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## What I Want Wine to Be, Part One

Posted by Fredric Koeppl under

We learn by experience, whatever the field or range of sensation. I started reading about wine and tasting wine seriously around 1980 and was launched into a career as a wine writer and reviewer in July 1984. It's an interesting phenomenon that these almost 40 years inevitably broadened my acceptance of a wide swath of wines, grapes and regions as well as narrowed my focus of preferences and what is amenable to my palate. For example, while a great chardonnay can be a noble, even a sublime drink, I will choose almost any white wine other than chardonnay for dinner, whether at home or at a restaurant. I don't encounter many white Burgundies, so the blame doesn't rest there, but I'll say that California chardonnay — so often over-oaked, stridently spicy, tropical and dessert-like — spoiled my taste for the grape. Likewise, I can't tolerate the level of oak and alcohol in many red wines produced in California, particularly in cabernet sauvignon and zinfandel. People, if a wine smells like oak and tastes like oak, there's too much oak. It boggles my mind that a winemaker would go to the trouble to produce a single-vineyard expression of a grape like chardonnay or pinot noir and then cloak the wine in so much oak that any trace of what may have been individuality and singularity is obliterated.

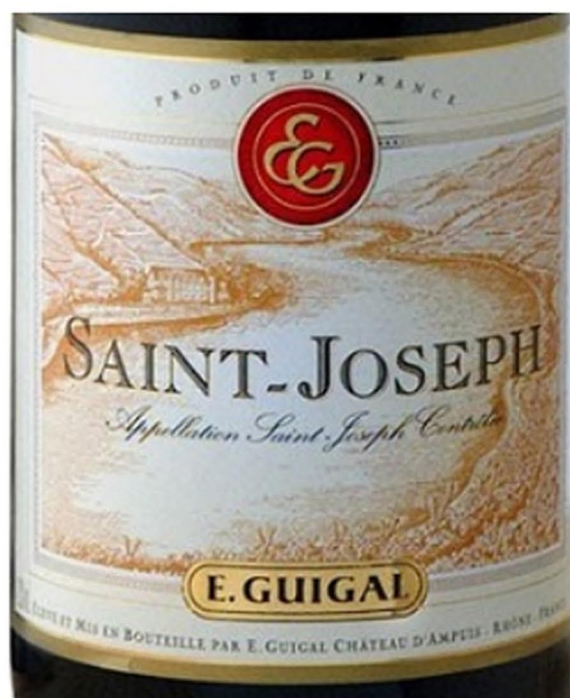
What do I want in wine? It's pretty simple. I want varietal integrity that includes a sense of purity and intensity of the grape that transcends technical feats in the winery; at the same time, I enjoy a bit of eccentricity and individualism. I want wine that displays a melding of power and elegance, of delicacy and tensile strength. I want a texture that feels lithe and sinewy on the palate rather than opulent and cushiony. I want acidity that plows a furrow and keeps the wine dynamic and engaging. I want a wine that to whatever extent possible reflects its origin in a piece of land under the sway of a particular climate. I want a wine that's balanced and poised and offers equilibrium in all its aspects and character. Above all, I like a wine that beguiles the nose and feels alive and essential on the palate.

I chose four wines to illustrate these principles for this first part of "What I Want Wine to Be": an aligoté from the Ribbon Ridge AVA of Oregon's Willamette Valley; a Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon; a Premier Cru Chablis (chardonnay) and a Saint-Joseph from the Rhone Valley (syrah). Each of these wines seems to me to be an exemplar of the grape crafted in a thoughtful and authentic manner.



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The vineyards of the Saint-Joseph AOC stretch along the west bank of the Rhône River from the village of Limony (pop. 776) in the north to the village of Chateaubourg (pop. 211) in the south. It's the largest wine region in the Northern Rhône Valley — though second in extent of vines planted to Crozes-Hermitage — where the syrah grape is king. In the Southern Rhône, of course, where the climate is Mediterranean rather than Continental, syrah shares billing with grenache, mourvèdre and cinsault. The E. Guigal Saint-Joseph 2015 seems to me a textbook example of the grape derived from a perfect setting. The grapes were fermented in stainless steel, and the wine aged 16 months in second-use oak barrels, so there's no trace of new oak. The color is intense black-



purple with a slight lightening to a magenta rim; aromas of violets, lavender and loam waft from the glass, highlighting notes of spiced and macerated black currants and plums. The wine is quite dry, with plenty of grip and traction on the palate, though tannins are soft and satiny; a little time in the glass opens touches of wood-smoke, warm stones, ink and iodine, with a back-note of blueberry tart. 13.5 percent alcohol. Try through 2022 to '25 with braised lamb or veal shanks, rack of venison, or a medium-rare ribeye steak, hot and crusty from the grill. I try many syrahs from California that are slathered with oak, high in alcohol and just too big for their britches. This E. Guigal Saint-Joseph 2015 embodies a sense of purity, intensity and varietal character that transcends those models. Excellent. About \$35. Imported by Vintus LLC, New York.