

# Syrah

The word "Syrah" can be downright confounding on a label as there are as many styles of West Coast Syrah to be had, from ripe and dramatic to sleek and refined, as there are places in which to grow it. Putting aside the unwinnable debate that there is a right way and a wrong way that it should taste, Syrah is showing remarkable resilience for a grape that has by some accounts become hopelessly stalled in the market, and its stubborn refusal to fade from discussion may well be owing to the very fact that there are such widely varying expressions to be had.


Provenance most assuredly accounts for much of the difference. Syrahs born of warmer climes such as Paso Robles, Rockpile, Eastern Santa Barbara County and much of the Sierra Foothills run naturally to ripeness and unabashed richness, while their racy cousins that call cooler districts like the Sta. Rita Hills and the western reaches of Sonoma County home find great vibrancy and brightness in leaner, less bulky, more elegant renditions. But, for all of the reasonable claims that place is paramount, it must be remembered that the effects of place can be tempered and shaped by winemaker preference; and make no mistake, the people who make Syrah leave their own indelible mark. There are more things in a great bottle than can be wholly explained by terroir.

Some, like those from Dehlinger, JC Cellars, Rusack and Ramey, to name but a few consistently successful examples, aim for and achieve richness and balance in ripe, boldly flavored renditions, while those more mannerly, equally noteworthy offerings from the likes of Red Car, Nagy and Qupé, steer to refinement while keeping raw power in check. In each case, Syrah's voice is clear, yet sometimes that voice is a bit higher pitched, sometimes it settles into a comfortable mid-range, and sometimes it has the authority of a booming bass. And, in the very best bottlings, it can reveal an astonishing and effortless all-octave range.




Will one style or another become the "gold standard" for California Syrah? The larger question, it seems to us, is should it? There is a learning curve for consumers and producers alike, and, when it comes right down to it, Syrah's local history is but a long generation in the making. It strikes us as woefully short-sighted and silly to proclaim that its day has come and gone; especially when there are so many satisfying versions to be had.

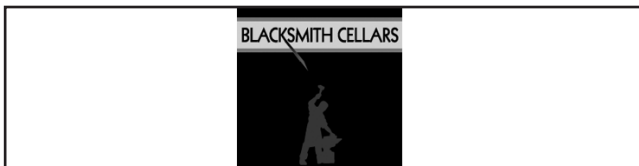
## 90 ANCIENT PEAKS Renegade Paso Robles 2011

62% Syrah; 28% Petit Verdot; 10% Malbec. There has been a good deal of debate about the potential virtues and pitfalls of the cool and quite challenging 2011 vintage, but this unlikely, unconventional combination of grapes very much speaks to the former. It leads with a mix of bright berries and slightly pungent, peppery spice in the nose and follows with lively flavors that are filled with fresh fruit and long on stamina. While sporting plenty of zesty acidity, it does not want for fruity stuffing, and it shows the kind of balance to suggest that it will age with great grace.




**GOOD VALUE**    \$23.00

## 87 BLACKSMITH Coyote Creek Vineyard 2009




**Alexander Valley.** Obvious ripeness and a fair bit of creamy oak lend a marked sense of sweetness to this one, but there is a good measure of essential blackberry fruit at work as well, and a spot of peppery spice works its way into view. While the wine gives ground to heat at the finish, it does not dry out and hangs on to just enough fruit to succeed.    \$18.00






## 85 BLACKSMITH Coyote Creek Vineyard 2008

**Alexander Valley.** If reasonably ripe, this wine seems to have let go of its fruit and is inclined to woody dryness in both scent and taste. It wants for more clearly defined Syrah character and is starting to soften at the edges, and it has the sense of a wine that is best drunk up soon.    \$18.00




## 84 BONNY DOON Jespersen Ranch Edna Valley 2010

Its early notes of earth and game could pass for varietal accuracy, but its underlying suggestions of vegetation cannot, and its very coarse, palate-drying astringency and somewhat elevated acidity do the wine no favors either. Its palatal lightness is entirely out of keeping with its tannins.    \$40.00

## 89 CADARETTA Windthrow Columbia Valley 2011

55% Syrah; 22% Mourvedre; 15% Grenache; 3% Counoise; 3% Cinsault; 2% Viognier. With a cepage that touches most all of the Rhône bases, this expressive, well-fruited red wine starts out with a supple, near-silky texture but takes a mid-palate turn to evident ripeness and heats up a bit as it goes. It winds up just ragged enough to warrant a few years of patience, but it has more than enough fruity heart to keep well and should find a little more polish with age.    \$50.00


## 89 CADARETTA Columbia Valley 2011

Rich but a bit restrained to start with slowly emerging aromatic themes of dusty soils and proper blackberry fruit that are picked up in its ripe, moderately deep flavors, this bottling flirts with a bit of heat here and there but is supple and fleshy and always fairly well-balanced. It hangs on and is buoyed by nicely placed acidity in the latter going, and its minor last-minute coarseness should abate with a few years of age.    \$35.00






## 87 CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Columbia Valley 2011

Ripe, well-formed, mildly spicy Syrah fruit leads the way in the open and outgoing aromas of this immediately likeable effort, and, if perhaps neither quite as deep nor as complex as it initially promised, the wine follows with accessible, minimally tannic, well-focused flavors that smack of berries and spice. It invites drinking now, and easily it earns "good value" endorsement.

**GOOD VALUE**    \$14.00

## 85 CLAYHOUSE Red Cedar Vineyard 2011

We like this wine's initial impressions of freshness, and we like its leading themes of pert fruit in the nose, but there is less to be found once in the mouth. Its clean, but faintly sour-edged flavors are narrow and cramped, and its fairly buoyant fruity beginnings go for naught.    \$35.00