

Wine

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Grenache displays its stunning side



Jon Bonne

Grenache grown in spots like this, the Santa Barbara Highlands vineyard in the high-desert town of Ventucopa, can adapt to a wide range of often arid climates.

By Jon Bonné

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It has become a theme around here that Grenache stands to become a great hope for West Coast

wine - stepping in where Syrah had boldly tried to go.

This happy grape, native to both the Rhone and Spain, has plenty to commend it. It is mellow by nature, but not without a tough side. (For good reason, a growing number of Californians are harnessing Garnacha clones from Spain's Priorat for their roughneck, tannic nature.)

If Syrah is channeling Bones McCoy, and Pinot Noir subs in here for Spock, Grenache can be Shatner-era Kirk: smooth, perhaps a touch glib, but also confident and dashing - and not without the occasional show of temper.

The hopes for Grenache ascendent have come to pass. Aided in part by 2011's relative chill, which made for a nail-biter of a year with such a late-ripening grape, the latest specimens from California and the Northwest are, at their best, downright lovely. They display the variety's innately charming berry flavors with a bit less swagger.



Accomplishing that last dash of hesitation in style - of tempering Grenache's gregarious nature with just a bit of Chekov-like reserve - is often the grape's downfall. When it goes large, Grenache goes wormhole. But this time, we found just enough shyness to enhance its appeal.

Of course there's still progress to be made in hoisting Grenache from its previous life in the basement. After serving as one of California's workaday grapes through much of the midcentury - used mostly in cheap pink wine - its fortunes, and acreage, shrank significantly as high-quality plantings appeared. (That push for betterment extended to Washington.)

But there's still a big quality gap. For all the fancier vineyards making often stellar Grenache, there were still more than 65,000 tons crushed in California last year - harvested from around 6,000 acres. That's more than 10 tons per acre, far above the statewide yield of even a grape like Cabernet Sauvignon, hardly immune itself to being farmed at industrial scale. Translation: A lot

of Grenache is still treated as a junk grape.

It shouldn't be. Here's a variety that thrives both in the coastal chill and the inland sun - from Santa Barbara to Santa Clara to the Sierra and the dry ridges of eastern Washington. (Paso Robles was a notable exception in our final lineup, but I'd posit that's more an issue of winemaking than terroir.)

The foothills in particular shined once again. El Dorado's affinity for the grape has been surging (go to: <http://bit.ly/TfbVXj>), and no different this time. But Sonoma, Mendocino and even Clarksburg were in the mix. As much as its Rhone-ish counterpart Syrah can be uncooperative in the wrong spot, Grenache really wants to get along.





Craig Lee, Special To The Chronicle

Grenache wine

If there's a cautionary note, it's in the realm of style. Even with the leaner vintage (and 2010 as well), there was still an abundance of wines attempting Grenache by brute force - trying to overwhelm rather than charm. With a grape so easygoing, why set the phasers to kill?

Otherwise, though, this should be a happy moment, for California especially. Here are pleasing, generous wines that do well on the table. Bottles from Four Fields and Birichino, particularly, offer distinction for a reasonable fare. In doing so, they find a happy balance between the Grenache's scullery past, and the ambitions of - you got it - the next generation.

A selection of Grenache

2011 Sheldon Ceja Vineyard Sonoma Valley Grenache (\$40, 12.8% alcohol): An auspicious effort from the edge of Sonoma, where it abuts Carneros. The light-touch cellar work shows here: fermentation using whole clusters in a semicarbonic fashion, aging in neutral oak. It's silken and gorgeous, with a green-olive savory edge and lily aromas to delicate strawberry fruit. A dark-

stone mineral tension elevates it further.

2011 Amphora Clarksburg Grenache (\$32, 13.7%): Rick Hutchinson tapped an improbable spot for Grenache - near the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. But it's tangy, with great doses of wet rose and talc to match its raspberry galette flavors. A distinct mineral side and a persistent liveliness make it everything that Grenache should be.

2011 Wind Gap Old-Vine Sceales Vineyard Sonoma County Grenache (\$36, 13.7%): Pax Mahle is among the vintners (Hobo's Kenny Likitprakong is another) who uncovered the virtues of this old Alexander Valley site, planted in the 1930s on sand -- a soil particularly kind to this grape. Juicy berry fruit and a surprising dose of tannin are edged by white flowers and sasparilla. Aged in old barrels and concrete eggs, it's mellow but shows great sinew.

2011 Four Fields El Dorado Grenache (\$18, 14.4%): After guiding many coastal winemakers to the charms of the foothills, grower Ron Mansfield and his son Chuck (winemaker at Sonoma's Hop Kiln) decided to tackle Grenache themselves. This debut effort from the Fenaughty vineyard and the Mansfields' own Goldbud Farms is vibrant and aromatic, with charcoal and allspice accents to licorice-edged blackberry.

2011 Birichino Besson Vineyard Vielles Vignes Central Coast Grenache (\$21, 13.5%): Alex Krause and John Locke have hit it again with this tremendous value - again tapping the century-old Besson vineyard near Gilroy for its Grenache bounty, here picked in late October amid the encroaching frost. An iodine-like tang and citron accents balance sweet berry fruit. Surprisingly complex.

2011 Skinner El Dorado Grenache (\$26, 14.8%): The Skinner family and winemaker Chris Pittenger found a hearty, musky expression from El Dorado: wild sage and mace, matched to tannic black currant and tangy raspberry. Dense and big, but still remarkably finessed.

2010 A Tribute to Grace Santa Barbara Highlands Vineyard Santa Barbara County Grenache (\$42, 14.4%): Angela Osborne's effort from the high desert of Santa Barbara has a quietude in this vintage. Green olive and cardamom, with its perfume showing as the wine opens. Lots of edgy red fruit and tangerine, and surprising tannin. With time, a birch-bark warmth

emerges.

2011 David Girard El Dorado Grenache (\$22, 14.2%): This foothills winery is on point again with its forthcoming release. There's robust fruit - like strawberry compote - but the vintage has extra lift to the flavors, and a perfume from whole grape clusters, plus cinnamon and hyacinth. Ripe but certainly masterful.

2011 Broc Cassia Martian Vineyard Santa Barbara County Grenache (\$27, 12.7%): Berkeley's Chris Brockway tapped a new source - the Martian property in the town of Los Olivos. It's a bit young and knotted right now. But with time its silken texture should settle out, and the yellow mustard-seed spice brings a great complexity to tangy, almost porcelain red berry fruit.

2011 Horse & Plow Testa Vineyard Old Vines Mendocino Grenache (\$27, 14%): Chris Condos and Suzanne Hagins tap old organically farmed vines in the town of Calpella for this inky, chewy example. With wild blueberry and tart plum, and a celery-like bite, it's almost like Dolcetto, and happier once it has time to mellow in the glass.

2011 Alexandria Nicole Purple Reign Destiny Ridge Vineyard Horse Heaven Hills Grenache (\$38, 14.4%): Winemaker Jarrod Boyle took a stylish (35 percent new oak) approach with this site on bluffs above the Columbia River, looking straight across the water into central Oregon. It shows that brawny, dark side of Grenache that can be winning, full of black raspberry and mint leaves.

2011 Amador Foothill Shenandoah Valley Grenache (\$20, 13.9%): This Plymouth winery's first Grenache is light and straightforward, with just enough extraction for pretty strawberry blossom and peach notes. Immediately enjoyable.

Panelists: Ian Becker, wine director, Absinthe Group; Jon Bonné, Chronicle wine editor; Yaron Milgrom, owner, Local: Mission Eatery and Local's Corner.

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