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DINING & WINE

California Syrahs, on Such a Winter's Day

By ERIC ASIMOV

California syrah seemed like a losing proposition back in 2010. Through the 1990s, growers had bet big on the grape. Plantings of syrah in California increased from fewer than 200 acres in 1990 to more than 17,000 by 2004. But sales of syrah wines crashed, and the pace of planting slowed to a trickle.

Different theories emerged to explain the failure of Americans to embrace the wine. Some thought that too many styles of syrah were being made, which confused consumers, who didn't know what to expect from a bottle. The sudden popularity of pinot noir after the 2004 movie "Sideways" was thought to have stolen syrah's thunder. Others believed a wave of cheap shiraz from Australia solidified an identify as an inexpensive supermarket wine, while adding to the consumer confusion, as shiraz is the same grape as syrah under a different name.

My own theory is that, while some superb California syrah was being produced, too much of it was generic fruity, oaky red wine with little to distinguish it. Too many acres had been planted in the wrong places by producers less interested in making great wine than capitalizing on what they had hoped would be a trend. Consumers had identified syrah as mediocre, and often more expensive than other generic, mediocre wines.

Paradoxically, syrah ought to be anything but inconsequential. Goodwines made of syrah in its home territory, the northern Rhône Valley in France, are gloriously fragrant, redolent of herbs, olives, roasted meats and flowers. They, too, are made in a range of styles from appellations like Hermitage, Côte-Rôtie, Cornas, St.-Joseph and Crozes-Hermitage. But the best wines share a savory identity that unites them, whether simple quaffs to drink young or complex wines to age for decades.

That handful of superb California syrahs posed a challenge. They proved that California had the capacity to make fine syrahs. Would more producers follow their lead? If they did, would they find an enthusiastic audience?

Back in 2010, the questions outweighed the answers. Now, after the wine panel recently tasted 20 California syrahs, a few things are becoming clearer. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Mia Van de Water, the wine director at North End Grill in Battery Park City, and Christy Frank, the proprietor of Frankly Wines, a retail shop in TriBeCa.

I think I can speak for all of us when I say that our initial impression was, "Wow!" The quality of winemaking was high and their identities were clear. Now, 20 bottles is a small sample of the syrahs produced in California. Yet, almost all showed great syrah character, even as the bottles ranged from wines that would not seem out of place among a lineup from the northern Rhône to examples of powerful, modern New World wines that value impact over finesse.

What might account for this? For one thing, I believe more growers understand that syrah does better in cooler climates. Much of the initial surge in planting syrah occurred in warmer regions, where the grapes tend to produce jammier wines without the signature syrah aromatics and flavors. Cool climates can be risky. In especially cold years, the grapes can struggle to ripen. But in good years, the wines are better for it.

In addition, the syrah business itself may be in the middle of a shakeout.

"I do see an important shift going on," said Jason Haas, a proprietor of Tablas Creek Vineyard in Paso Robles, which produces mostly southern Rhône blends, along with the occasional very good varietal syrah. "The producers who were making one as a part of a portfolio have largely gotten out of the syrah business, and are being replaced by smaller producers, mostly Rhône-focused, for whom syrah is a labor of love. I think the syrahs that are coming out of California are much better for it."

The panel was also impressed by how careful producers seem to have become in their use of oak barrels. We all had feared that we would be facing a lot of wines lashed by the vanilla and chocolate flavors of new oak.

Instead, overt oak flavors were barely discernible in this group.

Our top wine, the 2010 Qupé, was from Bob Lindquist, one of California's syrah pioneers. The wine, from the Sawyer Lindquist Vineyard in Edna Valley, was beautifully balanced and already complex with gorgeous flavors of flowers, olives, smoked meat and minerals, though it would definitely improve with age.

By contrast, our No. 2 bottle was from the Enfield Wine Company, one of the newer and smaller producers in our tasting. This rustic, savory syrah was not the sort of wine that you can encapsulate by listing a bunch of flavors. It simply was filled with soul and pleasure.

Some small-scale producers may be difficult to find, like the fresh, meaty 2010 Stone Soup from Clos Saron in the Sierra Foothills, our No. 3 bottle, and the tangy, immediately delicious 2011 Dark Matter from Martian Ranch and Vineyard in the Sierra Foothills, No. 7. I don't know how we found that bottle in a retail shop, as Martian Ranch apparently had to withdraw it from circulation after it was sued by another winery, which owns the name Dark Matter. It will be available again in future vintages, though by a different name. Meanwhile, Martian Ranch makes another pretty good syrah, Red Shift.

Other bottles ought to be more readily available, like Bonny Doon Vineyard's earthy, spicy 2010 La Pousseur, which was also our best value at \$25. Arnot-Roberts, Copain Wines and Wind Gap are three of the best young syrah producers in California. Their single-vineyard syrahs are all superb, though hard to find. But we did have their entry-level syrahs in our tasting, and they all made our Top 10.

In addition to their single-vineyard wines and those in our Top 10, syrahs from Failla, Peay Vineyards, Kamen and Edmunds St. John are all worth seeking out.

As pleased as we were, California syrah still has plenty of room for improvement. While we found many enjoyable wines, we didn't see a lot of complexity. Even so, these wines were not inexpensive. Twelve bottles in the tasting cost \$40 or more. As good as they have become, it may take a while for consumers to take the leap at those prices.

Pairings: Chinese Chili.

BEST VALUE

Bonny Doon Vineyard, \$25, ** ½

2010 Syrah Le Pousseur,
Central Coast

Earthy, smoky and spicy, with
aromas and flavors of flowers and
roasted meats.

