsobres, Beaumes de Venise and Rasteau to stand-alone status. Over 400 million bottles were sold in 2010, of which 80% were red wine, with just over 25% exported, the foreign markets dominated by the UK (20%), USA (17%), Benelux (10%) and Canada (10%). Generic Côtes-du-Rhône fares well at one end of the scale, bolstered by colourful and imaginative advertising, and at the other end, the on-going and influential support of Robert Parker has been backed up by some great vintages, the quartet of **1998-2001**, **2005**, **2007** and **2009** to name the most recent. Indeed some of Parker's most generous marks have, over the years, gone to the Rhône, with properties such as Beaucastel, Chave, Chapoutier and Clos-des-Papes all notable beneficiaries.

Beyond all the excitement, one must not overlook commercial realities. Average bottle sale price is low with the domestic market dominated by the *Grandes Surfaces* and the production is still largely controlled by the Co-operatives (63% by volume). The total wine exported has slipped by 8% since 2003, although in 2010, the figure of 108 million bottles is higher than both 2008 and 2009, so certainly heading in the right direction. In addition the Valley has 12,200 hectares under organic viticulture and is seen as a benchmark for 'green' viticulture. Other notable developments include the more careful management of oak, especially important to bring out the real character of Syrah, and with the whites, moves towards fresher wines, including more careful temperature-control and, with oak-aged examples, more 'reductive' lees stirring. From Ch. Grillet all the way down (geographically) to Ch. la Nerthe, the white wines are far removed, stylistically, from their forebears and provide a fascinating alternative to White Burgundy.

Economic pressures notwithstanding, the Rhône continues to excite and with the seemingly inexorable rise in prices from other premium areas, the future for the Valley looks bright. Asia looks set to turn its eyes towards these great appellations and the timely revitalisation of historical names such as Cornas, Hermitage, Gigondas and Châteauneuf-du-Pape leaves the Rhône extremely well placed. And what is more, **2010** is shaping up rather nicely with its more feminine style providing contrast with the powerful **2009s**.