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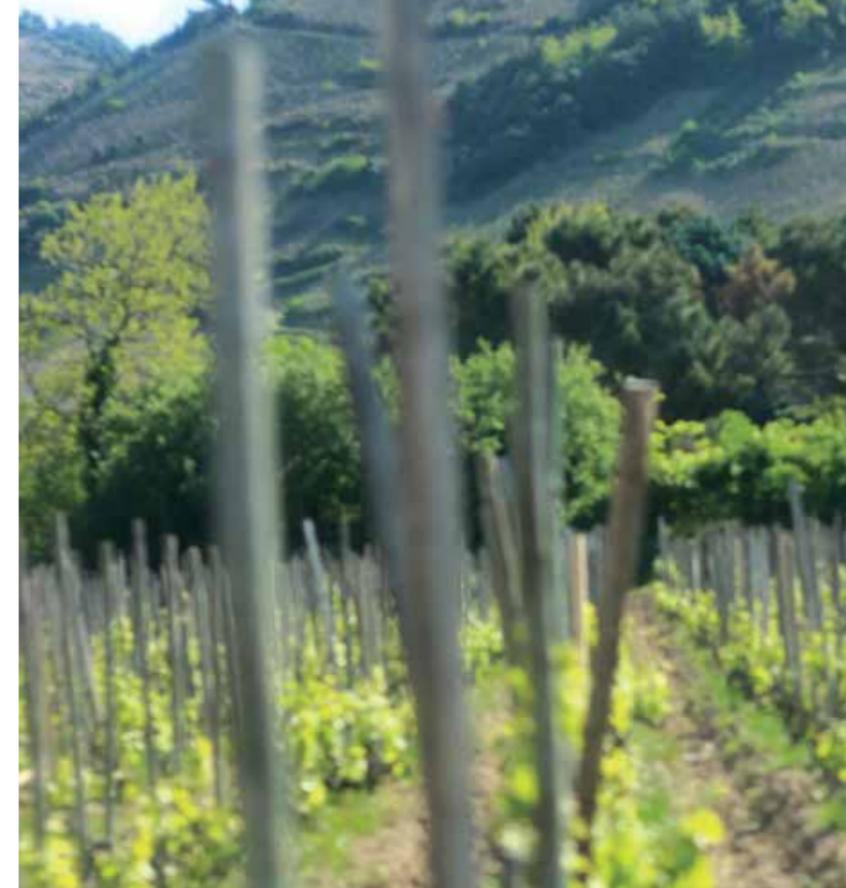
Tips from the experts

TERROIR *Perfection*

NEIL ALLANBY discovers why the terroir of Saint-Joseph vineyard is so well suited to growing syrah.

Vines have been grown in the Rhône Valley for millennia. The vineyards of the Rhône are divided into the Northern Rhône that accounts for only about five per cent of production, and the Southern Rhône. The Northern Rhône provides a spectacular backdrop as you pass down the valley from Vienne to Valence. Here, the valley is quite narrow and has steep sides carved through granite cliffs, the vines planted on the cliff faces in narrow terraces.

The Saint-Joseph vineyards are located around the 45th parallel on the right bank of the Northern Rhône, running in a narrow north-south band over 60km. The vines are planted on the terraced cliffs of crumbly granite, where the best exposure to the sun and protection from the Mistral can be found. The climate is more continental than Mediterranean, with cold winters and warm, sunny summer days. On the valley floor below the cliffs, peach, cherry and chestnut trees are in abundance. >>





THE RHONE VALLEY

The Rhône Valley is a major north-south axis, linking Paris, its surrounds, and northern Europe with the Mediterranean coastline. Not only does it allow passage for traffic along the Autoroute du Soleil, the main roads, the TGV line and the regular train lines but it also finds the space for the mighty Rhône River. Geographically, on the right bank of the valley we find the old static Massif Central, while on the left bank are the much geologically younger French Alps. It also provides the passageway for the prevailing wind, the Mistral.





The name Saint-Joseph comes from a local vineyard that was owned by the Jesuits, and Joseph was, of course, the husband of Mary, mother of Jesus, and considered the patron saint of a happy death as he most likely died in the arms of Jesus and Mary. The Saint-Joseph vineyards were granted appellation status in 1956 for red wine (uniquely from syrah/shiraz) and white wine (from marsanne and roussanne).

The wines of Saint-Joseph are solid, full-flavoured and powerful, yet without the big tannic backbone structure of heavy shiraz. The flavours are of soft black fruit, blackcurrants and peppery spice. The wines have concentrated depth and length yet generally mature faster than neighbouring appellations. As such, they are the most accessible of the red wines from the Northern Rhone.

Saint-Joseph wines were previously known as *vins de Mauves*, after the town in this region. They are mentioned in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* where the good bishop of Digne uncorks a bottle of vin de Mauves in honour of the hero Jean Valjean.

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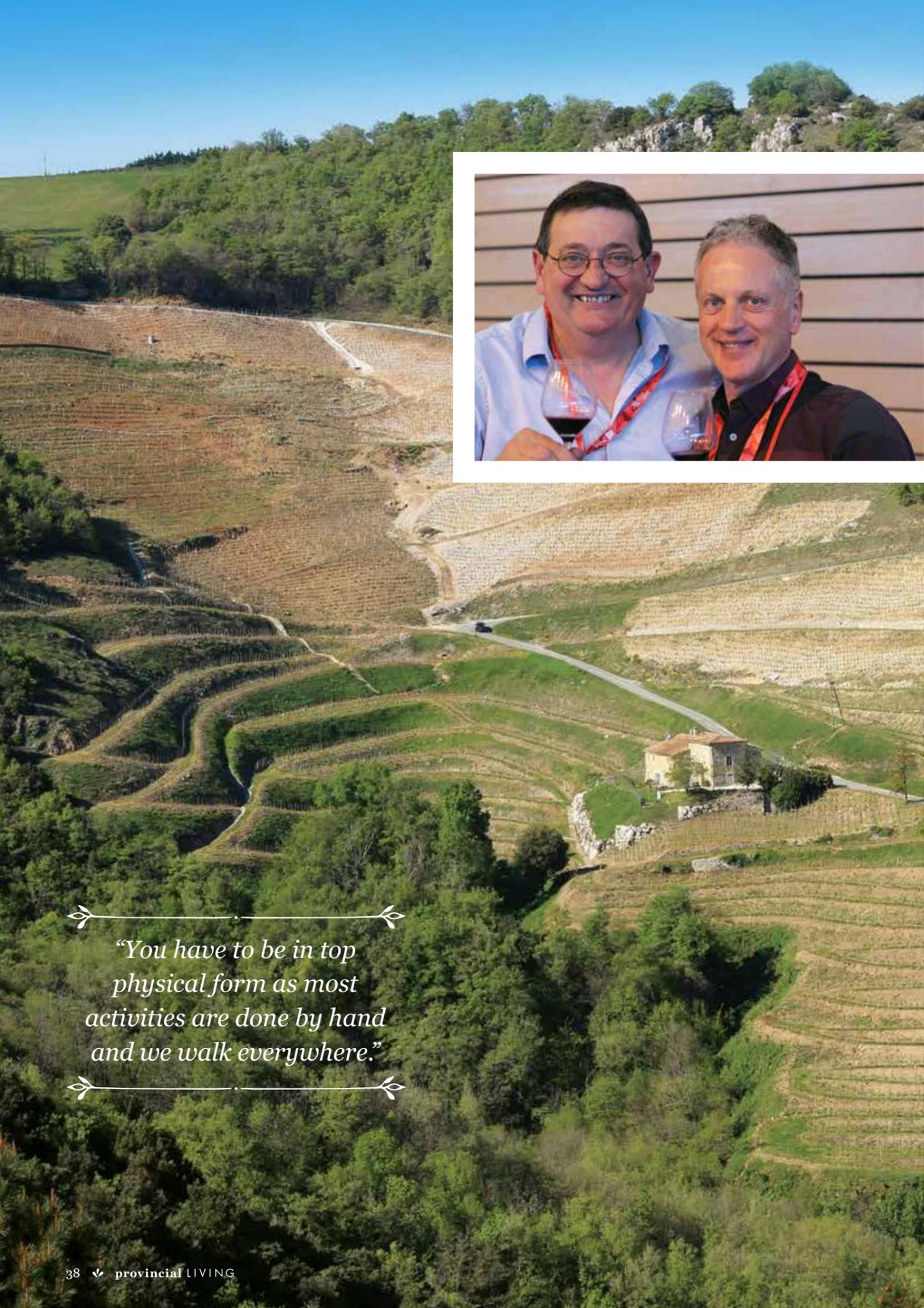
Découvertes en Vallée du Rhône is a professional wine fair presented by Inter Rhône, the marketing communications body for Rhône Valley Wines (rhone-wines.com). This wine fair showcases the best of the Rhône Valley Wines across four days and seven cities, with 600 winemakers exhibiting their wines.

It is there that I meet Laurent Courbis, part owner with his brother Dominique, of Domaine Courbis (vins-courbis-rhone.com) in Châteaubourg. Laurent and Dominique own the highly regarded vineyard Les Royes and I am curious to find out about it and have a little degustation too. I arrange to meet him at the vineyard the following day.

Immediately noticeable is Laurent's charm and his passion for the local area. Like his father before him, Laurent is the proud mayor of Châteaubourg – a village of 220 inhabitants – a responsibility he takes very seriously.

In common with many French vineyard owners, Laurent and Dominique were born into a wine family. The land has been in their family since the 1850s. They took over running the vineyards from their father in the early 1990s and have established their reputation as leaders in the modern school of winemaking. Their style is for wines of intense aromas and concentrated fruit with purity and length, from vineyards farmed using sustainable practices. The brothers' work styles complement each other – Laurent is the outgoing public figure while Dominique is more shy and discreet, preferring the vineyard and cellars. >>





“You have to be in top physical form as most activities are done by hand and we walk everywhere.”

Laurent takes me on a tour of the vineyards. They have holdings in both Saint-Joseph and neighbouring Cornas. Châteaubourg is in the far south of the Saint-Joseph appellation almost at Cornas, and Les Royes is the most southerly vineyard in Saint-Joseph.

As we pass through Cornas I see firsthand the vineyard issues that are encountered throughout the northern Rhône Valley. The steep slopes where use of machinery is almost impossible. The brilliant sunshine with no clouds in the sky as the Mistral blows anything airborne away. The vines planted in the selected valleys giving shelter from the Mistral. Each vine is bush-trained and staked – unlike grenache, syrah is fragile and needs support, especially from the Mistral. As Laurent says, “We have a super terroir perfectly adapted to syrah, with natural drainage and uniform growing conditions, yet the steep slopes are difficult to work and the storms can cause great erosion. You have to be in top physical form as most activities are done by hand and we walk everywhere. Above all, you have to be courageous – yes, lots of courage required here.”

We pass a neighbouring vineyard planted not on terraces but vertically down the slopes. Laurent informs me that after each big storm this well-known grower has to carry his soil back up to the top of his vineyard. We can see the furrows designed for horses to pass. The use of horses in the vineyards is one of the few sources of mechanisation. I also note dense plantings of vines where a severe green harvest will maintain low grape yields. Laurent informs me that this is seen as giving much better results than less dense plantings with more grapes per vine. Their vineyard yields are quite low.

In the next valley we come to Les Royes vineyard. It is a perfect cirque or amphitheatre, with full southern orientation. Looking at the cliff, I notice the different colour of the soil. Laurent explains, “The vineyard is seven hectares. There is a fault line running through it – the lighter colour is clay limestone while the darker colour is granite. It is rare for a Saint-Joseph to come from clay limestone soil.” Laurent adds, “See that house? That is where I live. The best vines are just near the house.”

The slope of the cliff face is about 50 degrees and the vines are all protected from the Mistral by the steep cliff face. Everything here must be done by hand. As we talk, Laurent quickly dives down the cliff to pick off a few shoots coming from the trunk of the vine – they won’t make good wine. His care, attention to detail and passion for this vineyard are obvious. Great terroir leads to excellent wines.

So how does the Saint-Joseph Les Royes Rouge taste? Profound and complex, with sweet black cherry



and raspberry fruit, peppery spice, mineral notes and smoke, with ripe tannins that gave a remarkable structure. Tender, suave and silky – a real pleasure to drink.

I ask one last question of Laurent – who would you most like to share your wines with? He answers, with a cheeky smile, “If he were still alive, Charles de Gaulle. Because we are French! If not him, then perhaps Brad Pitt – as long as I brush up on my English.” Charming as ever, it has been an absolute pleasure to spend this afternoon with one of the great ambassadors of the Rhône Valley and his fabulous wines. ♣

TRY LES ROYES YOURSELF
The cellar door is open from Monday to Friday, 9am to 12pm and 2pm to 6pm.
Also open on Saturday by appointment.



IMAGE CREDITS
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