

My annual tour of California's Central Coast afforded the opportunity to compare numerous 2007 reds against their 2008 siblings, and the differences were intriguing. Fans of low-octane—relatively speaking, of course; we are talking about the sunny Central Coast—bright, red fruit-driven pinot noir and spicy syrah will find plenty to like from 2008, if they stick to the top producers. And wine lovers who prize full-throttle renditions of those varieties will be even more excited by the number of choices available from the warmer 2007 vintage. The best '07s are rich and usually open-knit, expressing themselves already but also possessing very good depth and aging potential. By the way, many of the 2007s have been in the market for over a year now, and there has been steady demand for the wines since they were released. So we are fast approaching last call for the most sought-after 2007s.

"The best thing about the 2008s is that they have clarity and show their variety and place," Tablas Creek's Neil Collins told me. "It's a vintage where it really wasn't possible for the grapes to overripen, which is always a danger in the hotter areas of Paso Robles, and that's when the characteristics of the grapes can blur into a sameness of rich, or even roasted or overripe, dark fruits and not much else." He added that it was necessary to harvest late in '08, "which means that we started to run into the dangers of fall weather." Chad Melville (Samsara) is also a fan of 2008. "Naturally low yields without overripening means concentration without weight, which is exactly the style that I'm personally after. If you want more power and darker fruit character, then 2007 is going to be up your alley."

That said, few growers are making any great claims for their '08s and there was all-around disappointment with the small production brought about by uneven budbreak and a number of severe early spring frosts. Sashi Moorman (Stolpman, Harrison-Clarke) told me that 2008 required more vineyard work than any that he has experienced "and for not many grapes." In terms

of the cost of production, 2008 looks to be a debacle for conscientious growers on the Central Coast: a lot of extra work to produce a smaller-than-average crop that will be a harder sell than the 2007s.

Most of the white wines I tasted this year were from 2009, and in general they are forward and very attractive; most will be drinkable upon release. The growing season went smoothly, according to Arcadian's Joe Davis, with "a blast of heat in September, just before harvest, which helped to push up sugars but not too dramatically." It's too early to make a call on the '09 reds but the pinot noir specialists that I visited are cautiously optimistic that their wines will turn out well, with bright fruit and good energy. Brian Talley told me that "the even growing season and that heat spike in September were a good recipe for chardonnay and pinot. There's freshness and ripeness at the same time, not too much of one or the other."

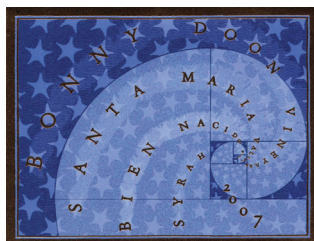
The metaphorical rain on the parade in the Central Coast is the ongoing struggle to sell syrah, especially at the higher end. Some producers even wonder if the grape can offer financial viability at any price. None of the growers I visited were getting set to graft over their syrah vines to a commercially realistic variety just yet, but they are taking a hard look at the market. They're painfully aware that they can't stay in the syrah business if their wines that are supposed to sell for \$40 only move if they're offered at \$20 or less, which is often the case these days. Some producers are even blending the syrah juice that used to make up their top bottlings down into lower-end and even entry-level wines, which makes for some real values for consumers, at least for now. With rare exception the producers I saw this fall told me that wholesalers have been treating syrah as if it were radioactive, with some of them flat-out refusing to carry any new vintages. If they do buy current bottlings it's almost exclusively the lower-priced versions. "Thank God for our private clients, mailing lists and people who come to visit the winery," more than a few producers told me in September.



2006 LE CIGARE VOLANT

91

(\$32; 43.6% syrah, 43.5% grenache, 11.7% cinsault, 1.1% mourvedre and 0.1% carignane) Bright ruby. Smoky red berries, flowers and underbrush on the nose, with complicating notes of black pepper and licorice. Sweet red berry flavors give way to deeper bitter cherry in the mid-palate, which features notes of succulent herbs and a touch of smoked meat. Already showing good complexity, with suave finishing silkiness and a lingering note of raspberry.



2007 BIEN NACIDO SYRAH

91

Santa Maria Valley 2007 (\$40) Inky ruby. Pungent, expansive aromas of black raspberry, violet, smoked meat and cracked pepper. Very syrah on the nose and in the mouth, offering sweet red and dark berry flavors and nuances of peppery spice and black olive. Finishes sappy and smoky, with lingering dark berry and spice qualities.



2007 LE VOL DES ANGES

91

Beeswax Vineyard, Arroyo Seco (\$30; for 375 ml.; picked at 33° Brix, 11.6% residual sugar by weight) Deep yellow gold. Pungent, smoky aromas of apricot, orange marmalade and white flowers, with slow-building spiciness and a touch of candied ginger. Lush and creamy in texture, offering densely packed pit and tropical fruit flavors and notes of brown sugar and chestnut honey. Deeply pitched but lively, with the orange marmalade note repeating on the long, clinging finish.



2008 VINFERNO

90

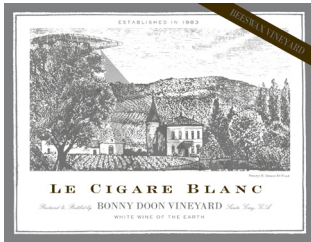
Beeswax Vineyard, Arroyo Seco (\$20; for 375 ml.; 51% grenache blanc and 49% roussanne, picked at 53° Brix and air-dried, 13.6% residual sugar by weight) Yellow-gold. Ripe and subtly smoky on the nose, which displays pit fruit nectar and poire William scents complicated by notes of marzipan and lemon thyme. Sweet and palate-coating but surprisingly light on its feet, offering lush, honeyed orchard and pit fruit flavors and gentle back-end bite. Finishes with sappy cling and an echo of candied pear.



2006 RIESLING TO LIVE

89

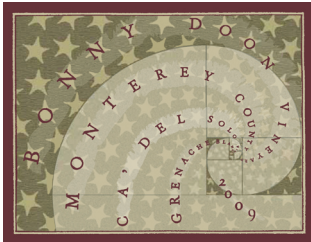
Sparkling Wine, Ca' Del Soto Estate, Monterey 2006 (\$35) Bright yellow gold, with strong effervescence. An exotically perfumed bouquet displays candied orange, pear and spun sugar, with a suave floral overtone. Fleshy orchard fruit and citrus flavors are complicated by notes of mustard seed and white pepper and become drier on the back end. Finishes firm and with strong, spicy cut. This would work great with a coconut curry fish dish.



2008 LE CIGARE BLANC

88

Beeswax Vineyard, Arroyo Seco (\$22; 57% roussanne and 43% grenache blanc, all biodynamically grown) Light, bright yellow. Fresh pear, nectarine and white peach on the nose, with a hint of lemon curd adding lift. Supple and expansive, offering lively orchard fruit flavors and a seamless texture. A touch of smokiness lingers on the sappy finish. Drinks well now but I'd be interested to see this in a couple of years.



2009 GRENACHE BLANC

87

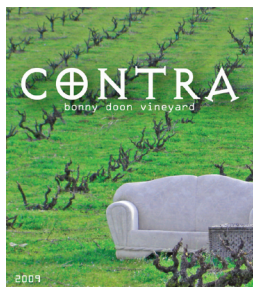
Ca' del Solo Vineyard, Monterey County (\$22) Yellow-gold. Honeyed apple and pear on the nose, with subtle herb and floral qualities adding complexity. Supple and round in the mouth, offering plump orchard and pit fruit flavors and good palate coverage. A tad loose on the finish, which leaves sappy peach and pear notes behind.



2007 SYRAH LE POUSSEUR

87

Central Coast (\$18) Dark purple. Dark berries and smoked meat on the nose, with hints of pungent flowers and licorice. Juicy and focused but slightly tart, offering zesty dark berry and cherry skin flavors and showing no rough edges. Refreshingly brisk but I'd like more flesh. The finish is lively, taut and linear, leaving bright dark fruit notes behind.



2009 CONTRA

87

Red Wine, Central Coast (\$14; a kitchen sink blend based on carignane) Bright ruby. Spicy red- and blackcurrant aromas, with notes of violet and black pepper adding complexity. Cassis and bitter cherry flavors pick up a smoky quality with air, along with a hint of herbs. This easy-drinking but somewhat hard-edged wine finishes with good clarity and cut.