



Notes from the Rhone Rangers

While I was not part of the original Rhone Rangers club that included Randall Graham, Matt Garretson, Gary Eberle, John Alban and a few others who, in the 90s had a vision of varieties from Southern France growing in California, I can say that I attended the first gathering Rhone geeks led by Matt at Alban Vineyards, and there all of our collective socks were knocked off by a Viognier from Horton Vineyards, in of all places, a strange place called Virginia. In my experience that wine is still one of the closest representations of a fine Condrieu as I have ever tasted in the U.S. The Rhone Rangers hosted an event at City Winery recently and I was delighted to find representatives from Damiani Cellars in the Finger Lakes and Tarara and Jefferson from Virginia, and can state definitively that their wines more than held their own against their illustrious California cousins. The 2010 estate Syrah from Damiani was a dense and fruity wine, and distinctly cool climate Syrah with an emphasis on the fruit but with nice spice and pepper notes. But even the 2011, a blend of estate and Sawmill Creek grapes made in a very soggy vintage, was a fine rendition of the variety. All of the Tarara wines, made by Jordan Harris, were outstanding and I think I liked the whites even more than the reds.

The event began with a panel session that presented seven non-Syrah or Viognier wines, intended to show the diversity of Rhone varieties and it was a complete success! I was not surprised at the quality of the wines, given the caliber of the wineries but what caught me off guard was the complete and utter charm of these wines, particularly the reds that emphasized fruit and freshness over weight, tannin and wood. They were sort of the anti-Syrah, that wine consumers have turned their backs on (more about that later). The Two Shepherds Mourvedre, Tablas Creek Cunoise, Bonny Doon Grenache and Ridge Carignane all showed a lightness that accented the fruit, yet with perfect balance. These were food wines at their best, and with the snow falling outside, it was the right time for reds.

Speaking of balance, I asked David Gates, the VP of vineyard ops at Ridge Vineyards, how they achieve this fine balance in wines grown in the intense California sunshine, i.e. balance alcohol against all the other virtues of the grape. David and I were at UC Davis together and he went on to become the wine grower for one of the great icons in international wine, and I, well, many readers know the story. His answer pretty much summed up the essence of making great wine – try to achieve a balanced vine. It sounds so easy but it's not and only the best growers achieve it. David said let the site dictate the balance of fruit to foliage, and choose varieties that will fully ripen to the terminus of the growing season. This is not anything new but to be stated so succinctly and simply by a grower of David's credentials really hit home with me. The grower must understand the site well enough to know the proper vine size for the site capacity, and then bring it into balance through proper vineyard design and vineyard management. It's important to realize that fine wines can be made from vines of many sizes, but only if they are in balance. That's what Phil Davis from Damiani Wine Cellars does with Syrah on the east side of Seneca and Jason Haas does with Mourvedre at Tablas Creek, they push the grape to the limits of the season to achieve full ripeness. If the grape doesn't get ripe by the time the season ends, then it's in the wrong place. David also mentioned restraint in leaf removal as an important tool in sunny California for moderating wines. Other viticulture concepts discussed by the panel included the importance of limestone to wine quality, which is one reason why many of the Rhone producers have settled in the area between the coast and Hwy 101 in Paso Robles. The Perrins of Chateau Beaucastel and their wine importer, Robert Haas,

searched for two years to find the best limestone site for Tablas Creek. The acidity was remarkably bright in these wines, which panelists attributed to the cool nights and large diurnal shifts along the California coast. In the case of the Bonny Doon vineyards in the breezy corridor of Soledad and Two Shepherds in the Russian River, a cool climate helps to promote the freshness in their wines, and a grape like Picouls Blanc that has high natural acidity can stand on its own or bring acidity to a blend. And the French always firmly believe that vine age contributes to vine balance and wine quality. At Beaucastel vines must be 10 to 12 or more years of age before they get into any of the best wines. At Tablas Creek, the 18 year old vines are just hitting their stride. Phil Davis said they take vine renewal very seriously so they can push the age of their vines for wine quality.

The white wines were equally as alluring as the reds – we tasted a Grenache Blanc, Picouls Blanc (translates to “lip stinger” which says something about the natural acidity of the grape) and a Rousanne. These were perfect autumn wines with very nice density with layers of flavors and complexity, yet fresh, clean and highly likable.

I have wondered why California Syrah has taken a nose dive in the marketplace in recent years. It seemed to be headed into the stratosphere, a la post-Sideways Pinot Noir, but the flame fizzled and I never understood why. I asked Cheryl Quist what happened and she offered her best possible explanation. Once a grape becomes a rising star in California it gets over planted, and often in very poor sites. Many of the resulting wines were the thick, goopy, high alcohol fruit bombs that writers like Eric Asimov (New York Times) and Jon Bonne (SF Chronicle) often take to task. In fact, Asimov once quipped in his column, “The only thing harder to get rid of than a case of California Syrah is a case of the pneumonia.” Ouch! While the Syrah market hit the skids, many of the poor sites were pulled or grafted and now, we hope, well-sited and farmed vineyards will deliver balanced and luscious Syrahs that will become the rule rather than the exception, and the market will bounce back. There is a bit of a happy ending for the Rhone Rangers to the pneumonia joke. It is a sad fact that worldwide the pneumonia, while mostly preventable, kills more children than any other cause, so the Rhone Rangers donated \$10 per case, which is the cost to vaccinate a child against the disease, and thus helped to save the lives of children, and at the same time improving their wines. Rhone wines are on the edge of acceptance, but nowhere near as hip as Pinot.

I couldn't help but note that this particular style of wine, a European one, if one must categorize, plays to our Eastern strength, and if influential wine writers like Asimov and Bonne prefer this style, then we should be well positioned in the marketplace. A recent reviewer of Asimov's new book *How to Love Wine* stated flatly that he is the most influential voice in wine in America today, and he is right in our backyard. Of course, getting him to take note of the wine in his backyard is yet another challenge. Oh, and as usual a frequent criticism that I heard from the wine director at city winery is that Eastern wines do not offer the balance of price-value-quality that her customers are seeking. Hmmm. Ed Boyce at Black Ankle Vineyard approached me with this matter last year and I'm baffled by it. Marnie Old says that wine consumers will allow for some locally produced surcharge on wines, perhaps \$2-4 on a \$20 bottle, but in the end, they will drink what they like and consider a good value – another challenge to overcome.

With Viognier recently declared Virginia's white wine, there is certainly a place for Rhone varieties from New York to the North Carolina. Syrah is cold tender and that presents a challenge for northern producers. Mourvedre may have too long a season to fully ripen even in the south of the region. These are sophisticated and delicious wines and it would be interesting to see how well they could perform in the Mid-Atlantic.

For more information about the Rhone Rangers, visit their web site - <http://www.rhonerangers.org/calendar/newyorkcity.php>. Their main tasting is held annually in mid-March at Fort Mason in San Francisco.