

CONNOISSEURS' GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA WINE



The so-called Rhône Revolution in California just keeps getting bigger and better. Despite a seeming slowdown in Syrah sales for some wineries, it is clear that others, especially those south of the Bay Area are doing just fine in that regard. This Issue is an open testament to the extent that Rhône-based grapes have made their ways into the California scene. It is our Annual Rhône review, and this year it has outgrown its bristles. We have moved the whites and rosés into the August Issue because there is no room for them here anymore, and we have found not only more wine than ever before but also a broader array of wine, including the big, bold styles that some folks in the wine writing world have tried to tell us are dead. Not so. Those “too hip for the room” writers may not like generous, tasty, mouthfilling wines, but judging by the expansion in their availability and the prices being charged, wines of size and depth are anything but unpopular, and the varieties in this Issue are among those most likely to show well when writ large.

Syrah

Let us be careful not to slight the very good Syrahs that are coming out of the North Coast and the Sierra Foothills, but one cannot but be impressed the numbers of Syrahs, and the quality of those wines, coming from Paso Robles and Santa Barbara County areas. Indeed, if there is one overarching conclusion to be drawn, it is that Syrah likes lots of places in California and is more than capable of making wines that are bold, deep, potent on the one hand and then turning around and showing a more gentle, refined side on the other.

Petite Sirah

When Freemark Abbey and Ridge Vineyards offered their dramatic, powerful Petite Sirahs from Spring Mountain's York Creek Vineyard back some forty years ago, they set in motion a direction for the grape that has continued to this day. It has not mattered that some wineries have cut back on the power and have looked to make a more accessible wine, the continuing dominant style for Petite Sirah is one that trades on unrestrained ripeness, inky color and tannin. We have seen these wines age for decades, and they are often much improved, but the truth is that Petite Sirah lovers are not putting wines away for decades. They are enjoying the gusto for itself. We still think a balanced, solid Petite Sirah is a treat with a slab of grilled meat, but it is obvious that there are people out there with stronger palates than ours and Petite Sirah continues to offer wines that have suffered no restriction in their making.

Grenache

We are not alone in thinking that Grenache has a far more exciting future here in California than what it has delivered in the past. While some have already proclaimed it to be the savior of California wine, we are less willing to engage in that kind of hyperbolic rhetoric. Suffice it to say that progress in making a more accessible, fruitier, balanced Grenache continues to be shown. Sad to add that progress is considerable slower than almost anyone who views Grenache as part of our vinous future had hoped for.

Mourvèdre

Because California is open to all comers, we are seeing a few varietally labeled Mourvèdres along with a number of wines in which Mourvèdre is the leading variety. Fans of all kinds of Rhône wines will want to give them a try.

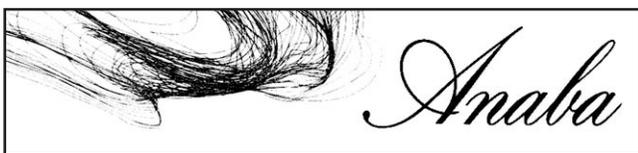
Grenache

Not so long ago, like in the past three or four years, a number of winewriters, ourselves included began to tout Grenache as the next big thing in California. We have long known of very good to great Grenache based wines coming out of the southern Rhône region and Spain, and have wondered why, when we have ten thousand acres of Grenache here, can we not make a decent wine out of Grenache. The common wisdom of the time was that Grenache was planted in the wrong places, and that those super-hot, jug wine locations

were simply not good for the grape. We kept hoping for plantings to arrive in cooler locales but somehow that never happened.

But, the so-called Rhône Revolution that brought us an abundance of Syrah and enough Viognier to at least tease us, also brought along glimmers of a change in the way that Grenache was perceived. And those first attractive entrants, with their open, easy fruit and supple textures that could, if we closed our eyes, remind us of Pinot Noir, led inexorably to a range of optimistic predictions—some of which proclaimed Grenache as the savior of California viticulture. Of course, those same voices also thought that Ribolla Gialla and Vermentino were our saviors, and so far, we see little saving going on.

That said, Grenache remains immensely appetizing for its potential. We may not have seen a rapidly rising tide in this Issue, but then again, it is a tide that is noticeably higher than it was a decade or so ago. We still believe that Grenache has great potential. Nothing has changed in that regard, but viticultural success is generally a slow process, and we are once again reminded that the Rhône Revolution has yet to extend all that much beyond Syrah on any large-scale basis.

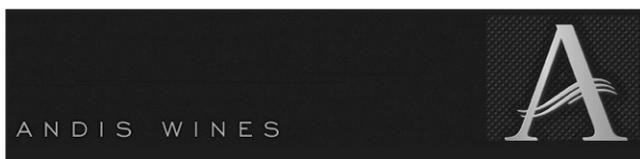


89 ANABA Turbine Red Sonoma County 2010

45% Grenache; 33% Mourvèdre; 22% Syrah. Medium-rich and open in styling with ripe strawberry/raspberry-scented fruit and a juicy, inviting cast, this full-bodied wine has a big presence on the palate and its flavors reiterate the direct and delightful fruit that shows up in the nose. Not likely to win awards for refinement, this wine makes its mark with depth and sheer drinkability even as light tannins rise in the finish.    \$28.00

87 ANABA Greywacke Vyd Russian River Valley 2010

Admittedly, this wine does come closer to what we expect of a balanced Grenache than its mate above, but, despite its elevated price tag, it is less well-filled at its heart. That said, there is reason to like its pert, berryish aromas and the acid-energized, raspberry-like flavors on the palate. Its firm finish is part and parcel of the wine's briskish style, and it encourages a stay in the cellar of three to four years to open up.    \$38.00



87 ANDIS Amador County 2011

20% Syrah. Its mix of lightly smoky oak and mild but attractive strawberry-like fruitiness with a hint of concentration is followed on the palate by a medium-full to full-bodied bottling with a firm texture and evident latter palate tannins. It comes across as a bit tough for Grenache but earns its spurs on the basis of its focused varietal character.    \$25.00

80 BAIOCCHI Sharon's Vineyard Fair Play 2010

Very much a wine of mixed messages and one that is destined to foment debate, this immense, extravagantly ripened wine is not a Grenache for the meek. It is hard to argue that it is not overdone, yet it is so deep and very rich that it still succeeds in its way, and, if it is palpably hot, it is intense, highly extracted and sure to win the hearts of unrepentant fans of full-throttle red wines.    \$39.00

86 BAIOCCHI G Minor Fair Play 2011

44% Grenache, 32% Syrah; 24% Tempranillo. This weighty, very full-bodied, blended red from the Sierra Foothills leads with ripeness as its principal theme, but it does not wholly lose sight of fruit and at least flirts with suggestions of cherries and berries from beginning to end. It is a decidedly direct and unnuanced wine that makes no claims to complexity, and, if just a touch tannic, it does not require lengthy aging and should reach its best in but a few years.    \$24.00

83 BIG BASIN Homestead California 2010

37% Grenache; 36% Syrah; 27% Mourvedre. Its label claims but 14.5% abv, but everything about this wine from its raisiny, sweet smells to its sharpness and heat simply screams over-the-top ripeness. It is, in too many ways, reminiscent of lesser Port, and finding a place for it at the table will prove a problematic and thankless task.    \$36.00



89 BONNY DOON Le Cigare Volant en demi muid 2008

Central Coast. 45% Grenache; 30% Syrah; 13% Mourvedre; 7% Cinsault; 5% Carignane. The identical wine as the bottling below which was aged in "foudre", the "demi muid" version was raised in smaller puncheons and is a richer, more outgoing effort that juxtaposes well-defined fruit with hints of Provençal herbs, dark soils and forest-floor spice. It is both moderately full-bodied and carefully balanced with finely fit tannins providing a nice bit of finishing grip, and its combination of structure and depth augers quite well for some four or five years of positive growth and development.    \$45.00

87 BONNY DOON Le Cigare Volant en foudre 2008

Central Coast. 45% Grenache; 30% Syrah; 13% Mourvedre; 7% Cinsault; 5% Carignane. Aged in 10,000 liter upright wood tanks, or at least in a portion thereof, the "en foudre" version of this year's Le Cigare Volant is a quietly complex variant of the Bonny Doon's signature blend that is slightly more "woody" than it is outwardly fruity. It is weighty and balanced, and shows a bit of tactile polish, and, if not a big wine, it is an interesting one with mid-term potential.    \$45.00