

Stirring the Lees with James Molesworth



James Molesworth

The Rhône, Day 8: Keeping Some Stubble for a Day in Cornas

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Cornas is a fascinating appellation. Often misunderstood and/or overlooked, its Syrahs are thoroughly unique in profile thanks to the appellation's dramatically different *terroir* (as opposed to Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie). For background on the appellation in general, you can [reference my feature story](#) from March 2008, which included [profiles on producers such as Thierry Allemand, Jean-Luc Colombo and others](#).

I never shave the morning I visit the domaines in Cornas. I need some rugged-looking stubble to not only get into the feel of the wines themselves, known for their chalky spine and overt olive notes, but also to fit in with the likes of Pierre-Marie Clape and Matthieu Barret, two of the appellation's top *vignerons*.

First stop was with the dynamic Barret at [Domaine du Coulet](#), located down a narrow winding road at the back end of town. Barret represents the future in Cornas. His domaine is, in my opinion, the single most exciting new domaine in the appellation today. With his nearly 14 hectares of vines (11 in Cornas), Barret is producing a quartet of wines that represent a new paradigm for Cornas—vivid, exceptionally bright, racy fruit flavors that at the same time harness the taut, sometimes severe minerality of the Syrah grown on the east- and southeast-

facing granite slopes above the town.

Barret farms his vines biodynamically and uses as little sulfur as possible during the *élevage*, racking only once but keeping the barrel bungs so tight he has to use a corkscrew to get them out for tasting.

“I want the olive character that comes with a little reduction in Syrah,” he said. “But not the animal notes which come from too much.”

Though he ferments some cuvées in stainless steel, he does not use temperature control.

“We don’t use heat or cold—just our brains,” he said, laughing. “The idea is not to destroy the wine, but just to help it along. I’m not a god, so how can I know what exact temperature to use? And why would I want to use the same temperature every vintage, since every vintage is different? It’s the same with using yeasts [Barret ferments with natural yeasts]—when you use them, everything is the same.”

You never need to follow up with a "why" or "how" when talking to Barret. He’s effusive, verbose and opinionated, and talks constantly about searching for "the truth" in the wines he makes.



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Cement eggs used for aging the Brise Cailloux cuvée at Coulet.

The **Cornas Brise Cailloux 2007** is the only cuvée fermented in cement vat. It’s then aged in egg-shaped cement vessels and a few barrels (none new). Just bottled, it’s tight and stony up front, with brisk acidity carrying Damson plum, spice and pastis hints with a long, razorlike finish. The finish is just the style that Coulet said he’s looking for.

The remaining 2007 cuvées are still in their 400-liter barrels and are set to be blended and bottled in the coming months. The **Cornas Les Terrasses du Serre 2007** is a blend of three parcels, including the Geynale and Guytounne *lieux-dits*. The Guytounne parcel, from a warm spot, provides electric aromas and flavors of briar and blackberry while the Geynale, a cooler spot, shows more violet and pastis hints.

“The Geynale is more classic Cornas, which is good to blend with the structure of the Guytounne,” he said.

The **Cornas Billes Noires 2007** comes primarily from the Arlettes parcel, the southern part of which delivers a very chalky entry with red currant and olive notes backed by firm structure. From the northern end of the same parcel offers stunning plum and blackberry fruit, with high-definition violet and mineral notes.

“Arlettes curves inward along the hill, so it’s generally cooler and delivers more minerality,” said Barret. “It’s the opposite of a parcel like Reynard that Clape and Allemand use, which curves outward, is warmer, and offers more fruit and power.”

The newest cuvée here is the **Cornas Gore 2007**, which will get a white label as opposed to the typical black label of the domaine. Gore refers to the local name for the very fine-pebbled,

sandy granite soils in the appellation, and the wine delivers a gravelly feel with a core of plum and pastis backed by a grippy finish.

“You can really feel the gore in the wine,” said Barret, running his thumb and fingers together for emphasis.

[Alain Vogé](#) is one of the deans of the appellation, and his domaine has been assured of continuing its quality by bringing in outside investors (in the form of Michel Chapoutier) as well as the expertise of Albéric Mazoyer, a former winemaker at M. Chapoutier. For background on the specific wines, click [here](#) for notes from a previous visit.

There are some minor changes taking place here. The weathered, blue wooden sign marking the *cave*, just off the main road through town, has been replaced with a clean, modern version. The white wines have received new labels that make them a little more identifiable as coming all from the same domaine. The wines themselves however, remain the same.

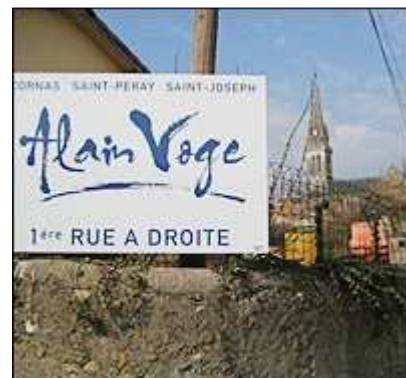
Vogé himself remains his mild-mannered, amiable self. Turning 70 this year, he will mark his 50th vintage. He’s slowed down a little, following a liver transplant 10 years ago that still requires a regular hospital visit.

“I’m up, I’m down,” he said, with a half smile. “I really liked good wine and food though.”

“Liked?” asked Mazoyer quizzically. “You mean like, present tense!” drawing a wider smile from Vogé.

Some importer troubles have made this a domaine whose wines can be hard to track down from time to time. But don’t let the inconsistent distribution stop you from searching.

The white wines are among the best bottlings from St.-Péray, a tiny (65 hectare) appellation that has rejuvenated itself in recent years. Now made from entirely Marsanne (what Roussanne the domaine has planted goes into a sparkling wine now), the trio of cuvées begins with the **St.-Péray Harmonie 2007** (formerly just the straight St.-Péray bottling). It’s delivers fresh white peach and mineral notes with a long stony finish. The **St.-Péray Terres Boissés 2007** (formerly labeled as the Cuvée Boisée) spends 12 months in barrel and delivers a creamier mouthfeel with deeper peach, lime and mineral notes. The **St.-Péray Fleur de Crussol** remains the top bottling, sourced from a single parcel of 70-year-old vines on limestone soils and fermented and then aged for 16 months in barrel. It’s very plump and ripe, almost showy, but stays restrained and focused with lots of melon and floral notes and an invigorating, long finish.



The sign has changed, but the wines remain the same at chez Alain Vogé.

“2007 has more *gras*,” said Mazoyer. “2006 has more acid and is fresher. Our yields are also very low in 2007 as it is just the second vintage since we have converted to biodynamic farming.”

For the reds, the **Côtes du Rhône Les Peyrouses 2007** is made from Syrah, sourced from vines around Cornas and St.-Péray. It's bright purple in color, with a fresh, open demeanor that lets cherry and *garrigue* notes play out. The **St.-Joseph Les Vinsonnes 2007** is a relatively new cuvée, now in its third vintage. Sourced from parcels around Mauves and Glun, it is aged for 14 months in barrel (none new) and delivers a mix of stylish red and blue fruits with elegant sanguine and *garrigue* hints on the finish.

The estate's youngest vines (20 years old) go into the first of the three Cornas cuvées, the **Cornas Les Chailles 2007**, which has almost crunchy acidity, a briary edge and a mouthwatering iron note backing the cherry fruit. The **Cornas Vieilles Vignes 2007** is a blend of seven or eight parcels, depending on the vintage, with vines ranging from 30 to 60 years of age. It receives 20 months of *élevage* and about 20 percent new oak, and has the appellation's telltale chalk spine buried in a core of violet, mixed berry and tobacco notes.

"At first I thought the vintage would evolve quickly," said Mazoyer. "But it turned out not to be the case, so we extended the *élevage* a little."

Quality did prevent a Vieilles Fontaines bottling from being made in 2007—the parcel will instead be blended into the Vieilles Vignes bottling. The **Cornas Vieilles Fontaines 2006** has been bottled however, after a 24-month *élevage*. There are just 3,300 bottles of this single-parcel cuvée (80-year-old vines), which is usually among the best wines in Cornas. It provides a sappy, kirsch core woven with tobacco and olive notes, while a strident minerality defines the finish. It's rather regal in feel for the typically rugged village of Cornas, with impressive length.

As with Alain Voge, [A. Clape](#) is also one of the most established names in the appellation. Following in his father's footsteps (and now joined in turn by his son) Pierre-Marie Clape has been producing reference point, ageworthy Cornas for a generation here—I just finished off the last of my '98 recently, and wish I had held it longer. The classic-scoring 2005 bottling is a monumental wine.

The 2007 will be hard pressed to reach those heights, but it's looking to be a very successful vintage in Cornas nonetheless, an appellation that often bucks the general trend of the Northern Rhône—both 2001 and 2004 are examples.

Still in its various parts and aging in *foudre*, tasting at *chez* Clape is a lot like tasting at Clos des Papes or Jean-Louis Chave—some parcels may be singing more than others from day to day, but in the end, the final blend is always greater than the sum of its parts.



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Yes, those are bottles of wine. The vieux millesimes at chez Clape.

The **Cornas 2007** remains in pieces, and Clape leads me through a number of samples drawn from *foudre*. From 60-year-old vines at the bottom of the hill in the Mazards parcel, a sample shows rugged, dense texture and a heap of blackberry fruit. Various young vine parcels—one 15 years, another 18—show snappy acidity and bright fruit—lively but without the depth of the older vine parcels. From the Sabarotte *lieu-dit*, the sample shows super gutsy blackberry fruit with lots of sanguine grip. Clape will decide which parcels make the final wine—in a good year the younger vines can get into the main wine if quality merits—as it did in 2005. One parcel that always makes it into the main wine however is a selection of old vines in the Reynard *lieu-dit*, the likely *grand cru* of Cornas were there ever to be a classification. This warm spot in the southern portion of the appellation is all iron, currant paste and dense, grippy tannins backed by saliva-inducing salinity. Though only part of the final blend, this is the parcel that always takes the upper hand in defining the wine.

Those parcels that don't make it into the main bottling go into the **Cornas Renaissance 2007**, which at this point is partially blended. It's well-rounded already, with black cherry, currant and licorice root notes and a long, minerally finish that lingers with a perfumy hint.

“I like the Renaissance right away, up to about 12, maybe 15 years maximum in a good vintage,” said Clape about aging the younger vine bottling. “But for the Cornas, it needs 10 years minimum, and up to 20,” he said about the main bottling.

As we discuss previous vintages, I compare 2005 to 1990 and Clape corrects me—2005 should be compared to 1978 in his estimation. And in retrospect, many vigneron are now expressing a clear preference for 2005 among recent vintages, thanks to its classic, long-term aging potential.

As for the **Cornas 2008**, the vintage wasn't easy. With its varying concave and convex hillsides offering a range of exposures and both cool and warm spots, dealing with rot in 2008 wasn't easy.

“It really just exploded in some parts [of Cornas],” said Clape.

The same top parcel from the Reynard *lieu-dit* in 2008 shows its gutsy fig and coffee profile, and there's admirable quality up and down the range of parcels we taste through with the vintage's snappy acidity running throughout. It will be interesting to see how much flesh develops to surround the bones of the vintage.

While known for the Cornas bottlings, the domaine also produces small amounts of other wines as well. Made from 100 percent Syrah, whole-bunch pressed and aged three months in *foudre*, the **Côtes du Rhône 2008** offers black cherry fruit, firm minerality and a dusty finish. The **Vin de Table Français Le Vin des Amis 2008** is also made from Syrah parcels below the town along the river. It's firm and chalky in style with snappy red cherry fruit. Both are a step behind their 2007 counterparts (already reviewed).

“2008 is complicated,” said Clape. “Lots of tartaric and malic acidity. The wines crashed early in the *élevage*, but they’re coming back now. It’s not a catastrophe.”

After the 2007 vintage, there will be no **Côtes du Rhône White** bottling for a while as Clape is replanting the vineyards. The domaine’s white wine now is a delightful **St.-Péray 2007**, made from Marsanne and offering very pure, nicely rounded white peach and mineral notes. The **St.-Péray 2008** has finished its malolactic already, and shows bracing peach pit and stone notes.

To finish the tasting, Clape generously opens a couple of older vintages, both the **Cornas 1999** and **Cornas 1998**. The '99 is “just starting to open,” he said, as it shows cedar, roasted vanilla, currant, beef and mineral notes with a long, bittersweet cocoa-tinged finish. The '98 in comparison shows a touch more acidity, with dried currant, rose petal, incense and roasted vanilla notes with a tauter, more mineral-driven finish that is just starting to hit its stride but remains a touch more closed than the '99. I’d rate both just shy of classic quality. It’s a stinging lesson to learn, as I think of that last bottle of '98 sitting in my recycling bin back home.



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Things can get heated in Cornas when the locals play pétanque.

With his consulting business and use of new oak during the *élevage* on his reds, [Jean-Luc Colombo](#) on the surface is the unabashed modernist of the appellation. When you stand in the middle of a steep, recently cleared slope in Cornas that he's going to plant this year, you realize Colombo is more *terroir*-obsessed romantic.

"One hectare, maybe," he said of the site, which when I visited last time was still covered in juniper-laced brush. "And we'll get 25 hectoliters if we're lucky, so 4,000 bottles maybe? That's a lot of work for 4,000 bottles," he said. Check out the accompanying video for more on this as-yet-unplanted parcel, which Colombo likens to finding and restoring an old boat.

Colombo's travel schedule is demanding, so kudos also go to his wife Anne (an enologist by training) and capable staff of Julien Revillon and Cyril Courvoisier who all work to keep things humming along when he isn't around. You can reference background on the domaine via my Cellar Notes on the [2003](#) and [2005](#) vintages.

Colombo is among those vigneron who is feeling the effects of the current economic situation (or isn't afraid to admit that he is feeling them). While some domaines with small production are still able to sell what they have in the cellar, others aren't so lucky. One importer recently folded up, leaving three top domaines in the lurch to the tune of a few hundred thousand euros of unpaid bills—likely not to be recouped. Colombo himself, who usually offers a presale on the upcoming vintage at the end of each year, saw orders crawl to a halt at the end of 2008 for his 2007s and has seen no signs of life so far in the first parts of this year.

“Like this,” he said motioning with his hand on a downward diagonal. “Domaines can maybe survive for a few months like that, but a whole year? 2009 is going to be a tough,” he said.

Colombo prefers the '07 vintage to his 2006s, for their more enjoyable fruit and richness. Bottling will begin in April for most of the top wines, which cover both the estate Cornas bottlings and his négociant lineup.

Among the négociant wines is a **St.-Joseph Les Lauves 2007**, with floral, incense and red cherry notes on an elegant frame, as well as a **Côte-Rôtie La Divine 2007**, which offers plump, forward mixed berry fruit, a hint of incense and a velvety finish; both are potentially outstanding.

The heart of the red lineup however is the Cornas range, and the **Cornas Les Méjeans 2007** resurrects an old label last used in the 2001 vintage. It's a combination of declassified estate juice as well as rented vineyards (Colombo is no longer buying juice). It receives a shorter *élevage*, just 13 or 14 months, and sees just 25 percent new oak, all aimed at producing a more accessible wine meant to be released sooner. The aim is to bridge the gap between vintages of the single vineyard wines while also providing an entry point for consumers to try Cornas. There are 12,000 bottles of the wines, which should retail for under \$40 when and if it hits shelves here, and it delivers the textbook black cherry, olive, briar and tangy mineral finish the appellation is known for. The **Cornas Terres Brûlées 2007** is still in barrel and it shows denser currant, briar and tobacco notes with a fresh, lively finish. The **Cornas Les Ruchets 2007** (13,000 bottles produced) has a very pebbly feel, with a bright mineral streak holding sway over cherry fruit, with a long, focused finish. The **Cornas La Louvée 2007** (8,000 bottles produced) is typically the ripest of the bunch, and it doesn't disappoint in 2007, with layers of ripe plum and cassis notes layered with minerality and a long, blueberry- and mulberry-tinged finish. From a small, single parcel at the top of the hill, Colombo bottles his **Cornas Force One 2007** (which he first produced in 2005, but not in '06). It's very grippy, with a mix of blueberry fruit, chalky spine and long, olive-filled finish. The top four bottlings are all potentially outstanding, with the La Louvée leading the way.

Don't overlook Colombo's whites either, some of which offer great value. The **Côtes du Rhône White La Redonne 2007** is a new label, but not a new wine. Formerly the Côtes du Rhône White Les Figuières bottling, Colombo lost the label as he forgot to trademark it, leaving it to be scooped up by a co-op in the south.

“A mistake I won't make again,” he said with a tinge of resentment. The two-thirds Roussanne, one-third Viognier blend offers plump melon and peach notes on a very round frame. The Viognier portion comes from vineyards around Chavanay, “basically declassified Condrieu,” noted Colombo. There's an ample 30,000 bottles produced and it should retail in the neighborhood of \$12. The **Côtes du Rhône White Les Abeilles 2007** should hit shelves in the \$9 range. The 60/30/10 blend of Clairette, Grenache Blanc and Roussanne sees only 10 percent oak, and it's brighter and fresher in style, with green almond, nectarine and floral notes backed by an easy finish. The **St.-Péray La Belle de Mai 2007** is 98 percent Roussanne, and a drop of Marsanne—reversing the typical blend of the appellation. Entirely barrel fermented (one-third new) it offers creamy, forward notes of almond, lime, lemon verbena and melon. The **Condrieu Amour de Dieu 2007** offers showy pear, fig, almond and fennel notes with a long, green plum-tinged finish.

To unwind at the end of the long day, I dropped in at [Le Mangevins](#), the 20-seat *bar à vin* in

Tain l'Hermitage that has become *the* local spot for the wine savvy. Owner Vincent Dollat continues to beef up the wine list, while his wife turns out modestly priced plates of fresh, modern French cuisine from a closet-sized kitchen. A plate of perfectly pink lamb chops and a bottle of [Bernard Faurie](#) St.-Joseph 2005 hit the spot. And you never know who you might bump into—Jean Gonon, Gilles Robin and Franck Faugier were all in attendance. ([You can read about Robin's and Faugier's respective domaines here](#). I'll be visiting Gonon tomorrow, so stay tuned for that.)