



Home / Blogs / Exploring Wine with Tim Fish

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Photo by: David Yellen

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Côtes du Rhône via California

Golden State winemakers are learning that Rhône-style reds are better as blends

France's Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Côtes du Rhône vintners figured out a

long time ago that Syrah and Grenache and Mourvèdre are better when blended than left to stand on their own, and California winemakers are finally getting the idea.

Here in the States, wines are most often labeled as a single grape variety (current labeling laws require varietals to be made from at least 75 percent of the grape on the label). In my upcoming annual report on California's Rhône-style reds—look for it in the March 31 issue — I focus on California winemakers who are stirring the pot with creative blends.

Scott Hawley of Law Estate Wines and his own Torrin Vineyard in Paso Robles, 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."

Winemakers can also compensate for the vagaries of a particular growing season. For example, the Grenache crop in 2015 was tiny in Paso, and therefore blends that are

typically based on Grenache will be dominated this vintage by Syrah or other grapes.

For Julia Iantosca, winemaker of Lasseter Family in Sonoma Valley, blends allow her to make complex Rhône-style wines with grace and finesse, but she admits that Syrah can be a brute. "It's pretty easy to swamp the character of other grapes with Syrah, because it just has such a powerful personality," Iantosca says.

Here are a few of my favorite Rhône-style red blends from the past year. WineSpectator.com subscribers can read detailed reviews by clicking on the links. Do you have any to recommend?

Top Blends

The Farm Winery The Big Game Adelaida District 2012 (91 points, \$75) Boldly structured, with slightly gamy accents.

Lasseter Family Chemin de Fer Sonoma Valley 2013 (92, \$56)
A stylish wine, balancing elegance with a distinctive personality.

Lewis Alec's Blend Napa Valley 2013 (94, \$62) Plush and generous with brooding boysenberry and smoky mocha flavors.

Shafer Relentless Napa Valley 2012 (94, \$85) Combines power with richness with aromas of blackberry and crushed rock.

Torrin Vicinage Series James Berry Vineyard Paso Robles 2012 (94, \$68) Balances refinement and rustic power with notes of huckleberry and smoky sage and cracked pepper.

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