

Franck Balthazar

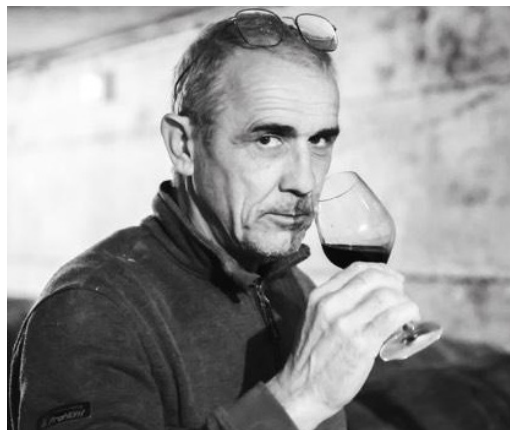


It can be hard to recall that tiny Cornas and its mere 110 hectares was once completely over-shadowed by much-larger Rhône appellations. The zone's terraced vineyards required a Herculean effort to work, and yet the wines' prices remained stubbornly low well into the early 2000s. It was natural then that many of the zone's youth in that era left for easier, better-paying jobs in nearby Valence or further afield.

But the scene in Cornas today is vastly different: it is now a universally beloved hot spot for traditional Syrah, and its top bottlings are among the Northern Rhône's most coveted.

Its modern-day success story began to take form in the 1980s, when a handful of older growers' success—including Clape, Verset, Michel and Juge—gave confidence to the next generation, encouraging them to return home.

One of that movement's leaders is Franck Balthazar, who left his textile factory job in 2002 to answer the siren song of Cornas' steep granite slopes. He took over his family's small estate and adopted, and then expanded upon, the classic farming and winemaking methods of his father, René.



Within a decade, he had established this estate as home to perhaps the most expressive, and rigorously traditional, wines in not just Cornas, but the entire Northern Rhône.

"Balthazar's elegant Cornas bottlings are among the very best in the appellation." - Josh Reynolds

ECHOES OF THE PAST

The Balthazar domaine dates to 1931, when it was founded by Franck's grandfather, Casimir. René took charge from his father in 1950 and, by the 1970s, he was estate-bottling a small part of his production, following the lead of Auguste Clape and Noël Verset. The balance



of his output continued to be sold in cask to local cafes, just as his father's generation had done.

Franck now bottles all his tiny production, made by methods little changed from those of his father and grandfather. Most of the estate's vineyards are planted to *la Petite Syrah*, the ancient local clone whose small, olive-shaped berries produce a wine of greater aromatic complexity than modern clones.

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Balthazar is so committed to his viticulture—and the traditional ways of his ancestors—that he plows many of his holdings with a horse and eschews the usage of artificial fertilizers, pesticides or fungicides. His approach in the cellar is just as “old school,” where his time-honored regime includes whole-cluster, native-yeast fermentations in concrete vats; manual cap punching; and aging in old, neutral *demi-muid* barrels before bottling without fining or filtration.



Aging in *demi-muid*, rather than the smaller *pièce*, is fundamental to the estate’s philosophy. As René Balthazar told Rhône wine guru John Livingstone-Learmonth, “We raise the wine in 600-litre *demi-muids* because they keep the wine’s perfumes better than the 225-litre casks.”

SUPERB SITES

A key to the stellar quality and character of Balthazar’s Cornas are the domaine’s great holdings. These include not only half-century-old vines in Mazards and La Côte, but also a 1914 planting of *Petite Syrah* in the revered Chaillot vineyard, acquired from Noël Verset.

Balthazar has slowly expanded the amount of land under vine and today tends over 4



hectares. A true son of Cornas, he has created terraces and planted vines on previously overgrown land on the steep Lègre slope above Sabarotte, and on high elevation Les Prés. And so he has demonstrated the *Cornasien* willingness to tackle the most challenging of sites, all in search of the aromas and flavors that only Syrah grown in marginal *terroirs* can provide.

Despite his growing fame, Franck Balthazar has remained remarkably humble. Every time we visit his small *cave*, we are struck by his contentment with a life spent working on Cornas’ steep slopes. Fame and fortune are of little interest to him.

“The greatest potential compensation for me is that people may appreciate my wines.” - Franck Balthazar

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THE WINES

The entry point for many is the **Cornas Cuvée Casimir**. Named in honor of Franck's grandfather, it comes from two sources: the old vines in Les Mazards combined with the new plantings from the early 2000s in Lègre. Powerful yet elegant, it forms the perfect introduction to Franck's style.

Franck's flagship wine is the **Cornas Chaillot**, from the fruit of century-old *Petite Syrah*. This famed site yields a wine of stunning depth, concentration and complexity – an archetypal traditional Cornas.

The estate's **Cornas San Soufre Ajouté** today rivals the Chaillot in renown. Franck abhors flawed wines, and he only dares produce this great unsulfured Cornas when the pH is low enough to limit risk. The fruit comes mostly from La Lègre and a little from Les Côtes.

A recent addition to the Balthazar lineup is the estate's **Cornas Juliette**, named after his mother-in-law who gifted the land to him. Located in the Les Prés climat, the vineyard's elevation and acidic soils yield a wine with explosive aromatics and a velvety texture.



Since 2019, Franck has also made **Hommage**, a micro-cuvée from Chaillot that's a tribute to his father and grandfather. It is vinified without sulfur from an extremely old parcel of vines, and a mere one gram per liter of sulfur is added at bottling. Only around 600 bottles are produced in top vintages.

Franck also produces a few value wines from outside Cornas' hillsides. He works with a friend in Séguret to produce an elegant **Côtes-du-Rhône Rouge** from mostly Syrah, rounded out by a touch of Grenache. As wine writer Jon Bonné put it, it is "a southern Syrah from a master of the form."

About 500 cases of **Crozes-Hermitage** are also made from plots in Mercuriol and La Roche-de-Glun. Destemmed and raised in a mix of old 228L and 600L barrels, the Crozes is a deliciously accessible introduction to the house style.

And finally in 2013, Balthazar acquired a small plot of pure Roussanne in **Saint-Péray** that is planted on clay over granite. Production is painfully small, with as little as one 300-liter barrel made in any given year.

Thanks to this quiet, thoughtful man's deep dedication, all these wines have classic Northern Rhône character in spades. And it's because of men like Franck that Cornas today stands with Côte Rôtie and Hermitage at the pinnacle of Northern Rhône *terroirs*.