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Cold Comfort

When it comes to temperature, syrah likes it both ways, thriving in warm spots tucked in cool places.

By Patrick Comiskey | Tuesday, 12 January 2010 | 11:11



In my most recent installment on American syrah, I hit upon a climatic formula that seems to produce exceptional results for this ubiquitous and occasionally rudderless Rhône variety. The phrase "a warm spot in a cool place" might best define the ideal conditions for growing syrah in California, places where cool temperatures slow the development of the grape so that phenolic ripeness can stay abreast of sugar ripeness but at the same time provide enough radiant warmth to bring those phenolics to maximum expression.

As syrah took root in California in the mid-'70s, no one was thinking "cool" at all, despite some obvious clues: Joseph Phelps' decade-long march south to cooler valleys, and the need to add copious amounts of tartaric acid to balance the ripe flavors of Estrella River syrah in Paso Robles. To date, the world's greatest syrahs had come from the Northern Rhône Valley, the Côte Rôtie in particular, and they didn't call it "rôtie" (roasted) for nothing. Most American producers took this to mean that syrah preferred warm sites. But growers soon realized that moving to cooler sites produced better wines. The Phelps wines, for example, showed immediate, emphatic results in cooler vineyards, even in their first and second vintages. The exotic aromatics so loved in French Syrahs, which had been largely absent in American versions -- florals, smoke, bacon fat, leather -- revealed themselves.

Indeed, within a decade of syrah's first modern plantings, some of the finest sites in the country were thriving in regions once thought to be too cool even for Burgundian varieties such as pinot noir and chardonnay. And with each passing decade the envelope got pushed a little further: now syrah is found in Oregon's Willamette Valley, and in the frigid Santa Rita Hills of Santa Barbara County.

Time will tell if these exceptional sites will pan out. In the meantime, here are prime examples of the warm spots in cool places phenomenon. It's not a complete list, but it's a good place to start.

Santa Maria Valley

In recent times, the first site planted with syrah in California was Bien Nacido Vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley, the northernmost wine-making region in Santa Barbara County. The syrah project was a joint effort of Bien Nacido's Bob Miller, a forward-thinking grower, and Bob Lindquist, the winemaker at Qupe Winery who'd had early success with syrah at the much warmer Estrella River. In 1986 Miller came to Lindquist and asked him how he thought syrah would do at Bien Nacido.

"No way," said Lindquist. "You're too cool."

"Well," said Miller, "we ripen Cabernet there."

"Yeah, but have you tasted it?" Lindquist said wryly.



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"I know," admitted Miller, "it's never been that good, but it gets ripe. I think syrah would, too." Lindquist agreed to come out and take a look, and they found a few blocks worth grafting. Thus began a successful partnership that has established Bien Nacido and the valley in which it resides as one of the more compelling syrah sites in California. Daily blasts of fog and wind batter the vines here, but Lindquist's best blocks go into his proprietary Hillside Estate syrah, situated on a southwest facing slope on one of the vineyard's highest spots where they capture the maximum hours of sun exposure in an otherwise cool place.

Santa Maria Valley producers: Qupe, Kynsi, Bonny Doon, Io, Foxen

Santa Maria vineyards: Bien Nacido, Dierbergs, Tepusquet, Upper Bench

Sonoma coastal

Syrah thrived in Sonoma County in the 19th century where successful plantings in the Sonoma Valley and the Sonoma Mountain areas established a reputation for the variety and for the region itself. "A very useful wine, of splendid color, fine fragrance, and a frank, clean vinous taste," wrote journalist Federico Pohndorff in 1885, describing a Hermitage from Sonoma Valley resident J.H. Drummond in the Pacific Wine & Spirits Review. Drummond's settlement was in a valley protected from the ocean's cooling influence. A century later, cool climate plantings were increasingly common, especially on the fogbound slopes of the Russian River Valley, but they were devoted largely to varieties like pinot noir and chardonnay. No one had yet considered syrah in such places. But in 1989, Tom Dehlinger, who had already established a reputation for great Russian River pinot noir, planted syrah on his estate. The resulting wines -- dark and brooding, tightly woven, beautifully structured and built to age -- proved that cool spots in Sonoma were good for syrah, too.

Syrah is planted all over the vast Sonoma County, but it has been distinctive in three unlikely places: the Russian River Valley, the Petaluma Gap, and Sonoma's Outer Coast, all areas once considered cool even for pinot noir.

Russian River Valley

Dehlinger's three acres of syrah were followed by plantings at Saralee's Vineyard and Dutton Ranch, whose great success with pinot and chardonnay in the late '80s and '90s brought new attention to the outer edges of the valley. In 1997, the Duttons planted Cherry Ridge Vineyard to syrah. Its warm ridgetop on the southern end of the valley has been the source for a stellar syrah from Dutton-Goldfield, a brand that partners the Dutton family with winemaker Dan Goldfield. The wine from Cherry Ridge, like many from the Russian River, is tender, black-fruited and supple, with a tinge of smoke and subtle forest floor accents reminiscent of Russian River pinot.

Russian River Valley producers: Dutton-Goldfield, Copain, Radio-Coteau, Dehlinger

Russian River Valley vineyards: Lauterbach Hill, Timbervine, Dutton Ranch

Petaluma Gap

South of the Russian River lies the Petaluma Gap, one of the more dramatic terroirs in Sonoma County. This narrow corridor of land practically doubles as a wind tunnel from almost unimpeded exposure to ocean gales. As in the Russian River, pinot and chardonnay dominate the slopes here, but beautiful syrah is finding expression, especially in the savory wines of Pax Mahle, whose new winery, Wind Gap, captures the essence of this place. Mahle, who until 2006 produced syrah bottlings by the dozen in a given vintage for his label Pax, at the moment makes just one wine; its fruit is sourced largely from the gap but also from a number of Sonoma Coast sources -- a judicious blend, assembled and handled like pinot noir.

Petaluma Gap producers: Wind Gap, Keller Estate, Pax, Lost Canyon

Petaluma Gap vineyards: Que, Griffin's Lair, Stage Gulch, Clary Ranch

The Outer Coast

The so-called Outer Coast is a the network of hills between Jenner and Fort Ross where pinot and chardonnay were tentatively planted 20 years ago. In most cases, the sites are above the inversion layer of fog and aren't shrouded the entire day, leaving the syrah with enough radiant heat to get to full ripeness slowly, with harvests well into October.

It's where Ehren Jordan planted syrah on his estate vineyard. "It's not the coldest site on the coast," he says, "but it's very cool; I'm surrounded by neighbors growing very expensive pinot noir, the same ridge as Hirsch and Flowers. It's an exquisite place to grow syrah, too; I can get it as ripe as I want to get it -- though it takes a long, long time."

Outer Coast producers: Failla, Peay, Neyers, Renard

Outer Coast vineyards: Failla Estate, Peay, Old Lakeville Road

Los Carneros

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