



Reds: Mix and Match



Syrah, Grenache and more come together for balanced, complex wines

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Less is traditionally more when it comes to blending a California wine. The focus in the Golden State has been on individual varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Noir, and the goal has been to use as much of that grape type as possible in the finished bottling. One hundred percent is the ideal.

That's beginning to change, and nowhere is the shift more apparent than with Rhône-style reds. California winemakers are taking a cue from their colleagues in France's Rhône Valley, ignoring the predilection for varietal purity and crafting creative blends from Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre, Cinsault and Carignane.

In fact, blends account for some of the most intriguing wines from the current vintages of Rhône-style reds now on the market: 2013 and 2012. Since my previous report on the category ("California Rhônes Come On Strong," March 31, 2015), I have reviewed nearly 400 wines in blind tastings at our Napa Valley office, covering regions across the state. At this early stage, I give the 2013 vintage a preliminary rating of 92–95 points on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale, which could equal or surpass 2012's 93-point score. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

Recent growing seasons have certainly cooperated. Like 2012, the 2013 vintage was nearly ideal throughout California. The season got off to an early start, and flowering and veraison went smoothly. Summer offered an abundance of sunshine, and temperatures rarely spiked above the mid-90s.

"2013 was almost made-to-order," says renowned vintner Santiago Achával, who co-founded The Farm Winery in Paso Robles in 2009. Scott Hawley, winemaker at Paso wineries Law Estate Wines and his own Torrin Vineyard, agrees: "The 2013s will be quite expressive out of the gate."

Napa Valley has long topped the list of the best Rhône blends, and this year is no different. The Lewis Alec's Blend Napa Valley 2013 (94 points, \$62) combines Syrah with Merlot

and Cabernet Sauvignon for a plush and generous red that shows excellent structure and focus. The Shafer Relentless Napa Valley 2012 (94, \$85), a blend of Syrah with Petite Sirah, combines power with richness in a complex package.

Paso Robles has also made a name for itself with red Rhône blends. One of the best current examples comes from Torrin, the Vicinage Series James Berry Vineyard Paso Robles 2012 (94, \$68). Blending 68 percent Grenache with the rest Syrah, Hawley has produced a distinctive wine that balances refinement and rustic power. He also made the impressive Law First Tracks Paso Robles 2012 (92, \$69), a Syrah blend.

Hawley appreciates the versatility that blends allow him as a winemaker. "We're not necessarily concerned with consistency from vintage to vintage," he says. "We're concerned about quality. We let Mother Nature decide, and blends allow us to make the best wine every year."

Among other advantages, blends can help compensate for the vagaries of a particular growing season. For example, the 2015 Grenache crop was tiny in Paso, so blends that are typically based on Grenache may be dominated this vintage by Syrah or other grapes.

While the Torrin and Law blends emphasize power, winemaker Julia Iantosca seeks grace and finesse with the **Lasseter Family Chemin de Fer Sonoma Valley 2013 (92, \$56)**, a mix of 60 percent Grenache with Mourvèdre and Syrah. Owners Nancy and John Lasseter prefer elegance in their blends and are fans of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, which Iantosca emulates with a California twist.

Not only has Iantosca gradually increased the percentage of Grenache in Lasseter's Rhône reds, but she has added complexity to the blends by working with vineyard manager Phil Coturri to plant six different clones among the estate's 6 acres of Grenache, including clones that Tablas Creek brought in from Châteauneuf.

Like Pinot Noir, Grenache is a finicky grape to grow, which is one reason it isn't as widely planted as the easygoing Syrah. Though Grenache thrives in many locations, it is vulnerable to bad weather conditions in the spring, and it produces a large crop. As a result, many of the wines can be bland and pale in color.

"Grenache likes to produce big bunches of grapes, so you have to be pretty ruthless with how you thin the vines," Iantosca says. "It can really be a prima donna."

While Syrah remains the mainstay of most California Rhône reds, there are pitfalls to using it in a blend, according to Iantosca. "It's pretty easy to swamp the character of other grapes with Syrah, because it just has such a powerful personality," she explains.

This powerful personality is one of the reasons that Achával blends with Syrah at The Farm Winery. His rich, bold The Big Game Adelaida District 2012 (91, \$75) combines Syrah with Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. "Syrah is the Rhône variety that best aligns with Bordeaux varieties," Achával says. "And it creates beautiful spice tones and a bit of a wild character in a blend that would otherwise be a little too tame and civilized."

continued... see Wine Spectator March 2016 Issue for complete article.