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American Syrah: Can It Ever Rival Pinot Noir?

Once hailed as the Next Big Grape, Syrah has yet to attain the star status of Pinot Noir. With so many excellent, food-friendly American Syrahs available, it's time that changed.

Here, 5 eminently drinkable bottles

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ONE OF THE MOST famous vineyards in California is home to two grapes. One is incredibly popular and one is so unfashionable that some retailers joke they can't give it away. I'm talking about Pinot Noir and Syrah. The vineyard is Garys' Vineyard, named after two friends, Gary Francioni and Gary Pisoni, who planted the 50 acres in the Santa Lucia Highlands region of California in 1997. They sell lots of Pinot Noir and a little Syrah to some of the best winemakers in the world.

When the two Garys planted their vineyard, California winemakers' hopes for both grapes were high. Pinot Noir was already a star and,

as Mr. Francioni recently related, they hoped Syrah could be another. In fact, quite a few producers were convinced that Syrah was the Next Big Grape. Never mind that the northern Rhône Valley of France, the home of Syrah, had long held steady at approximately 1,000 acres planted to the grape—with no indication the world wanted more.

And yet stateside Syrah-loving producers plowed ahead. They kept planting the grape until there were over 18,000 acres of Syrah in California and 5,000 acres in Washington State, where it's currently the third most-planted red grape.

"We were growing Syrah at a modest rate and then all of sudden the plantings went up," said Adam Lee of Siduri Wines in Santa Rosa, Calif., who makes four Syrahs under his Novy Family Wines label. He also noted that the Syrah acreage in California increased almost 10 times over the past couple of decades: from 2,084 acres in 1996 to 18,063 in 2015. Syrah holdings went up in Washington too, from around 3,000 acres in 2011 to 5,325 in 2016.

Syrah grows all over California: Napa Valley, Sonoma, Carneros, Santa Barbara, Paso Robles, the Sierra Foothills and a few other places. It's important in Washington and grown in southern Oregon too.

The fact that Syrah is highly adaptable and easy to grow was a boon that turned into a flaw when the supply of Syrah far exceeded the demand. Wine drinkers failed to fall in love with the grape in large numbers and the subsequent glut dampened prices. Cheap Syrahs churned out to make a quick buck dampened the grape's reputation as well. And yet



there are terrific Syrahs produced today, though few wine drinkers seem to know or care. What made oenophiles turn away—and what might make them turn back? I put the question to some of the country's best Syrah producers. Matt Reynvaan, winemaker and vineyard manager of Reynvaan Family Vineyards in Walla Walla, Wash., thought Syrah's biggest problem was its "two faces," meaning the grape can produce two kinds of wine. Syrah from warmer climates skews rich, full bodied and higher in alcohol while the cool-climate version tends to be more restrained, with higher acidity. Those drinkers not well-versed in wine regions might not know what to expect.

Winemaker Justin Smith of Saxum Vineyards, who produces highly acclaimed Syrah-dominant blends in Paso Robles, Calif., wondered if Syrah had been dragged down by an association with cheap Aussie-import Shiraz. "Yellow Tail Shiraz might have given them a bad taste of Syrah," he said. (The two grapes are the same, though Shiraz is typically a bigger, more fruit-forward wine.) Mr. Francioni said, jokingly, that California Syrah from warm climates like Paso Robles should be called Shiraz (which sounded a bit punitive to me).

He made this remark after a tour of his vineyard, which I visited in late March, when we sat down to taste with his son Adam. Mr. Francioni's elegant 2011 ROAR Rosella's Vineyard Syrah showed how well Syrah ages, though his current vintages were impressive too: the powerful 2014 ROAR Rosella's Vineyard Syrah, the lush 2014 ROAR Garys' Vineyard Syrah (both \$42).

Later I joined Gary Pisoni's son Mark Pisoni, who manages the Pisoni family vineyards, for a tasting. Mark's brother, Jeff Pisoni, is the family winemaker, and Jeff's wife, Bibiana González Rave, makes wine from Pisoni and Francioni fruit under her own Cattleya Wines label. Ms. González Rave's stunning 2014 Cattleya Soberanes Syrah (\$70) was one of my very favorites, a truly gorgeous example of Syrah that would easily have passed for a wine from the northern Rhône.

Encouraged by the high-quality Syrah I'd tasted in Santa Lucia, when I returned home I sought Syrahs from other regions in California and Washington, priced between \$20 and \$75. (Most under-\$20 Syrahs aren't very good.) I looked for wines from cooler climates because they seem to be the most versatile and food-friendly, and often contain more modest levels of alcohol, too.

At the lower end of the price range, I was impressed by the well balanced 2014 Stolpman Vineyards Estate Grown Syrah Ballard Canyon (\$22). In the middle I found a rich and densely fruited 2014 Carlisle Santa Lucia Highlands Syrah Sierra Mar Vineyard (\$40) and a supple 2013 Gramercy Cellars Lagniappe Columbia Valley Syrah (\$48) that proved particularly versatile with food—unsurprisingly since that winery's proprietor, Greg Harrington, is a former sommelier. At the upper end, the 2014 Reynvaan In the Hills Walla Walla Syrah (\$75) showed power coupled with finesse.

Mr. Harrington said he believes Syrah is a more versatile food wine than Pinot Noir. "I make a statement in jest that Syrah is a grape for Pinot Noir lovers who have sophisticated palates," he told me. "Syrah is the progressive Pinot Noir."

So, how to convince skeptical wine drinkers? Mike Officer of Carlisle Winery & Vineyards had a waggish suggestion. Perhaps the solution is cinematic. "They need to come up with a movie about Syrah," he said, adding, in a nod to the Pinot-focused movie "Sideways": "They could call it 'Up and Down.'"