

ROUGH RIDE *for* CALIFORNIA RHÔNES

IN 2011, COOL WEATHER RULED, YET WINES SURPASS EXPECTATIONS / **BY JAMES LAUBE**

There are plenty of ways to spin 2011 for producers of Rhône-style reds in California. "Disaster averted" is one. "Making do" is another. But for consumers, the best advice is "pick and

choose carefully." More so than in other recent vintages, location mattered and quality varies. Though 2011 was the most problematic year in a decade for many producers, there are more bright spots



Outstanding bottlings from Tablas Creek, Herman Story, Colgin, Bonny Doon and Keplinger show the range of styles and color among Rhône-style wines.

BONNY DOON VINEYARD
2012 Clos de Gilroy
Central Coast Grenache

than expected. Some vintners fared much better than others and have reason to be enthusiastic about the outcome of the vintage, even if the journey was perilous.

No wine or region in 2011 escaped the unusually cool, often damp weather that hung over the growing season and impacted ripeness. Late-season rains did the most damage, particularly along the North Coast. Most vintners had already adjusted to the cold spring and reduced their crop load, banking on enough heat to fully ripen their fruit.

The year's Rhône reds share many stylistic traits with other Golden State wines from the vintage. They are less ripe than usual, showing unwieldy tannins and often coming up short at midpalate. Quality is all over the map, with some wines delivering pure, rich flavors and others displaying botrytis and occasionally mold.

"[It] was a roller coaster of a vintage that was slow to start and seemed to drag on forever," says winemaker Chris Pittenger of Skinner Vineyards, voicing a sentiment shared by many. "A cold and wet spring diminished yields, and meticulous farming was essential to bringing in quality fruit, especially after the October rains."

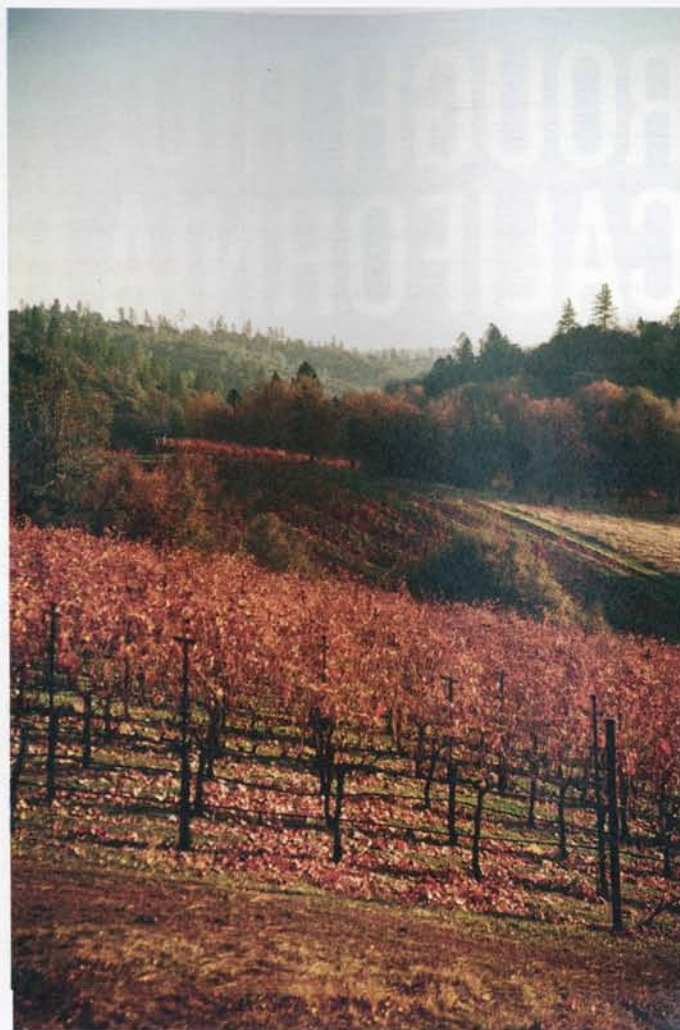
Jeff Ames, winemaker at Tor, says that the defining aspect of the vintage is "the almost complete lack" of heat at times during the growing season when heat would be expected. Though there was some good early-season heat that pushed the state's Rhône grapes to get started, overall the summer of 2011 was the coolest in recent memory. Yet Rhône varieties fared better than red grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon, which relies more heavily on the normal September heat for ripening. The cooler weather, Ames explains, allowed the Rhône grapes to hang longer into the late summer and fall, since there wasn't the concern that they would get overripe.

Since our previous report ("California Rhône's Savory Allure," March 31, 2013), we have reviewed 550 Rhône Valley-inspired reds in our Napa Valley office, along with nearly 100 Rhône whites, the latter tasted since our Aug. 31 report on the state's white wines ("California's Fresh Whites"). This report focuses on the 2011 vintage, though you'll still find plenty of wines from 2010, the better of the two years. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/033114.)

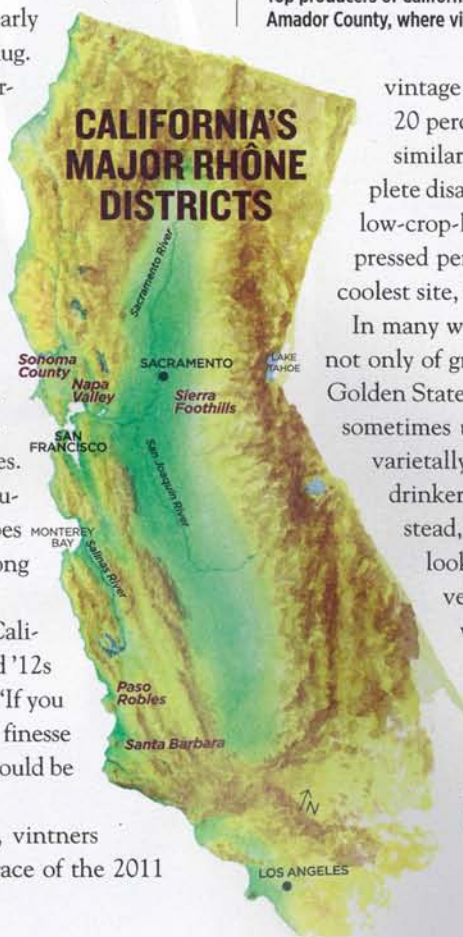
Syrah continues to be the dominant grape pulling the Rhône wagon. Yet cuvées employing two or more grapes are more common than varietal bottlings, and just about anything goes when mixing and matching different varieties. Mourvèdre and Grenache are gaining in popularity and admiration, while non-Rhône grapes such as Cabernet, Merlot and Zinfandel, among others, are finding their way into blends.

"If you want prototypical superdense, dark California Rhône-based wines, then the 2010s and '12s are probably more up your alley," says Ames. "If you are looking for something with a bit more acid, finesse and restraint, then the 2011s are wines you should be looking at."

For Turley winemaker Tegan Passalacqua, vintners dodged a bullet in 2011. "The real saving grace of the 2011



Top producers of California Rhône's are increasingly drawn to the rugged terrain of Amador County, where vineyards such as Shake Ridge are yielding high quality reds.



vintage was the low yields," he says. "We were about 20 percent below normal. Had 2011 crop levels been similar to 2012 and 2013 it would have been a complete disaster. Most of our sites really benefited from this low-crop-level, cool-year combo. Our warmer sites expressed perfume that I have rarely experienced, and our coolest site, bramble and pepper."

In many ways, California Rhône's are at the cutting edge not only of grapegrowing and winemaking, but also of how Golden State producers market their wines. These blends of sometimes unfamiliar grapes are not the straightforward, varietally uniform bottlings that many American wine-drinkers are accustomed to and comfortable with. Instead, learning these wines' composition often means looking at the back label and making sense of diverse grapes and blending combinations. Some wines don't divulge even that much. In this sense, Rhône-style wines have more in common with their European brethren, where blends are common.

Yet there are some historical markers. Petite Sirah, a traditional workhorse grape genetically related to Syrah, remains true to itself and its long history in California. Even in a difficult

year such as 2011, Petite merits special attention, both as a stand-alone varietal and in blends.

The confluence of all these elements, as well as plenty of new labels, makes the fast-paced Rhône scene the most dynamic in California. There's wide-ranging diversity on display among the top 2011s alone. The report's highest-scoring Petite is the Turley Paso Robles Pesenti Vineyard (95 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale, \$35); Keplinger's Caldera El Dorado (94, \$60) is the top Mourvèdre blend; Keplinger's Lithic Amador County (94, \$60) and Saxum's James Berry Vineyard Paso Robles (93, \$89) showcase Grenache; and the Herman Story Santa Barbara County White Hawk Vineyard (94, \$48) is the top Syrah. Only Pinot Noir rivals the range of appellations; no other category rivals the blends.

There were successes in 2011 in each of the major regions that produce Rhône-style reds. Here's a look at the leading appellations and the wines that fared best. (See the chart on page 76 for the top wines and top values overall, along with our top Rhône whites.)

NAPA VALLEY / Rhône grapes don't play much of a role in Cabernet country, but what is produced is often among the best the state has to offer, with three 2010s at 95 points: the Araujo Syrah Eisele Vineyard (\$135), Colgin Syrah IX Estate (\$200) and Shafer Relentless (\$72), a blend of Syrah and Petite Sirah.

The top-rated 2011s include the Girard Petite Sirah (93, \$30), Lagier Meredith Syrah Mount Veeder (92, \$48) and Lewis Alec's Blend (92, \$60), which mixes Syrah with Merlot and Cabernet. Turley also made two 2011 Petites at 93 points: the Howell Mountain Rattlesnake Ridge (\$44) and Napa Valley Library Vineyard (\$38).

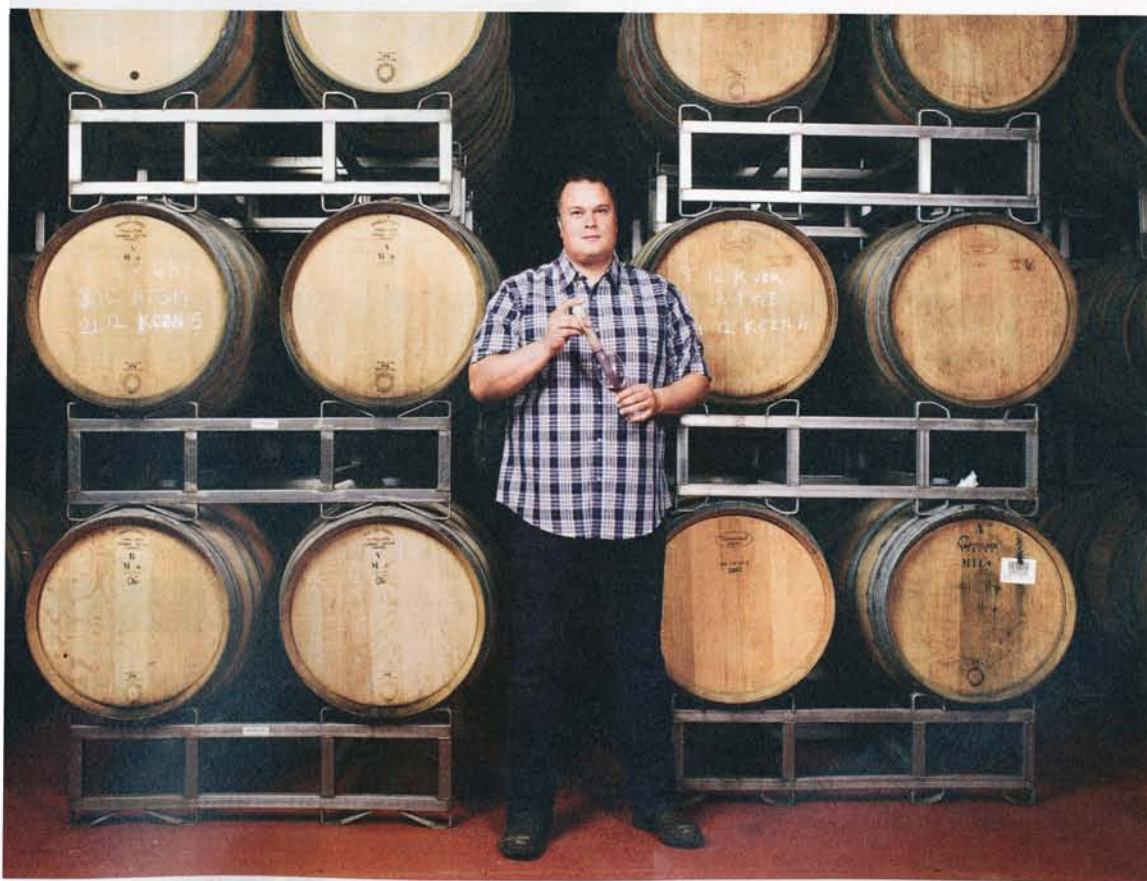
PASO ROBLES / Midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, this appellation is hanging its hat on Rhône reds. The 2011 vintage was cool but not wet, says Jordan Fiorentini of Epoch. A hard April frost cut the crop significantly and delayed the growing season.

"It made me quite happy knowing that Paso has gears and can also play the cooler-climate act," says Fiorentini. "We got grapes that were completely ripe—from 25.5 to 28 Brix—and I did not ever feel pressured to pick because an impending storm was coming. The numbers were textbook perfect. The fruit condition was perfect."

Epoch's wines are more subtle than flamboyant, and Fiorentini expects they'll take longer to come around and age well. The winery's Sensibility 2011 (92, \$65) and Veracity 2011 (91, \$65), both Grenache-based blends from Paderewski Vineyard, show the outstanding quality this region is capable of even in a difficult year.

SANTA BARBARA / The southernmost parts of the state avoided the heavy rains in 2011, but not the cooler temperatures. "The

"THE REAL SAVING GRACE OF THE 2011 VINTAGE WAS THE LOW YIELDS ... MOST OF OUR SITES REALLY BENEFITED FROM THIS LOW-CROP-LEVEL, COOL-YEAR COMBO." —Tegan Passalacqua



Turley winemaker Tegan Passalacqua crafted five outstanding reds in the difficult 2011 vintage, including one of this report's top-scorers.

picks were late and we had a whole line of storm systems in the Pacific threatening to give us a cool, wet harvest," says Craig Jaffurs of Jaffurs Wine Cellars. "Miraculously, that did not happen."

As has become expected in Santa Barbara, Syrah is the star, with the grape dominating this report's list of top-scoring reds. Grenache is close behind, whether in varietal bottlings or blends.

"We dropped fruit early and opened our canopies," explains Jaffurs. "We had a relatively dry winter preceding harvest, so the clusters were small. They reached full maturity at relatively low sugar levels—23.5 to 25 Brix. Grenache and Mourvèdre came in nicely dark and tannic, with great structure."

Jaffurs is bullish on his 2010 wines, yet considers the 2011s more complete. "They are gently fruit-forward, but have big tannins and ample acid," he says. "Some folks have called these wines chewy. They remind me of the 2009s, but with less ripeness."

RECOMMENDED RHÔNE-STYLE WINES FROM CALIFORNIA

Nearly 650 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/033114. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

Rhône-Style Reds

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
TOP WINES		
ARAUJO Syrah Napa Valley Eisele Vineyard 2010	95	\$135
COLGIN Syrah Napa Valley IX Estate 2010	95	\$200
SHAFFER Relentless Napa Valley 2010	95	\$72
SINE QUA NON Syrah Sta. Rita Hills This Is Not An Exit Eleven Confessions Vineyard 2009	95	\$220
TURLEY Petite Syrah Paso Robles Pesenti Vineyard 2011	95	\$35
CALCAREOUS Trés Violet Paso Robles 2010	94	\$38
CARTE BLANCHE Syrah Bennett Valley Three Peaks 2010	94	\$50
KEPLINGER Caldera El Dorado 2011	94	\$60
HERMAN STORY Syrah Santa Barbara County White Hawk Vineyard 2011	94	\$48
SKINNER Mourvèdre El Dorado Estate 2010	94	\$32
SWITCHBACK RIDGE Petite Sirah Napa Valley Peterson Family Vineyard 2010	94	\$58
BEHRENS FAMILY Sainte Fumée California 2010	93	\$55
BONACCORSI Syrah Santa Ynez Valley Lerner Vineyard 2009	93	\$40
DEHLINGER Syrah Russian River Valley Frei Road 2009	93	\$48
EPOCH Authenticity Paderewski Vineyard Paso Robles 2010	93	\$65
LE MISTRAL Monterey County Red 2009	93	\$45
POTT Communication Block Lampyridae Vineyards Mount Veeder 2010	93	\$50
PRUETT Syrah Sierra Foothills Championship Cuvee 2011	93	\$75

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
QUIXOTE Petite Syrah Napa Valley Helmet Of Mambrino Stags' Leap Ranch 2010	93	\$100
SAXUM James Berry Vineyard Paso Robles 2011	93	\$89
HERMAN STORY Grenache California On the Road 2011	93	\$42
T-VINE Syrah Calistoga Frediani Vineyard 2010	93	\$42

TOP VALUES

FOUR VINES Petite Sirah Paso Robles Skeptic 2011	92	\$25
BONNY DOON Grenache Central Coast The Wine Formerly Known as Clos de Gilroy 2012	91	\$20
NEYERS Sage Canyon California 2012	91	\$24
MORGAN Cotes du Crow's Monterey 2011	89	\$18
NOVY Syrah Napa Valley 2010	89	\$19
BECKMEN Cuvee Le Bec Santa Ynez Valley 2011	88	\$18
BONNY DOON Contra Old Vine Field Blend Contra Costa County 2011	88	\$16
CLINE Cashmere California 2012	88	\$17
DOMAINE DE LA TERRE ROUGE Tête-à-Tête Sierra Foothills 2011	88	\$18
MICHAEL DAVID Incognito Lodi 2010	88	\$18
CONCANNON Petite Sirah Livermore Valley Conservancy 2009	87	\$15
STERLING Syrah Central Coast Vintner's Collection 2010	87	\$13
BOGLE Petite Sirah California 2010	86	\$11
MONTE VOLPE Primo Rosso Mendocino County 2009	86	\$9

Rhône-Style Whites

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
BONNY DOON Le Cigare Blanc En Bonbonne Beeswax Vineyard Reserve Arroyo Seco 2010	91	\$50
VOGELZANG Viognier Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara Reserve 2011	91	\$28
CALERA Viognier Mount Harlan 2012	90	\$30
EBERLE Côtes-du-Rhône Blanc Paso Robles 2011	90	\$24
JADA XCV Paso Robles 2012	90	\$35
MCPRICE MYERS Viognier Santa Ynez Valley Lerner Vineyard 2011	90	\$28
ROAR Viognier Santa Lucia Highlands Sierra Mar Vineyard 2011	90	\$40

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
TABLAS CREEK Côtes de Tablas Blanc Paso Robles 2012	90	\$27
VILLA CREEK Roussanne Paso Robles James Berry Vineyard 2012	90	\$45
QUPÉ Marsanne Santa Barbara County 2012	89	\$20
TABLAS CREEK Patelin de Tablas Blanc Paso Robles 2012	89	\$20
BONTERRA Viognier Mendocino-Lake Counties 2012	88	\$14
NOVY Four Mile Creek White North Coast 2012	88	\$14
CLINE Viognier North Coast 2012	87	\$12
SMASHBERRY White Central Coast 2012	87	\$12
MCMANIS Viognier California 2012	85	\$11