

Cold weather comfort foods and wine

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As this winter drags on, our spirits can be nourished by comfort foods. A great wine pairing with these dishes are the hearty and rustic reds of the Southern Rhone Valley in France.

The Rhone Valley in France stretches from the center of the eastern side of France to southern France. This valley is divided into two distinct wine regions, simply called the North and South. The Northern Rhone Valley lies just below the Burgundy region and has a cool climate. The grape vines are planted on steep slopes overlooking the Rhone River and has soil that is mainly granite and slate. The Southern Rhone Valley offers a stark contrast. The climate is warm to hot, and is heavily influenced by the Mediterranean Sea. Hot gusts of wind referred to as "Le Mistral," are prevalent and have two positive affects. These winds cool the grapes at night to help preserve the grapes acidity levels and dry the grapes on the vine, to reduce mold and mildew.

The Southern Rhone Valley is considerably larger than the Northern region and the vines tend to be planted on the valley floor. The Southern Rhone Valley's major wine appellations (called villages) include Chateauneuf-du-Pape, Vacqueyras and Gigondas. Of these, the most celebrated village is Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

Chateauneuf-du-Pape's terrain is covered with softball-sized round limestone rocks that dominate the vineyard's landscape. These rocks help hold moisture in the soil and impart a limestone minerality that is the trademark of these wines.

The French use two general terms to describe a wine's style - "elegante" (wines of finesse and subtle flavor) and "savage" (wines that are bold, more in-your-face). Chateauneuf-du-Pape reds definitely fall into the second category, as these wines are dense, earthy, spicy and bold. With this style, they pair well with a hearty stew, game, grilled meats, heavier pasta dishes (Bolognese sauce for example) and peasant-style breads. Hard-aged cheddar and nutty Swiss Gruyere cheeses pair especially well with these wines.

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Taster's choice

Here are my Chateauneuf-du-Pape Value Wine Picks (with suggested retails):

- Domaine du Grand Tinel - \$22
- Domaine des Relagnes - \$22
- Clos du Mont-Olivet - \$30
- Cuvee du Vatican - \$30
- Bosquet des Papes - \$35
- Clos St. Jean - \$37