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Que Syrah, Syrah

NOW THAT THE WEATHER HAS TURNED COLDER, there are more occasions for big, bold reds. Many wine historians believe the Syrah grape originated in or near Shiraz, Persia, and is the oldest grape commonly available today. Legend generally credits the Romans for bringing plantings up the Rhône River to the vicinity of Ampuis, where most Syrah-based wines are produced, although recent DNA profiling by the University of California at Davis, and the French National Agronomy Archives in Montpellier, proved that Syrah is indeed indigenous to France. It is a genetic cross of two relatively obscure grapes, the white Mondeuse Blanc and the Black Dureza.

The region known as the Northern Rhône is home to several famous appellations based on Syrah. The most famous are Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie, followed by Cornas and St. Joseph. The only red grape permitted in these wines is Syrah. In the case of Côte-Rôtie, a small amount of Viognier

is permitted which serves to soften the wine. In general, Hermitage, Côte-Rôtie, and Cornas are very big, masculine wines. St. Joseph, on the other hand, is somewhat softer and feminine in style with a shorter life span. Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie wines from great years and producers have very long lives spanning from 20 to 50+ years.

Syrah is also a very popular grape in the Southern Rhône Valley. While the Grenache grape is the most prevalent, Syrah is found in many of the greatest wines from this region and serves to add heft and complexity to the wines. It is a common addition to the most complex and famous Châteauneuf-Du-Pape wines and is used in more basic wines such as Rasteau, Vinsobres, Vacqueras, and Côtes-du-Rhône.

So what is it that makes this grape so worshiped in the great appellations of the Northern Rhône where bottles sell from \$60-\$800 depending upon producer and vineyard, yet is so common in Southern Rhône areas that most very

good Côtes-du-Rhône are available for under \$20 and many for half this amount?

Syrah grows well in several parts of the world, but it is not ubiquitous like Chardonnay. It is a very dark color grape, almost black with substantial texture and richness, and depending upon temperature levels can tend towards high alcohol with medium to high tannins. The wines often have a rich or voluptuous mouth feel with medium acidity. The grape usually has black fruit versus red fruit flavors as in blackberry or black currant, and is redolent of multiple spices including clove, black pepper, and anise, as well as scents of earth, graphite, cedar, oak, smoke, leather, and savory gamey notes. This amounts to a complex mouthful and one which goes well with big, rich foods. More than half of the world's Syrah grapes are planted in France, but it also does extremely well in the New World.

Several years ago, many wine writers thought Syrah was going to be the next really 'hot' grape,

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perhaps even giving Cabernet Sauvignon a run in the U.S. This did not happen, although Syrah increased over the past two decades principally due to the Rhône Rangers who have religiously sought out the best places in America for producing Syrah. Many successful efforts have come from the California Central Coast, particularly around Paso Robles. It has also done well in Sonoma Valley. In California, these wines taste very spicy with both red and black fruit flavors. Often peppery, they are usually full-bodied. California production totals approximately 19,000 acres.

Over the last decade, many fine examples have come from Washington state, particularly around Walla Walla. Since initial production in 1993, the grape has taken well to Washington's soils and the hot sunny climate of the state's eastern vineyards. Washington Syrahs tend to be less exuberant and more savory with notes of tobacco and olive. Production is currently only 3,100 acres, but is growing rapidly.

The final stop of this introductory overview takes us to Australia where Syrah is the country's dominant grape. It grows well in most of the viticultural regions, but reaches its apex in South Australia in the Barossa Valley. Syrah has long been the dominant grape in Australia and was introduced in the mid-19th century. After Max Schubert, a winemaker at Penfolds in the late 1940s, went to France to see how Australia could improve its wine quality, he knew he had issues. Most of his time was spent in Bordeaux and pre-global warming. He realized the climate and temperature difference between Bordeaux and South Australia meant that he was disadvantaged in competing with the French using Cabernet Sauvignon in addition to the fact that Bordeaux varietals were sparsely planted in Australia.

After a trip to the Rhône Valley where he discovered how well the vintners were producing great Syrah based wines, he had a "eureka moment". When he returned to Australia, he headed the movement to focus more intently on Syrah (known as Shiraz in Australia). His transformational vehicle for this focus was the iconic, most famous wine from Australia known as Grange Hermitage, or simply as Grange, beginning with the 1989 vintage.

Since this wine propelled Australia's best producers through the '70s and '80s to improve their quality, Australian wines started to be taken more seriously throughout the world. During this period in general, the Australian Shiraz benefited from higher average temperatures than French Syrahs and therefore seemed more alcoholic and fruitier than the Rhône counterparts.

Over the past two decades, global warming has lessened this difference. While the best Syrah-based wines from Australia are and should be taken very seriously by the world's best critics, about 15 years ago the world was besieged by its inexpensive 'critter' wines. Due to the popularity of Shiraz, many of these cheap and often not very good wines were made from this grape. As a result, Australia's market share worldwide dipped significantly after a meteoric rise over the previous period.

I will review some of the best wines and best values in two subsequent articles focusing on Syrah from France and the New World.

À votre santé!