



FRICK MARIANI

Syrah nights

Martha Stewart undoubtedly drinks red wine in winter and white wine in summer. What could be more correct?

The problem, of course, is that proper behavior and pleasure can be two different things. And for its part, wine is far more allied with the latter than with the former.

Then, too, there's the issue of food. On a July night, with the helplessly alluring aroma of steaks cooking on the grill, does one really crave white wine?

As I build my case for red wine in summer, one more point must be made: Loving red wine is chronic, progressive, and cumulative. You start out enjoying a glass of Zinfandel every now and then, and before you know it, you're an incorrigible red wine chauvinist, a person for whom wine means red, period.

You guys know who you are.

For me, summertime and red wine intersect at Syrah. Darkly masculine, earthy, spicy, even gruff, Syrah is my favorite wine with almost anything grilled. In part, that's because Syrah (like grilled foods themselves) is robust and a little brazen. Syrah doesn't know about passivity; most examples (at least from California) are not what you'd call

elegant or even well mannered. But *mm-mm*, are they compelling. Syrah is a tuxedo-clad Clint Eastwood with a 5 o'clock shadow.

The other day, a winemaker friend said to me, "Just watch. Syrah is going to be the next Merlot in California." A call to the Wine Institute confirmed Syrah's increasing popularity. While it's got a long way to go to catch up with Merlot, Syrah acreage has increased nearly tenfold since 1988. A third of these acres aren't yet in production.

The world's most famous Syrah comes from the Rhône Valley of France. In the north end of the valley, the famous wines of Côte Rôtie and Hermitage are made from Syrah. In the southern Rhône, Syrah is one of the chief wines that make up the blend in Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas. In the Rhône, Syrah's potent and exuberant flavors lean toward leather, damp earth, wild blackberries, smoke, roasted meats, and—especially—pepper and spice. The best have a kinetic mouth-feel with flavors that detonate on the palate like tiny grenades. (Consult your wine merchant; there are numerous great producers, though the wines are very expensive.)

These were the Syrahs that, in the early 1980s, inspired a whole group of maverick California winemakers. The "Rhône Rangers," as the group came to be called, went on to make some full-bodied, deliciously earthy wines, forging a whole new direction for red wine-making in America in the process.

But well before we became enchanted with the grape, South Africans and Australians did. In the 17th century, French Huguenots brought Syrah from France to South Africa's Cape of Good Hope, where it was rechristened "Shiraz." From South Africa, the grape was brought to Australia, where it's also called Shiraz and now produces delicious wine.

Shiraz (Syrah) is, in fact, the leading red grape in Australia, and the big-bodied wines made from it can be positively hedonistic with their almost syrupy boysenberry-jam flavors. The most legendary Australian Shiraz is Grange (formerly called Grange Hermitage), considered one of the top red wines in the world. Grange is expensive, but Australia also makes the world's best inexpensive Syrahs. Try, for example, the lip-smacking Rosemount Estate Shiraz (\$12), a big teddy bear of a Syrah.

A final note: Petite Sirah (also spelled Petite Syrah) is not exactly the same as Syrah. Grape DNA "fingerprinting" indicates that what is called Petite Sirah in California is actually four or more different varieties, possibly including the obscure French grapes Durif and Peloursin as well as true Syrah. Look for a future column on Petite Sirah.

So back to the critical question: What to have with that grilled steak? Why not try one of the many intriguing Syrahs made in California? Below are just a few of my favorites.

Alban Syrah "Reva" 1994, \$18 (Edna Valley). Wild blackberries meet wild herbs; smoky and sophisticated.

Cline Syrah 1995, \$18 (Carneros). Exuberant with rushes of ripe raspberries.

Eberle Syrah "Fralich Vineyard" 1995, \$18 (Paso Robles). Rich boysenberry flavors laced with white pepper.

Edmunds St. John Syrah 1995, \$15 (California). Fascinating chocolate, violet, and menthol flavors.

Joseph Phelps Vin du Mistral Syrah 1994, \$24 (Napa Valley). Exotic lavender and chocolate flavors.

Qupé Syrah "Bien Nacido Reserve" 1995, \$22.50 (Santa Barbara County). Dense, brooding, the Heathcliff of Syrahs.

Truchard Syrah 1995, \$24 (Carneros/Napa Valley). A dense, gamy style very reminiscent of the Rhône. ♦

WINE DICTIONARY | BODY

The perceived weight of the wine in the mouth. The higher the wine's alcohol content, the more full-bodied it will seem on the palate. A good method when determining the body of a wine is to imagine the relative weights in the mouth of skim milk, whole milk, and half-and-half. Light-bodied wines feel like skim milk, medium-bodied like whole milk, and full-bodied like half-and-half. — K. M.