



Once popular only among a small band of maverick growers taking their inspiration from the Rhône Valley, Syrah is now establishing itself as a California favourite. Will it last, asks NORM ROBY

Syrrah may be a cute curiosity in several New World regions, but in California it has arrived big-time. A number of artisan wineries – Jaffurs, Palmeri, Saxum, Copain, L’Aventure, JC Cellars, Adelaida, Domaine Alfred, Montemaggiore and Terre Rouge – are flirting with cult wine status. Each produces Syrah in garagiste quantity, and new vintages quickly sell out, either on a futures basis or to a mailing list clientele. At least another two dozen wineries have positioned themselves as Syrah specialists while others are making it their flagship wine.

Twenty-five years ago, Syrah was produced by three or four California wineries whose winemakers – the original Rhône Rangers – probably consumed most of the production during group discussions. Today, well over 400 wineries produce it. The surge in consumer interest has industry analysts predicting that Syrah will follow Pinot Noir as the next trendy red. While that remains to be played out, there is no denying that the major wine companies – Constellation, Gallo, Kendall-Jackson, Diageo – have seriously ratcheted up production of Syrah within

their portfolios to meet the anticipated demand. From a scant 142ha (hectares) planted to Syrah in 1990, today’s total, after explosive growth in the 1990s, is just short of 7,700ha. But is it in danger of going the same way as Merlot, and being overplanted, in areas where it has no right to be? And will consumers continue to buy up all the Syrah being made?

To draw any conclusions as to Syrah’s likely progress, we have to look at what jump-started it. The nursery programme at Tablas Creek (the Beaucastel connection) first encouraged the importation of Syrah clones and focused attention on rootstock selection. Then winemakers learned how to deal with Syrah’s tendency to grow like the proverbial weed. Lise Ciolino says of her breathtaking Montemaggiore Dry Creek Valley Syrah, “We use every trick in the book to keep its growth in check, ranging from intensive planting, to cane pruning to deficit irrigation.” Her steep hillside vineyards also restrict yields.

Jeff Cohn of JC Cellars offers another theory. “In the 1990s, a number of the right people with a passion for Syrah joined in and they shared that slightly

outrageous Rhône Ranger openness to new things.” One was to explore unusual sites, especially those with marginal climates. Cohn produces Syrah from the high altitude Rockpile Vineyard in Sonoma, as well as from the steep Stagecoach Vineyard in Oakville, and the windy Ventana Vineyard in Monterey.

Schools of thought

One certainty today is that California Syrah is going in several directions. One vocal group of winemakers insists high elevation mountain vineyards and steep hillsides are best for Syrah. Others follow the cold-climate school and are convinced Syrah responds favorably to windy, cold, marginal conditions that extend the growing season. A few insist that poor soils severely restricting yields are the key.

Coastal Santa Barbara, with its well-drained sandy soils and breezy valleys running east to west was tested for Rhône varieties by Ojai Vineyard, Qupé and Zaca Mesa Vineyards. Based on their Syrahs made in the 1980s, it passed with flying colors. Winemaker-owner Craig Jaffurs, a Syrah specialist,



Left: Syrah budwood from Napa Valley.

and Truchard came along to make fine Carneros Syrah. MacRostie Winery is now making an impeccable Syrah from Wildcat Mountain Vineyard in the Carneros. Here, the vines dig into the sparse volcanic soils and stand firm against the winds. This is Carneros at its coolest. The most significant, recent addition to Carneros Syrah comes from Buena Vista. It offers two noteworthy Syrahs: a juicy, complex Carneros and a limited, fantastic Ramal Vineyard.

The first dynamic cool-climate Syrahs from the Russian River Valley were from Dehlinger and later from Arrowood. The style here, as typified by Arrowood's 2002, displays the smoked meat, gamey side with deep plum fruit. With its Cherry Ridge Vineyard, Dutton Goldfield has found the desirable "warm place in a cool region which is just temperate enough to ripen Syrah."

With ocean breezes coming in from Morro Bay, Edna Valley rarely experiences temperatures over 32°C, which makes it cooler than nearby Santa Barbara. In the early 1990s, John Alban of Alban Vineyards located Syrah on hilly terrain compromising Edna Valley's distinctly poor, chalky soils. As Alban's neighbour Terry Speizer of Domaine Alfred explains, Edna Valley is "a classic category 1 (the coolest) region and therefore we are on the precipitous edge of being able to ripen our Syrah fruit." For those willing to risk it, the chalky soils, frequent winds, and cool days of Edna Valley have so far resulted in rich,

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describes classic Santa Barbara Syrah as "tannic, dark and fruit-driven, with a nice pinch of spice on the finish. It has a lower pH (higher acid) than Syrah from Napa or Paso, so it is fresher, more gripping, and less soft." He concludes, "We have hardly begun to see what we can do with Syrah in Santa Barbara."

Over recent vintages Qupé and Ojai are continuing their magic touch with Syrah. Foxen is a favorite among locals, Fess Parker Reserve Syrah is usually well above the ordinary and Zaca Mesa's Black Bear Block has been brilliant of

late. With Estate vineyards on Purisima Mountain, Beckmen Vineyards is a name to watch closely. Other promising wineries include Bridlewood Estate, Lincourt, Silver Wines, and Taz Vineyards. Foley, Melville and Ojai are exploring Syrahs from the County's ultimate cool area, Santa Rita Hills.

One cool customer

Carneros, the cool region in Southern Napa and Sonoma assumed to be ideal for Pinot Noir, was first planted to Syrah by Cline Cellars. Later, Havens

compressed and vibrant Syrahs. Others making good Edna Valley Syrahs are Toloza, Laetitia, Baileyana, Bishop's Peak, and Kynsi.

Seaside Attraction

The Sonoma Coast is the latest cool-climate region, with many new vineyards located not far from the Pacific. One is Peay Vineyards in Annapolis which makes excellent Syrah. Owner Andy Peay says: "We can grow Syrah here — where we barely get our Pinot and Chardonnay ripe. We planted Syrah because

we want to make elegant wines with complexity.”

Working with Syrah from what he calls “the fierce Sonoma Coast”, John Drady of Sonoma Coast Vineyards also knows the area well. “Harvest sugars of 23° brix for mature Syrah are typical.” He adds: “Elements of Sonoma Coast Syrah remind us of wines from the northern Rhône, yet it has a fullness and elegance that says California.”

After 30 years of winemaking for others, Kerry Damskey established Palmeri to produce only mountain-grown wines. With Syrah, he cites three advantages of the mountain soils: they are more limiting, better drained, and the sites tend to be cooler, leading to ripe fruit thanks to slower maturation. Being above the fog line, these sites provide more sunlight in cool years and more hang time in warmer years.

Syrachs from diverse mountain vineyards such as Kuleto Estate, Viader, Pride Mountain and newcomers Bugay Wines & Vineyards in the North Coast, and Chalone and Marr Cellars elsewhere display an intensity, power and balance that strongly supports mountainside advocates.

In 1991, pioneer Bill Easton of Terre Rouge planted Syrah on slopes as high as 984m, the highest planted elevation in the Sierra Foothills of Amador County. This is capable of capturing white pepper, violets, olives and smoky tones. These attributes, associated with the northern Rhône, are displayed in the

2003 Edmunds St. John Syrah from two hilltop vineyards in El Dorado County. Similarly intriguing notes of spice, meat and herbs are found in the Syrah of newcomer CG DiArie. Its 2004 Foothills Southern Exposure Syrah is a gem, as is its Syrah from the Fair Play appellation. Sobon Estate, Cedarville, Sierra Vista and Montevina also offer attractive Foothills Syrah.

Syrah from high-altitude vineyards could be the wine to put Lake County on the map. For years, winemaker Jed Steele toiled alone here, but now he has good company. Sitting 590m above Clear Lake is Brassfield Estate Winery; its 2003 High Valley Syrah offers tones of bright fruit. Jade Mountain has a lovely 2004 Syrah from Snows Lake Vineyard, a superbly tended vineyard at 656m. Tiny Copain Cellars and Obsidian have discovered Lake County Syrah, so expect to see more wineries looking into it.

Mind the ‘gap’

With about 1,050ha planted to Syrah, Paso Robles (see right) accounts for a significant 15% of California’s total. As for producers, there are 121 members in the regional association and a recent survey indicated that 82 of them produce a Syrah. This is a warm climate, and there is no shortage of ultra-ripe Syrah made here. But the real story is the growing number of nicely balanced Syrahs made here. One sub-region preferred by many is around Templeton. Syrah vineyards



A strip of California Syrah stands out in stark contrast to its arid surrounds.

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in this location enjoy a slight cooling influence from a breach in the coastal range known as the ‘Templeton Gap’.

A few vineyards have carved out Syrah vineyards on hillsides at elevations of 490m or more. Then there is soil. For Paso Syrah, Justin Smith of Saxum explains, “Our soils are the magic bullet. The calcium and lime help retain great natural acidities, and the clay helps to hold the rain we get in winter and spring well into the growing season.” These same soils won over the Perrin and Haas partnership of Tablas Creek who wanted to match the climate and high pH soils of Beaucastel in the southern Rhône.

Saxum and L’Aventure winery are pushing a trend that favours the cuvee concept for Paso Syrah. Stephan Asseo, a Frenchman, established L’Aventure on the West-side. His Estate Cuvée – Syrah with a big dollop of Cabernet – is a simply amazing wine for its depth. Another sensational blend is the 2004 Savant, a 50/50 mix of Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon made by Justin Vineyards.

Other Paso Robles residents that deserve full attention are the ever-reliable Wild Horse Vineyards and J Lohr, along with newcomers Hug Cellars, Halter Ranch, and Robert Hall Winery.

Left: no longer a small player, Syrah has been a huge success story in California

WHY PASO ROBLES RULES

by Linda Murphy

Syrah flourishes throughout California, yet nowhere in the state does it connect with France’s Rhône Valley more promisingly than it does in Paso Robles. As evidence, the French themselves are in ‘Paso’ making Rhône-style wines in this Central Coast ranching region best known for majestic oaks and cowpokes. Today, vine roots are as common as cowboy boots. Several vineyards are planted to Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre, Cinsault, Viognier, Marsanne, Roussanne and other clones from the nursery established in Paso Robles by the Perrins of Château de Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape and its American importer, Robert Haas.

For 15 years, Paso Robles have staged Hospice du Rhone, a wackily serious weekend of tastings, dinners and bowling, most recently featuring Rhône representatives Le Vieu Donjon,

Domaine Marcoux and Domaine du la Janasse among the 3000 participants.

Paso Robles has limestone, a soil component so common in the Rhône Valley yet so rare in California. When deposits of this calcareous soil are found, there’s a dash to put grapevines into it that’s as mad as the Gold Rush of 1849.

And plant they have in Paso, an appellation dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon (nearly 2,749ha of it), yet which has seen Syrah hectareage zoom from 158ha in 1998 to 703ha in 2006, according to the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance. The number of bonded PRWCA wineries doubled from 50 in 2000 to more than 100, and many of the newcomers have put their eggs in the Rhône varietal basket; it’s the rare winery that doesn’t produce at least one wine containing Syrah.

More recent authentication has come from an outside source, Robert Park-

er, whose 90-point scores for wines produced by the likes of Adelaida, Garretson, L’Aventure, Linne Calodo, Saxum, Villa Creek, and the Perrin-Haas joint venture Tablas Creek, have put Rhône varietals on a pedestal that Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel haven’t yet climbed.

In 2005, Parker wrote that ‘a decade from now, the top viticultural areas of Santa Barbara, Santa Rita Hills, and the limestone hillsides west of Paso Robles will be as well-known as the glamorous vineyards of Napa Valley.’ Even if one’s palate isn’t in synch with Parker’s, the boost he’s given Paso Robles as a “Rhône of the West” is undeniable.

In 1975, Gary Eberle, owner/winemaker of Eberle Winery, was the first to plant Syrah in Paso Robles, using cuttings from UC Davis that reportedly came from Chapoutier in Hermitage. Eberle transplanted them on his east-side Estrella River property and shared

cuttings with other producers. But it was the arrival of Tablas Creek Vineyard in 1989 that gave Paso Robles instant legitimacy as a maker of Syrah and its Rhône-varietal cousins.

Haas and the Perrins planted Beaucastel clones of Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre, Cunoise, Viognier, Marsanne, Roussanne and Grenache Blanc on the west side of the Paso Robles appellation, at an average elevation of 457m, and 18km from the Pacific Ocean. They found the clay soils mixed with high-pH, calcium-rich limestone, the warm summer days and cool evening breezes to be a close mirror of the conditions in the southern Rhône.

Bordeaux native Stephan Asseo was also attracted to the calcareous western hills. His exceptional L'Aventure wines favour blends of Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot, though his 100% estate Syrah is a triumph too.

The former proprietor of Domaine de Courteillac in Bordeaux's Entre-Deux-Mers bought Paso Robles land in the Templeton Gap in 1998, after becoming "tired of all the regulations in France". He adds, "if you compare this part of the Central Coast to the Rhône, they have a similar Mediterranean climate, there is the Châteauneuf Mistral, the same vegetation and the same trees."

One of the region's rising-star winemakers, Austin Hope of Treana Winery and Austin Hope Winery, says Rhône varieties thrive here. "There are several different soils and climates within Paso Robles that can show different styles of the Rhône Valley," he says. "Some of our warmer regions can show similarities to Cornas, much riper and rounder

Below: Paso Robles' limestone soils won over Tablas Creek's winemaking team



wines with power and weight, whereas the cooler areas, like the Templeton Gap, show more Côte Rotie style, more perfumed with great elegance and finesse."

Asseo also makes PharoahMoans, a new Syrah that's set Paso pricing on its ear, at \$570 for a six-bottle, pyramid shaped case. The 2005 is powerful and rich, with 14.8% alcohol, yet like the Flying Wallendas at their best, it keeps its balance and freshness. It also sold out soon after release, price being no object.

Asseo's partners in PharoahMoans are Bryan Ogden of the eponymous restaurant in Las Vegas, and John Schwartz, owner of Amuse Bouche Winery in Napa Valley. "Syrah is entering the high-end market and a number of California producers are focusing on producing a meatier, smokier style of Syrah, as made in the northern Rhône," says Schwartz.

With success in Paso has come controversy over the potential subdivision of this 263,000ha American Viticultural Area. One camp, headed by Peachy Canyon Winery owner Doug Beckett, asked the Alcohol, Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) to create a 72,700ha Westside sub-appellation within the greater Paso Robles AVA.

Jerry Lohr, a pioneer who planted Cabernet in the area in the early 1980s, countered on behalf of opposing vintners, filing petitions to split Paso Robles into 11 sub-appellations, each based on its presumed distinctive microclimate, soils and history.

Justin Baldwin of Justin Vineyards and Winery was one of 21 original supporters of the Westside plan, but withdrew his support, saying it was too large and diverse to have the specificity of an AVA. He now supports Lohr's group.

"The whole Westside thing is driven by marketing," says Eberle. "There is no basis for its existence as an AVA – no science, no enology, no history behind it. I still believe we're better off as just 'Paso Robles', but some people think a sub-AVA will give them an identity. At least the (11-AVA) proposal has a reason to exist; it can be defended scientifically and historically, although I'm not sure it can be defended enologically."

Whichever way the turf battle turns, Paso Robles has dug in its spurs as a wine region with which to be reckoned.

Linda's Paso Robles Picks

L'Aventure, Optimus 2004 *****

Predominantly Syrah, plus Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. Bacon fat and graphite aromas, lively black fruit, Cabernet-like tannins, Rhône-like spice. Up to 2014.

Tablas Creek, Esprit de Beaucastel 2004 *****

Mourvedre, Syrah, Grenache and Cunoise meld seamlessly in this juicy yet structured beauty, laced with black pepper and tar. Up to 2015.

Garretson, The Aisling 2004 ****

Scents of meat and blueberry. Lush and supple. 15.2% alcohol moderated by crisp acidity and firm tannins. Up to 2010.

Justin, Estate Syrah 2004 ****

Toasty and firm, with dark black fruits, subtle black spice and slightly dusty tannins. Nicely balanced. Up to 2012.

Linne Calodo, Nemesis 2004 ****

Powerful and with enough acidity to handle the intensely ripe black fruit and chocolate character. 80% Syrah plus Grenache and Mourvedre. Up to 2012.

Saxum, James Berry Vineyard Red Wine ****

Super-ripe blend of Mourvedre, Syrah, Grenache and Cunoise. Attractive earthiness, supple tannins and rich glycerin mouthfeel. Up to 2012.

Eberle Steinbeck Vineyard 2004 ****

Earthy yet elegant. Spicy vanillin oak, bright berries, mocha and refreshing acidity. Excellent value. Up to 2012.

J Lohr, South Ridge 2005 ****

Bright dark berries and cherries, rounded tannins and a spicy kick. Easy drinking; fine value. Up to 2009.