

THE EYE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Contrast Tours, by Monsieur



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Organic Wine Grove In Provence © Jean-Christophe Rostagny



JEAN-CHRISTIAN ROSTAGNI ([HTTPS://LOEILDELAPHOTOGRAPHIE.COM/EN/AUTHOR/JEAN-CHRISTIAN-ROSTAGNI-2/](https://loeildephotographie.com/en/author/jean-christian-rostagni-2/))

- OCTOBER 17, 2016

His name is Jean-Christian Rostagni. He lives in the US and has two passions: photography and wine. That he recently morphed into a new activity. He now organizes wine tours in France. Here is his story.

This story starts in Valence, France, on the northern banks of the Rhône River, where I grew up. In those days it felt very provincial. Montélimar, where I was born, a town 45km away with a reputation for its nougat, seemed even further from proper civilization. You don't want to be born in a town known for candy; there is no respect in that.

We are in the seventies before the first oil shock of 1974. Life is good; the sky is the limit, so why not an otherwise promising future to attempt a career in photography? Forty four years later I am starting to see what the answer probably was to that rhetorical question. My stepfather is the son of a winemaker; I hear about wine all the time in family get-togethers. Valence after all, is neighbor to some of the best wines in the world. I am mostly a late bloomer though, career-wise like most artists, maturity-wise like many men, and wine-wise as well, exceptionally by French standards. I only started drinking wine at age 21 in the late '80s, after my landlady near Aix en Provence gave me a bottle of her own production, touting health benefits, and marking the end of my ascetic sobriety.

Wine is an art form, and its appreciation yields the same reflexes, as does art collection. Before long it becomes a quest for the rare find, for that elusive winemaker who is still little known, but nevertheless offers an exciting style and value. I therefore start visiting properties along the way whenever possible as part of an ongoing educational quest. I locate wines that appear to me uniquely round, thick and rich in distinctive flavors. Syrah quickly becomes my favorite grape, due to its floral personality, especially the elusive aroma that makes it so distinctive and characterizes excellent northern Rhône wines.

I moved to the US in 1993, transporting in my container the bounty of a Tour de France of wines, with the idea of starting a side business in wine. I quickly dropped that ambition, finding the legislation unusually daunting, and proof that this country has yet to recover from prohibition, or of the Puritans for that matter. My brother attended a wine school and goes into the wine business. He now runs the domestic sales of a large winemaker in the southern Rhône Valley, and introduced me to that part of the region that I did know very well. This proved to be crucial when I recently decided to organize a wine tour of the Rhône.

Valley for my American companions of exile. That first tour is in partnership with a local wine merchant who has close relationships with the winemakers we visit. It went quite well and shows a clear market: travelers are enthusiastic, curious, and in the end proud of their new Rhône wine expertise.

Striving for perfection means a permanent evolution. The tours of the second season will be longer, day feasts of an authentic French experience with a stellar wine selection. Remarkable site visits of the valley, which due to its exceptional location in Europe is historically and geographically very rich, are paired with privileged visits with the winemakers, and abundance of luscious food. We stay in elegant accommodations and charming B&Bs.

Photography is still my principal professional activity and a life-long passion. It is therefore an inherent component of the tours. I present our program of the day from an artistic perspective, aiming at deepening or feeding my customers' appreciation for art. I have an extensive experience in the darkroom, and I like to explain how wine making reminds me of that creative process. It is an alchemy that relies on the sensibility of the vintner who orchestrates it, only on a totally different scale compared to photograph printing, with a more complex formula, uncontrollable parameters, and a redo has to wait next year's harvest.

Some of my upcoming tours will feature a dinner with eminent photographer Denis Brihat and his wife Solange at their home in Bonnieux, one of the nicest spots in the Luberon, the pearl of Provence. This lovely village hosts one of the southern Rhône Valley's very best wine producers, with a red and a white that are marvelous, and will be at the center of this evening of exceptional hospitality, in what I consider one of the living temples of photography. Denis was one of my professors in school, and has since been a major influence for me. He is also a pillar in the history of photography and the current living spirit of Edward Weston.

A tour of the Bordeaux region will be launched in 2018. There will be several tours of the Rhône Valley in 2017 between May and November. They will soon be presented on the Contrast Tours website and Facebook page. The Rhône tours fly into Nice and end in Paris. For me Paris is always a happy end.

Jean-Christian Rostagni

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Jean-Christian Rostagni is also known as "Monsieur Contraste," the anti-hero character of the Rodrigo Dorfman 62'00 documentary film on his life and career.


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