

Winemaker Anthony Yount, of Denner, released outstanding wines from both Syrah and Grenache.

CALIFORNIA'S RHÔNE RESOLVE

REDS

Outstanding Syrah and Grenache continue to flow from the Golden State as vintners take challenges in stride **BY TIM FISH**

California Rhône winemakers are a stubborn bunch. As consumers puzzle over the category's range of grapes and styles, sales can be sluggish. Add to that a five-year drought that stressed vineyards in Paso Robles and Santa Barbara, the heartlands of leading Rhône varieties Syrah and Grenache, and you might wonder why these winemakers keep at it.

"I just love Syrah," explains winemaker Jeff Cohn. "I really believe it is one of the most interesting varieties in California." For his part, Denner winemaker Anthony Yount shrugs off challenges such as the drought, saying, "I think challenging vintages can make compelling wines."

After reviewing nearly 400 Rhône-style reds in blind tastings at our Napa office over the past year, it's hard to argue with Yount and Cohn. The latest releases of

Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre and the category's various blends continue to impress. Since my previous report ("Progress & Promise," April 30, 2017), winemakers from around California have maintained a high standard. I give the 2015 Syrah vintage a preliminary rating of 92–95 points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale, which puts it in the same outstanding class as 2012, 2013 and 2014.

Even better, the praise extends to value labels. Just consider Tablas Creek Patelin de Tablas Paso Robles 2015 (90, \$25), a plucky blend with a lively core of blackberry, licorice and smoky cracked pepper. Robert Hall Syrah Paso Robles 2014 (89, \$20) is soft and easygoing, while Morgan Cotes du Crow's Monterey 2015 (89, \$18) is a zesty mouthful of black raspberry and grilled anise. Hahn GSM

Central Coast 2016 (88, \$15) is plump and likeable for its cherry and pepper flavors.

Meanwhile, a pair of this report's top-scorers fall into the classic range (95–100 points). Winemaker Justin Smith of Saxum once again leads the pack of top wines, with two red blends. Saxum Paderewski Vineyard Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2014 (95, \$98) is a rich and polished Mourvèdre-dominated blend that's loaded with blackberry, smoky beef, licorice and pepper flavors. Saxum James Berry Vineyard Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2015 (95, \$98), a blend of mostly Grenache and Mourvèdre, combines power and refinement with blackberry, stony mineral and dark licorice flavors.

Familiar names abound among the outstanding-scoring wines as well. John Alban, who helped pioneer Rhône wines in California, remains at the top of his game. Alban Syrah Edna Valley Reva Alban Estate 2013 (94, \$98) is refined yet dynamic, with polished black raspberry, smoky meat, licorice and orange zest flavors. Winemaker Eric Jensen's Booker Oublié Paso Robles 2014 was No. 10 on *Wine Spectator's* Top 100 of 2017, and the 2015 (94, \$75) is in the same league: structured and stylish, with *garrigue*, stone and blackberry accents.

Jordan Fiorentini crafted the impressive Epoch Syrah Paso Robles Willow Creek District Block B Paderewski Vineyard 2014 (94, \$95), a rich and polished red with great structure. Grapegrower Lee Hudson started planting vines in Napa's Carneros in the late 1970s and a few years back launched his own label, turning to consulting winemaker John Kongsgaard. Hudson Vineyards Syrah Napa Valley Carneros 2015 (94, \$90) combines power and finesse, with

polished blueberry, licorice and smoky chocolate flavors.

Producers in the Sierra Foothills have championed Syrah, Grenache and their Rhône brethren for years, but the wines are generally produced in such small quantities that they don't get the exposure they deserve. Two of the newer and better players in the

Foothills are Helen Keplinger and Scott Pruett. Keplinger Lithic Amador County 2015 (94, \$70) is supple and well-knit, with vibrant blackberry, crushed stone, smoky meat and pepper details. Pruett Syrah Sierra Foothills Championship Cuvee 2015 (94, \$100) is brooding and intensely structured, with expressive blackberry, black olive and smoky cracked pepper notes.

To get the big picture on the latest trends in the California Rhône category, I checked in with winemakers in three regions: Paso Robles, Sonoma and Santa Barbara.

"2015 was a challenging year," says Anthony Yount of Denner in Paso Robles.

Spring in the appellation was cool, windy and humid, but shy on rain. That, paired with the ongoing drought, led to a poor fruit set, producing tiny grapes and uneven grape bunches.

Then the rain came—uncharacteristically—in July. "One big storm dropped 3 inches of rain and that was the drought relief we needed just in time," Yount says. The crop was largely unaffected, and the precipitation cooled off the warm season. "I think that's what drives the elegant nature of the vintage. The 2015s are more floral and fruit-forward than the '14s."

Yount's Syrah blend, Denner Dirt Worshipper Central Coast 2015 (95, \$70), is a bruiser with style and breeding, offering smoked meat, blackberry, blueberry and pepper flavors. Denner Ditch Digger Paso



Lee Hudson and Cristina Salas-Porras Hudson, owners of Hudson Vineyards in Carneros, started planting Rhône grapes in California in the 1970s and released one of 2015's top-scoring Syrahs.

Rating Vintages of California Rhône-Style Reds

| | Napa | Sonoma* | Paso Robles | Santa Barbara** | | |
|------|-------|---------|-------------|-----------------|--|---------------|
| 2015 | 92-95 | 92-95 | 92-95 | 91-94 | Challenged by a warm season marked by heat spikes, winemakers managed to retain elegance and aromatics | NYR |
| 2014 | 93 | 94 | 92 | 92 | Similar to the 2013s, but more ripe, more full-bodied and in some regions more tannic | Drink or hold |
| 2013 | 94 | 93 | 94 | 92 | Nearly ideal growing season with lots of sunshine but few heat spikes; wines are expressive early but show aging potential | Drink or hold |
| 2012 | 93 | 92 | 93 | 88 | Record-sized crop with firmly tannic wines and some real beauties; should reward time in the cellar | Drink or hold |
| 2011 | 87 | 87 | 87 | 87 | A damp, cool year led to mixed results. Off the pace of best years, yet there are pockets of success; early drinkers | Drink or hold |
| 2010 | 93 | 93 | 97 | 87 | A cool, late harvest, but amazingly ripe and full-bodied wines | Drink or hold |

*Sonoma includes Alexander Valley, Dry Creek Valley, Russian River Valley, Sonoma Valley and Sonoma Coast AVAs

**Santa Barbara includes Santa Barbara, Sta. Rita Hills, Santa Maria Valley, Santa Ynez Valley and Edna Valley AVAs

A score range indicates preliminary analysis based on barrel samples and/or a limited sampling; many wines of the vintage not yet reviewed.

Vintage ratings: 95–100, classic; 90–94, outstanding; 85–89, very good; 80–84, good; 75–79, mediocre; 50–74, not recommended. **Drinkability:** "NYR" means most of the wines of the vintage are yet to be released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature.

Recommended Rhône-Style Reds From California

Nearly 400 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/043018. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP WINES

| WINE | SCORE | PRICE |
|--|-------|-------|
| DENNER Dirt Worshipper Central Coast 2015 A bruiser, with a sense of polish and focus. Blackberry, crushed rock and smoked meat aromas combine with deeply complex blueberry, licorice and pepper flavors. Syrah blend. | 95 | \$70 |
| SAXUM Paderewski Vineyard Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2014 Distinctive and loaded with personality, offering blackberry, smoky beef, licorice and pepper flavors that take on richness and polish toward the long finish. Mourvèdre blend. | 95 | \$98 |
| SAXUM James Berry Vineyard Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2015 A dynamic combination of power and refinement, with a penetrating but balanced core of polished tannins and expressive blackberry, stony mineral and dark licorice flavors that finish with verve. Grenache blend. | 95 | \$98 |
| ALBAN Syrah Edna Valley Reva Alban Estate 2013 Refined yet dynamic, with a balanced core of acidity and tannins framed by black raspberry, smoky meat, licorice and orange zest flavors. | 94 | \$98 |
| BOOKER Oublié Paso Robles 2015 Stylish, with floral <i>garrigue</i> , crushed stone and blackberry accents that build power toward big but refined tannins. Grenache blend. | 94 | \$75 |
| CARLISLE Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands Sierra Mar Vineyard 2015 Offers blackberry, <i>garrigue</i> and smoky meat aromas that open to vibrant black raspberry, licorice and sage flavors. Polished tannins. | 94 | \$45 |
| COLGIN Syrah Napa Valley IX Estate 2014 Potent and brooding, yet polished, with plum, smoky beef and cracked pepper flavors that build depth and tension. | 94 | \$315 |
| EPOCH Syrah Paso Robles Willow Creek District Block B Paderewski Vineyard 2014 Combines richness and polish with great structure, offering plump blueberry, licorice and spiced beef flavors that take on complexity. | 94 | \$95 |
| HUDSON VINEYARDS Syrah Napa Valley Carneros 2015 Plush and powerful, with smoky blueberry and licorice aromas and lush boysenberry, bittersweet chocolate and orange zest flavors. | 94 | \$90 |
| KEPLINGER Lithic Amador County 2015 Plush, polished and well-knit, with blackberry, crushed stone, smoky meat and pepper details that build momentum. Mourvèdre blend. | 94 | \$70 |
| LEWIS Syrah Napa Valley 2015 Well-built, with expressive blackberry, smoked pepper and licorice flavors that take on speed and depth toward refined tannins. | 94 | \$75 |
| PRUETT Syrah Sierra Foothills Championship Cuvee 2015 Dark, brooding and structured, with expressive blackberry, black olive and smoky cracked pepper notes that take on additional power. | 94 | \$100 |
| SAXUM Booker Vineyard Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2014 A real bruiser, with floral raspberry jam and mocha aromas and intense, layered blackberry, peppered beef and crushed stone flavors. | 94 | \$98 |
| SINE QUA NON Syrah California Piranha Waterdance 2014 Rich, ripe and powerfully built, with deep and expressive smoky beef, cracked pepper and currant flavors that charge like a bull. | 94 | \$170 |
| TENSLEY Syrah Santa Barbara County Colson Canyon Vineyard 2016 A distinctive red, offering floral blueberry and <i>garrigue</i> aromas and dynamic huckleberry, river stone and smoky meat flavors. | 94 | \$42 |

TOP WINES (continued)

| WINE | SCORE | PRICE |
|---|-------|-------|
| TENSLEY All Blocks Tensley Vineyards Santa Barbara County 2016 Polished, with black raspberry, crushed stone and <i>garrigue</i> aromas that open to blueberry and savory licorice flavors. Grenache blend. | 94 | \$34 |

TOP VALUES

| WINE | SCORE | PRICE |
|---|-------|-------|
| LE P'TIT PAYSAN Le P'tit Pape Central Coast 2015 Pairs elegant fruit with a sense of gaminess, accented by dried cherry and smoky dried herb notes. Grenache blend. | 91 | \$22 |
| TENSLEY Fundamental Central Coast 2016 Loaded with personality, offering blackberry, orange peel, espresso and smoked sage flavors. Syrah blend. | 90 | \$18 |
| BONNY DOON Grenache Central Coast The Wine Formerly Known as Clos de Gilroy 2016 Sleek and vibrant, with floral raspberry and smoky anise aromas and lively cherry and spice flavors that have a snappy finish. | 89 | \$20 |
| CLINE Syrah Sonoma County 2015 Offers plenty of power, with smoky cracked pepper, blackberry and licorice flavors that finish with firm tannins. | 89 | \$11 |
| ROBERT HALL Syrah Paso Robles 2014 A lovely, easygoing Syrah, with violet and blueberry aromas and supple, soft raspberry and spicy cinnamon flavors. | 89 | \$20 |
| MORGAN Cotes du Crow's Monterey 2016 Snappy and easy to drink, with floral raspberry, licorice and smoked pepper flavors that finish on a lively note. Grenache blend. | 89 | \$18 |
| BOGLE Phantom California 2014 Shows lots of torque and not much polish, but this is jammed with black cherry, espresso and toasted spice flavors. Petite Sirah blend. | 88 | \$18 |
| CASTLE ROCK Petite Sirah Paso Robles 2015 Appropriately brawny, yet easy to drink, with black raspberry and espresso flavors. | 88 | \$13 |
| HAHN GSM Central Coast 2016 Plump and lively, with modestly proportioned black cherry and roasted pepper flavors. | 88 | \$15 |
| KENDALL-JACKSON Syrah Santa Barbara County Vintner's Reserve 2015 Approachable and spirited, with notes of huckleberry and cracked pepper, and a hint of toffee on this finish. | 88 | \$17 |
| MICHAEL DAVID Syrah Lodi 6th Sense 2015 Dark and plump, this red features brooding blueberry and bitter chocolate flavors. | 88 | \$16 |
| MURPHY-GOODE Red Wine California 2013 An easygoing blend, this offers notes of blueberry, pepper and smoky anise. Syrah blend. | 88 | \$14 |
| ANDREW MURRAY Syrah Santa Ynez Valley Tous Les Jours 2016 A trim version, featuring pensive notes of dried herb, smoky plum and licorice. | 88 | \$18 |
| RHIANNON California 2015 Zesty, if modest in scale, with spicy toast and black cherry flavors. Petite Sirah blend. | 87 | \$12 |

Robles Willow Creek District 2015 (91, \$70), a Grenache-based blend, is smoky and savory, with a muscular core of tannins bound by expressive crushed rock, dark berry and grilled anise notes.

The drought impact was less severe in Sonoma in 2015, according to Jeff Cohn of Jeff Cohn Cellars, but yields were down about 40 percent on average and harvest came early and fast, before fall rains could arrive. "The wines are more fruit-driven, but we also got great minerality," Cohn says. His biggest focus was managing the crop to give the grapes time to develop mature flavors without becoming overripe. Summer was sunny and fairly warm, and in September and October, temperatures regularly approached 100° F.

Cohn's best 2015s are the Jeff Cohn Syrah Russian River Valley Zio Tony Ranch 2015 (93, \$85), which is expressive, with rose petal and blackberry aromas and plump raspberry, licorice and bitter

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BONUS VIDEO: Meet four stars of the California Rhône-style wine scene—Anne-Marie Failla, Helen Keplinger, Annie Favia and Jordan Fiorentini. Watch at www.winespectator.com/video.

chocolate flavors, and the Jeff Cohn Petite Sirah Russian River Valley Landy Sweetwater Springs Vineyard 2015 (92, \$45), deep and dark, with blackberry, dark chocolate and white pepper flavors.

Joey Tensley, of Tensley Wines in Santa Barbara, has already released a few 2016 wines. "Summer was pretty warm. We seem to be getting budbreak earlier and earlier." A heat spike arrived in late August and proved a headache for white grapes, but reds were largely unaffected. "The 2016s are a little fresher than the 2015s but they still have great weight and texture," Tensley says.

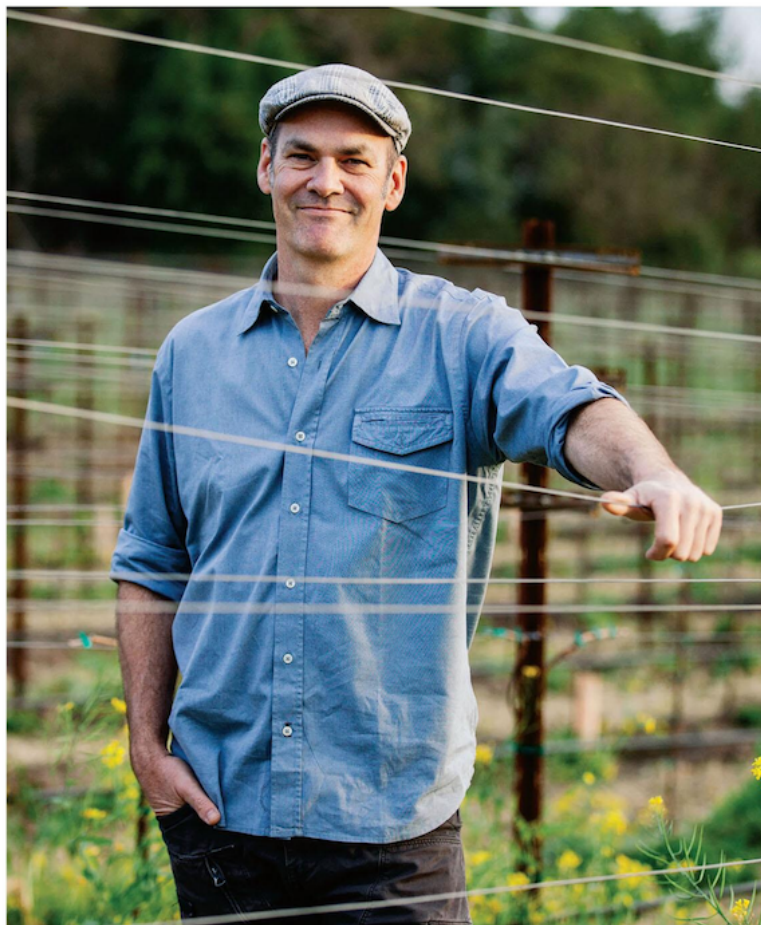
His leading wines in this report include Tensley Syrah Santa Barbara County Colson Canyon Vineyard 2016 (94, \$42), which offers floral blueberry and *garrigue* aromas and dynamic huckleberry, river stone and smoky meat flavors. Tensley All Blocks Tensley Vineyards Santa Barbara County 2016 (94, \$34) is a refined and well-structured blend, with fragrant black raspberry and crushed stone aromas that open to blueberry and savory licorice flavors.

Senior editor Tim Fish is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California Rhône-style reds.

WHITES

White Rhône's seduce with aromatic intensity and supple texture

► By MaryAnn Worobiec



Aaron Pott's namesake winery produced a leading example of Napa-grown Viognier in the 2016 vintage.

Rhône-style white wines in California have a new grape on the roster: Picardan. The Tablas Creek Picardan Adelaida District 2016 (88 points, \$30) is the first bottling of this approved Châteauneuf-du-Pape variety to come from California. "There's only 1.2 acres planted in France," explains Jason Haas, Tablas Creek's general manager. "So the half-acre we planted at Tablas Creek increased the world's footprint by 42 percent."

It may be small news, but it's also a sign of Rhône-style whites' growing momentum in California over the past decade. Acreage has been edging up and winemakers continue to refine their wines.

The category, which has included varietals and blends based on Viognier, Grenache Blanc, Roussanne, Marsanne, Picpoul Blanc, Clairette and now Picardan, may remain overshadowed by California Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, but Rhône-style whites maintain a loyal following among vintners and wine lovers alike. The Tablas Creek Picardan seems poised to add fans to the club for its full body, lemon curd, beeswax and poached pear notes and firm acidity.

One of this year's top-scorers, the Carol Shelton Coquille Blanc Paso Robles 2016 (92, \$24), a blend of Grenache Blanc with Roussanne, Viognier and Marsanne, highlights how well the various grapes can harmonize. "I'm known for Zinfandel," says the Sonoma-based vintner. "And I'm Chardonnay'd out. But I wanted to create my ideal dream white wine, and [Coquille Blanc] is truly my favorite wine I make." Shelton cites the wine's distinctive aromatics and creamy yet crisp mouthfeel as key qualities she strives to build.