

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

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Future of Cal-Rhone Blends May Hinge On Fate of a 'Dissed' Grape Variety

By Dan Berger

A few weeks after the extravaganza called the ZAP tasting at the pavilion at San Francisco's Fort Mason Center, a similar sort of tasting was staged in the same hall, on a similarly brilliant Saturday morning.

In many ways, the events looked alike: the glass handed out was the same shape; the baguettes at the door were identical in size and appearance, and the tables were arranged the same way, with wine makers pouring mainly dark red wine.

But these were clearly different events. For one thing, last Saturday's event staged by the Rhone Rangers was far less well attended. At the Zinfandel event, more than 5,000 persons crammed into the hall to get sips of wine from one grape, much of it barrel samples of as-yet unbottled wine. This past Saturday's first annual Rhone Rangers wine tasting was attended by fewer than 1,000 and there were very few barrel samples.

That's because of the essential differences between Zinfandel, a varietal wine that may be sampled from the barrel as early as January, and so many of the more popular Rhone-like blends that remain disparate parts until the wine maker chooses to make a final blend some weeks – or hours – before bottling. It's true that the grape that dominates many of the Rhone blends is Syrah, which was virtually unknown in California a decade ago. (In 1986, California grape authorities formally acknowledged that there were 143 acres of true French Syrah planted in the entire state of California. The state's acreage of Syrah is well over 10 times that figure today.)

However, Rhone Valley tradition says that some of the most interesting wines are blends of Syrah and other grapes, and one such grape is the poorly regarded Grenache. It's poorly regarded only by those who remember the spunky sweet wine of two decades ago called Grenache Rosé that was like soda pop. Sadly, this image of Grenache remains in the minds of many, even a few wine makers. At a time when Syrah is making a dramatic surge in sales as a premium wine, Grenache is almost completely ignored. Which is sad.

Frankly, I believe Grenache is the grape that will make all the difference if great Rhone-styled red wines are to gain fame in the future. For now, many California wine makers are hitching their Rhones to Syrah and nothing else.

As evidence of that, look at the tonnage crushed of Syrah

in 1996 and 1997. Last year 7,056 tons of Syrah were crushed in California, compared with 3,580 the year before. And, it's important to note, 1,280 tons came from San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties, and nearly 1,000 tons from Sonoma, premium growing areas.

Even in countries where Grenache does well it is disrespected.

On a visit to the Rioja of Spain not long ago, walking through a vineyard of Tempranillo grapes, I asked a wine maker if he had any Grenache.

"I love Garnacha, but the owner, he doesn't," said the wine maker.

A few yards down, toward the end of the vineyard, the wine maker stopped and said, "Here. Here we have some Garnacha. But don't tell the owner..."

During last Saturday's Rhone Rangers' tasting, I asked a number of producers if they grew or had access to Grenache, and if they did, what did they think of the grape. Almost to a person, everyone said they loved Grenache, but few had access to any *quality* Grenache – and keep in mind that italicized word.

"I can't find any – at least, any that's very good," said Chuck Ortman, wine maker for Meridian Vineyards in Paso Robles.

"It's the only grape I can't buy, if it's any good," said J.P. Pawloski, wine maker for River Run. "Take my card. If you hear about any, call me."

"I have only a tiny amount, less than an acre, and I wish I could get more," said Qupe's Bob Lindquist.

Among the others at the tasting surveyed, most had only scant acreage of Grenache. The largest contiguous planting was at Don Galleano's property in Rancho Cucamonga, east of Los Angeles, some 150 acres. McDowell Valley has 28 acres in Mendocino County; Joseph Phelps, one of the most bullish wineries in regard to Grenache, now has 40 acres planted near King City and wine maker Craig Williams praises the quality of fruit he gets from Scheid Vineyards in Monterey. Others with scant acreage of quality Grenache include Zaca Mesa (17 acres), Phil Staley (2), Sobon Estate (8½), Sierra Vista (3½), Preston (2), and Cline (8).

So it was a shock to me to learn from State ag officials that California crushed 115,000 tons of Grenache last fall – more than 16 times the amount of Syrah!

The difference is where that tonnage came from. About

95% of it came from the hottest regions of the state – from San Joaquin County south to Kern County. And clearly these hot-climate grapes are not the “quality” grapes wine makers like Ortman and Lindquist would even consider. (One exception is Galleano’s warm Rancho Cucamonga Grenache. His ancient, low-yielding vines make Joe Hart’s delightful red and rosé wines (see Tasting Notes).

Only 85 tons of Grenache were crushed out of Napa and Sonoma last year.

“It is a truly fascinating grape,” said Williams the day before the Rhone tasting. “We’ve planted a lot more of it, in southern Monterey County, and we think it’s the key ingredient in our Le Mistral.”

Curiously, and not so coincidentally in my opinion, some of the best wines at last Saturday’s Rhone tasting were blends that included some Grenache, as well as wines made entirely of Grenache. Some of these wines have proprietary names that don’t indicate which grapes were used, allowing wine makers blending freedom from vintage to vintage. A number of wine makers are tinkering with variations of “Cotes du Rhone” and one may soon use a clever play on this phrase.

Tasting Notes (Tasted open at Rhone tasting except where noted)

Exceptional

1995 **Ferrari-Carano** Syrah, Alexander Valley (\$18): Remarkably deep, concentrated flavors of black cherry, pepper and clove with a hint of raspberry. Ripe, but not overdone. Oak is held to a minimum and the finish is remarkably balanced for such a big, chewy wine. Tasted at the winery.

1996 **Zaca Mesa** Cuvee Z, Santa Barbara County (\$12): Wonderful clove and cranberry spice, loads of fresh fruit and charming crisp aftertaste. A wine with nearly half Grenache that offers near-term drinkability and approachable flavors.

1996 **Truchard** Syrah, Carneros (\$21): Deeply complex, lush fruit of blueberry and black cherry, thick and yet not as tannic as some. Enjoyable now; will be great in three years.

1995 **Joseph Phelps** Le Mistral, California (\$17): Remarkably complex wine with hints of dried flowers, clove, pepper and sandalwood. A truly Rhone-ish sort of wine, with depth of flavors, but graceful tannins. Almost sold out; the 1996 will be released soon. Tasted at the winery.

1996 **Meridian** Syrah, Paso Robles (\$14): Amazing richness of black cherry fruit with hints of pepper and spice. Aftertaste is loaded with raspberries and jam, and the entire wine reminds me of a synthesis of California fruit and Rhone complexity, needing only a bit of time to develop.

1995 **Philip Staley** Grenache, Russian River (\$12): Bright

Lower tannins than many, but wonderfully crisp finish that works with food.

1994 **Sierra Vista** Fleur de Montagne, Sierra Foothills (\$14): Huge aromatic wine with clove and cherry, fairly deeply flavored with stylish fruit and plump finish.

1996 **Perry Creek** Syrah, El Dorado County (\$15): Peppery with racy strawberry jam notes and a soft, fleshy finish. For near-term drinking.

Very Highly Recommended

1996 **Hart** Grenache Rosé, Cucamonga (\$8): From Don Galleano’s grapes, a soft, slightly sweet version of rosé with real depth of flavors. Works brilliantly with spiced foods.

1996 **Preston** Faux, Dry Creek Valley (\$11): Ripe fruit of cranberry and cherry with traces of pepper and clove. Medium weight, generous, and pretty gutsy for the price.

1996 **McDowell Valley** Grenache Rosé (\$8.50): Drier version with similar cherry aroma, but with a bit more citrus notes in the finish. A superb pink wine.

1995 **Tria** Syrah, Sonoma County (\$20): A true effort to make Rhone in California. A gamey note and high-tone fruit of blackberry and pomegranate make this wine a bit controversial. Nicely structured.

1996 **Beaulieu** Solaris, Grenache (\$17): Served chilled at the tasting, the wine was refreshing with strawberry and pepper notes, but I thought the price slightly too high for this red wine that wants to be pink.

Wine of the Week ?

1996 **B.R. Cohn** Pinot Noir, Sonoma Valley (\$24): A stylish and dramatic “new” Pinot Noir from a region that also grows excellent Cabernet. The B.R. Cohn story is complex and intriguing, and will be told another day. For the moment, let’s focus on this wine. A complex aroma that has strawberry fruit as well as dried herbs and flowers, hints of oak aging, but not overdone. The flavors are very complete and offer a glimpse of a Burgundian style of wine with California fruit and firm, age-worthy finish. Cohn made Pinot Noir a decade ago, then gave up when he decided to focus on Cabernet. New consulting wine maker Merry Edwards helped new staff enologist Mike Gulyash make this wine. Only six barrels were produced, only 190 cases available. For details call the winery (707-938-4064) and while you’re at it, ask about Cohn’s extra virgin olive oil and flavored vinegars.

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Juliann Savage, Editor & Publisher
415 S. Topanga Canyon Boulevard, #174
Topanga, CA 90290-3142
310-455-WINE, Fax: 310-455-2294
e-mail: RLLS92A@Prodigy.com