

La Landonne: Promise & Rebirth in Côte-Rôtie

“Today’s a Landonne day,” Philippe Guigal says to me with boyish delight. As he reiterates later, Landonne was *his* vineyard. “I was born in January 1975, and Landonne has been planted in January 1975,” he explains. Philippe’s grandfather Etienne began acquiring Guigal’s portion of the *lieu-dit* bit-by-bit in the early 1960s. When his son, Marcel, and daughter-in-law, Bernadette, revealed they were expecting, the Guigals decided to finally plant Landonne—which hadn’t seen vines for decades—in Philippe’s honor.



A terraced parcel in southern La Landonne (Photo credit: Bryce Wiatrak)

“It’s a very clever thing to do,” admits Philippe, who has two young twin sons. “You’re eight years old. You’re watching a cartoon on TV, and your grandfather comes to you and says, ‘I’m going to the vineyards. Do you want to walk with me?’” For most kids, that would be an unenticing proposition, argues Philippe. Only Etienne and Marcel were smart. “‘Philippe, I’m going to your vineyard, because La Landonne is *your* vineyard. Do you want to come with me?’ And you feel like, ‘Wow, it’s my vineyard—so yes, of course!’” For Philippe, Landonne was a place of pride, but to his

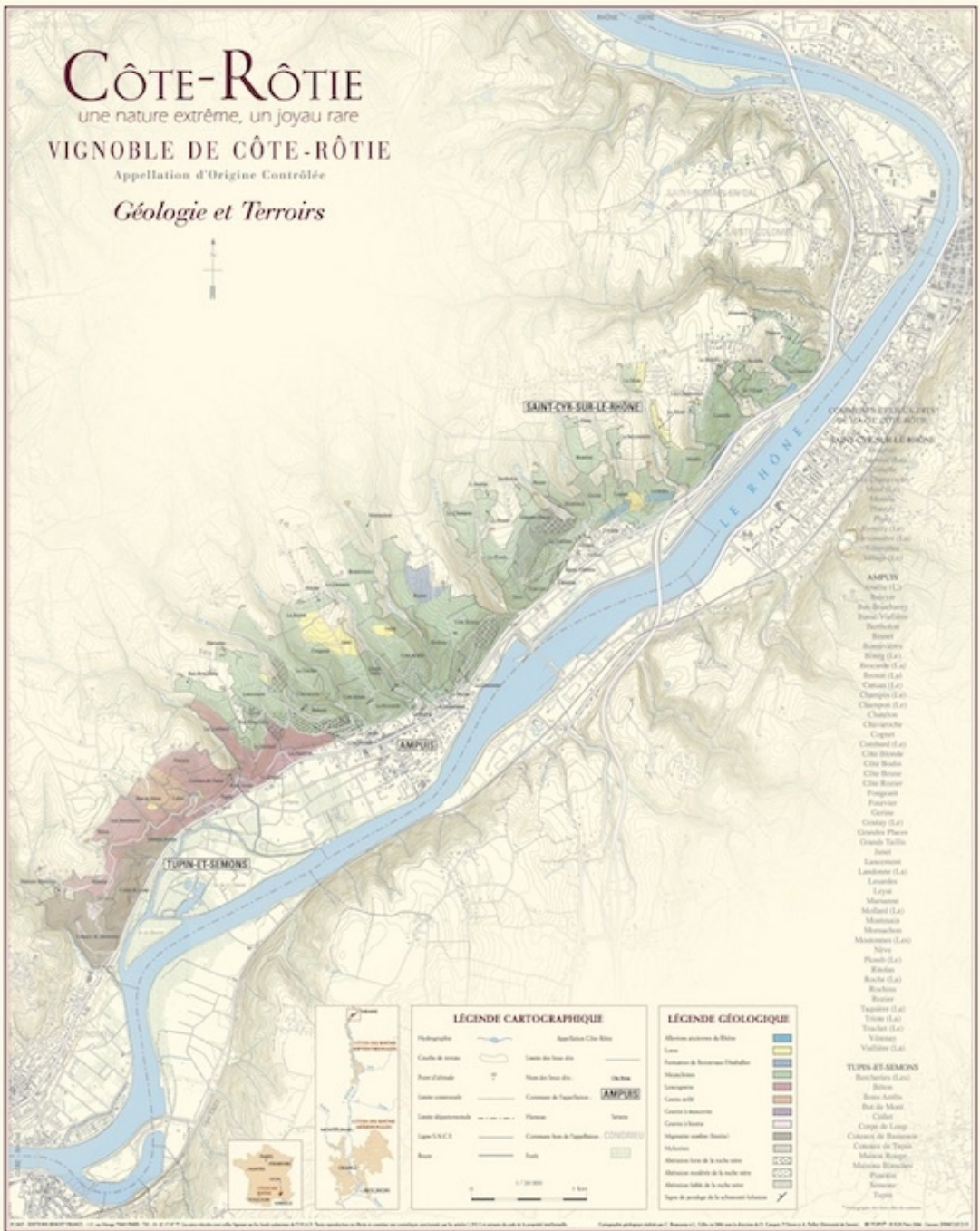
father and grandfather, it was a promise of generational succession. I asked him if his boys have their own vineyards yet. “Maybe,” he grins slyly.

La Landonne was the second of Guigal’s trilogy of “La-Las” to be released, and it is often considered the most stately, as compared to La Mouline’s elegance and La Turque’s exoticism. Landonne also has several distinguishing factors: it’s the only official *lieu-dit* of the three, it’s the only single-varietal Syrah, and it’s the only one that doesn’t come from a monopole. Rather, in the years since its inception, the Guigals have found themselves surrounded by a band of prestigious neighbors, each with a different interpretation of what has become one of the Rhône’s most celebrated vineyard sites.

Landonne Reborn

Unlike Burgundy's *lieux-dits*, whose definition by the Benedictine and Cistercian monks over the course of many centuries is well documented, records denoting the origins of Côte-Rôtie's *lieux-dits* are scarce. Guigal finds La Landonne's earliest mention in Louis Larmat's *Atlas de la France Viticole: Côtes du Rhône*, printed in 1943, and his grandfather Etienne remembered seeing vines there in his youth. Nonetheless, by the time World War II ended, its plantings were gone, as was much of the region. Two wars (which largely depleted Côte-Rôtie's labor force) and a global depression successively hit the appellation, still freshly scarred from the 19th-century phylloxera crisis. Its residents diversified into fruits, nuts, and other produce, and by 1945, a kilo of grapes from Côte-Rôtie earned 45 centimes, less than half the price of a kilo of apricots, which cost one franc. Though it was granted early AOC status in 1940, most Côte-Rôtie of the time was sold as *vin ordinaire*.

The rebirth of La Landonne can be attributed to Etienne Guigal, who is chiefly credited with the revival of the entire region. At age 14 in 1924, Etienne began working in the vineyards of Côte-Rôtie, spending most of his young career at Vidal-Fleury and climbing the ladder to become cellar master and eventually head vigneron. Following the war, Etienne departed in 1946 to forge his own venture, *Établissements Guigal*. Côte-Rôtie's recovery period over the next two decades remained lethargic, and in 1965, only 59 hectares were harvested (308 hectares are planted as of 2017). Perhaps the first great reminder of its promise came the following year, when Guigal vinified the first of its La-Las, the 1966 La Mouline—a single-vineyard wine from the Côte Blonde, whose vines date back as far as 1893, among the earliest post-phylloxera plantings in Côte-Rôtie. (The third La-La, La Turque, came in 1985, after Marcel Guigal purchased Vidal-Fleury and, along with it, this prestigious site, bringing his family's history full circle.)



Credit: Syndicat des vigneron de Côte-Rôtie (Click to enlarge and zoom in)

By 1961, before the world ever tasted the first Mouline, Etienne’s eyesight had started to deteriorate. While he didn’t go fully blind, he was no longer able to drive or read a newspaper. Ultimately, his son Marcel, only 17 years old, had to take charge of the winery, but Etienne continued to build his family’s enterprise. With a few newfound hours of leisure, Etienne took to visiting his friends around Ampuis. His calls weren’t purely social. He remembered a steep site just above the north of town, La

Landonne, whose slopes had laid barren since World War II. “He had an idea of the quality potential of this land,” explains Philippe. But after several generations of divisions, La Landonne had dozens of owners, each possessing only a splinter of the land. Etienne found 15 friends willing to sell him their share, allowing him to piece together 1.8 hectares of the abandoned *lieu-dit* (today, Guigal owns 2.3 hectares). They each, however, issued a warning, as Philippe recounts: “We don’t want you to come back in a few months or in a few years and say, ‘You’ve been rude to me; you sold me something that cannot be planted—because it’s too steep, because it’s crazy to plant in the slopes, etc.’ So I’m very okay to sell to you, but I don’t want any reproach afterwards.”

As Philippe arrived in January 1975, vines were planted in La Landonne after a three-decade absence. In 1978, Guigal fermented the vineyard’s first vintage. Unlike the vinescape portrayed on bottles of La Mouline, or the kaleidoscopic whimsy later observed on La Turquie, Marcel donned La Landonne with a nod to antiquity. “We can directly link the viticulture to the dynamism of the economy in Vienne,” says Philippe of the region’s nearby former capital, prosperous in the first few centuries CE. For the Landonne label, still used today, Marcel took an image from an excavated mosaic housed in the Musée Gallo-Romain in neighboring Saint-Romain-en-Gal. The relic depicts a calendar year in agricultural work, and Marcel chose September, which illustrates a crush pad, to feature on his wine—further embellished with Doric columns and the vintage dated in Roman numerals.



La-La labels, from left to right: La Mouline, La Turquie, and La Landonne

But despite the ancient heritage, the first vintage of La Landonne was harvested from very young vines, and even today, Landonne’s oldest are only half the average age of La Mouline’s. “Outside La Mouline, La Landonne and La Turquie are for me the expression or the illustration of the fact that the age of the vines is important, but it’s not essential,” explains Philippe. While La Landonne collected early praise for Guigal, by the time La Turquie’s first vintage, 1985, was released—also from young vines—all three La-Las earned 100 points from Robert Parker, further cementing Guigal’s cult status with its trio of icon wines. With these wines, the Guigal family was able to not only rebuild Côte-

Rôtie's reputation but also achieve a newfound glory that had all but eluded the region over its millennia of history. Admiration for Côte-Rôtie's wines is well documented in older texts; in his 1816 guide *Topographie de tous les vignobles connus*, wine writer and vintner André Jullien lists Côte-Rôtie as "first class," with exceptional cellaring potential. Yet the region had seldom garnered the enthusiasm given to Hermitage, the imposing hill on the opposite end of the Northern Rhône—Jullien goes on to call the wines of Hermitage "on par with the best in the kingdom." A century later, English scholar George Saintsbury in his 1920 *Notes on a Cellar-Book* called Hermitage "the manliest French wine I ever drank," a critical juxtaposition to the comparative delicacy, perhaps itself a very subtle euphemism for inferiority, prescribed to Côte-Rôtie.

Though no less capable of nuance, Guigal's La-Las, and most particularly La Landonne, upend that stereotype, delivering wines of brawny, unbridled power. Such an approach, which detractors might decry for its extraction and clear markers of new oak, also ushered in for Côte-Rôtie a new era of "modernism," for lack of a better term, analogous to what could also be observed in regions like Rioja or Barolo in the last decades of the 20th century. Today's retrospect is often more critical of this stylistic schism, in which Guigal diverged from stalwart traditionalists like the late Marius Gentaz-Dervieux and Albert Dervieux-Thaize, whose old bottles now frequently far surpass prices of the La-Las at auction. But, regardless of personal palates, the La-Las brought new energy and conversation to a region lost from public consciousness, and without them, it's difficult to imagine the sky-high prices earned by so many beyond Guigal.

Still, it's unfair to attribute the present success of Côte-Rôtie to a single producer, and the appellation's broad contemporary appeal likely derives from its multitude of expressions. On a smaller level, the same could be said of La Landonne. Unlike La Turque and La Mouline, which are both monopoles, Guigal wasn't alone in La Landonne for long. René Rostaing acquired less than a quarter hectare in 1971, in the early years of his eponymous estate and two decades before he would inherit parcels from his legendary relatives, his father-in-law Albert Dervieux-Thaize and uncle Marius Gentaz-Dervieux. Jean-Michel Gerin planted his 0.4 hectares of La Landonne in 1991 and crafted his first vintage in 1996. Delas, the renowned négociant best associated with Hermitage, acquired its 0.65-hectare plot through marriage, first making a Landonne in 1997. The Condrieu-based newcomer Xavier Gérard created his initial Landonne in 2013, after several years of blending the fruit into his general Côte-Rôtie.

Today, these five vineyard-designated La Landonne wines are bottled (Guigal, Rostaing, Gerin, Delas, and Gérard). A couple others, such as Jean-Paul Jamet, have small holdings that contribute to broader cuvées, and Bernard Levet's plot of La Landonne comprises 60% of his Les Journaries bottling, the balance from Côte Blonde. Surprisingly, despite the vineyard's recognition, only for

Guigal is Landonne at the apex of an estate's portfolio (though an argument might also be made for Gérard, whose production remains a diminutive 400 bottles annually). Delas is best known for its two top Hermitage wines, Domaine des Tourettes and single-*lieu-dit* Les Bessards, while Gerin's highest acclaim typically edges in favor of its Les Grandes Places. René Rostaing is quick to profess, "For me, the better terroir is the Côte Blonde." He explains, "La Landonne is more rustic . . . with bigger tannins, less refined"—regardless of the sea of collectors, sommeliers, and tradespeople who cherish this wine.

The Land & The Wines

As is the case with so many of the world's great sites, Landonne is "an extreme vineyard," according to Philippe. Côte-Rôtie boasts 75 registered *lieux-dits*, a list formalized in the 1960s, among them La Landonne. Although La Landonne can be noted on some earlier documents, such as the Larmat maps, other *lieux-dits* that also appeared, like La Turquie, are not recognized by the government. (Only registered *lieux-dits* are allowed to appear on Côte-Rôtie labels, but Guigal has skirted this with trademarking both La Turquie and La Mouline.)

La Landonne sits on the northern edge of Ampuis, the first vineyard to the left after leaving the town's brief main stretch. The historic heart of Côte-Rôtie is commonly divided into the Côtes Brune and Blonde, named, according to legend, after the blond and brunette daughters of the feudal lord Maugiron and the two adjacent hillsides offered as their respective dowries. (Confusingly, both Côte Blonde and Côte Brune are also smaller, registered *lieux-dits*.) The metaphor extends to the quality of the wines themselves. The vines in the Côte Blonde are planted in soils with a greater limestone content, offering softer, more delicate Syrah, often with a contribution of Viognier. Just south, Côte Brune's Syrahs are darker, more muscular, and grounded in iron-rich schist—qualities amplified in La Landonne, which is found on the Brune side.

With a southeasterly exposition, the vineyard slants a steep 45 degrees. Just a stone's throw from the Rhône, it is burrowed at the bottom of the slope and rises between elevations of 175 and 275 meters. Still, the precipitous incline makes for Landonne's greatest challenges in farming. "Imagine running around in this vineyard with 25 kilograms on your back when it's about 30 degrees [Celsius]," explains Delas winemaker Claire Darnaud-McKerrow of their spraying regimen, which repeats every 10 days into the blistering summer months. To assist with harvest, Guigal has every third row spaced wider to accommodate a pulley system, onto which pickers can load their grapes.

Workers start at the bottom of the hill and climb upward, as it's easier to see the grapes from below than above.



A parcel in northern La Landonne (Photo credit: Bryce Wiatrak)

The schist soils demonstrate high manganese and iron oxide content and are rather sturdy against erosion. “You don’t really need the terraces in La Landonne,” says Philippe Guigal. “The same vineyard in Côte Blonde wouldn’t work because of the soil. As soon as there would be rain—*whoosh*, everything would be washed down.” This holds particularly true in the northern half of La Landonne, where parcels drape uninterrupted from top to bottom. Guigal owns the near whole of this portion, except for Gérard’s block, in addition to a diminutive sliver siphoned off on the opposite side of the Route de Rozier, which follows the path of an old Roman road. The very northern tail was planted by Guigal in 1985 and makes a concave bend that further traps heat. The southern portion of the *lieu-dit* is more diverse in ownership and much more serpentine, with ancient terraces; Gerin has spent the past decade repairing its share. Like most of the Côte Brune, Landonne’s soil lends itself best to Syrah, and no Viognier is cultivated nor included in its wines. Skins grow thicker here than elsewhere in Côte-Rôtie, and the small berries remind Darnaud-McKerrow of what she often observes in Delas’ old parcels on the Hermitage hill.

Approaches to vinifying La Landonne vary dramatically among the vigneron who bottle vineyard-designate wines. The most distinctive is that of Guigal, an intentional decision on Marcel's part, knowing that unlike his monopole La Mouline, he'd eventually be joined by other growers and needed a way to differentiate his expression of the site. Marcel fashioned a series of square stainless steel tanks that he filled to the brim with whole clusters. A grid separates the grapes from a second smaller vat nested on top, and a column brings the must from the lower to the upper tank, allowing for continuous pumping over the course of fermentation and maceration, which lasts for approximately four weeks. The result is some combination of carbonic maceration and submerged-cap methods commonly observed with Nebbiolo—the idea being to harness the full tannic grip of La Landonne through a constant, but gentler, method of extraction.



Gerin's tank of La Landonne (Photo credit: Bryce Wiatrak)

Xavier Gérard barrel ferments his Landonne and retains the majority of the whole clusters, while Gerin, by contrast, destems all its fruit, allowing for a three- to five-week maceration and fermentation in stainless steel, exclusively relying on pumpovers. Following a short cold maceration, Delas ferments its Landonne in open-top concrete tanks, employing a more traditional combination of *pigeage* and *remontage*. As with all his wines, René Rostaing vinifies his Landonne whole cluster in roto-fermenter—a piece of food-processing equipment, often derided for yielding over-extracted wines. Nonetheless, Rostaing's wines have earned appreciation for their restraint, and he likes the roto-fermenters for ease of breaking up the cap. *Élevage* similarly varies widely between these producers. Guigal ages its Landonne longest—42 months in entirely new barrels, operating a own cooperage on-site at the Château d'Ampuis. Gérard follows with 24 months; Gerin with 20 to 22 months in 100% new oak; Rostaing with 18 months in primarily older demi-muids; and Delas with 14 to 16 months in 30 to 40% new casks.

Latour with a Tinge of La Tâche

“I used to say as a joke that La Landonne is the most Pauillac of all Côte-Rôtie,” says Philippe Guigal. Côte-Rôtie and the Northern Rhône often conjure comparison to Burgundy—fragmented plots, humble towns, whole clusters, obsession with “place.” For this reason, Philippe’s mention of Pauillac is particularly illuminating. “In terms of viticulture, we feel very Burgundian. Sometimes, in terms of the expressions of our wines, the capacity that a La Landonne has to age for 40 years, we feel closer to the Bordelais.” He doesn’t feel the same way with La Mouline—that, to him, is more Vosne. “Is Romanée Conti better than Latour, or is Latour better than Romanée Conti? It’s just a matter of taste.” Regardless what yours may be, it’s evident Philippe places his wines among noble company.

One palate that bemuses Philippe belongs to a man largely responsible for apotheosizing La Landonne—and to a degree Côte-Rôtie more generally—for the modern drinker. Philippe recalls asking Robert Parker during one of his last visits to Guigal, “Bob, how is it that if La Mouline is a 97 or 98, La Landonne is going to be a 99 or 100?” According to Philippe, despite the scores giving a certain seriousness to Landonne, Parker admitted that his preferences lie elsewhere. Philippe paraphrases Parker’s response: “You have to realize that my personal taste goes for finesse and elegance, but when I rate the wines, I always think of what people expect. I always think of cellaring. I always think of investing. . . . So, La Landonne is the most reliable between the three.” Indeed, as early as his 1987 book *The Wines of the Rhône Valley and Provence*, Parker tacks an additional 5 to 10 years of aging capacity beyond what he gives to La Mouline to each vintage of La Landonne. He writes, “If La Mouline begs to be accompanied by Mozart, La Landonne demands the sound and fury of Tchaikovsky.”

As explosively exhilarating as the “1812 Overture” may be, Philippe spent a long time reflecting on what this self-professed “Mouline guy” meant. He admits it finally clicked when he read of Parker’s involvement with Beaux Frères, a project with his brother-in-law in Oregon’s Willamette Valley. “He’s the master of Bordeaux, and he invests in Pinot. This is Parker’s paradox.” In a way, it’s La Landonne’s paradox too—a wine from a region that just begs for analogy to its northern neighbor, yet whose expression defies those expectations. To Philippe, La Landonne has the stoicism of Pauillac. Darnaud-McKerrow tastes the virility of Hermitage. Of course, La Landonne is neither of those things, and it’s rarely ideal to define appellations or vineyards by their relationships to others. Instead, La Landonne is a vineyard whose history reflects that of the whole of Côte-Rôtie: Roman origins, 19th- and 20th-century struggle and desertion, and only recent extolment. Its renaissance signaled that of the region, an appellation that doesn’t need to resemble Pauillac, Vosne, or Hermitage to accept its place on the throne.

Tasting Notes

Guigal Côte-Rôtie La Landonne

While he believes most winemakers might be inclined to counterbalance vintage character in La Landonne, Philippe prefers an approach that exaggerates the attributes of any given year. “When a vintage is born nice, soft, and delicate, we should not go against this and try to do more extraction, because I believe we’re going to extract things that were not supposed to be extracted,” he explains. “In the same idea, when a vintage shows the power, the structure, and the tannins, we should go in this direction because the grapes have everything to be extracted, because it was born this way.” The cold, rainy summer is evident in his 2014 Landonne—an infant that still needs a few years to grow into its oak and the austerity of its tannin. Still, the wine captivates with a brilliant acidity that carries its flavors of chilled black cherry and crushed stones. The rains of 2013 came both earlier and later, and for Guigal, this yielded an exceptional Landonne, though even less approachable than its successor at this age. The wine leans into Syrah’s more savory tendencies—thyme, cracked pepper, espresso—matched by a structured pillar of tannin and balanced by a bolt of acid. The 2012, which saw a warmer growing season and harvest, is less punishing—meaty, smoky, and complemented by gentler tannins. The 2011, coming from an early-ripening vintage that led to some raisination, finds a more medicinal profile. It tastes of hibiscus, wilted herbs, and bitter chocolate. The 2009, from a warm, dry year, gives the most pleasure of this flight. Its dusty, taut tannins underlie the wine’s immense structure, while its anise, lavender perfume meets more earthy flavors of kalamata and black currant.

Delas Frères Côte-Rôtie La Landonne

Among the most renowned wineries in Hermitage, Delas vinifies a dazzling suite of wines from all major Rhône AOPs, both north and south. “When you taste our Landonne throughout the vintages, it’s got the same leitmotif. It’s got the same textural elements and concentration,” says Claire Darnaud-McKerrow. Within that through-line, she continually observes a *queue de paon*, or “peacock’s feather,” a French expression given to wines that fan out to an expansive mid-palate and finish. Such a character might be felt in the 2016 Landonne, a wine whose herbaceous aromas of rosemary and spearmint find a deep generosity on the palate, with a lingering impression of sweetness, masked by charcuterie tones at its end. The 2014 (from magnum) suggests an equally inviting interpretation of Landonne, and one whose tannins are silkier and more elegant than many of its peers. The wine also tastes more red-fruited than most—red plum, raspberry coulis, rosewater

—with a distinctive rockiness. The 2003, from an early, drought vintage, has fully synergized. Dried mint, black pepper, saucisson, and raspberry flavors find softened tannins and a persistent acidity.

René Rostaing Côte-Rôtie La Landonne

René Rostaing has one of the most enviable family trees in the Rhône Valley; both his late uncle Marius Gentaz-Dervieux and father-in-law Albert Dervieux-Thaize were giants of the 20th century whose old wines continue to command increasingly high prices. Rostaing carries on their legacies in the plots he inherited from them, but long before he absorbed those holdings, he made his mark on La Landonne as a young winegrower breathing new life back into Côte-Rôtie. Today, he's considered a member of the old guard and aims for a less opulent expression of Landonne, believing that reliance on new oak obstructs a sense of place. His 2016 captures that intention of purity, a wine that despite its promise of longevity is deceitfully accessible in its heady, blue-toned aromas, violet pastille flavors, and finessed tannins.

Jean-Michel Gerin Côte-Rôtie La Landonne

Jean-Michel Gerin broke off from his father Alfred (noted for bringing the first American investment to Côte-Rôtie) in the late 1980s and today is joined by his sons Michaël and Alexis. Cornas producer Jean-Luc Colombo was an early consultant for the project, and the wines continue to exude a certain sleek polish also characteristic of Colombo. Gerin's Landonne comes from the middle of the vineyard, beneath Rostaing and already where the terraces have begun. Unlike Guigal, which harvests its Landonne plots 10 days later than La Mouline, the Gerins find Landonne to be the earliest to ripen of their holdings—which they attribute to the site's luminosity and exposition. Their 2016 Landonne shows a tarry, liqueur-like concentration with boisterous crème de cassis tones. By contrast, the 2006 has grown more open-knit with time—olive skin, roasted plum, and wilted rose, with a chalky brininess to the finish.

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