

# CLUB ENOLOGIQUE



## Syrah and beyond

How the Rhône's winning blend  
finally conquered the world

# SYRAH ZEINUS

Oz Clarke draws back the curtain on the history –  
and mystery – behind a grape variety with two  
names and a thousand different personalities  
Photography by Deborah Wastie

What does Syrah mean to me? A red wine of intellectual fascination, absorbing, sometimes challenging, very likely to speak eloquently of the vineyard whence it comes. A connoisseur's delight – and along with the gentler, milder Pinot Noir, often their favourite red style.

And what does Shiraz mean to me? Liberty. Joy. An explosion of exuberance, a cavalcade of ripeness and sauciness and fun. A ruddy-faced standard-bearer for all that is good about the New World. Red wine without tears. Where's the party?

One sounds like a wine-tasting note, the other a call to arms. We're not talking about the same thing here. Well, yes, we are. We're talking one grape variety: Syrah in France; Shiraz in Australia. As for the rest of the world, they call it Syrah if they want to be taken seriously by wine critics and applauded for following the more restrained, more cerebral French flavour model. Or they can call it Shiraz to send out the signal that their wine is supposed to be rich and soft, ripe with toffee and chocolate flavours, and set up in the Aussie style for drinking, not pontificating about.

The variety that the grape offers up is astonishing. I had a look at a couple of my – rather grandiloquent – tasting notes. Here's a Syrah from a chap called Hervé Souhaut on the western edge of the Rhône Valley: 'Hauntingly scented with lilies and summer night jasmine, a scent that runs right through the lush, juicy blackberry, pear and peach richness, just tickled with the crunchiness of black pepper and celery, dusted with ginger and nutmeg, and cut through with a gleaming, glinting mineral, like quartz caught in the early morning sun.' See what I mean? Fabulously appetising and contradictory flavours and tastes you would never expect to sit together. Just reading them, I can remember the wine as if I had just finished the glass. Oh, and it's only 11.5% alcohol. Half of those flavours would be lost if you ripened the grapes to 13%.

One of Syrah's greatest gifts is how it reacts to cool conditions in a hot country. Take this Chilean Syrah from Aymura in the Elqui Valley, a wild and unlikely vineyard site up towards the Atacama Desert, which, because of the ferocious cold winds that blow up the valley from the icy Pacific, actually manages to be cool. I made this note: 'Almost shockingly scented for a red wine, a mixture of lilies and a bonfire of the branches from a pepper tree. The taste is simply packed with blackberry and Santa Rosa plum fruit, but the bitter-edged brilliance of springtime wood sap hurtles through this heady fruit, trailing after it a summer scent like warm creosote, a hint of talcum powder and a brush of coal dust from a collier's apron.' Again, flavours you would never put together or, in some of the cases, would never expect to find in a wine at all. But it works.



The Rhône rendition of Syrah tends to harness more scented, savoury notes – celery, pepper and nutmeg, for example – than those of Australia and Chile (following pages)

And what about Australia? I've got a Tim Adams Shiraz from the Clare Valley, not as hot as the more famous Barossa Valley to the south, but it showcases the more Australian face of Shiraz. Again, 'wonderfully scented wine, reeking of blackberry juice and the scent of black plums, late into summer but still on the bough, with a purple bloom bursting over them as they ooze nectar, and the merest nudge would knock them to the ground and the wasps would swarm and fight. The flavours wash over your tongue, leaving a trail of sweet mint leaves, blackcurrants rubbed in eucalyptus oil, and all this in a cocoon of coconut and chocolate cream.'

I wish I had those three bottles open in front of me as I write. They show three very different styles of wine, from the cool crispness of the French one through to the lush richness of the Australian, but all connected by Syrah's God-given ability not to be boring and predictable. I am completely confident in saying that Syrah/Shiraz is one of the world's great grapes. So why wasn't it better known? People have been drinking and talking about Bordeaux and Burgundy for hundreds of years, making Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay world-famous. Yet the Syrah wines of the Rhône Valley, created before either Bordeaux or Burgundy ever had a vine, were virtually unknown until the 1980s.

The answer is geography and politics. The two places that made exceptional Syrah – and which are still considered probably the world's two best sites – are tiny. Côte-Rôtie is one single, incredibly steep cliffside teetering above the Rhône as it dips slightly to the west, just south of the old Roman city of Vienne. A couple of kilometres further on, the river curves towards the south again, and this precious, precipitous slope – protected from the violent mistral winds that can blow down the Rhône, and angled invitingly towards the morning and midday sun – is gone. The second is Hermitage, a single, haughty outcrop of rock a bit further south, as the Rhône finally fights its way out of the hills and on to the broad plains that stretch away towards the Mediterranean. Its broad-chested slopes catch every ray of sun from dawn to tawny sunset. Just two tiny chunks of challenging granite hillside. Hermitage has never been more than 136ha. Côte-Rôtie has been half of that, though recent expansion has brought it up to the giddy heights of 276ha. Some single estates in Bordeaux cover more than 100ha alone, which rather puts it into perspective.

As a result, when vineyards were developed on the other continents, Syrah rarely figured. Almost no one drank the wine, so they didn't think of Syrah as a useful grape to plant.

Cabernet Sauvignon became the go-to, top-quality grape across the globe, because people knew Bordeaux and thought that planting Cabernet would give a pretty good start to their own vineyards. Except in one place: Australia.

Most relevant to the spread of Shiraz around the world was the rise of the mighty Australian brands, starting out with names like Penfolds, Lindeman's and Wolf Blass, moving on through Jacob's Creek and Rosemount, and ending up in the 21st century with Yellow Tail. The easy-drinking, juicy, warm, not always completely dry red wines under these names were led by Shiraz. More than any other red grape – with the possible exception of Merlot from California – Shiraz showed the way for the wine-drinking boom that began in the 1980s and gathered pace during the '90s. And although big, serious, expensive Hunter Valley and Barossa Valley Shirazes have been accorded more and more respect during the past 20 or 30 years, it was the attempts to recreate easy-going, ripe, approachable and affordable reds that fired up other countries around the world to latch on to Shiraz.

French Syrah got its call during the 1980s. First, the most important wine critic of the time, Robert Parker, discovered the Rhône. He loved big, broad flavours, so he was always going to love the wines of the Rhône. He went to town on Hermitage from producers like Chave and Jaboulet, whose La Chapelle he classed 'truly immortal' – if any Rhône wines could be said to be well known, these ones were. Great Hermitage was, and still is, rare, but its turbulent cauldron of flavours is intoxicating – tar and coal smoke, potato peel, raw herbs and savage pepper scratch at your tongue and try to mask the gloriously intense fruit flavours of bramble, raspberry and blackcurrant. Sometimes, after tasting young Hermitage, your tongue needs a massage and a lie-down. But if you give the wine 10 or 20 years, all the crudity mellows into a strange but wonderful, warm softness of cream and liquorice, dark fruit syrup and well-worn leather.

But it was Côte-Rôtie that knocked Parker into a swoon. Côte-Rôtie is a gentler wine than Hermitage. Sometimes they even add a little Viognier to make it gentler still. This is just about the most northerly point in France that can ripen Syrah – you're on that magic cusp. In traditional Côte-Rôtie, the colour isn't that deep, the wine has the floral fragrance of violets and even lilies, and the fruit flavour is of raspberries, perhaps cut slightly with the sweet acid of damsons, and seasoned with the grainy burr of apricot skins and pepper. The highest compliment you could pay an old-style Côte-Rôtie producer was *ça pinotte*, or 'That's starting to taste like Pinot, like Burgundy.' And then along came Guigal, revolutionising winemaking, filling his cellars with new

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oak barrels for ageing his super-ripe reds, and charging a lot of money for this new breed of Côte-Rôtie.

And around the world, if people are thinking of French Syrah, they generally follow Côte-Rôtie, not Hermitage. Some also follow Guigal in ripeness and generous application of oak. But thankfully, there is a growing band of enthusiasts who are prepared to look behind the gaudy exterior and into the heart of that old-style Côte-Rôtie – the one that starts to taste like Pinot, like Burgundy, but in many cases tastes just a little bit better, because in many cases Syrah as a grape has a little more to offer than Pinot Noir.

In California, in South Africa, in Australia, producers are getting the message that you can grow Pinot and Syrah in adjacent fields. That sounds as if Syrah is asking to be considered a cool-climate grape. Cool conditions but lots of sunshine? Sounds like Switzerland. Sure enough, the Alpine suntrap of the Valais region has made tasty, concentrated Syrah on its south-facing slopes for as long as I can remember. And what's that river at the bottom of the valley? Oh, it's the Rhône, beginning its long, tumultuous journey south to the Mediterranean.

Syrah has spread rapidly around the globe, either with new plantings or with a sudden revival of interest in old ones. Barossa Valley Shiraz represented the complete opposite of what we were mostly drinking in Europe during the 1980s. French and Italian reds were thin; Barossa Shiraz was thick. The European reds were raw, the Shirazes were anything but – juicy, jammy, stewy even. The European reds made you wonder whether the sun ever shone on the vineyards any more, while the Barossa wines tasted as though the Aussies had bottled the sun along with the wine, and the wine kept ripening and ripening in the bottle, until it virtually forced the cork out of the neck by sheer exuberance of personality, showering your palate with black fruit and spice and dark bitter-rich chocolate and liquorice – and if that wasn't enough to make you choke with excitement, there was vanilla and the mouthwatering smoke of toast about to burn under the grill. And did I mention blackcurrants? And blackberries? And aromatic plums, the flesh so sweet and ripe that their skins split trying to contain it?

South Australia has other seriously powerful Shiraz heartlands apart from Barossa. McLaren Vale, just south of Adelaide, is another beefy operator, with significant amounts of rich, old Grenache and Mourvèdre, too. Clare Valley, north of Barossa, is technically a little cooler, but its Shirazes are powerful and rather magnificent. Eden Valley, though, in the hills just above the Barossa Valley, is significantly cooler. They grow really good Riesling up there, and they grow some of Australia's greatest Shiraz. Henschke is a custodian of vines up to 160 years old – and maybe older – at its Hill of Grace vineyard. The Shiraz it makes is now frequently Australia's most sought-after wine, more clamoured for even than the Barossa's husky jewel, Penfolds Grange. And Hill of Grace has all the intensity of a mighty Shiraz, but as you ponder flavours that move on from the blackest of

chocolate and the squashtiest of plums into a world of cherries soaked with mint, leather and peppercorns simmered with blackcurrants – is there a hint of French Syrah complexity just peeping out? Perhaps, perhaps. Is South Australia flirting with Syrah? Perhaps.

Cool-climate Chilean Syrah is less delicate, more scented and uniquely different from Burgundy. As with California and its discovery of Syrah's liking for cool conditions, which brought out wines with flavours that no one had previously attained, so it is with Chile. The next valley south from Elqui is Limarí – again, barren and swept by icy winds, but sunny and underdeveloped. Here the Syrahs from the likes of Tabalí are filled with rich blackberry fruit, but this time the wine is broad and meaty, with a suggestion of charred leather dabbed with fish oil and rubbed with jalapeño chilli, above which drifts a mellow floral scent. Syrah again: expect the unexpected.

Twenty years ago, Syrah occupied less than 1% of South Africa's vineyards. Now it occupies 10%, and this proportion rises every year. Syrah from South Africa becomes more explosively delicious with each vintage, and there's a strong argument that Syrah produces South Africa's most exciting reds. And one area more than any other has been leading the way: Swartland.

Eben Sadie is the man you can credit with giving Swartland its own identity. He set up shop there in 2000 and created the first thrilling, utterly self-confident Swartland red wine, called Columella, using Shiraz and Mourvèdre grapes. Because that was what Swartland was full of – old plots of the southern French grapes, not the trendy Cabernet Sauvignons that had made Stellenbosch famous. Syrah, Cinsault, Carignan and Mourvèdre, even Grenache – you can find these vines, old and scrubby, and you can plant more now that people know how good they are. So many 'new' wine countries followed the 'Cabernet is best' route, sometimes for generations, before realising that they'd got more suitable vines, usually from the Rhône Valley and southern France, sitting in the warm sun of their own backyard, just pleading to be rediscovered.

Swartland Syrah is shaking the complacency out of South Africa's reds. There are quite a few good producers now, but none more impressive than Mullineux, which even releases two different Syrahs called Granite and Schist to show how the soil changes the wine style. Granite is scented, savoury, smoky, sprinkled with rock dust, and rich with raspberry and blackberry fruit. Schist is deeper, richer, smokier, less scented, but with even riper raspberry and blackberry fruit thrumming through the heart of the wine. There is now an Iron Syrah too, whose powerful, brooding taste is self-explanatory. All memorable. And if you want to see the new face of Swartland, clamber and stumble up the Porseleinberg hill, so rocky you wonder if there's any soil at all. Just enough, obviously, to plant 30ha of new Syrah and Grenache. And with its dark, rich red plum and cherry fruit, its liquorice-black core and its trail of smoke, the Syrah could have come right off a prime slope on the hill of Hermitage. ○

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