



GRAND SYRAH: SYRAH GRAND

In the hands of those prepared to ignore the extremes of winemaking fashion, Syrah is responsible for some of the USA's greatest reds, says **Dominic Fenton**

Photography © Getty Images

There is nothing wrong with the term “Rhône Ranger.” As a name, it follows hard on the heels of other great alliterative successes such as Clark Kent, Peter Parker, and, of course, his southern cousin, Peter Piper, who picked a peck of pickled peppers. Did Piper’s name help promote his family’s pickled pepper business? Unquestionably. Has Robert Parker’s parochial ‘Rhône Ranger’ tag succeeded in promoting Californian Rhône styles both domestically and internationally? Undoubtedly. Will there ever be another alliterative name in California wine as successful as California Cabernet? Unfortunately not. Rhône Ranger will always come a distant second.

As an umbrella term, it is a perfect shelter for Grenache. It is broad enough to encompass Marsanne, Roussanne, and even pretty Viognier. The Ranger tag is kitsch and quaint, a genuine piece of French-Americana, suited to most Californian Rhône styles. It even works for the little grape, Petite Sirah. But not for its big brother. No, definitely not for its big brother, which is, as any wine geek or grower knows, the world’s grandest grape. When it comes to the real thing, when it comes to SYRAH, no umbrella term is big enough, as this grape prefers to stand alone and out in the rain. The smell of violets, lavender, and white pepper is beguiling. The supple fruit emanating from the glass is intoxicating, the exquisite juice saturating the palate with its stony black minerality. The untold wine story of the decade is that the grandest grape in the world has come of age in California. It is not shy and retiring, and it doesn’t speak French. There is nothing petite about it, nor anything kitsch or quaint, as in every respect it is Grand Syrah: Syrah Grande.

So, why is the world’s grandest grape also paradoxically a ghost grape, a grape with no name? How can a grape with such a grand character have no identity at all in the wine marketplace? Why don’t more Americans know what Syrah is? California Cabernet fought the French for credibility in the 1950s through the ‘80s. Pinot Noir had the success of a Hollywood box-office hit to stop it going sideways. But what about Syrah, the grandest grape of all? “You mean Shiraz, Mate.” No, I mean Syrah. “Pas du tout, Monsieur; c’est Hermitage, Côte Rôtie, Cornas.” No really, I mean Syrah. The problem is partly one of terminology. Australian Syrah is called Shiraz because the Australians believed it came from Persia. Californians call it Syrah because they believe it originated in France; while French Syrah is not defined by the name of the grape, but by where it grows. Concerning the regal grape’s origins, it really doesn’t matter who believes what (although research indicates France): Syrah/Shiraz, potayto/potahto... But let’s not call the whole thing off!

Although the spelling of Syrah serves no historical purpose, it does define the respective style of the wine. Shiraz describes a wine that is more exotic and spicy, while French Syrah purports to be more savory, meaty, and complex. Which of these styles is Californian Syrah? Well, neither. Syrah Grande has its own unique expression; it is florally aromatic, while its exuberant fruit is grounded by deep black minerality, making it a grandiose style even for Syrah. And with its potential for long-term aging, as well as its ability to serve as a lens with which to bring site transparency and blending expression into focus, Syrah is the most exciting wine being cultivated in California today. “Passion” is the word on the lips of every winemaker I visit.

The climate and soils in California are of course perfect for Syrah. Rocky sun-drenched vineyards at tectonic/volcanic

elevation are cooled by their close proximity to the ocean. The ideological climate, however, is an entirely different story. The drinkers follow the critics, whom the winemakers in turn either follow or steer away from. While French grape growers are emigrating to Napa, Californian winemakers imitate France. As for the people, with their casual culture of shorts, sports, and plenty, and where no one will tell you their last names, Californian growers are looking to define themselves. And because everything grows in the Golden State, and to unsettling proportions, for those seeking to make a name, there are just far too many choices. So, like all things Californian, and within Syrah’s grand expression, there is the risk of extremes at either end of the spectrum, as well as the capacity and opportunity to produce Syrah Grande.

Old and new extremes

There is much in Californian wine that is not even remotely “Grande.” At one extreme, winemakers are producing wines that are so sweet, alcoholic, and oaky that they lose their identity completely; sometimes it is even a struggle to identify which grape they are made from. Why high-profile critics insist on rewarding and inspiring this dim, unpalatable style of winemaking, Bacchus alone knows. Just as pure gold is too soft to hold its shape in jewelry, these bottles of Syrah Syrup are not wines as such. They are the astronaut’s meal of the 1960s: a dehydrated three-course banquet in a pill; the extract of 12 bottles of wine condensed into a single glass. At up to \$300 a bottle these wines represent sound value, if the tag price includes the cost of launching them into outer space.

A modern critic calling an infant wine “balanced” at excess alcohol and ripeness levels is like a teacher evaluating an infant child’s potential on the strength of its overbearing parents; in this case, Mrs Too Much Ripeness and her husband Mr Too Much Wood. A wine that has too much of anything is by definition unbalanced, and attempting to balance too much with too much merely breaks the scales.

Additionally, in a climate where trend is stronger than daylight, while Syrah was thought to be the next Big Thing seven years ago, today the prominent new French owners of Araujo are ripping out their Syrah vines in favor of their more commercial Cabernet. Only the devout remain faithful.

At the other extreme, what I will appropriately call the Cult of Cold Climate in California (CCCC) is both the antithesis and the consequence of the state’s fashion for excess in wine. Disappointingly, as with most cult ideologies that purport to be “In Pursuit of Balance,” it has quickly become equally extreme, by dictating ideal alcohol levels and wood treatment parameters, irrespective of terroir or grape variety. Although the wines try hard to smell vaguely French, the mouthful is often weak and weedy, a consequence of picking too early and from fashionably cold sites. Several producers I visited not only competed for bragging rights over how early they picked their grapes, but admitted chaptalizing their wines to bring the alcohol over 11 percent—a practice that is not only unnecessary in California, but illegal. These young winemakers are producing wines that not only smell and taste of ideology, but are, I suspect, the siblings of euro-centric anti-New World snobbery. “Come taste my La-las,” urges one winemaker attempting to make Californian versions of Guigal’s famous Côte Rôties, La Landonne, La Mouline, and La Turque. Constant French



Photography by Michael Alan Ross

referencing makes the members of this Cult, apologists for California, while their wineries have become forums where “American oak” are dirty words, and American fruit exuberance must be avoided at all costs in favor of Old-World sensibilities.

This version of “New California” is the same old story. Underripe is simply the new overripe, dressed up in today’s fashions; and what’s hip in San Francisco doesn’t necessarily travel well. Ironically, some CCCC members were producing wines at the opposite extreme only five years ago, suggesting that they are not as ideologically motivated as they claim to be.

While fashion is the tent-pole for those lacking their own identity, both extremes damage the perception of Californian wine. Too much doesn’t balance too much, and it certainly isn’t balanced by too little, either. Fine wine must take a longer and more reasonable view than what happens to be in fashion, or wines defined by today’s fashions will age themselves into irrelevance. As the extremists grab most of the headlines, the discerning consumer should seek out the artisanal producers who respect the golden mean, turning out wines of quality, longevity, and terroir expression.

Qupé

The bottle of Syrah Grande that first inspired my passion was a bottle of 1997 Qupé Hillside Estate, from the Bien Nacido vineyard, made on the central coast by Bob Lindquist, the godfather of cool- (not cold-) climate Syrah in California. In a recent conversation, Bob told me with a sigh, “Syrah had always outgrown the Rhône Ranger tag.” Bob’s first vintage at Qupé was 1982, and the wines today haven’t deviated from what he always hoped to achieve: a Californian expression of the world’s

Above: Joe Nielsen, winemaker at Donelan Family Wines, checking fruit at harvest: “It’s all about terroir expression, it’s about taking inspiration from the vineyard”

This version of “New California” is the same old story. Underripe is simply the new overripe, dressed up in today’s fashions; and what’s hip in San Francisco doesn’t necessarily travel well

grandest grape. Concerning the current controversy regarding excessively high and low alcohol levels, he simply states, “Syrah character lends itself to a robust sweet spot of alcohol levels between 13 and 14.5 percent.” Lindquist is looking for the mineral expression you get from farming Syrah from volcanic soils, infusing his wines with spice, pepper, lavender, and garrigue notes, as well as the herbaceous element bestowed by the inclusion of whole-cluster fruit.

Donelan Family Winery

If my initial interest in Syrah Grande was kindled by Bob’s ‘97, it was set alight by the Pax/Donelan partnership of the early 2000s. This was a watershed moment for Syrah in California that unfortunately got lost in the flood upon its dissolution in 2008. Joe Donelan’s money set up the winery, Pax Mahle as winemaker was allowed to place his name on the label, and they chose the vineyard sites together. The ugly fallout in 2008–10 has been given enough airplay. Nonetheless, these men were trailblazers, even if they ended up burning the ground. Their partnership went a long way toward giving Californian Syrah an identity. By making predominantly site-specific wines, they >



Photography by (bottom) Rachel Balunasat and (top) MJ Wickham

showed the grape's potential for terroir expression in Northern California. It is testament to this partnership that more than six years after it ended, more than half the growers I recently visited are using old Pax/Donelan sites, and citing one of their wines as inspiration.

Today, Donelan is forging ahead with Donelan Family Winery. Hurt by an expensive lawsuit, as well as tainted by a marketplace that didn't want to touch him, he placed his own name on the label this time, picked himself up, hired a new winemaker, and with quality as his watchword, rolled up his sleeves. What he has achieved in six short years is nothing short of staggering.

After the recent departure of winemaker Tyler Thomas, Donelan promoted Joe Nielsen, Thomas's 28-year-old assistant of five years, to head up his winemaking team. "I am giving him a great opportunity," Donelan explains. Having tasted the 2013 vintage from barrel, I am convinced that Nielson's promotion was a shrewd move.

Syrah is the focus at Donelan. Among the four site-specific Syrahs and two stylistic blends, it is the Obsidian and Richards vineyards that are quintessentially Syrah Grande. Located high above Knight's Valley, the 40-year-old vines of the Obsidian Vineyard (named for the obsidian blocks pock-marking its soil) produce a structured, tannic wine that is all about coal, rocks, and stony black minerality. The wine is that old abandoned Californian gold mine, long since deprived of its metal, now

Tasting through a vertical of the Obsidian Vineyard 2005–2013, I am convinced that this is Californian Syrah at its grandest. From the 2008 vintage, and under the Donelan label, the wines are extraordinary

alchemically making gold out of grapes. German producer Erni Loosen would call this wine "the rock and Riesling show," and aside from the grape variety, he wouldn't be wrong. I have always believed that Syrah, although in boldness the antipathy of Riesling, is its natural red counterpart in florality and minerality. Tasting through a vertical of the Obsidian Vineyard 2005–2013, I am convinced that this is Californian Syrah at its grandest. From the 2008 vintage onward, and under the Donelan label, the wines are extraordinary. Across all varietals, I have encountered no clearer example of vineyard expression in California.

The Richards Family vineyard, although made from younger vines, for me represents the other side of Syrah Grande's profile. This wine is all about violets, lavender, and mid-summer flora. It is a Californian garden in the glass, exhibiting both wild and pretty nuances; a synthesis of the savagery and suavity that invokes old California. These two wines together represent the essence of Syrah Grande. I find myself wondering what they would taste like blended. Enter Cuvée Keltie, one of two Syrah

Top: The Morlet family: Luc, his American wife Jodie, Paul, Claire, and Chocolate
Bottom: Cattleya's talented Colombian winemaker, Bibiana Gonzalez Rave

blends made at Donelan. A best-barrel selection taken predominantly from the Richards and Obsidian vineyards, this fascinating grown-up wine is built for the long term, while their other blend, the Cuvée Christine, is a charming youthful fruit expression.

At the nerve-center of the Donelan Family Winery isn't just any old Joe, but Little Joe—winemaker Joe Nielsen—and Big Joe—owner/director Joe Donelan. Thoughtful and strategic, Little Joe doesn't talk much, but if you listen carefully, you can hear him thinking, and his mind is always in the glass or bottle. Inside the barrel-room, however, is another story, as Little Joe just doesn't shut up. If he could use one word to describe what he is looking for in his wines, it would be elegance, but he doesn't use one word. "Don't let the numbers misguide what you're tasting," he begins, "it's not science, it's agriculture. It's all about terroir expression, it's about taking inspiration from the vineyard, and not from that French bottle you had last night." Slow down, Joe, I think to myself, as he climbs a three-story ladder with his wine-thief in hand, while delivering an unexpected seminar on winemaking, followed by some inspired juice into my glass. "We conduct over 20 blending trials for each wine, as the wines keep evolving," Nielsen continues, while I struggle to keep up with my pen. "Okay, Joe," I nod. It was becoming quite clear to me that Little Joe's approach is doggedly artisanal. "We are not trying to copy," he continues, "the goal is to make a complex wine from California. And it's not about messing around with the grapes in the winery; it's about a clear expression of the site." I blow on my fingers, which are fast turning numb, as the interior of the barrel-room is distinctly cold climate. Seizing the opportunity, Little Joe adds, "We are not looking for cold sites, but uniqueness." "Can you slow down please," I ask him, as he begins to eulogize about blending, describing it as "the difference between an orchestra and a solo performance." Big Joe nods on sagely like a proud father, although by this stage he is also starting to shiver. Losing feeling in my toes, I am happy to exit the barrel-room, thankfully with my ears still attached, even though Nielsen has all but talked them off. Like a clockwork ballerina, Little Joe shuts up the instant the cellar-door is closed.

Transparent quality was not a surprise for me at Donelan, as I have followed these wines since their inception. The true surprise of my visit was tasting the 2012s and '13s from barrel. Both were bumper crops, with no producers or critics citing any major difference in the conditions, but I was struck by just how different these two vintages taste. While the '12s are floral and pretty, the denser, darker '13s keep their concentrated potential quieter; certainly a lot quieter than barrel-room Little Joe. That said, I never heard him speak again.

Paul Lato

A Polish immigrant and ex-Canadian sommelier, Paul Lato has been making wine since 2002, and Syrah Grande of note since 2006. His mission brief is purity, finesse, and freshness; an al dente style, but without undercooked connotations. Above all, the motivation for Paul is passion. Elaborating on the assumption that Pinot Noir is the focus of his winery, he admitted that while he is married to Pinot, he maintains a strong friendship with Syrah. Tasting through his Syrahs, Lato remarked that he had "made love to his wines." I steer my mind away from the image, as it is obvious that his relationship >

with Syrah has progressed way beyond friendship.

Lato makes two single-vineyard Syrahs; one from the Lerner Vineyard, and the other from the Bien Nacido site made famous by Bob Linquist. Interestingly, Paul reveals that Lerner's blocks were procured for him with invaluable help from Robert Parker. Produced from sandy riverbed soils, the Lerner is impressive for its fruit and earthiness, while the juice from the Bien Nacido site balances supple tannins with compressed minerality. Tasting through the 2007–11 wines, it is clear to me that these wines are escalating annually in excellence, the 2010s impressing most for their depth and complexity, and the '11s for their terroir expression. While Lato describes Lerner as a cooler expression of a warm site, and Bien Nacido as a warmer expression of a cool site, I would describe his wines as an extremely polished expression of a passionate Pole.

Carlisle

Converted from Welch's grape juice to wine at the age of 18 by his big sister in a single sitting, mild-mannered Mike Officer gave his winery his wife's maiden name Carlisle, in what I can only assume was an attempt to appease her for all the attention he is now busily lavishing on it. A true *garagiste*, Mike began making wine in his garage in Santa Monica. Outgrowing the garage and his day-job, Mike now produces 10,000 cases a year at his Windsor winery, of which 1,000 cases are Syrah, due only to lack of mature vineyard availability, while the rest is predominantly old-vine Zinfandel. A self-confessed Zin-guy, Mike set about hoovering up any old-vine sites following the disintegration of companies such as De Loach and Ravenswood. Today, he turns up his nose at any vines planted after 1927.

Similarly believing in older Syrah vines, Mike outsources his grapes from Paso Robles, the Central Coast, and Santa Lucia Highlands, as well as locally in the Russian River Valley. Describing himself as "a plain vanilla winemaker," he opened bottles from 2008 through 2013, including offerings from the celebrated James Barry vineyard. There is nothing plain or vanilla about these wines. Showcasing floral aromatics and incense, anchored by penetrating mineral depth, these brilliant wines typify Syrah Grande, in that they are unapologetically Californian.

Morlet

"I have opened all my Syrahs and I can't wait to try them." These were the words with which Luc Morlet greeted me upon my arrival at his St Helena winery. Clearly, he believes in delayed gratification, as I was first treated to a whistle-stop tour of Luc's life in wine: his French family's excellent Champagne; his barrel-import business; the sorting tray he invented; and finally, after what seems like hours, we sit down to try the wines.

Identifying himself as "le *villain petit canard*" (which he translates as "the black sheep of my family"), Morlet ventured beyond his inherent obligations. Establishing himself as winemaker at Peter Michael, where he continues to consult, and where he was succeeded by his brother, Morlet started producing under his own label with the 2006 vintage. This "ugly duckling" has since turned swan.

The fruit from Morlet's Bouquet Garni Syrah is sourced from the Judge Family vineyard in Bennet Valley, a site distinct for its black clay and rocky soil, while susceptible to the bay's breezy influence. Stylistically Morlet describes the vineyard as

similar to that of Côte Rôtis La Landonne. The Frenchman references French wines, although he pays them no undue reverence. "I do not make the wines at 12.5% ABV to please the French," he told me, "nor at 17% to please the wine critic." Alcohol levels here fluctuate from the low- to mid-14s, depending on vintage conditions. Tasting through every vintage he has made from 2006 to 2012, I found the wines impressively consistent, revealing non-intrusive winemaking, as well as site and vintage character. Floral aromas dominate the Bouquet Garni; violets and orange blossoms mixed with white pepper and tobacco smoke lead to a palate saturated with dusty earth and rare meat infused with spice, while olives and clay crockery leave one with the impression of having eaten Greek. These wines reveal new nuance each time I return to the glass. Morlet married an American (Jodie), and on the basis of his Syrah, the union is unquestionably harmonious.

Spottswode

The winemaking team at Spottswode make Syrah for their Field Book label, which bears no resemblance in appearance to their brand's recognized stamp. Made in minute quantities, this wine, incredibly, is created not only as a reward for their loyal mailing-list customers, but also as a reward for the winemaking staff. Field Book is made "solely in the practice of expanding our craft," winemaker Aron Weinkauff tells me. The vinous equivalent of a Christmas bonus, this offering from the Griffin's

Showcasing floral aromatics and incense, anchored by penetrating mineral depth, these brilliant wines typify Syrah Grande, in that they are unapologetically Californian

Lair vineyard, situated in the Petaluma Wind Gap, made famous by the Pax/Donelan partnership, is the most transparent expression of this site I have tried to date. The Syrah program here, started by Jennifer Williams in 2007, graduated in 2010–12 to Griffin's Lair fruit. Tasting through the wines, spanning two generations of winemakers, I was amazed both by their balance and also their juicy vibrancy. Characterized by its smoky, gamey nose, as well as its untamed animal and spice palate, the Griffin's Lair vineyard shines resplendent here at Spottswood.

Kongsgaard

Once considered the vanguard of cool-climate Syrah in Northern California, the Hudson Vineyard in Carneros, made famous by John Kongsgaard, now edges toward the riper side of the spectrum, producing some high-alcohol wines. Although Kongsgaard is also committed to quite an aggressive new-oak regime, his wine is still a reference point for Syrah Grande.

Forty minutes' drive up a deserted mountain road, John

Top: Paul Lato surveying one of the two vineyards whose fruit he bottles separately
Bottom: Carlisle owner-winemaker Mike Officer, passionate about old-vine Syrah



Photography (bottom) courtesy of Carlisle Winery; (top) by Mareshall Harrington



Photography by Niram Photography

Kongsgaard stands by the entrance to his subterranean winery. There was a look in his eye that told me, “no one ever asks me to talk about Californian Syrah.” A committed introvert, he makes his wine in a cave on top of a mountain. He is old-school California, or as old as California ever gets. In this case, he’s been making Syrah since 1996, but also remembers Napa when there were only six wineries.

We tasted through a Syrah line-up spanning 1999 through 2010. A bloody and gamey expression, it is a testament to both the grape and its terroir that the ‘99 is only now beginning to show secondary nuances. The ‘04 and ‘08s are closed and brooding, while ‘07 and ‘10 are youthfully exuberant, the later impressing with its cool-vintage clarity as well as with the maturing complexity of vines planted in 1993. As I walk out of the acoustic cave, John, a classical music aficionado, flicks on his stereo, playing out my departure to Beethoven. He drives me up to his house, perched on top of the mountain with an encompassing view of the ocean. As Kongsgaard is of Norwegian heritage, the roof of his home bears the markings of a Viking ship. Looking beyond the valley and vineyards to the ocean, I am convinced that when the judgemental flood hits, John Kongsgaard will be ready.

Failla

Ehren Jordan of Failla is a self-confessed hermit and recluse, so I was delighted to lure him out of his shell. He makes Syrah as a “labor of love” and “because I drink it at home”, admitting that “I’m just happy that some crazy people on my mailing list seem to like it”. He pauses when I asked him how he would identify the Syrahs he makes. “Erm... that’s a really hard question.” At last he admits, “I resist the typical Californian winemaker’s urge to use their wines to identify themselves; all I am is a translator, I just don’t want to get in the way of what the place has to say.”

When I taste a Californian wine from our guys who’ve worked in the Rhône and are now making Syrah at 11% ABV, I want to say, “you need to go back to France and study harder” —Ehren Jordan, Failla

Failla’s 20-year-old Hudson Vineyard vines produce a plush, volcanic wine, replete with animal blood and carcass character; while the cooler whole-cluster Estate Syrah from the Sonoma coast (Fort Ross-Seaview) displays the florid aromas I have come to expect from Syrah Grande. When I ask Ehren about his apprenticeship in Cornas with reference to his wines, he replies, “don’t talk to me about France; the climate and soils here are more like Tunisia. When I taste a Californian wine from our guys who’ve worked in the Rhône and are now making Syrah at 11% ABV, I want to say, ‘you need to go back to France and study harder.’” Ehren depicted the current working climate as young and exciting for winemakers, describing it as “the dawn of great Syrah in California,” and predicting that the wines will gain in complexity with vine age. While Failla’s 2012 Estate Syrah is remarkable for its wet stones and juicy blue-fruit vibrancy, the floral fireworks on the Hudson Vineyard make it an aromatic aphrodisiac. This wine is the most elegant expression of Lee Hudson’s site I have tried, and a stylistic counterpoint to Kongsgaard’s. Failla’s graceful Syrahs balance ripeness with

Above: Ehren Jordan of Failla harvesting Syrah, which he describes as a “labor of love”

acidity, flowers with mineral depth and detail, while maintaining elegance and freshness for those who said it all couldn’t be done in a single glass.

Cattleya

Women in wine are rare enough; women in Syrah/Shiraz, the muscular, meaty grape, are almost unheard of. For me, the presence of women in Syrah Grande is confirmation of its floral aromatics. Cattleya is an orchid, and the national flower of Colombia. As the drag queen of the horticultural world, orchids disguise their masculinity, just like Californian Syrah. “I love the violets you get,” Cattleya’s Colombian winemaker tells me. “How do you describe yourself as a woman?” I asked Bibiana Gonzalez Rave. “A lot of passion and fire, but with the finesse that comes from my training,” she answers. “Why Californian Syrah?” I follow up with. “I love the finesse and elegance that goes with its power. I never forget that I am female and that my approach is from passion, my training, and from love.” Having made Syrah since 2001, the winemaker insists that she does not make wine by following the numbers, the only important figure for her being the pH: “The alcohol varies depending on the vintage, but I look for bright acidity.” This approach, which also emerged during my discussions with Bob Lindquist, Joe Nielsen, and Ehren Jordan, confirmed that an intuitive approach is not uncommon among the producers of Syrah Grande. “I pick the grapes when I feel they are aromatically and phenologically ripe, and am guided by the way they look and taste,” Bibiana continues to explain. The outstandingly pure 2012 Soberanes Vineyard (Santa Lucia Highlands) saturates the nose in blossoming violets, lilac, and lavender, while its bright delineated palate infuses stemmy blue-fruits with sensual hints of white meat; Parma-ham over wild boar suggests Bibiana has succeeded in providing a female perspective.

Keplinger

“How do you feel about being a woman in a male-dominated profession, as well as working with a masculine grape variety?” I ask Helen Keplinger. “I never thought about it that way,” she replies. “I just make the wines I’m passionate about.” And so my line of questioning screeches to a halt, and I find my interview hijacked by a driven woman at the steering wheel. I buckle my seatbelt and try to keep up. “It’s about the site and farming strategy,” she begins. What does she look for in Syrah Grande? “Flowers, blue-fruit, spice, and rocks.” What does she expect from her site? “Soils, slopes, elevation, and good drainage.” What does she require of her own Syrahs? “Texture, tension, and masculinity.” “What about...” I was going to say femininity, but she ignores me. “The most important work is done in the vineyard to cultivate a unique expression.” “But...” I try. “I listen to the vineyard,” she avoids me once again; “I listen to the wine at all stages of its development.” “It’s all about listening,” I confront her. “It’s about understanding,” she quickly moves on. “I don’t do anything I’m not 100 percent on. I look for warm sites in cool regions, as overripe wines lose their terroir, complexity, and flowers, becoming almost macerated. I want ageability. I want Syrah character refined with prettiness.” “Aha...” I think to myself; “prettiness, femininity, there’s a way back for me here!”

“I make three Syrahs,” Keplinger begins to accelerate, “two from Sonoma and one from Lee Hudson’s site in Carneros. I

love Sonoma for Syrah; you get the red volcanic soils from the fault lines, and then the sandy soils from the raised sea-floor. We don’t have 3,000 years of grape-growing in California, but we do have hundreds of microclimates, and I love diversity!” “Do you look to France,” I manage to squeeze in. “There’s nothing wrong with looking to France,” she replies, “I look to wines from all over the world. I look to everywhere for inspiration; they all make me think, and they all have something to say.” “Do you mean that you...” I begin to say. “I know where I live,” she sees where I’m going, “and I don’t try to copy. People are starting to pay attention to terroir in California, and a sense of place can be so special if you honor it.” “How do you see yourself as a woman?” I finally blurt out, although I was denied an answer. Helen Keplinger is a winemaker first and foremost, and talk of anything else simply doesn’t matter.

Keplinger clearly has a gift for picking distinctive sites and soils. Blackcurrant compote wafting off the glass of her Kingpin Rows in Knight’s Valley precipitates a primordial palate layering hoisin, shitake, and blood-iodine, over coal, graphite, and crushed granite. Candied lilacs on the Fuego Y Mar (Fire and Sea), lead to a synthesis of saline earth singed with volcanicity. Like Keplinger herself, her wines won’t be interrupted.

Edmunds St John

“I wanted to do something other people weren’t doing,” explains Steve Edmunds of Edmunds St John. Inspired by Bob Lindquist’s 1983 central coast offering, Edmunds began making Syrah in 1985. Still doing what others aren’t, he is now making Syrah from a site in the Sierra Foothills, far from the Pacific breezes, and relying instead on 2,900ft (880m) of altitude to cool his grapes. “Californian fruit taught me how to make wine.” At almost 30 years old, Edmund’s 1986 Durrel Vineyard Syrah is still fresh and full of character. “But there are wines being made today that wouldn’t last three years,” he warns me.

Ridge Vineyards

Ridge Vineyards has been making small quantities of Syrah Grande for almost 20 years, and I have yet to find a wine that isn’t spellbinding. As with all Ridge wines, Californian icon Paul Draper uses 100 percent American oak as he believes in its quality and feels it supports terroir. “We bought the western half of our Lytton Springs vineyard in 1995,” Draper tells me. “The Syrah vines were 15 years old, planted to Syrah Noir, a clone that has been producing American Syrah for almost a century. When we planted more Syrah using the recommended French clones, we eventually had to rip them out, as they weren’t producing wines that were nearly as interesting or as complex. The reason I first joined Ridge,” he reminds me, “is that I was blown away by the ‘62 and ‘64 Monte Bellos, made by the three founding partners who had never made wine before, let alone tasted a fine French wine.”

A uniquely Californian expression

Syrah Grande is a uniquely Californian expression of Syrah. It doesn’t sunbathe on the beach, nor ride the waves of fashion. It doesn’t speak French with a strong American accent. A reviewer’s points can’t quantify its uniqueness. Exuberance is the hallmark of Californian fruit, with no apologies necessary. Grand Syrah is being made in California, and from California with “Passion” comes Syrah Grande. ■