

FineWine

FOR THOSE WHO CAN AFFORD IT, AND THOSE WHO WISH THEY COULD



Hollywood star power is illuminating the American west again – inspiring W&S to survey 'Rhône' on the range

Image: Photos.com

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.

Californian Syrah

Wines are arranged alphabetically by producer or brand name. Star symbols ★ indicate high praise from nearly all of the judges. Listed prices are recommended retail per bottle in US dollars. UK prices are shown where available.

★ Alban Vineyards Reva Syrah 2005 (Edna Valley)

Huge, smoky, gamey black fruit. Hints of star anise and even soy. Smooth, full, rich, spicy black fruit flavours. Quite extrovert. A "love it or loathe it" wine. Packed with character.

(\$74; £54, contact The Wine Treasury)



Andrew Murray Vineyards Clone 99 Syrah 2005 (Santa Ynez Valley)

Opulent, herbal black fruit with a touch of liquorice and cola on the nose. Rich palate bursting with herbal/cola tones over spicy black cherry fruit. Impressive.

(\$36)

★ Andrew Murray Vineyards Roasted Slope Vineyard Syrah 2005 (Santa Ynez Valley)

Dense, ripe black fruit on the nose with touches of thyme/oregano and green olive. Smooth and rich on the palate. "Grown-up" flavours of herbal black fruit with some black pepper. Firm grip at the finish. Really stands out.

(\$34)



★ Arrowood Vineyards & Winery Saralee's Vineyard Syrah 2002 (Russian River Valley)

Bright, floral nose of black fruit with savoury herb and sweet oak tones. Very smooth and silky palate. Blackberry and blueberry flavours with some cola and black pepper. Layered and lovely. Well balanced.

(\$39)



L'Aventure Syrah Estate 2004 (Paso Robles)

Intense, deep chocolate and coffee aromas over ripe, black fruit aromas. Smooth, rich, mocha-laced dark cherry and berry fruit flavours. Silky and glossy.

(\$60)

★ Bonny Doon Vineyards "Le Pousseur" Syrah 2004 (Central Coast)

Deep, herbal, slightly gamey, black fruit aromas. Juicy, fresh blackberry and raspberry with herbal/tea leaf tones on the palate. Seductive.

(\$16; £13+ The Secret Cellar)



★ Cline Syrah 2006 (Sonoma County)

Deep blackberry and blueberry aromas with touches of mocha/coffee and white peppercorn. Ripe black fruit flavours with spice and herbal (sage) notes. Very nice texture.

(\$12; £10, contact The Wine Treasury)

La Crema Syrah 2005 (Sonoma County)

Deep, creamy black cherry and dark berry nose. Smooth, ripe black cherry-berry flavours with spicy vanilla tones. Some grip at the finish. Charming.

(\$20)

Epiphany Hampton Vineyard Syrah 2004 (Santa Barbara County)

Herbal and black olive tones over creamy black fruit aromas. Smooth and rich blackberry and mocha flavours with herb and olive notes.

(\$35; £23, contact Hilltop Wines)

Fess Parker Syrah 2004 (Santa Barbara County)

Huge black fruit nose. Some gamey and black olive notes, too. Smooth, dense palate of black fruit with spice and cola or coffee notes. Lots of approachable character.

(\$20; £12, contact Hilltop Wines)

★ Fess Parker "The Big Easy" Syrah 2005 (Santa Barbara County)

Huge, rich, creamy black fruit on the nose with a layer of attractive, herbal or tea-like accents. Dense, juicy palate packed with savoury herb-tinged black fruit. Long finish.

(\$45)



Fess Parker Rodney's Vineyard Syrah 2005 (Santa Barbara County)

Vibrant, rich black fruit aromas with herb and cocoa notes. Smooth, ripe black fruit flavours with spicy cola and chocolate characters. Some grip at the finish.

(\$45; £25, contact Hilltop Wines)

★ Joseph Phelps Vineyards Syrah 2005 (Napa Valley)

Ripe black fruit aromas with herb, coffee and black pepper notes. Juicy black cherry-berry flavours with touches of cocoa, cola and spice. Smooth, perhaps even seamless.

(\$45)



★ Justin Vineyards & Winery Syrah 2005 (Paso Robles)

Vibrant black fruit with complex spice tones on the nose. Very smooth and dense palate. Spicy, creamy, black fruit flavours. Very good balance.

(\$26)



McDowell Valley Vineyards Syrah 2003 (Mendocino County)

Dark berry nose with touches of sweet vanilla and cola. Smooth, creamy and toasty black fruit flavours. Some grip at the finish.

(\$25)

Melville Winery Donna's Syrah 2005 (Santa Barbara County)

Big black fruit and cola aromas with some animal and earth tones. Rich and spicy black fruit flavours with cocoa/caramel notes.

Capricious.

(\$36)

Melville Winery Estate – Verna's Syrah 2005 (Santa Barbara County)

Bright, spicy black cherry-berry aromas. Juicy blackberry flavours with a touch of white pepper. Dense and rich with a warm finish.

(\$22)

Novy Syrah 2005 (Sonoma County)

Rich blueberry and black raspberry nose. Some herbal and liquorice notes. Smooth, spicy (tea leaf-laced) black fruit flavours. Slightly baked note at the finish.

(\$19)

Novy Christensen Family Vineyard Syrah 2005 (Russian River Valley)

Pronounced, herbal, black fruit aromas. Smooth, rich, spicy black cherry flavours with a touch of peppercorn. Savoury grip at the finish. Nice balance.

(\$29)

Novy Judge Family Vineyard Syrah 2005 (Bennett Valley)

Rich, gamey, herbal blackberry with a hint of pepper on the nose. Smooth and rich. Black cherry-berry flavours with tea leaf and black pepper accents.

(\$29)

Continues over

Californian Syrah (continued)

Novy Page-Nord Vineyard Syrah 2005 (Napa Valley)

Deep, lightly toasty/smoky black fruit aromas. Smooth, rich, herbal and meaty black fruit flavours. Grippy finish.

(\$32)

The Ojai Vineyard Bien Nacido Vineyard Syrah 2003 (Santa Barbara County)

Rich, raisiny black fruit aromas with clove and cinnamon notes. Rich black fruit flavours with savoury, herbal accents. Very smooth.

(\$37.50)

The Ojai Vineyard Roll Ranch Vineyard Syrah 2004 (California)

Rich blackberry and blueberry aromas with herbal touches – thyme and rosemary. Smooth and full of fresh, spicy black fruit flavours. Long finish. Nicely balanced.

(\$45)

★ The Ojai Vineyard White Hawk Vineyard Syrah 2004 (Santa Barbara County)

Deep, herb-laced, creamy black fruit on the nose. Smooth and silky texture. Cola and spice accents over rich, black fruit flavours. Lots of extract.

(\$45)



★ Pax Castelli-Knight Ranch Syrah 2004 (Russian River Valley)

Rich, dense, black-fruited nose with savoury herb characters. Concentrated, very smooth texture. Creamy black cherry and berry flavours with some cola and vanilla. Savoury herbs, too. Big and bold. Long finish.

(\$75; £45, contact Vineyard Cellars)



Pax Cuvée Christine Syrah 2005 (Sonoma County)

Bright aromas of ripe blackberry and cranberry with cocoa, smoke and herbal tones. Big and dense, but still fresh. Ripe, spicy black fruit layers in the mouth. Lovely.

(\$65; £50, contact Vineyard Cellars)

★ Qupé Syrah 2006 (Central Coast)

Bright, with a ripe black raspberry nose and vanilla-spice accents. Fresh and lively flavours of creamy black fruit with a warm, spicy finish. Lots of easy appeal. This is a great value wine.

(\$16.50; £13.50, Berry Bros)



Qupé Bien Nacido Hillside Estate 2004 (Santa Maria Valley)

Intense blackberry fruit aromas with pepper and high-toned herb (or mint). Very smooth texture with rich, herbal black fruit and cola flavours. Long, almost nutty finish.

(\$45)

Qupé Bien Nacido Vineyard Syrah 2006 (Santa Maria Valley)

Bright, black cherry and blueberry aromas with spicy vanilla notes. Lively, ripe black fruit flavours with touches of nutmeg and clove. Smooth and pure.

(\$27.50; £20, Berry Bros)

Radio-Coteau Cherry Camp Syrah 2005 (Sonoma Coast)

Pure, ripe black fruit with layers of game, olive and smoke on the nose. Smooth, rich palate of black fruit with cola and herb touches. Again, some grip at the finish. Lots of material here.

(\$50)

Radio-Coteau Las Colinas Syrah 2005 (Sonoma Coast)

Ripe black cherry and blueberry aromas with a lifted, herbal accent. Very smooth palate. Fresh black fruit flavours with black pepper, tea leaf and cola. Long finish.

(\$38)

★ Radio-Coteau Timbervine Syrah 2005 (Russian River Valley)

Dense, black cherry aromas with savoury herb and peppercorn notes. Smooth, rich, very appealing texture. Lively blueberry and black cherry flavours with black pepper, cola and cocoa accents. Some grip at the finish. Well integrated.

(\$48)



Sean Thackrey Orion 2005 (Napa Valley)

Pronounced – even piercing – high-toned herbs over ripe, deep black fruit aromas. Very intense black fruit flavours. Strong whiff of eucalyptus. There is some chocolate there, too. Big character.

(\$75; £65, contact The Wine Treasury)

Shafer Vineyards Relentless Syrah 2004 (Napa Valley)

Brambly black fruit aromas. Cherries and berries with lifted, high-toned herb notes. Somehow both deep and dense on the palate with a real freshness. Ripe black fruit and cola flavours. Lots of depth. (\$65)

Terre Rouge Syrah 2002 (Sierra Foothills)

Savoury, meaty and oaky on the nose. Smooth with straightforward flavours.

(\$24)

Terre Rouge Ascent Syrah 2003 (Sierra Foothills)

Dark, smoky, herbal black fruit aromas. Very, very deep. Smooth and inky, but with an earthy edge. Enormous black fruit flavours with a touch of roasted coffee. This is more than four years old, but still needs time. Not sure about the price.

(\$80)

Terre Rouge Les Cotes de l'Ouest Syrah 2004 (California)

Dark berry fruit with some herbs or tobacco leaf accents on the nose. Some black pepper, too. Fresh on the palate with bright acidity. Light character.

(\$16)

Terre Rouge High Slopes Syrah 2003 (Sierra Foothills)

Piercing nose. Some anise/licuorice over meaty black fruit. Herbal, peppery black fruit flavours. Ripe, grainy texture. Grippy finish.

(\$35)

Terre Rouge Sentinel Oak Vineyard Pyramid Block Syrah 2003 (Shenandoah Valley)

Bright, herby, licuorice tones on the nose. Deep, savoury black fruit flavours. Chewy structure.

(\$35; £25, contact Vineyard Cellars)

William Roan Shiraz 2004 (Mendocino County)

Rich blackberry and roast coffee aromas. Smooth, spicy black fruit flavours with cola notes. Easy-going appeal.

(\$14)

Zaca Mesa Syrah 2003 (Santa Ynez Valley)

Smoky or coffee-like tones over brambly black fruit aromas. Deep black fruit and savoury herb flavours. Spicy finish.

(\$20; £14)

Zaca Mesa Black Bear Block Syrah 2004 (Santa Ynez Valley)

Bold, herbal, peppery black fruit nose. Lots of density. Smooth, rich, black fruit flavours with cola and herb touches. Good acidity.

(\$55)