



Who is that masked man? Houston's Own Rhone Ranger

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



Mild-mannered wine importer
Doug Skopp becomes ...



... the Rhone Ranger!

Maybe you remember the 1989 Wine Spectator cover featuring Bonny Doon owner Randall Graham as "the Rhone Ranger"? Overnight, California's producers of Rhone varieties – mostly Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre, and a bit of Viognier, Roussanne, and Marsanne – became known collectively as the Rhone Rangers even as their wines blended from those varieties also became known as Rhone Rangers. That cover put Rhone varieties at the front of consumer awareness. California's Rhone-style industry got its "Sideways" push but a funny thing happened: awareness of the original Rhone appellations and wines referenced by the new world imitators also increased. The Rhone range expanded with the old world benefiting along with the new world.

As time passed, various champions of the Rhone have emerged. Writer Robert Parker (the Wine Advocate) and importers Kermit Lynch, Bobby Kaacher, JC Mathis, and Dan Kravitz (Hand Picked Selections) are all national figures who rode or even drove the Rhone train for a time. Since then, the surge has eased a bit and Rhone is part of the wine establishment. There are lots of great Rhone producers – Chave, Pegau, Ogier, Guigal, Vieux Telegraphe, Chapoutier, Beaucastel, St. Cosme, Rayas ... - well known in the US. But who is out there looking for new producers and working to develop a market for these new entries? One answer to that question is Doug Skopp. Who? Allow me to introduce you to Houston's own Rhone Ranger.

Doug Skopp didn't start out thinking he would make a mark in the wine business. A 1983 mechanical engineering graduate of the University of Texas, Skopp was CEO of a small research and engineering firm until 2001 when he left that industry to follow his passion into wine. Rather than open a wine bar or specialty retail shop, Skopp went into the wine importing and wholesale business as Dionysus Imports. He started small, really a one man show, traveling to France to visit producers and select wines and traveling between restaurants and shops in Texas to present and sell his selections. He was president and CEO but he was also salesman, warehouseman, purchasing agent, and delivery driver. Over the years he has built up a more substantial if still small import and wholesale company and a big reputation as an excellent selector of high quality Rhone producers. His "stable" includes Domaine Mourchon, Domaine l'Ameillaud, Domaine Notre Dames des Pallieres, Domaine Balandran, Domaine Monardiere, Domaine de Cayron, Domaine St. Laurent, and Aurelien Chatagnier. The back labels all read "Douglas Skopp Selection". Maybe you've heard of some of them? Maybe not ... but if you love good Rhone wines, you'll be paying attention to these up-and-comers on the Rhone range.

Domaine Balandran

Balandran is located in Costieres de Nimes so it isn't technically a Rhone wine. The grapes are the same and the terroir is close but the location is a bit too far west and south. Nonetheless, the flavors are a fit and that is what Skopp and his customers are looking for. Doug found out about Balandran when he tasted about bottle over dinner at Walter McKinlay's home in Seguret. He was impressed and went looking for them.

BALANDRAN "Les Mugues" Blanc, Costières de Nimes, 2009

12x750ml \$14.79 \$166.16

Tech: 13% Alcohol. A blend of 50% Grenache Blanc 30%, Roussanne, 10% Viognier, and 10% Rolle tank fermented using no ML and aged 4 months in all stainless steel tanks. Straw in color with good legs; dry, medium-light-bodied with freshly balanced acidity. Fresh, lively, juicy. Lemony fresh fruit with a hint of tropical. Very fresh. Yum. Fine. BS: 89VHR.

BALANDRAN "Les Mugues" Rouge, Costières de Nimes, 2006

12x750ml \$14.49 \$162.50

Tech: 13.5% Alcohol. A blend of 80% Syrah and 20% Grenache aged 12 months in concrete tanks. Dark-blue-purple in color with red highlights and with well formed legs; dry, medium-full-bodied with balanced acidity and moderately chewy phenolics. Rich and juicy in the mouth with dark red and more black fruit accented with black pepper and a subtle garrigue note. Finishes with a bit of dust. Really Fine. BS: 90+.

BALANDRAN "Vielles Vignes" Rouge, Costières de Nimes, 2006

12x750ml \$22.24 \$247.81

Tech: 13.5% Alcohol. 100% Syrah from 50 year vines given a pre-fermentation cold soak and aged 12 months new French oak. Purple-blue in color with well formed legs; dry, full-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Rough and rustic with LOTS of black fruit, dark earth, and garrigue. Layers in black pepper, oak, dust, and a bit of smoky bacon fat. Excellent. BS: 91+.

Ch. Saint Pierre de Mejans

The estate of Ch. Saint Pierre de Mejans is built around a priory and vineyard that dates back to at least the 1100s. The current iteration of this upper Luberon terroir took hold in 1993 under the proprietorship of Brice Doan de Champassak. Skopp found this estate though the folks at Balandran. He was looking for something excellent from Luberon and hadn't found it until he got this introduction.

Ch. SAINT PIERRE DE MEJANS, Côtes du Luberon Blanc, 2009

12x750ml \$14.99 \$168.80

Tech: 13% Alcohol. A blend of 40% Clairette, 30% Grenache Blanc, and 30% Vermentino fermented and aged in all stainless steel tanks. Pale straw in color with good legs; dry, medium light-bodied with balanced acidity. Offers indeterminate citrus and stone fruit with minerals and accents of subtle floral and mountain meadow. Long, clean finish; lively focused and somehow satisfying. Tastes better than my note seems to indicate. Elegant but not at all boring. Fine. BS: 88HR.

Ch. SAINT-PIERRE DE MEJANS, Cotes du Luberon Rouge, 2006
12x750ml \$14.99 \$168.80

Tech: 13.5% Alcohol. A blend of 35% Grenache, 50% Syrah, 15% Carignan from vines with an average age of 20-25 years fermented using pump-over. Aged 18 months in all concrete tanks. Bottled with no fining and a light palate filtration. Red-purple in color with good legs; dry, medium full-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and moderately chewy phenolics. Juicy dark red and some black fruit with lots of sweetness. Cherry and hints of strawberry along with notes of garrigue, rustic earth, and black pepper. Bright and alive. Really Fine. BS: 90+.

Domaine l'Ameillaud

Domaine de l'Ameillaud dates back over 200 years but the first estate bottling was done in the 1980s. The owners today are Sabine and Nick Thompson. Nick, an Englishman, had an uncle who was Master of Wine and who gave him some inspiration and interest in wine. In London, he as a young man met a French girl, Sabine, grand-daughter of a wine grower in Cairanne. Not surprisingly the young couple moved to France. They both took courses at the wine school in Beaune and then Sabine's grandfather offered them the job as managers of his domain. After the grandfather's death, in 1991, they bought part of the domain from the heirs. Skopp knew about l'Ameillaud from the excellent press it was getting in Europe and on the west coast he was put onto by his friend Walter McKinlay of Domaine Mourchon.

Domaine de l'AMEILLAUD**Cotes du Rhone Villages - Cairanne, 2009**
12x750ml \$17.64 \$196.56

Tech: 15% Alcohol. A blend of 65 % Grenache, 25 % Syrah, and 10% Carignan from 45 year old vines grown on limestone and clay soils on south and south-west facing slopes located to the east of the village of Cairanne. No oak is used except for press wines, the rest is all concrete. Sensory: dark-blue-purple-black in color that stains the glass with well formed legs. Dry, full-bodied with softly balanced acidity and moderately chewy phenolics. Lovely black fruit, rich and dense with a lovely texture. Supple, almost fat. Delicious. The finish hints at blackberry liqueur. YUM. Excellent. BS: 93+.

Domaine de Pallières

An old family property (back to the 1200s) now run by cousins Jean Pierre and Claude Roux based in Gigondas but growing the vines in several appellations around the southern Rhone for a total of more than 65 hectares under vines. The wines are vinified in Gigondas using recent if not modern equipment.

Domaine NOTRE DAME DES PALLIERES,**Cotes du Rhone Villages - Rasteau, 2007**
12x750ml \$15.34 \$172.75

Tech: 14% Alcohol. A blend of 75% Grenache, 20% Mourvedre and 5% Cinsault and 2/3 in tanks and 1/3 in 3rd and 4th use barriques. Red-purple in color with well formed legs; quite dry, medium-full-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. LOTS of Garrigue with lots of black and some red fruit. Very dusty (as if it had some Carignan in the blend. Rustic but in a good way.) Really Fine. BS: 90.

Domaine NOTRE DAME DES PALLIERES, Gigondas, 2007**12x750ml \$27.30 \$307.44**

Tech: 14.5% Alcohol. A blend of 80% Grenache, 10% Syrah and 10% Mourvedre from 50 year old vines manually harvested. The 31 day, temperature controlled fermentation and maceration includes 20% whole clusters. 20% of the wine press is incorporated and the whole is aged in all old oak foudrees. Purple in color with well formed legs; full-bodied with balanced acidity and moderately chewy phenolics.

Rich ripe dark red Grenache fruit (cherry and strawberry) dominates with black fruit complexity from the Syrah and Mourvedre. Dusty and rich in the mouth. Subtle rustic garrigue character. Delicious. Excellent. BS: 92.

Domaine de Mourchon

Established in 1998 with the purchase of 17 hectares of existing vines, Domaine de Mourchon is the vision of retired IT entrepreneur Walter McKinlay. Until he bought the plot, its fruit from these vines had been vinified at the co-operative disappearing into the local blends. McKinlay had to both build a winery and create a brand at the same time. He was convinced by the terroir and the quality of the vines (average age 55 years) so he built of a new gravity-flow winery, which was completed for the 1999 harvest. In 2003, McKinlay purchased another 7 hectares of vines in order to supply an ever-increasing demand from both the international and local market.

Skopp says he originally found out about Mourchon via Rick Jamail who then worked for Republic Beverage (RNDC) and is now the on-premise manager for Spec's wholesale division. Doug was impressed enough to seek out Mourchon as his first Rhone supplier.

Domaine de MOURCHON Tradition,
Cotes du Rhone Villages - Seguret, 2007
12x750ml \$18.20 \$204.96

Tech: 14% Alcohol. A blend of 65% Grenache, 25% Syrah, and 10% Carignan from 40 year vines grown on a mixture of clay, limestone, and grey sandstone on steep slopes yielding at 35 hl/ha. Aged 24 months in all concrete tanks. Blue-purple in color with red highlights and well formed legs; dry, very full-bodied with balanced acidity and moderately chewy phenolics. Supple, rich, spicy; lovely feel. Offers deep dark red and more black fruit. Spicy with subtle garrigue. A bit dusty at the end, but more elegant than rustic. Excellent. BS: 91+.

Domaine de MOURCHON Grande Reserve,**Cotes du Rhone Villages - Seguret, 2007**
12x750ml \$26.59 \$300.12

Tech: 14.5% Alcohol. A blend of 65% Grenache and 35% Syrah from 60-year-old vines grown in a mixture of clay, limestone and grey sandstone on steep slopes with a yield of only 20 hl/ha. Aged 24 months, of which one year is in once used 40% oak barrels and 60% concrete vats and then another year all in concrete. Purple-blue-black in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with balanced acidity and moderately chewy phenolics. Rich and rounded with lots of juicy rich black and red fruit. Classic dust and garrigue with fine brightness. Great focus, and yes, elegance. Excellent. BS: 92+.

Domaine de MOURCHON Family Reserve S (Syrah),**Cotes du Rhone Villages - Seguret, 2008**
6x750ml \$48.40 \$266.40

Tech: 14% Alcohol. 100% Syrah from 60 year vines grown on pure grey sandstone on steep slopes at only 15 Hl/Ha. Vinification in small stainless steel tanks, aging in oak barrels (about 10 months). Bottled with no filtration. Less than 200 cases made. Deep-dark-blue-purple-black in color with subtle red highlights. It paints the glass with its well formed legs. Dry, very full-bodied with balanced acidity and quite chewy phenolics. Deep dense, but alive. Real WOW wine. Explosive Black Syrah fruit and great texture. Syrah and sand terroir with black pepper and dark spices. Truly Delicious. Really Excellent. BS: 95.



continues on page 3

Clos de TRIAS, Cotes de Ventoux, 2007**12x750ml \$19.94 \$225.02**

Tech: 14.5% Alcohol. A blend of 70% Grenache, 20% Syrah, 7% Carignan, and 3% Cinsault from 40-year-old, Biodynamic vines fermented and aged all in tank. Purple in color with well formed legs; dry, full-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Dusty-juicy mix of some black and more red fruit with plenty of garrigue, black pepper, dusty earth, and subtle spice. Yum. Quite rustic and richly satisfying. Really Fine. BS: 90+.

Domaine La MONARDIERE, Vacqueyras, 2006**12x750ml \$29.25 \$329.40**

Tech: 14.5% Alcohol. A blend of 70% Grenache and 30% Syrah from 40 year old vines yielding 32 hl /ha on limestone soils. Purple-red in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Earthy, almost to the point of barnyard, rich, spicy with more red than black fruit with subtle garrigue. Rich but lively and bright. Really Fine. BS: 90+.

Domaine du CAYRON, Gigondas, 2007**12x750ml \$34.78 \$391.62**

Tech: 14% Alcohol. A blend of 70% Grenache, 14% Syrah, 15% Cinsault and 1% Mourvedre aged 9 months in old oak foudrees. Blue-purple-black in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Rustic with lots of garrigue. Dense with ripe red and some black fruit. Note of black pepper and a hint of coffee. Fine. BS: 89. (Doug sees a bit more here than I do.)

Domaine SAINT LAURENT, Chateauneuf du Pape, 2007**12x750ml \$37.30 \$424.56**

Tech: 14% Alcohol. 90% Grenache and 10% Syrah. Manual harvested and completely destemmed, the wine gets a long maceration with regular pump-overs followed by 15 months in oak barrels. Red-purple in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with balanced acidity and medium chewy phenolics. This is a clean, lively moderately rich Chateauneuf offering as much black as red fruit with black pepper and a subtle garrigue note. Fine. BS: 89+. (Again, Doug sees a bit more here than I do.)

AURELIEN CHATAGNIER, Saint Joseph, 2006**12x750ml \$36.99 \$417.24**

Tech: 13% Alcohol. 100% Syrah. Deep-red-purple in color; stains the glass with well formed legs; dry, full-bodied with softly balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Dense with mostly black Syrah fruit. Earthy with rich terroir notes, black pepper, and subtle spice. Fine length. The terroir here has changed and we are definitely in the Northern Rhone. Excellent. BS: 91. ✨

