

The results

You still have to choose carefully with Crozes-Hermitage, said our expert tasters, but the basic standard is rising and this is a very good vintage that wine lovers can buy with confidence. Amy Wislocki reports

ONLY ONE AWARD here, but a positive performance by a northern Rhône appellation known for value. Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for the Rhône, John Livingstone-Learmonth, set out what one should expect from a good Crozes: 'Easy-to-drink black fruit; in the simple cuvées, something you can drink with friends at a barbecue. It should be the freest expression of Syrah in the northern Rhône, without tension and tautness.'

'For me, a good Crozes should have expressive red (veering on black) fruit, slightly spicy notes and a hint of tapenade,' chipped in Simon Field MW. And did that typicality come through? 'Certainly the best wines had the peppery, vibrant character that I'd expect,' said Stephen Brook. 'I came with high expectations - I thought 2010 would be the kind of vintage I like, with lots of freshness - and by and large I wasn't disappointed.'

The vintage is superb, agreed Livingstone-Learmonth, and standards in winemaking are rising. But he did admit to a 'cloud of suspicion' when tasting Crozes since the use of oak chips was first permitted in the appellation in the past year or two. 'It's a political move, and it does damage its credibility as a proper, old-fashioned appellation.'

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The issue of oak came up more than once during tasters' discussions. 'You've got two styles here,' said Livingstone-Learmonth, 'the fruity, early-drinking style, and the more oaked style. Consumers need to be ready for an occasional marked oak influence in a bottle of Crozes, especially if they pay a bit more, and this oak might take a year or two to subside.'

'They shouldn't have to overwork the wood as generally the vines are pretty young,' added Field. 'Some of the wines had a greenness to them that you wouldn't expect in a vintage as good as 2010. And some were just overextracted. But in the middle there was a clump of attractive wines, with pleasing aromatics, nicely integrated tannins and fruit flavours.'

The scores

67 wines tasted

1
Outstanding

9
Highly recommended

50
Recommended

7
Fair

0
Poor

0
Faulty

18
Good value
(£15 and under)

The tasters' verdicts

Stephen Brook



Stephen Brook has been a contributing editor to Decanter since 1996. He has won a clutch of awards for his wine writing and is the author of more than 30 books. He fully revised the last two editions of the Hugh Johnson Wine Companion, and writes for magazines in a number of countries.

Brook's verdict

'I came to the tasting with high expectations, given that 2010 was heralded as an outstanding vintage here,

with wines showing freshness rather than extreme ripeness. Nor was I disappointed, and I scored well over a third of the wines at 16.5 or higher. Inevitably there were disappointments, with wines showing greenness, dilution, extraction or other flaws. But there were few really poor wines. Crozes, after all, is not a particularly prestigious appellation, with many of its vineyards located on the plain. There are more interesting sectors to the north, with rockier, often granitic soils and steeper sites.

'The majority of Crozes wines are produced from middling terroir, so one shouldn't expect too much from the area. Although I have had wines in the past that have aged for decades, they are very much the exception. Crozes should be relatively undemanding, with vibrant Syrah fruit and sufficient tannins to give some stuffing and medium-term ageability. That said, I have been more than happy to reward the ambitious grower, who is trying to produce a wine of distinction and personality, and I don't believe Crozes should be consigned to the category of "easy-drinking wines", even though they are the least structured and least expensive of the northern Rhône appellations.'

Simon Field MW



A former chartered accountant, Simon Field MW joined UK merchant Berry Bros & Rudd in 1998. He became a Master of Wine in 2002. Among the many countries and regions he is wine buyer for, one of his favourites is the Rhône Valley.

Field's verdict

'Even in a good vintage such as 2010, a good Crozes Hermitage will usually lack the complexity and capacity to age of a modest Hermitage. This truism was not

definitely challenged by this enjoyable tasting. Indeed, the common view that there is little real difference discernible in the wines coming from such apparently different terroirs as the steeper granitic vineyards of the north and the broader more clay-based planes of the South is also extant.

'On the other side of the equation, there were few green wines, few that were dramatically overextracted and few which showed signs of having endured the rigours of carbonic maceration or worse. By and large, the winemaking appeared relatively discreet and sensitive to both the strengths and the limitations of the appellation. The quality of the vintage, ripe but not overblown, with impressive natural acidity levels from the cool nights and correspondingly supple tannins, helped to give a consistently pleasurable set of wines. Trying too hard would have undermined this dramatically; so all in all a good showing in a very good vintage.'

Crozes-Hermitage 2010

'I'm less troubled by oak than my colleagues,' said Brook. 'Some were distinctly oaky but I enjoyed them nonetheless. I do agree that there were a surprising number of rather green wines.'

Field's other complaint was a lack of terroir identity. 'I've been buying Rhône wines for years and I still can't really identify the different terroirs of Crozes-Hermitage - essentially the steeper, granitic vineyards north of Tain, and the vineyards on the plain which should give riper, more generously fruity wines. Today, I couldn't distinguish between them. With St-Joseph you are starting to be able to do that, and I wonder if St-Joseph is pulling ahead of Crozes a bit?'

Many consumers looking for value northern Rhône for early- to mid-term drinking would naturally look to Crozes and/or St-Joseph, so how do they compare? 'Crozes has always been a bit cheaper, a bit more open, a bit flashy and a easier to sell,' said Livingstone-Learmonth. 'The economics are in Crozes' favour - vines can be worked mechanically on the big plain, while in St-Joseph they're working on terraces and there's far more manual labour. You'd be hard pushed to find a St-Joseph for less than £10.'

Tasters stressed several times that you have to buy selectively. 'It's always like that in Crozes,' said Brook, 'but the overall quality of the wines we tasted was pretty high, and I think the best is yet to come. I look forward to the next decade.'

Individual tasters' scores and notes are listed in addition to the *Decanter* average score for all 'Outstanding' wines (previously known as *Decanter* Award or 5-star). For 'Highly Recommended' and 'Recommended' wines (previously 4- and 3-star), individual and average scores are listed but the tasting notes are combined efforts. A full explanation of our new tasting methods and scoring system can be found on p71

John Livingstone-Learmonth



DWVA Regional Chair for the Rhône, John Livingstone-Learmonth has written about Rhône wines since 1973. He has published four books including, in 2005, The Wines of the Northern Rhône, which won the Louis Roederer International Book prize.

Livingstone-Learmonth's verdict

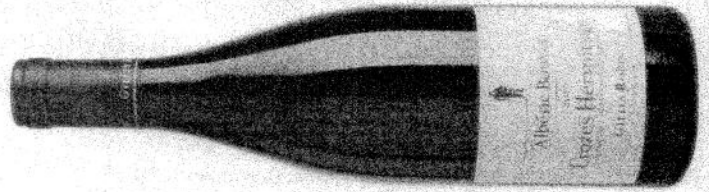
'2010 is a vintage of supreme, succulent Syrah fruit in the northern Rhône and in this tasting I tried wines I wanted to drink

there and then - a hallmark of good Crozes-Hermitage. The best have real fruit flair, a rampant expression on the palate, and are also fresh on the finish, leaving you ready for another sip. This hardcore quality of the year was evident often enough to satisfy me that there is a body of growers who worked well and were not over-ambitious in 2010.

'The northern, rocky, granite zone gives red-fruited wines that are cautious in their youth, with flinty tannins. The plains produce the bulk of wines. They come booming out of the glass, a mix of black fruits and olives, their texture nicely oily, backed by smoke and liquorice. 2010 is favouring the latter group for now, based on this tasting.

'Many growers use young oak to legitimise their top cuvées, without always having the expertise to ease it into the frame of their wines. I did not find a lot of oak intrusion here but have enormous concerns about what may happen in the future at Crozes now that the extraordinary decision has been taken to allow oak chips in the maturation of the wines. It is a massively retrograde step for both the quality and the image of this appellation.'

Outstanding 18.5-20pts (95-100pts)



Gilles Robin, Albéric Bouvet

Decanter average score: 18.75pts/20 (95+pts/100)

Individual judge's scores:

Stephen Brook 18.5 Simon Field MW 18.5 John Livingstone-Learmonth 19

£17.95 Lea & Sandeman

2010 was Gilles Robin's 15th vintage, following the family's departure from the Cave de Tain; a local boy, his great-grandfather was employed by Paul Jaboulet Aîné. His first wines, from a new cellar near Jaboulet's headquarters, suffered from excess extraction, no doubt encouraged by his Montpellier Wine School experience. In recent vintages they have hit a more assured stride, offering greater flair and more refined balance.

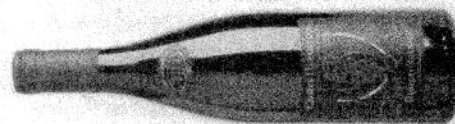
Stephen Brook: 'Lush, vibrant black- and blueberry nose. Sleek and silky, concentrated, elegant acidity, lively aftertaste with lots of pepper on the finish. Classic Crozes - not too weighty or extracted but stylish and long.'

Simon Field MW: 'Rich raspberry coulis, vanilla and spice nose. Sweet fruit allowed full glorious expression behind the weight of extract and ripe tannins. A seductive and very appealing example for hedonists.'

John Livingstone-Learmonth: 'Blackberry, floral and fennel perfume. Focused, juicy black fruit palate. Liquorice, chocolate and coffee on the finish. Good typicity of terroir, good energy and life.'

Drink 2012-2019 Alcohol 13.5%

Highly Recommended 17-18.25pts (90-94pts)

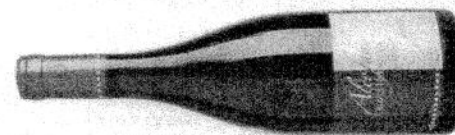


Domaine Les Bruyères, David Reynaud, Georges Reynaud

17.25 (90+) SB 17 SF 17 JLL 17.5

£23.99 Liberty Wines, Secret Cellar

Ripe nose, black fruits and espresso. Broad, opulent, creamy, with fine weight of fruit and concentration. Earth and rosehip notes on the palate. Rounded, long. Drink 2012-2020 Alc 13%



Natacha Chave, Aléofane 17.5 (91)

SB 18 SF 17.5 JLL 17

£17.20 ow Loeb

Meaty black fruit nose with salty liquorice and prune. Palate is edgy, yet with balancing acidity, lots of red and black fruit and sophisticated tannins. Spicy, tarry and peppery. Has character and punch. Drink 2012-2020 Alc 13%