



**Arlequin Wine Merchant  
One-Bottle Club, March 2019  
Domaine Clusel-Roch “Les Schistes”  
Côte-Rôtie, Rhône Valley, France 2017**

**GRAPE VARIETIES** 96% Syrah, 4% Viognier

**WINEMAKER** For fans of northern Rhône wines, the Clusel-Roch name brings three associations to mind: ageworthy Côte Rôtie reds, organic farming and traditional, hands-on family winemaking. This intimately scaled domaine, located in northern Côte-Rôtie, is managed today by Guillaume Clusel, who has taken over day-to-day winemaking responsibilities from his mother Brigitte. His father, Gilbert Clusel, comes from a family who have farmed their 13 acres of vines in Côte Rôtie and Condrieu for generations, and Gilbert still tends the vines alongside Guillaume: fixing tractors, pruning, tying up vines, spreading compost, repairing terrace walls and generally helping with all of the hard, never-ending labor that farming in Côte Rôtie requires. The family was actually among the first in this storied appellation to bottle their own wines in the late 1960s, along with Marcel Guigal and Marius Gentaz. Recently, impelled by a series of vintages in which hail wiped out much of their Côte Rôtie crop, Guillaume has also started making wines from the nearby Coteaux du Lyonnais appellation.

**VINEYARD** The Northern Rhône wine region is a narrow, 50-mile-or-so stretch of steep, terraced hills along the Rhône River, bookended by the appellations of Côte Rôtie in the north and Cornas and St-Péray in the south. The region’s output is small, accounting for less than 5 percent of all Rhône Valley wine production, and its wines reach their apogee in Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie, the tiny appellations that produce an outsized number of world-class reds. The only red grape permitted in northern Rhône vineyards is Syrah; small amounts of Viognier are often added to “fix” the wine’s bright purple color and add fragrance. The Clusel-Roch Côte-Rôtie vineyards comprise small parcels in three terraced, southeast-facing *lieu-dits* in the northern reach of the appellation: “Viallière”, “Champon” and “Le Plomb”, each of which goes into “Les Schistes”, their flagship wine. Here, vines dig into ferrous, schisty soils laden with black mica. Over millennia, the black has faded to a dark brown and given this area its moniker, the *Côte Brun* (brown slope). After a decade of trial and experimentation, the estate officially converted to organic farming in 2002, making them organic pioneers in Côte Rôtie’s modern era. On these vineyards, the work is, of necessity, entirely manual—there’s no way you could get a tractor up the steep, crumbly paths that climb this slope. The family tills the soil by hand with picks, hoes and hand-plows. Medicinal herbs are used to promote vine health, rather than industrial chemicals,

and composted manure is the only fertilizer used. The Clusel-Roches replant vines only from their own selection of *Serine*, a finicky, local clone of Syrah that produces smaller grapes and more aromatic, mineral-driven wines. Occasional Viognier vines are interplanted among the Syrah—about 4 percent in total.

**WINEMAKING** Winemaking *chez* Clusel-Roch is about as traditional as it gets. Grapes are picked by hand and carried downhill in small containers. For “Les Schistes”, the family uses only fruit from vines at least a decade old. When the crop arrives at the wine cellar, the grapes are partially destemmed, with up to 50 percent of whole clusters included. Fermentation is wild, with no yeasts added. The Clusel-Roches’ one concession to modernity has been the introduction of stainless steel tanks, in 2005. The controlled temperature of fermentation now allows a gentler extraction, and has resulted in brighter, purer and more precise wines in recent years. During fermentation, there is some *pigéages* (punching down the raft of grape skins and seeds that rise to the top of the tank) and *remontage* (pumping over of the juice over the cap), in order to gently extract tannin, color and flavor. Parcels from each vineyard are fermented and aged separately for 15 to 24 months in large oak barrels, depending on the lot, then blended before bottling. A few new barrels are introduced each year, never comprising more than 15 percent of the total used.

**VINTAGE** Twenty-seventeen marks the Northern Rhône’s third strong vintage in a row. Although the season began and ended early—with flowering and harvest taking place two to three weeks earlier than usual—the quality was very high. Driven by drought, yields were low, meaning regional prices continue to rise.

**TASTING NOTES** One of the great pleasures of Côte Rôtie is its fragrance—a heady, filigreed mix of sun-warmed berries, peppery spice and pretty floral notes. Those are on full display in this classic example, along with a mineral edge that reminds us of iron. On the palate, the wine is firm and nearly full-bodied, with polished tannins girding the rich fruit. Notes of red and black plums, currants, black pepper, iron and licorice unfold with some time in the glass. There’s a sense of coiled energy and power held in check, a kind of tension to the palate that indicates this wine has a long life ahead.

**FOOD PAIRING** Lamb is a traditional partner to Northern Rhône reds for excellent reasons: The meat’s protein tames Syrah’s tannins, while the wine’s savory edge marries beautifully with the gaminess of the meat. Our go-to meal is broiled lamb chops, marinated in a purée of garlic, olive oil, rosemary, salt and pepper. You can give the same treatment to steak, or a whole leg of lamb, with superb results. For dinner parties, we can personally vouch that Paula Wolfert’s recipe for slow-cooked duck with olives and Provençal herbs is a show-stopper with Syrah. Whatever your menu, decant the wine at least an hour before serving.