

The Dentelles de Montmirail

Neil Allanby introduces us to the fabulous wines and scenery of Gigondas.



Images: Neil Allanby

Rising up from the valley floor to a height of 700 metres, dominating the skyline of the eastern side of the southern Rhone Valley, is a spectacular group of sharp limestone peaks, with finely chiselled lace-like ridges, needles and saw-tooth formations, called the Dentelles de Montmirail. In this location, the climate is definitely Mediterranean, with dry winters and summers and rainfall peaking in autumn. The prevailing wind is the Mistral and the west-facing slopes profit from the sustained warmth of the abundant evening sunshine. Here, we find the small wine town of Gigondas, the home of the prestigious wines of the same name. The name is derived from the Latin word *jocunditas*, meaning

great pleasure and enjoyment. The location was used as a recreational site by Roman soldiers, who clearly must have given it this apt name.

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Although grape vines have grown in this region since Roman times, it was olive trees that prevailed until the frosts of 1956 and 1959 wiped out the entire olive crop. Since then, a concerted effort by the local winemakers has paid dividends to elevate the quality

of the wines of Gigondas, and they are now seen as a serious rival to Châteauneuf-du-Pape wines. The appellation of Gigondas was granted in 1971 and is for wines from red-wine grapes only (a quite small quantity of rosé is also produced).

Similar to Châteauneuf-du-Pape, the major grape variety is grenache, with its smoothness and concentrated mouth-feel. Grenache grapes will ripen to higher sugar levels than most grapes, and have thinner skins than average – providing wines with higher alcohol content, softer tannins and slightly lower colour intensity (the tannins and colour come from the skin, the alcohol from the sugar level). Syrah is added to provide the spice and fruit flavours, plus additional colour, to the wine. Small amounts of mourvèdre can also be included for additional structure. Grenache vines are generally bush trained low, while syrah vines are wire trained, so you can notice the difference when you visit the region. All harvesting is done by hand.

Personally, I find Gigondas wines are most to my liking after three to five years from vintage, and highly recommend them as food matches to either *magret de canard* (pan-fried duck-breast fillet) or *boeuf en daube* (a provincial beef stew). My favourite wine from Gigondas is Domaine La Bouïssiere, which has vines growing on the cooler upper slopes of the hills, allowing a more subtle wine of greater flavours.

Today, Gigondas is a beautiful small town of 612 inhabitants, sitting elevated on the side of the Dentelles. Its central square is pure Provence, and the views over the Rhone Valley are superb. Bordering the central square is Le Caveau du Gigondas, the wine tasting cellar door run by the syndicate of winemakers to collectively promote the wines of Gigondas. Each winemaker is allowed to make two wines available for general public tasting – and subsequent sale. This is where I first tasted the wines of Domaine La Bouïssiere. For more information you can visit www.caveaudugigondas.com. This site is in French and online sales are only for delivery to a French address, so take advantage of the cellar door sales when you next visit France!

Also bordering the central square are two fabulous places to eat. First, for an outdoor lunch under the shade of the plane trees on a warm summer's day, is Du Verre à l'Assiette; perfect for a great copious salad and glass of Gigondas wine. No need to be in a hurry

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– take in the great view of the Rhone Valley, as well as observing the local activities and goings-on of the wine town while you dine. Then, there is L'Oustalet restaurant for the evening's gastronomic dinner – great provincial cooking.

Also bordering the central square is the Office de Tourisme, where you can enquire about the hiking tracks in the Dentelles. There is an extensive network of well marked and easy-to-follow hiking tracks through the Dentelles, from beginner to medium level. Hiking tracks in France are marked with a standard set of symbols, which can be simply explained by the tourist office staff, who can also provide maps of the tracks. I spent many days hiking through the Dentelles, discovering the locations of the different vineyards as well as all the points of interest in the forests. There is a small French Air Force base at Orange in the Rhone Valley and planes from this base fly training missions low over the Dentelles – which makes for some interesting photos! Due to their steep cliff faces, the Dentelles are also popular with rock climbers – their voices carry over the still air of the valleys between the hills. A pure provincial back-to-nature moment. ♣

