

## GRENACHE FINDS A STAR TURN IN CALIFORNIA

Sunday, February 26, 2012  
Jon Bonné

The prediction a year ago (go to: [sfg.ly/zulbKs](http://sfg.ly/zulbKs)) was that Grenache stood ready to accomplish American Syrah's unfulfilled promise of a great next red grape.

It wasn't the most obvious notion, perhaps because of Grenache's ignoble history in California. Once widely planted, its acreage was halved to 6,000 acres between 1994 and 2010 as its use in cheap table wines waned and huge plantings, mostly in the San Joaquin Valley, were cut away. This ran counter to a global trend that left Grenache as one of the world's most planted grapes, but it was simply symptomatic of our sometimes schizoid obsession with chasing varietal fashion.

And yet, as a serious wine, Grenache is on a star turn. Our tasting of about 30 bottles - not to dismiss the charms of Rhone-style blends, but we limited ourselves to wines labeled specifically as Grenache - yielded the most auspicious tasting in months. It is a grape that has done well in the two cooler vintages of 2009 and 2010, and the less oak and heavy-handed winemaking it receives, the more it seems to reward its maker. What's not to like?

Coastal plantings in Sonoma or Santa Barbara have been the dominant story where California's Rhoneish growth is concerned, but the geography of Grenache is more colorful. Certainly there are auspicious new plantings near the coast, like Landmark's effort in Kenwood, but in our roster you'll also encounter the brilliant soils of the foothills, the high-elevation charms of eastern Santa Barbara. Lodi can rally here. So can Gilroy.

As an added bonus, these wines remain affordable, for the most part. Many of the bottles here hit that sweet spot under \$30, where you'd be proud to bring it to a dinner party but not afraid to uncork it now - and at that price, these wines certainly compete with their Old World counterparts in the Rhone. (Spain, too, figured out that this was a grape it could use to compete with its neighbor to the north.) Indeed, it's rare to have a lineup of California reds that don't tip above the \$50 mark.

Given all that, it's clear that we're on to a growing success story - not only in California but in Washington, too. The next challenge is to make great Grenache in enough volume to become a familiar sight on shelves. But if that could be accomplished for Pinot Noir - using, let's be honest, a range of dark arts - there's no reason that easygoing Grenache can't rally where its Rhone-native siblings have struggled.

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VINEYARD**

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### 2010 CLOS DE GILROY

Central Coast Grenache (\$18, 13.1%)

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Randall Graham has Grenache back on the brain in a serious way, and this longtime bottling is in great shape in the subtle 2010 vintage. Brooding and reminiscent of a Spanish region like Calatayud, it's full of dark stone, blackberry and plum. Give it air in the glass.



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*Panelists: Alex Bernardo, owner, Vineyard Gate; Jon Bonné, Chronicle wine editor; Jenna Boyer, sommelier, Restaurant Michael Mina.*

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