

Behind The Bottle

Where We Rhône: Wine Trends In Silicon Valley

BY STACY BRISCOE | FEBRUARY 02, 2018



Rhône-varietals and relaxation served up to music at Lion Ranch Vineyards and Winery in San Martin.

Santa Clara Valley and Santa Cruz Mountain Winemakers Find Fresh Palates (and Passion) for Old World Wines

Rhône varietals and Rhône-style blends are not new on California’s wine menu. The first California plantings date back to the late 1800s, when immigrants to our Golden State gave up on their search for gold and turned their focus back to what they knew: agriculture. The post–Gold Rush era saw an influx of French settlers in San Jose and Santa Clara County, and it was here that the first Rhône grapes were planted, including Grenache, Carignane, Mourvèdre and Cinsault.

With phylloxera infecting most vines in the 1880s, followed shortly by Prohibition, many vineyard plantings failed to survive. It wasn’t until the 1960s that the Rhône region’s native grapes had their comeback in California. In fact, one of the first recorded instances of a modern “Rhône renaissance” happened right here in the heart of Silicon Valley, when David Bruce set out to establish his eponymous winery amongst the craggy cliffs of the Santa Cruz Mountains in the mid 1960s. Though his intention was to create the rustic Pinot Noirs for which he is known today, he had little access to land or vines, so turned to the sprawling valleys of Gilroy and Morgan Hill where he found thriving old-vine Rhône grapes left over from the pioneer days. Bruce is credited for bottling California’s first single-varietal dry Grenache.

Around California other winemakers were also working to revive Rhône production. Robert Haas of Tablas Creek in Paso Robles worked alongside French winery Château de Beaucastel to import new cuttings of the Châteauneuf-du-Pape grape varieties, many of which were completely new to California terroir. By 1996, the Tablas Creek team had enough vines to plant *and* sell to other vintners interested in producing Rhône wines. Haas, in conjunction with other major players such as John Alban of Alban Vineyards, Randall Graham of Bonny Doon Vineyard, Joseph Phelps of Joseph Phelps Winery and Bob Lindquist of Qupé Winery worked tirelessly to popularize Rhône varietals.

Uncorking Rhône’s French Origins

Much like Bordeaux or Burgundy, the Rhône region of France is defined by a certain set of grape varieties and winemaking methods. In northern Rhône, where the climate is cooler, the late-budding Syrah is king. Indeed, Syrah is the *only* red wine grape permitted within the north. But interestingly, the Rhône Valley is the one region in France where winemakers can mix red and white wines together. Syrahs from the northern Rhône—especially those from the most popular appellations Côte Rôtie and Hermitage—can be bold, brawny, oftentimes animalistic in aromas and tastes. For this reason, Syrah is commonly cofermented, or blended, with up to 10% of the white wine grape Viognier. Viognier,

with its light body, floral aromas and healthy dose of acidity, helps soften both the textures and flavors of the rustic red wine.

Besides Viognier, the only other two white wine grapes grown in the north are Marsanne and Roussanne. While certain Rhône appellations do produce single-varietal bottlings of each, the Marsanne-Roussanne blend is a classic French combination. Roussanne, with its floral, herbaceous flavors and somewhat silky texture stereotypically dominates the relationship; while Marsanne, with its citrus fruit notes and somewhat waxy consistency, takes the backseat.

To the south, the Rhône rules could not be more different. Here, the region's reputation is dominantly defined by the wellknown appellation Châteauneuf-du-Pape, which allows up to 18 different grape varieties: the most common reds being Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre, Carignane and Cinsault; while common whites include Roussanne, Marsanne, Grenache Blanc, Viognier and Picpoul Blanc. The south's significantly hotter climate results in uneven ripening stages for all the grapes, and thus most wines produced—both reds and whites—are, in fact, blends. Although there aren't any rules or restrictions about the amounts or types of grapes used for a specific blend, the heatloving grape Grenache tends to take center stage, acting as the backbone to Châteauneuf-du-Pape's most well-known Rhone blend, Grenache-Syrah-Mourvèdre (or GSM).

Parlez-vous Rhône? Here's a quick rundown:

Viognier, a white wine with light body, floral aromas and healthy dose of acidity.

Roussanne, a white wine with floral, herbaceous flavors and somewhat silky texture.

Marsanne, a white wine with citrus fruit notes and somewhat waxy consistency.

Mourvèdre, a complex red wine with delicate tannin texture and combination of fruit, earth and umami-like flavors.

American Grenache, a red wine that tends to be a bit more fruit forward, with dominant flavors of strawberry, cherry and blackberry and secondary flavors of baking spices.

GSM Blend, a classic southern Rhône blend of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre, most notably represented by the famous French Châteauneuf-du-Pape.



Fast forward to 2018, and here in Silicon Valley there are more than a few wineries practicing the art of the Rhône, sourcing grapes from across the state as well as our own backyard. From bold, fullbodied Syrahs to the softer, floral Viogniers, get ready to take a virtual wine tour of the many seductive styles of Rhône varietals and blends.

Ridge Vineyards, Cupertino

It wasn't until 1995, when Ridge purchased the western portion of their Sonoma County Lytton Springs vineyards, that the current winemaking team found previously planted Syrah and Petite Sirah from the 1960s, as well as old-vine (up to 100 years old) Grenache. Today Ridge produces estate Carignane, Grenache, Syrah, Petite Sirah, as well as Rhône-inspired blends.

Winemaker John Olney's Rhône recommendation: Lytton Estate Petite Sirah—for those who enjoy the bold red wines associated with Ridge's reputation. John describes the wine as “rustic and rugged, yet completely approachable.”

Pairs with: Slow-roasted chuck roast, served with soft polenta

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J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines, San Jose

“Old World influence with a Paso Robles accent,” is how Cynthia Lohr describes her family's expression of their estate grown Rhône. Syrah has been a steady staple in the J. Lohr wine lineup, but it wasn't until 2009 that the family-run winery produced a more complete portfolio of Rhône wines under their Gesture series. Today their Paso Robles estate vineyards produce Rousanne, Viognier, Grenache Blanc, Mourvèdre, Syrah and Petite Sirah.

Cynthia Lohr's Rhône recommendation: Gesture Mourvèdre—for those looking for a red wine with a bit of complexity. With its delicate texture and balance of flavors (fruit and earth, hints of umami and a sneaky smoky background), this is a fun wine to sip on its own or pair with food.

Pairs with: Cornish game hen—“It balances with the luscious, savory characteristics of the wine, match made in heaven,” says Cynthia.

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Big Basin Vineyards, Saratoga

Big Basin offers a few different Rhône varietals and blends, but Syrah is by far the main focal point. Winemaker Bradley Brown says, “It's a difficult variety for consumers to understand, as it's wildly dependent on its specific growing conditions.” He encourages those new to Rhône wines to taste Syrahs from various locations to find an expression suitable to their palates.

Winemaker Bradley Brown's Rhône recommendation: 2012 Rattlesnake Rock Syrah—for those interested in what Brown calls the “full expression” of his Syrahs. “It has a little age, which is when Syrah really starts to shine,” he says.

Pairs with: Roasted lamb chops—Bradley notes, “With its sweet, slightly gamey flavor [lamb] is the perfect foil for Syrah's complex fruit and spice.”

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Sarah's Vineyard, Gilroy

When Tim Slater took over Sarah's Vineyard in 2001, there was already Grenache planted, and he recognized that Santa Clara Valley's climatic conditions are similar to France's Châteauneuf-du-Pape region. So, he continued to cultivate Grenache and in 2005, added new plantings of several Rhône varieties. “Americans are used to buying things based on the name of the grape,” says Tim, and he encourages people to stop by and learn a few new ones.

Winemaker Tim Slater's Rhône recommendation: Madonne Blanc—for those who enjoy a light-bodied white wine with a refreshing finish and a bit of texture as well. Slater describes this

combination of Roussanne, Grenache Blanc, Clairette Blanche and Picpoul Blanc as a classic expression of a Châteauneuf-du-Pape white blend.

Pairs with: Seafood, specifically shellfish, will complement the floral-fruity complexity of this southern Rhône-inspired white blend.

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Aver Family Vineyards, Gilroy

John Aver and his wife, Carolyn, started their winemaking adventure in North Bay's Marin County, but when they decided to get serious about owning a vineyard and winery, they found the perfect location for their combination home and vineyards in the sunny valleys of the South Bay. All of their Rhône-focused grapes are literally grown in their backyard. "Santa Clara Valley doesn't have a varietal reputation to hang its hat on," says Carolyn, "We believe that Rhônes could be it."

Winemaker John Aver's Rhône recommendation: Hope Rhône red blend—for those who enjoy a balanced, medium- to full-body red wine. John describes this combination of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre (with a small percentage of Carignane and Petite Sirah) as a classic interpretation of the Châteauneuf-du-Pape red blend that made him fall in love with the region's wines.

Pairs with: Rack of lamb or—for those with a bit of a sweet tooth—chocolate praline almonds

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La Vie Dansante Wines, Gilroy

"People are interested in Rhône wines because they're looking for something new and different," says La Vie Dansante winemaker Jeff Fadness. "The truth is, these are some of the oldest grapes!" When it comes to California Rhône wines, Jeff notes, "Rhônes don't necessarily have a 'California style.' Each varietal will vary greatly across different regions." What he likes about making Rhône out of the Santa Clara Valley is its consistent temperatures, allowing for relatively even ripening stages for the grapes and, thus, balanced wines.

Winemaker Jeff Fadness' Rhône recommendation: Prelude GSM Blend (Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre)—for those looking for a food-friendly red wine that doesn't overpower the meal but acts as a part of the experience.

Pairs with: Mediterranean grilled chicken, served with capers, kalamata olives and feta cheese

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Lion Ranch Vineyards & Winery, San Martin

When Kim and Todd Engelhardt bought their San Martin estate in 2011, they knew they wanted to dedicate their vineyards and winemaking to the white wines of the Rhône Valley with which they'd fallen in love. It was a gamble, as there weren't a lot of these types of grapes being grown within the immediate area. Today, the Engelhardts have five acres of flourishing Grenache Blanc, Viognier, Picpoul Blanc, Marsanne and Roussanne.

Winemaker Kim Engelhardt's Rhône recommendation: Viognier—for those looking for a "great 'alternative' white wine," says Kim. "With such characteristic aromas and flavors, it may be like nothing people have ever tasted before."

Pairs with: Pears and goat cheese—or spicy Thai or Indian takeout

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