



Updating Syrah

by Charles M. Bear Dalton

Back in 1997 I wrote, with the zeal of a religious convert, an article called “The New Pinot” in which I touted American Syrah as the next breakout wine just as American Pinot Noir had been the last break out wine. I was wrong. I still love to drink great American Syrah but I was wrong about it being the next big thing. Maybe my crystal ball was set for a date (still to come) further out than I had imagined. Nevertheless, I got lots of positive comments on the article including some of the “you gave away the location of my favorite fishing hole” type. Syrah is not a breakout success story like Pinot Noir. However, over the last four years, American Syrah sales have increased (albeit slowly) even as Australian Shiraz sales have tanked. Pinot Gris (Grigio) and Moscato (the real breakout success stories of the last four years) are growing MUCH faster than Syrah. Even stodgy old Cabernet Sauvignon is out-growing Syrah. Syrah can be a real challenge (more to sell than to make) and some producers have given up. I’ve heard more than one Syrah producer say “You know the difference between a case of Syrah and a case of the clap? You can get rid of a case of the clap.” I get it. That is to say I get the joke but not ... well, you know.

Syrah has been and continues to be a challenging wine to sell. Syrah can grow anywhere from the coolest Sonoma Coast vineyards well suited to Pinot Noir to the warmest vineyards of Paso Robles. And winemakers make it with pump-overs and punch-downs and even “punch overs” (combining the two techniques) not to mention submerged cap and rack and return. Between the varied climates and the mix of techniques, it can be hard for even a Syrah lover to know what he is getting when trying a new wine. And yet ...

Syrah is making, both by itself and in blends, some of the most exciting wine being made in the US today. (I mentioned American Syrah’s role in blends a couple of weeks back in “Other Red.”) As varietal Syrah goes, wine such as Hyde de Villaine, Duxoup, Araujo, Justin, Stolpman, Big Table Farm (coming soon), Gorman, Grey Stack, Rock Block, and Waters really get me going. Below are my notes on some of the most exciting Syrah wines available for sale today.

PARSING SYRAH

Choosing a Syrah can be vexing for a lot of consumers. The problem is figuring out what is in the bottle before you spend your money on it. With many popular wines, there is a more uniform expectation of type than there is with Syrah. Of the major grape varieties, only Riesling offers as extreme a range of styles as Syrah. The two big factors in determining a Syrah’s style are Climate and Cap Management. Where was it grown and how was it made?

CLIMATE

American Syrah is grown up and down the length of the American West Coast (including both Baja California and British Columbia) and even in Virginia, Texas, and Colorado. Some of the best Syrah vineyards can be downright chilly and others are frankly hot. These extremes, as well as the range in the middle, produce divergent levels of fruit and acidity. They determine the balance between red and black fruit. In general, cooler sites will yield more red fruit and warmer sites more black fruit. Generally, Carneros, Sonoma Coast, Russian River Valley, Santa Maria Valley, Sta. Rita Hills, and Willamette Valley are cooler areas. Generally, Napa and Alexander Valleys as well as Oregon’s Rogue Valley and Washington’s Eastern areas are warmer climates. Generally, but not always. Knowing where the grapes were grown will help you to know the style.

CAP MANAGEMENT

To further confound things, winemakers typically use two main, but quite different, cap management techniques when making Syrah: Pump-Overs and Punch-Downs. Others, such as submerged cap, rotary fermenters, or rack-and-return (delestage) may be incorporated but pump-overs and punch-downs are by far the most commonly seen.

More and more winery PR and wine bottle back labels talk about the techniques used to make the wine. Red wines’ color, structure, and flavor all come largely from the grape skins. How those skins (which form the cap) are managed during fermentation goes a long way in determining the character of the finished wine. Here we look at the techniques for cap management most commonly employed.

The cap is the mix of grape skins and pulp and seeds that rises to the top of the fermenting tank as it separates from the juice during fermentation. The carbon dioxide produced during fermentation (a whopping 50 liters for each liter of wine produced) helps form the cap as it rises to escape from the juice. Left untended, the cap will float on top of the wine and dry out. This separation of skins and juice limits the opportunity for the juice to extract color, flavor, and tannin from the skins. Left untended, microbial and other spoilage problems will develop in the cap as it dries. The techniques most commonly used to manage the cap include punch-downs (pigeage), pumping over, rack-and-return (delestage), and submerged cap.

Punching down is the oldest form of cap management and is the technique most commonly used for fine Pinot Noir. For pigeage, the must is pumped into a tank (usually open-topped) no taller than it is across. When the cap forms, it is periodically broken up to mix it back into the wine. Pigeage may be mechanical or manual. A pole with a plate on the bottom may be used to break up the cap or a hydraulic plunger may serve the same purpose. In a large tank, the cap can get firm enough overnight that a man can walk across it. Breaking up this sort of cap manually is quite laborious. If the tank is small enough – like the one-ton fermenters used for many Russian River Valley Pinots and Zins – pigeage can be accomplished by leaning in and using the arms to break and turn the cap. The traditional means of pigeage was to get into the tank and use the human body to break up the cap. Of all the cap management techniques, pigeage gives the fermenting wine the least exposure to oxygen.

Pumping Over is the most common cap management technique used in making red wine today. Typically the ripe grapes are de-stemmed and crushed and this must – the combination of juice, pulp, skins, and seeds – is put into a tank about twice as tall as it is across. As the ferment starts in the tank, the juice separates from the solids and the cap forms. As many as five times a day, juice is drawn out from the bottom of the tank and pumped up and sprayed over the cap so that it wets down the cap as it works its way back down and through the cap like water seeping through coffee grounds. Most non-Pinot Noir based red wines are most often made in this manner. Pumping over can introduce a lot of oxygen into the fermenting wine.

Sometimes a winemaker doing punch-downs will also do a pump-over every few days. This is sometimes referred to as a “punch-over”.

If you know where it was grown and how it was made, and you know which types you like, you will be better able to figure out which Syrahs are for you.

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GORMAN Pixie Syrah, Red Mountain, WA, 2008

12x750ml \$40.39 \$453.84

100% Syrah aged 20 months in 100% French Oak (90% new). Dense-purple-black in color with well formed legs (stains the glass); dry, full-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Big dark red and more black fruit. Big feel in the mouth. Dense and rustic with still-integrating notes of oak and earth. Tech: 15.2% Alcohol. Spec's Score: 91.

DUXOUP 'Teldeschi' Syrah, Dry Creek, 2007

12x750ml \$16.29 \$183.00

90% Syrah and 10% Cabernet Sauvignon aged 7 months in French Oak barrels (25% new). All hand sorted, gravity flow, with malolactic fermentation is in barrel. Purple in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Funky rich, juicy Syrah offering what starts as black and then goes to dark red fruit. Fresh Balance. Excellent. Tech: 13.5% Alcohol. Spec's Score: 91.

Domaine Serene ROCK BLOCK Del Rio Vineyard Syrah, Rogue Valley, 2005

12x750ml \$18.99 \$213.74

100% Syrah sourced from Del Rio Vineyard in Southern Oregon overlooking Rogue River. Rocky clay loam soils. Aged 14 months in primarily French Oak barrels (63% new). Black-purple in color with well formed legs; dry, full-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Rough and rustic. Mostly back fruit and earth with notes of coffee grounds, tobacco, black pepper and dark spice. Delicious. Drinking beautifully. Tech: 14.4% Alcohol. Spec's Score: 91+.

GREY STACK MARIE'S BLOCK SYRAH, Sonoma, 2007

12x750ml \$29.44 \$333.06

100% Syrah given a 5 day cold soak, fermented in open tops with punch downs, and aged for 12 months in French oak barrels. Purple-black in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Supple, fresh, juicy dark red and some black fruit accented with dark spice and a hint of coffee. Ripe and well integrated; rich, dark and delicious. Tech: 13.5% Alcohol. Spec's Score: 92.

WATERS Loess Valley Vineyard Syrah, Walla Walla Valley, 2008

12x750ml \$36.89 \$414.75

90% Syrah and 10% Viognier co-fermented and aged 24 months in all French oak barrels (40% new). (Loess is owned and managed by Leonetti Cellars - only 2 acres of Syrah are planted.) The fruit was crushed and destemmed then the stems are dried in small slotted cherry bins for 36 hours and then approximately 30% are added back into the fermentation. Deep purple red in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and medium-chewy phenolics. Spicy, juicy, ripe, red and black raspberry and some cherry fruit Syrah. Offers dark spice, black and white pepper, and plenty of coffee grounds. Finishes more red cherry than raspberry. Bright and alive. Tech: 14.1% Alcohol. Spec's Score: 92+.

**WATERS Pepper Bridge Vineyard Syrah, Walla Walla Valley, 2008**

12x750ml \$36.89 \$414.75

100% Syrah aged 16 months in all French oak barrels (10% new). Pepper Bridge is one of the oldest vineyards in Walla Walla, planted along elevated terrace islands formed by slack water drainage from the Walla Walla River. Purple in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Much earthier and bigger. Dark red and some black fruit. Black raspberry and red raspberry with red cherry and lots of coffee grounds. Bright and fresh but huge in the mouth. Completely different style than the Loess vineyard. Tech: 14.1% Alcohol. Spec's Score: 93+.

CALCAREOUS Syrah, Paso Robles, 2007

12x750ml \$28.39 \$319.59

100% Syrah aged 24 months in French oak barrels (30% new). Purple-red-black in color with well formed legs; dry, full-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Rich and ripe with lots of dark red and black fruit accented with spice and mineral earth. Complex mix of fruit and spice with well integrated earth and oak. DELICIOUS. Spec's Score: 94. Tech: 14.5% Alcohol.

STOLPMAN VINEYARDS Estate Syrah, Santa Ynez Valley, 2009

12x750ml \$34.99 \$395.28

97% Syrah and 3% Viognier. (Syrah yield 1.5 ton per acre). Fermented in 2 ton fermentors with 3 daily punch-downs. Viognier is co-fermented with additional pressed Viognier skins and 25% sorted brown stems included. Aged 16 months in French 300 liter cigar barrels (33% new). Deep-dense-purple-blue-red in color, with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Ripe, rich and chewy. As much black as red fruit Syrah, offering lots of coffee and coffee grounds with black and some white pepper along with toasty oak and warm earth. Some dark floral and cassis perfume emerges as it opens. Dense but layered. Delicious. Excellent. Tech: 14.5% Alcohol. Spec's Score: 94.

ARAUJO ESTATE Eisele Vineyard Syrah, Napa Valley, 2007

6x750ml \$97.49 \$536.13

100% Syrah fermented in open tops with punch downs and aged 22 months in all French oak barrels (50% new). Deep purple in color with well formed legs; dry, full-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Subtly elegant, focused but juicy Syrah. More black than red fruit (but the red fruit is present). Notes of spice and dry earth. Very well integrated. Delicious. Great texture and feel. Outstanding. Spec's Score: 96.

STOLPMAN VINEYARDS Originals Syrah, Santa Ynez Valley, 2008

12x750ml \$22.79 \$257.66

97% Syrah and 3% Viognier fermented using punch-downs. Syrah yield is 1.25 tons per acre from the oldest block in Ballard Canyon. Viognier is co-fermented. Aged 10 months in French 300 liter cigar barrels (50% new). Deep purple in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with balanced acidity and medium-chewy phenolics. Cooler and more finished in the mouth. Offers power and elegance. Delicious. Succulent, juicy ripe Syrah but in precise balance. Deep, lovely, supple red and some black fruit. Black and a bit of white pepper. The earth and oak are nicely integrated. Tech: 14.9% Alcohol. Spec's Score: 96.

