

A Grape to Call our Rhone

The Rhone Rangers, a group of maverick winemakers, are recasting classic French varietals for American palates. BY WILLIAM KISSEL

Back in 1927, an Italian grape grower named Dominic Buchignani planted five acres of carignane grapes on his D&D Ranch in California's Alexander Valley, only to discover years later — after his son Deno planted an additional 18 acres — that there was no market for the obscure French varietal. So for nearly five decades the Buchignanis called the grapes “mixed zinfandel” and sold them to one of California's largest winemakers, who presumably couldn't tell the difference.

In a similar case of mistaken identity, winemaker Randall Grahm of California's Bonny Doon Vineyard recalls making a wine in the mid-1990s called Le Sophiste that he describes as “amazingly great for a roussanne/marsanne blend.” The problem was the roussanne grapes Grahm had included in the mix were actually another grape varietal known as viognier. “That wine even impressed the late Gerard Jaboulet,

the famed French vintner of Jaboulet Aine, who was completely knocked out. He said, “We cannot make wine like this in France,” offers Grahm, noting how in the early years when American winemakers were just discovering the relatively unknown grapes of France's southern Rhone, many of the region's varietals were so misunderstood — and difficult to pronounce — that even the experts couldn't tell them apart.

California winemakers have mostly built their reputations over the past 100 years on cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay, widely known grapes that command nearly half of all domestic wine sales (86 of the 199 cases shipped in 2010), according to the San Francisco-based Wine Institute. But over the past four decades a group of maverick American winemakers have slowly discovered the little-known varietals from the Rhone River valley, a region in the southeast corner of France

known for growing more unusual grapes such as viognier, roussanne, mourvedre, grenache, and syrah, among others. There are 22 grape varietals originating from Rhone, which is known not only for its idiosyncratic grapes but also its innovative way of blending to create fruit-forward wines bursting with flavors that go beautifully with a wide variety of foods. Connoisseurs know the French versions of these wines as Cotes du Rhones, generally less expensive wines featuring grapes mostly from the southern Rhone, and Chateauneuf-du-Pape (CDP), the highest quality blends combining grenache, syrah, and mourvedre (often referred to as a GSM), along with as many as 10 other CDP-approved grapes, depending on the winemaker.

Sample the Rhones

These upcoming Rhone Ranger (800-467-0163, rhonerangers.org) wine-tasting events offer the perfect opportunity to savor the flavors of the Rhone.

NEW YORK CITY, NOVEMBER 7

Wine tasting with more than 30 wineries; in partnership with City Winery. 155 Varick Street

PASO ROBLES, CALIFORNIA, FEBRUARY 17, 2013

Paso Robles Rhone Rangers Experience wine tasting with more than 40 wineries. (805) 239-1231, ext. 26

SAN FRANCISCO, MARCH 22-23, 2013

16th Annual Weekend Celebration of American Rhones, with seminars, winemaker dinner, and wine tasting featuring more than 100 wineries.

If you join the Rhone Rangers as a “Sidekick,” you will automatically be notified of upcoming events and receive special discounts on tickets. Visit rhonerangers.org and click on “Become a Member,” and then click on “Sidekick.” There is no charge to become a Sidekick member.

Some of these varietals, such as carignane, syrah, and grenache, have been growing in small quantities in northern California for over a century with little notice. Often brought across the pond illegally, they were blended into jug wines that rarely listed the varietals by name, or they were used to create semisweet wines that fell out of favor with most Americans' tastes in the 1970s. However, perceptions began to change a decade later, and especially in the 1990s with the formation of the Rhone Rangers, a nonprofit group of American winemakers dedicated to producing award-winning Rhone-style wines. “These were winemakers just getting started in their careers who started going to places like Kermit Lynch's wine shop in Berkeley that is

all about French and Italian wines,” explains Cheryl Quist, executive director of the Rhone Rangers. “He inspired some of the early Rhone Rangers like Gary Eberle [Eberle Winery] and Randall Grahm [Bonny Doon], who bought these wines and loved them so much they started going to the Rhone and bringing back what are often referred to as suitcase clones — grape cuttings brought over in suitcases. So it kind of got started in a very organic way.”

Back then, if you were an American winemaker producing anything other than chardonnay or cabernet, you were taking an enormous financial risk. By concentrating on Rhones, now-established winemakers such as Bob Lindquist (Qupé), Bill Crawford (McDowell Valley Vineyards), Craig Williams (formerly of Joseph Phelps Vineyards), Steve Edmunds (Edmunds St. John), and Adam Tolmach (The Ojai Vineyard), among others, “were bucking the trend. They were almost like the Lone Ranger ... champions of the greater good,” says Quist, explaining how the Rhone Rangers got their name.

What makes Rhone wines so enticing to both American winemakers and drinkers alike are the subtle flavors and nuances that enhance, rather than overwhelm, the food-pairing experience. Some cabernets and chardonnays, for instance, have a lot of alcohol or residual sugars that tend to clash with many foods, while Rhone wines are much more versatile and better suited to American diets. Take roussanne, for example. “It's a full-bodied white with waxy flavors, a touch of oatmeal on the nose with a creamy texture, and a nice departure from all those oaky chardonnays,” explains Ernst Storm, the winemaker at Los Olivos-based Curtis, the Rhone-style winery owned by Brooks & Kate Firestone (of the Ohio tire family), who helped introduce the wine industry to Santa Barbara's Santa Ynez Valley in the late 1960s. By contrast, “syrahs are darker, more rustic, with white- and black-pepper notes that go well with richer meats and barbecue, while grenache showcases more high-tone red fruit, strawberry flavors that are more delicate and work well with lighter meats, duck, and other game birds,” he says, noting how the California climate is perfectly suited to the Rhone winemaking style. Which doesn't mean they are immune to other growing regions; most recently Rhone grapes have also proven successful in states like Washington, Oregon, and Virginia, among others.

One of the first to recognize the potential for Rhone grapes in California was Tablas Creek, an influential Paso Robles-based winery launched in 1989 by an American businessman, Robert Haas, working in collaboration with the French winery Château de Beaucastel. Haas bought his first Rhone cuttings from the Beaucastel vineyard that same year and entered into a three-year USDA quarantine program to legally import the grapes into the United States. By 1992 he had enough cuttings to develop a grape-

vine nursery, and by 1997 he was harvesting Tablas Creek's first viable crop.

"The nursery was important in that it helped create the category in a modern way," explains Jason Haas, general manager of Tablas Creek and the son of Robert Haas. In addition to planting the French grape cuttings, "we actually planted an acre of each of five California-sourced clones (already growing in the state) to have a control group, and found the grapes from California made much less interesting, rich, complex, and concentrated wines than the grapes growing next to them that we brought over from France." At that time the Haas family made an extraordinary decision to sell the proprietary French cuttings to other winemakers interested in producing Rhone-style wines. "We ended up selling Rhone varietal cuttings to more than 400 vineyards around the U.S.," says Haas, adding that approximately 80 percent of Rhone wines made by American winemakers today originated from cuttings supplied by Tablas Creek.

That decision to share proved beneficial, says Haas, because it helped jump-start the spread of Rhone varietals in America. In the Paso Robles region alone, there are now more than 240 wineries, about 90 percent of which produce at least one Rhone wine. They vary from the rich red blends at Calcareous vineyards and Tablas Creek to the estate-grown syrahs at Venteux to the lush stone-fruit-flavored viogniers at Katin. Neighboring Santa Ynez, home to such important winemakers as Curtis, Zaca Mesa, Andrew Murray, and Qupé, is perhaps California's fastest-growing Rhone wine region because the climate is most agreeable to growing the French grapes. Haas cuttings can be found in both regions and, with continued growth in mind, this year the family plans to expand its cutting nursery with the addition of seven new and rare Rhone varietals, including terret noir, bourboulenc, picardin, and muscardin, to round out its library of the 13 designated Chateauneuf-du-Pape grapes.

Ironically, many grape growers and wine aficionados consider American-made Rhones better than those from the French source. The warm days and cool nights allow the grapes in California to hang on the vine longer than in other growing regions, which helps them develop more structure and enhanced flavors. "The longer the grapes are on the vine, the more they are able to pull up minerals from the soil, and the more complex the wines," explains Haas.

Most important, the growing conditions in California and the southern Rhone are remarkably similar, making for a more congruous fit. "I especially like the fact that we can make more natural wines. We don't have to acidulate them — manipulate the alcohol — to make wines that impart a certain grace or aesthetic complexity you just can't get if the wine has been strongly manipulated," says Gramm. In other words, he adds, "we don't have to make heroic interventions to make these grapes grow here; they are just perfectly suited to our climate." 

American Beauties

LEFT SIDE (top to bottom)

DENNER 2010 Grenache

The addition of 13 percent syrah and 6 percent couniose contributes woody and peppery spices on the nose, which give way to nuances of cherry, plum, and pomegranate on the finish. \$50, dennervineyards.com

DAVIS FAMILY VINEYARDS 2009 Cuvée Luke

A traditional white cuvee of roussanne, marsanne, and viognier, this flavorful blend of grapes grown in California's Sierra Foothills opens with bright citrus and stone fruits before softening to a creamy finish. \$26, daviswines.com

VENTEUX 2008 Estate Petite Syrah

Dry-farmed on three rolling acres to create a rustic, aromatic syrah with hints of hyacinth, plum, and pepper on the nose and an earthy black-fruit finish. \$46, venteuxvineyards.com

STOLPMAN 2009 L'Avion Roussanne

Rich in minerality and gentle acidity, this flavorful roussanne offers essences of honeycomb, pear, and cashew and finishes with a slightly creamy complexity. \$38, stolpmanvineyards.com

RIGHT SIDE (top to bottom)

L'AVENTURE Côte à Côte 2009

A classic GSM (grenache, syrah, mourvedre) blend that favors big fruit up front — plum, cherry, and blackberry — before finishing with hints of cocoa, leather, and subtle spices. \$85, aventurewine.com

CASS 2010 Mourvèdre

Unseasonably cold weather in 2010 didn't mess with this mourvedre, which opens with scents of cedar, black cherry, and cranberry, and offers a smoky, spice-filled finish. \$36, casswines.com

FOLIN CELLARS 2009 Estate Misceo

Latin for "to blend," the Misceo is a classic syrah-mourvedre-grenache blend from Oregon's Rogue Valley that offers bold spice on the nose and soft black and stone fruits on the finish. \$34, folincellars.com

BONNY DOON VINEYARD 2011 Vin Gris de Cigare

A complex blend of grenache, mourvedre, and cinsault uncharacteristically combined with white grapes such as grenache blanc and roussanne gives a refreshing hint of fresh berries and citrus to this Cotes de Provence-style cuvee rose. \$16, bonnydoonvineyard.com



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