



Once upon a wine in the west

Gary Werner rounds up an impressive herd of top Californian Syrahs

Did you notice the number of westerns nominated for Academy Awards this year? It wasn't just the frontrunners *No Country For Old Men* and *There Will Be Blood*. Other titles included *The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford* and *3:10 To Yuma*. Hollywood is clearly back in the saddle with this genre, so you can expect more time on the trail at cinemas in the coming months.

To help slake your thirst, the Wine & Spirit editorial team conducted its own re-assessment of the American west through top examples of Californian Syrah. We corralled 42 wines from 21 leading producers that collectively represent most of the key growing regions along the full length of the Golden State. It was a big job, so our resident gum-slingers drew support from Christine Boggis of sister title *Off Licence News* and James Doidge of Californian wine specialist *The Wine Treasury*. We tip our Stetsons to both of them for help with this review.

Tasters worked in pairs to survey the range in different ways. One approach investigated whether there was any distinct sense of regionality. Comments inspired by a selection

of two dozen wines included: "Santa Barbara wines seem more brambly, nutty and savoury in style. The Sonoma wines, by contrast, seem more floral and juicy. So, yes, there are some differences in character between the wines of these regions, but they don't appear to be very significant when you consider the [300-mile] distance between them. Stylistic variation seems more like a reflection of the winemaker than anything."

A second theme sorted the wines into six price brackets. The first was entry-level bottles priced roughly from US\$15 to \$20. The remaining five groups each ascended in \$10 increments – with a \$25-\$30 set, then a \$35-\$40 group, and so on. Comments here pointed out impressive performances from among the least expensive wines. Then there was plenty to praise through the higher-priced offerings – \$45 and up. However, the tasters generally noted a hole in the middle bracket.

Summary comments from Doidge included: "There didn't seem to be a clear benefit to moving into that mid-range. Many of these wines didn't have the attractive price nor the pretty fruit characters of some entry-level

Syrahs. But they also lacked the complexity and depth of those at the high end." Notable exceptions were the two wines from Andrew Murray and a Syrah from Arrowood. This trio really stood out from their thirtysomething (dollar) neighbours.

With that said, the standard was very high across the entire tasting. Our team was thoroughly impressed by the bright characters of these wines. Nothing could be described as flabby or sweet. Jane Parkinson said: "These were much fresher and livelier than I would have expected. They were very balanced. Actually, I was shocked by how well the alcohol was integrated given the high numbers listed on these labels – often 15 to 16.5 per cent abv." Very similar thoughts were repeated around the room and they demonstrated the way this range exceeded our expectations.

Sadly, there isn't a gala ceremony to acknowledge the stars of our Californian Syrah round-up (as magazine budgets are somewhat tighter than those in Hollywood). Though we did highlight some of the best performances – including *Radio-Coteau* and *Pax* – in the listings across the next two pages. Happy trails.