

TASTING REPORTS

California Rhône

Paso Robles and Santa Barbara take center stage on the Central Coast



A longer season in 2019 gave Denner winemaker Anthony Yount the hang time required to produce expressive, flavorful reds. (Nicole Joy Kirkpatrick)



By Tim Fish

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California's Rhône-style wines thrive throughout the state, whether it's hearty reds made from Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre or floral whites from Viognier and Grenache Blanc. This diversity of locales and grape varieties is what keeps the wines interesting—and keeps consumers and winemakers coming back for more. That said, specific regions stand out in different vintages, and the 2019 harvest belongs to California's Central Coast, particularly Paso Robles and Santa Barbara.

That's my takeaway after reviewing more than 200 Rhône-style reds in blind tastings at our Napa office since my previous report ("[Open Range," \[https://www.winespectator.com/articles/open-range-california-rhone-style-wines-053121\]](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/open-range-california-rhone-style-wines-053121) May 31, 2021), in addition to nearly 75 Rhône-style whites reviewed by me or senior editor MaryAnn Worobiec. For Paso Robles and Santa Barbara, I give the 2019 reds a classic rating of 95 points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale, while Napa and Sonoma receive an overall rating of 92 points. These scores are nearly identical to the final ratings I gave the 2018 wines, with the Central Coast regions faring just slightly better in 2019.

Justin Smith of Saxum rises to the top for this report with a knockout lineup of Rhône-style releases. Leading the pack are the James Berry Vineyard Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2019 (98 points, \$98), a Grenache-based blend that's a real powerhouse, deeply structured and a bit decadent but not weighty, and the Broken Stones Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2019 (97, \$98), a spirited Syrah-based blend that offers supple blackberry, smoky meat and stony mineral flavors.

Winemaker Eric Jensen crafted an inky dark Booker Syrah Paso Robles Fracture 2019 (94, \$98) that's nicely layered yet not heavy. Neighboring winemaker Jason Joyce nailed his Calcareous Moose Paso Robles 2019 (94, \$60), a Syrah blend that's deep and dynamic yet supple. There's polish and personality in the Denner Cirrus Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2019 (94, \$90), a Grenache blend that shows winemaker Anthony Yount at his best.

Not to leave out Northern California, there's Jeff Cohn's vibrant and racy Syrah Rockpile Domaine des Chirats Rockpile Vineyard 2019 (94, \$105), a collaborative effort with the Rhône Valley's Yves Cuilleron. Perennial favorite Colgin Cellars delivers the Syrah Napa Valley IX Estate 2019 (94, \$NA), a potent yet rich and well-structured red from winemaker Allison Tauziet. Credit winemaker Danielle Langlois and consultant Tony Biagi at Lasseter Family for the winery's elegantly complex and vibrant Chemin de Fer Sonoma Valley 2019 (93, \$56), overflowing with fresh raspberry, grilled anise and smoky black pepper flavors.

There are also a few standouts among the 2020 Rhône-style reds that are starting to arrive on the market. Combining grace with power, the Tensley Syrah Santa Barbara County Colson Canyon Vineyard 2020 (95, \$46) comes from a vineyard bought in 2016 by vintner Joey Tensley, who continues to make impressive wines from his home base in Los Olivos, in Santa Barbara wine country. The latest notable release from winemaker McPrice "Mac" Myers is the McPrice Myers Beautiful Earth Paso Robles 2020 (94, \$45), which blends Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre, Cabernet Sauvignon and more for a red that's supple, rich and plump with personality.

Values abound this year as well, primarily from the 2019 and 2020 reds and the 2021 whites. The Cass Mr. Blanc Paso Robles Geneseo District 2021 (90, \$19) is a white blend of Roussanne with Marsanne and Viognier that's lush in texture and lively with jasmine flowers, honeydew rind and lemon verbena. The generous Bedrock Syrah California 2020 (91, \$30) from Morgan Twain-Peterson is zesty, with notes of black raspberry and fruitcake spices. Foppiano, which has been making Petite Sirah for generations, delivers this year with the lively Russian River Valley 2019 (90, \$28), showing briary wild berry and licorice accents. Talk about bang for the buck, Morgan's Cotes du Crow's Monterey 2019 (89, \$22) is jammed with easygoing raspberry and spiced cinnamon flavors, while Qupé's fruit-forward Syrah Central Coast 2019 (89, \$20) shows raspberry and toasty mocha accents.



Lying just 10 miles inland from the Pacific, the steep slopes of Saxum's James Berry Vineyard yielded this report's highest-rated wines.

(Courtesy of Saxum)

Winemakers owe much of their success with the 2019s to a cooperative growing season. It started with one of the wettest Mays on record, which was a good thing in drought-prone California, but that led to uneven ripeness in some vineyards. Summer was warm but balanced overall. "We had heat spikes at the right times, and it cooled off at the right times," says Myers. "It was a great growing season for us."

Veraison, in some regions, took longer than usual to complete, but the weather was moderate leading up to harvest, with cool evenings. "That really stretched out the growing season," Yount explains, adding that the longer season led to greater maturity of flavors. When the weather finally changed in the Central Coast and there was frost on the horizon, winemakers hustled to bring everything in.

The reds and whites are similarly supple and aromatic, retaining a sense of finesse. "The tannins on the reds are really polished," Myers says. "Grenache in particular loves that late-season hang time." Yount agrees: "The wines tend to be driven by acid in their profile rather than tannin."

The 2020 vintage was a different beast. The Central Coast enjoyed a rainy winter, but Northern California was extremely dry until March brought chilly temperatures and modest rain, which in some cases stunted bloom and led to a smaller crop. June and July were hot and kept getting hotter. “We had heat spike after heat spike after heat spike,” Myers says. “It was just relentless.” Then in mid-August, a series of dry lightning storms set off wildfires throughout California wine country, from Monterey to Mendocino, and much of the region was covered in smoke.

The impact of the fires and smoke varied from region to region and even from vineyard to vineyard. Santa Lucia Highlands, Napa and Sonoma were hit particularly hard. Some wineries skipped the vintage altogether, while others such as Bedrock and Ridge made wine in limited quantities. Mike Officer of Carlisle produced only two Rhône-style wines, a Syrah from James Berry Vineyard in Paso Robles and a Mourvèdre blend from Two Acres in Russian River Valley. “The rest of our Rhône variety fruit went unpicked,” Officer says.

Yount calls 2020 one of his most challenging vintages. “There are going to be some great wines, but it’s a vintage with a stigma attached to it,” he says. Officer agrees, noting that some of his regular customers are already balking at his 2020s, but the vintage shouldn’t be written off. Most of the leading Rhône producers made less wine or, in some cases, none at all. My advice is to shop carefully and rely on the producers you trust.

Senior editor Tim Fish is Wine Spectator’s lead taster on California’s Rhône-style wines.

Tim Fish’s Recommended California Rhône-Style Reds

Nearly 275 wines were reviewed for this report. [A free alphabetical list is also available \[https://www.winespectator.com/articles/alphabetical-guide-to-california-rhone-style-wines-101522\]](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/alphabetical-guide-to-california-rhone-style-wines-101522). **WineSpectator.com** members

can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online [Wine Ratings search](https://www.winespectator.com/wines/search). [<https://www.winespectator.com/wines/search>]

TOP WINES

SAXUM

James Berry Vineyard Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2019

Score: 98 | \$98

WS Review: A powerhouse red, deeply structured but not weighty, with notes of blackberry, *garrigue*, spices and smoked pepper. Grenache blend.

TENSLEY

Syrah Santa Barbara County Colson Canyon Vineyard 2020

Score: 95 | \$46

WS Review: Combines grace with power, showing expressive flavors of blackberry and blueberry, with *garrigue*, river stone and smoked pepper tones.

CALCAREOUS

Trés Violet Paso Robles 2019

Score: 94 | \$60

WS Review: Deeply structured yet light on its feet, with dramatic licorice, dried cherry and crushed stone accents that build tension. Mourvèdre blend.

CALIZA

Syrah Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2018

Score: 94 | \$70

WS Review: Plump and full-bodied, with deeply layered blackberry, smoked meat and black licorice flavors backed by broad-shouldered tannins.

CARLISLE

Syrah Russian River Valley Papa's Block 2019

Score: 94 | \$48

WS Review: A wine that offers a true sense of place, with blackberry and currant flavors that show licorice, smoky game and black pepper accents.

JEFF COHN

Syrah Rockpile Domaine des Chirats Rockpile Vineyard 2019

Score: 94 | \$105

WS Review: Vibrant and racy, with black raspberry, *garrigue* and smoked meat flavors that build richness and structure toward refined tannins.

COLGIN

Syrah Napa Valley IX Estate 2019

Score: 94 | \$NA

WS Review: Potent and polished, with deeply structured flavors of blueberry, smoked meat, licorice and fruitcake spices that gather tension.

DENNER

Dirt Worshipper Central Coast 2019

Score: 94 | \$85

WS Review: Handsome and refined, with briary wild berry, herbes de Provence, crushed stone and smoky white pepper notes. Syrah and Roussanne.

DUMOL

Syrah Russian River Valley Eddie's Patch 2019

Score: 94 | \$99

WS Review: Bold and expressive yet well-built, with rose petal, huckleberry and smoked pepper flavors that gather richness toward zesty tannins.

KAMEN

Syrah Moon Mountain District 2019

Score: 94 | \$80

WS Review: Deeply structured and bold, this is also precise, offering blackberry, smoked meat and white pepper flavors that gain complexity.

LAW

Syrah Adelaida District Intrepid 2018

Score: 94 | \$105

WS Review: Vibrant and stylish yet well-structured, with bold notes of fresh violet, raspberry, spicy mocha and white pepper that build tension.

LEWIS

Syrah Napa Valley Ethan's 2019

Score: 94 | \$45

WS Review: Plump and polished, this features compelling black raspberry, mocha espresso and smoked meat accents that finish with savory tannins.

MCPRICE MYERS

Beautiful Earth Paso Robles 2020

Score: 94 | \$45

WS Review: Supple, rich and plump with personality, this offers black raspberry, smoked meat, cracked pepper and black olive flavors. Syrah blend.

PRUETT

Syrah Sierra Foothills CSP 2019

Score: 94 | \$42

WS Review: A dynamic red, rich and bold yet focused, with blackberry, licorice, smoked meat and cracked pepper flavors backed by plump tannins.

SHAFER

Relentless Napa Valley 2018

Score: 94 | \$95

WS Review: This marries deep structure with richness and polish, showing black cherry, grilled anise and smoked pepper notes. Syrah and Petite Sirah.

LASSETER FAMILY

Chemin de Fer Sonoma Valley 2019

Score: 93 | \$56

WS Review: This elegantly complex and vibrant red overflows with fresh raspberry, grilled anise and smoky black pepper flavors. Grenache blend.

RAMEY

Syrah Sonoma Coast 2018

Score: 93 | \$40

WS Review: This red is polished and precise, offering blackberry and currant flavors laced with crushed stone, smoked meat and black pepper.

ROAR

Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands Garys' Vineyard 2019

Score: 93 | \$50

WS Review: Bursts with aromas of *garrigue*, blackberry, licorice and smoked meat, opening to deeply structured, slightly brooding flavors.

TOP VALUES

NEYERS

Sage Canyon California 2019

Score: 92 | \$30

WS Review: Ripe blackberry and huckleberry flavors mingle with olive and sage notes. A terrific mix of fruity and savory elements. Carignane blend.

RIDGE

Grenache Blanc Paso Robles 2020

Score: 92 | \$30

WS Review: This vivid white is juicy and fleshy, offering a mouthwatering mix of peach, lime and nectarine flavors, showing a hint of butterscotch.

MARGERUM

M5 Santa Barbara County 2020

Score: 91 | \$29

WS Review: A zesty blend with genuine personality, this red offers an array of cherry, cranberry, licorice and lavender accents. Grenache blend.

SAN SIMEON

Viognier Paso Robles Stefano Vineyard 2020

Score: 91 | \$25

WS Review: Dried apricot, mango and candied orange peel flavors are succulent and juicy, with hints of honeysuckle, peach blossom and marmalade.

TABLAS CREEK

Patelin de Tablas Paso Robles 2019

Score: 91 | \$25

WS Review: This zesty red has an easygoing personality, showing black cherry, cracked pepper and spice notes, with polished tannins. Syrah blend.

MARGERUM

M5 White Los Olivos District 2020

Score: 90 | \$29

WS Review: Vibrant, fresh and expressive, with steely lime, honeydew and lemon verbena flavors that dance on the finish. Grenache Blanc blend.

MORGAN

Cotes du Crow's Monterey 2019

Score: 89 | \$22

WS Review: Fruit-forward and zesty, with floral raspberry and cherry flavors that draw in accents of spicy cinnamon and pepper. Grenache

blend.

MCPRICE MYERS

Syrah Central Coast Right Hand Man 2019

Score: 89 | \$20

WS Review: This gutsy yet generous red delivers lively flavors of blackberry, bitter mocha and smoky spice.

QUPE

Syrah Central Coast 2019

Score: 89 | \$20

WS Review: A generous version, jammed with easygoing flavors of raspberry, toasty mocha and spice.

RODNEY STRONG

Upshot White California 2019

Score: 89 | \$19

WS Review: Sleek and juicy, with vibrant acidity putting pineapple, apple and ruby grapefruit flavors in mouthwatering focus. Grenache Blanc blend.

TENSHEN

Santa Barbara County 2019

Score: 89 | \$25

WS Review: An eclectic red, offering lively flavors of cherry, smoked meat and cracked pepper that finish with frisky tannins. Syrah blend.

EBERLE

Viognier Paso Robles Eberle Estate Vineyard 2020

Score: 88 | \$28

WS Review: Peach, melon and citrus flavors are restrained in this firm white, which offers herbal and orange blossom accents on a medium body.

CLINE

Viognier North Coast 2021

Score: 87 | \$15

WS Review: A festive white, with honeysuckle, lemon custard and spice flavors that finish with a succulent accent.