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Chatting With the Rhône Rangers

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Interviews and photographs by MaryAnn Worobiec

The Rhône Rangers didn't hold back, pouring barrel samples, library wines and new releases alike at the third annual Rhône Rangers Tasting in San Francisco on March 25. As more than 2,000 fans gathered round, winemakers offered theories about the current popularity of Rhône-inspired wines.

Truchard Vineyard

Jo Ann and Tony Truchard, owners; Sal De Ianni, winemaker

"The American consumer has a broader palate these days, and likes to try new things," offered Tony Truchard. When he and Sal weren't behind the table pouring their 1998 Carneros Syrah, they were scouting other producers to sample Roussanne. The winery plans to launch its own debut Roussanne from the 2000 vintage, but it's not too late to do some homework. "Some feel that Roussanne has more characteristic consistency than Viognier," Tony said, explaining why the winery is picking up this lesser-known variety. "Roussanne has a good future."



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JC Cellars

Jeff Cohn, owner and winemaker

Pouring his Syrah Monterey Ventana Vineyard 1998, Jeff couldn't stop thinking of descriptions for it: "Such fruit! It's so decadent! Roasted herbs -- rosemary and thyme. It's elegant! It's sexy! When I make a wine like that, I'm amazed I made it." Throwing his hands up to the heavens, he shouts, "Thank you!"

The R. H. Phillips Vineyard
Barry Bergman, winemaker



According to Barry, the popularity of Rhône-style wines has to do with their consistent affordability, "especially in comparison with the rest of the wine marketplace." And the popularity of the Rhône Rangers? Well, that comes from the original group of Rhône Rangers, who met informally in the 1980s but quickly disbanded. "We were too iconoclastic back then. Now, we're still quirky, but focused. We're still having fun."



T-Vine Cellars

Greg Brown (right), owner and winemaker; Yvonne, his wife, and Ron, his father

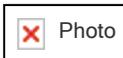
"In the palette of colors of wines, the Rhône ones really stick out," says Greg, explaining the wines' popularity. "The flavor spectrum is different than Cabernet. It's a style people like." Greg was pouring T-Vine's 1998 Grenache (which, he suggests, is a "high-fidelity" wine, full of candied raspberry notes) and 1998 Syrah (which he finds to be full of blueberry and chocolate flavors).



McCrea Cellars

Kim and Doug McCrea, owners

Only a few Washington wineries were represented at the Rhône Rangers tasting, but Doug promises that more will be joining. "Washington state has shown a reluctance to Rhône varieties, but that will change," says Doug, who makes the McCrea wines. These grapes seem to grow well in Washington, where, he says, the biggest problem they have is that the grapes grow so vigorously, they need constant thinning. Pouring the McCrea 1998 Viognier and 1998 Syrah, both from Yakima Valley, Doug says that the winery will increase production because "the vineyards are so damn good!"



Domaine de la Terre Rouge

Bill Easton and Jane O'Riordan, owners

Bill believes that one of the hardest challenges in selling Rhône-style wines is to convince people who are used to varietal labels that blending is a valid option for these grapes. "But the Gen X wine drinkers are more savvy," says Bill, who makes the domaine's wines. "They're looking for value and complexity." One of the flagship wines of Domaine de la Terre Rouge is Enigma, a blend of Marsanne, Roussanne and Viognier.

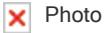


Swanson Vineyards

Michael Updergraft, marketer, and Marco Cappelli, winemaker

Marco was pouring a vertical of the Swanson Syrahs from 1993 to 1997 from magnum. He says his favorite is the 1994: "I like the spiciness, the cinnamon character." Although he prefers to age his Syrahs a few years to integrate the oak flavors, Marco doesn't mind that most people consume the wine immediately. Michael explains, "Syrah gives so much pleasure, and it's so good with food."

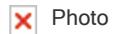
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Photo

Zaca Mesa Winery
Benjamin Silver, winemaker

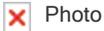
Benjamin, a fan of Rhône-inspired wines, doesn't get his inspiration from France, but rather from walking through the Zaca Mesa vineyards and tasting the grapes. Zaca Mesa is located in Santa Barbara County, where the grapes get plenty of time to get ripen. Says Benjamin, "It's a difference between having to work a wine, and picking the grapes ripe and having it make itself."



Photo

McDowell Valley Vineyards
Bill Crawford, owner and winemaker

To prove that Syrah has a shelf life, Bill was pouring 1980 and 1984 McDowell Valley Syrah, along with his current releases. The wines were showing well, but he knows that the popularity of Syrah has little to do with its aging potential. "Syrah can grow anywhere," he says. "It's blendable. You can stick it in a barrel. You can whole-cluster ferment it. You can use many different yeast strains. It's not targeted towards a specific program. You can blend it with anything."



Photo

Renwood Winery
Robert Smerling, owner, and Don Reha, winemaker

Robert was excited to be pouring Renwood's second label, Santino. The 1998 Santino Viognier has a suggested retail price of \$10, which, he says, proves that "besides being great wine people, we're good businesspeople. Who else produces a Viognier in the \$10 range?" Production is only 800 cases, but he promises that this wine will remain affordable while production nearly doubles in the next few years.

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[Back to the Rhône Rangers](#)