

Andrew Jefford climbs the wintry slopes of Seyssuel to track down a forgotten classic...

image: <http://keyassets.timeincuk.net/inspirewp/live/wp-content/uploads/sites/34/2017/01/Vienne-France-Seyssuel-Alamy-630x417.jpg>



Long lost wine in Vienne, south-eastern France. Credit: Howard Taylor / Alamy Stock Photo

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The wine world doesn't have many stories like this.

A suite of great French vineyard hill slopes toppled into a coma after phylloxera. Those slopes were not only fully planted in the late nineteenth century, but were prized by the Romans almost two thousand years earlier, notching a tasting reference from (among others) Pliny the Elder. A sizeable percentage of the French population must have passed the forgotten hillsides in question at some point or other, driving south down the Autoroute du Soleil for holidays and back again afterwards. Forgotten ... until recently. How many of the drivers, while sitting in the celebrated Rhône valley summer traffic jams, will have looked up and noticed vineyards once again nibbling their way, over the last decade, across the forested scrub?

This is Vienne, just 32 km south of Lyon. The city was Rome's great entrepôt on the Rhône, and the bridgehead for the Roman imperial push north. Vienna (as it was called then) was also a much more significant city than Lugdunum (modern-day Lyon), as its archeological remains attest – including an amphitheatre which seated 12,000 (Lyon's could only accommodate 4,500). The Roman population of Vienne was around the same as its modern-day counterpart, at just under 30,000. One of them was, for a while, a wine merchant called Caius Maximus Paternus, whose carved epitaph can be seen in Vienne's Museum collections.

The river is at one of its narrowest points within France just here, and the town is surrounded by five hills, with more to the south. Côte Rôtie and Condrieu above Ampuis are well-known to wine lovers, as is Hermitage above Tain. Will we talk of Seyssuel in the same breath one day?

It's possible. The river is flowing in a south-easterly direction at this point, creating those splendidly steep south-facing and south-west facing hill slopes, with soils based on granite and schist – a northerly echo of the south-eastern facing slopes above Ampuis. Côte Rôtie and Condrieu too, remember, struggled to recover for many decades after phylloxera – there were only 50 ha of Côte Rôtie in 1960, while Condrieu had as little as 14 ha as late as 1982. Both appellations almost died.

Seyssuel did die – or rather never became an appellation at all, despite its pre-phylloxera history. The renaissance was due to three growers, Yves Cuilleron, François Villard and Pierre Gaillard. “We'd always known that those terraces existed,” Villard told me in 2001. “We often drove past them. Then one day Yves said ‘What about replanting Seyssuel’, as casually as one might say ‘D’you want a cigarette?’” They took up the challenge together, creating Vins de Vienne in February 1996, and beginning the scrub-clearing work a little later in the same year.

This was brave. It required a huge investment of time and effort in a tough, low-production, high-cost vineyard doomed, at least in the first instance, to go to market as no more than Vin de Pays des Collines Rhodaniennes. The results, as another subsequent pioneer, Stéphane Ogier, pointed out “had to be high in quality, close to what can be produced in Côte Rôtie” to get a break-even price. “We found the adventure of the Vins de Vienne guys magical,” continued Ogier, “and we wanted to follow them. There's something very special up on those slopes. The aromatic expressions; the tannic structure – there's more complexity and finesse than you get in St Joseph, for example.”

Ogier and his father weren't the only ones; there are now 15 different producers of wines there, with two more set to come into production this year, and a total of around 40 ha planted, spread over three communes – the steep hills above Chasse-sur-Rhône and Vienne itself as well as Seyssuel. The growers estimate that the hillsides have a potential for about 150 ha, though locating the owners of small parcels of scrub often abandoned for well over a century isn't easy. The two biggest producers at present are Vins de Vienne and Vignobles de Seyssuel (a team effort between Louis Chèze, Pascal and Laurent Marthouret and Georges Treynard, whose wines are sold under the Sixtus and Saxeolum names), with around half the planted vineyards between them.

They're also setting out down the long road to appellation status. A dossier was submitted to the INAO in 2014 after ten years' preparatory work – for red wines made from Syrah, and whites from Viognier (though a little Marsanne and Roussanne have also been planted). If

approved, of course, the zone would simply become part of the Côtes du Rhône; further dossiers and decades would be needed to climb the ladder to *cru* status.

On a morning of blowing wet snow in early January, I had a chance to climb the steep, gritty slopes of Seyssuel with Anthony Paret and look across the thunder of the A7 to the river beyond – a source of reflected light and warmth come summer. (Anthony reminded me that snow was traditionally called the ‘fertilizer of the poor’ in rural France, since it contains dissolved nitrogen – around 12 kg/ha.) Then it was back to the warmth of Vienne for a tasting at the Tourist Office, with its fine view over the Rhône. Not one of my notes echoed that of Pliny, by the way. In ancient times, the wines of Vienne were resinated.

- [Jane Anson on Seyssuel – a ‘new’ frontier for Syrah](#)
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Tasting the wines of Vienne

The fancifully Latinate flavour of many of the wine names (beyond the level of Monty Python’s Biggus Dickus, but sometimes not by much) strikes a historical pose. What you’ll find in the bottle, though, are graceful, slender reds of considerable contemporary appeal – I often felt I was tasting burgundy with the flavours of Syrah, and Alexandre Poinard of Louis Chèze/Vignobles de Seyssuel confirmed that local growers have noticed how Syrah there seems to become Pinot-like once in bottle. Comparing the warm 2012 vintage with the cooler 2014 vintage (where some of the red wines had marked green tones), though, emphasised how close to the ripening margin growers sail in Seyssuel. The whites have some of the flamboyance of Condrieu, but with a slightly fresher style and more slender in outline. Both make essential drinking, in sum, for those fond of the on-the-cusp charm of the Northern Rhône.

2014 Red Wines

Ripa Sinistra, Yves Cuilleron 2014

The three Vins de Vienne collaborators also produce Seyssuel wines under their own labels as well as jointly, and for me those of Cuilleron are the most successful. This has bright, floral scents and vivid, slender yet balanced flavours. 89

Lucidus Rouge, Lucidi & M.Chapoutier 2014

Michel Chapoutier’s interests in this zone take the form of a joint venture with Paul Lucidi, who has vines in the village of Chasse, to the north of Seyssuel. This wine has plenty of just-ripe red fruit, light, graceful and pure though with very little heft on the tongue: imagine Santenay planted with Syrah and you won’t be far out ... 89

Ame Soeur, M & S Ogier 2014

A bright, floral scent with plenty of polished energy and freshness in the mouth: smooth textures, yet plenty of peppery red fruits in flavour terms. 90

Serinae, Alain Paret 2014

This wine (which contains a little Viognier as well as Syrah) was the ripest of the 2014s I tried, with fresh, bright, faintly smoky scents and a juicy palate, combining boisterous raspberry fruits with some peachy richness. 92

Esprit d'Antan, Pierre-Jean Villa 2014

Villa was a former Vins de Vienne collaborator who branched out on his own in 2009. His 2014 is one of the few to outclass its 2012 counterpart: pepper and bacon scents; then a soprano yet mouthcoating palate with a little fresh spice creeping into the mix. 89

2012 Red Wines

Ripa Sinistra, Yves Cuilleron 2012

The fine aromatic complexity of this wine – an origami of currants, tobacco leaf, undergrowth and sweet leather – promises much for the region. The palate print doesn't quite live up to this aromatic billing, but there is still much to enjoy here in the wine's quiet play. 90

Ame Soeur, M & S Ogier 2012

This has a richer and more complex scent than its 2014 equivalent, with notes of tobacco, vanilla and supple leather. The palate is vivid, fresh and dappled, a pointilliste mist of raspberry, redcurrant and red apple with a delicious drinking balance. 91

Domaine Les Serines d'Or 2012

Long-term Seyssuel landholders Jérôme Ogier and Damien Robelet are the first new 'native' winegrowers the sub-region has produced, and they've made a good start. The 2012 Serines d'Or has sooty, savoury scents and a lively, mouthfilling flavour with plenty of liquorice complexities. 90

Saxeolum, Les Vignobles de Seyssuel 2012

A pure flute partita of sustained Syrah fruit, both aromatically and in the mouth, too: vibrant, poised and fresh, trilling between raspberry and blackcurrant. 91

Sotanium, Vins de Vienne 2012

This attractive wine has exuberant scents – but, being from Seyssuel, that means soft and smoky-sweet rather than the bacon-fat rasp you might get further downriver. That's true of the palate, too – this is sweetly tarry, graceful and well-rounded, the tannins softly chamfered into place without a trace of roughness. 92

2015 White Wines

Frontière, Julien Pilon 2015

Julien Pilon is a recent arrival who has only released a white so far: sweet nougatine scents with fresh, lively flavours and a clean, poised finish. 89

Jad'Or, Domaine Les Serines d'Or 2015

There's a very attractive balance of sweetness and freshness here: soft, lush, comely and rounded, perfume-layered, but retaining its grace and poise to the last. 91

Sixtus Blanc, Les Vignobles de Seyssuel 2015

This wine (picked in two passes, one in early maturity and one a little later) has disarmingly lovely scents of cream, vanilla and crystallised fruits. The palate is fruitier and less creamy than the aromas suggested, with lots of lively orange. 90

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