

US Syrah

Syrah has taken off in the US over the last 15 years, and has found particular success in the northern states of Washington and Oregon, writes **DAVID FURER**

The first Syrah varietal wine in America was California's 1974 Phelps culled from its neighbour Christian Brothers' vineyard. Since then the grape (known as either Syrah or Shiraz) has risen hugely in popularity, especially in the last 15 years, fuelled by a number of factors: an insatiable American appetite for 'new and improved'; winemakers' natural curiosity; and also by increasing critical attention paid by US wine critics to Rhône valley wines. A fatigue for Bordeaux varieties also added to this strong growth.

In California Syrah is the fifth most planted red wine grape variety. San Luis Obispo (SLO) county has the greatest number of plantings in the state although, as is the case in all of California's viticultural areas, the 1990s rush to plant Syrah has now slowed to a crawl, signifying a plateauing of interest in the variety by consumers, probably in favour of Pinot Noir. Outside SLO, most California Syrah is planted in Monterey, Fresno, Madera and San Joaquin, but these grapes are destined to find their way into anonymous state appellation wines. Sonoma and Santa Barbara, on the other hand, are both known for their high-quality single-vineyard Syrah sites and run second to SLO for quality Syrah

production. There are also a few noted older vineyards in Napa and Mendocino.

Syrah plantings in Washington state are accelerating. The grape is found in significant quantity in every Washington AVA except for Puget Sound and the white wine-focused Columbia Gorge, and most are in the semi-arid eastern portion of the state. The broad Columbia Valley appellation is the leading area for Syrah, with the Yakima Valley and Horse Heaven Hills close behind. In Oregon, the Walla Walla Valley, which straddles the Columbia River in both Washington and Oregon, is responsible for most of the state's Syrah.

Viognier, as in the Rhône's Côte-Rôtie, is often added to Syrah wines, especially those from California, and most good-to-great Syrahs can mimic reasonably well those from Côte-Rôtie and Hermitage. The grape's likelihood of even berry set and ripening makes it an attractive grape to cultivate, as does its moderately high sugar content.

With so much differentiation in location and site, specific vintage variation is difficult to pinpoint in both states so it's best to base your choices upon producer and price. The annual Hospice du Rhône event, held in Paso Robles is America's preeminent celebration for this French grape. Founder and local winemaker Mat Garretson has been a driving force for the development of this grape, especially with Viognier.

Washington's northern neighbour, Canada, has the greatest thirst for the state's Syrah, importing more than 2,000 cases annually and far outpacing any other country for exports of these wines. Critical interest is still strong for California's output; however, Washington state's top wines are widely recognised as being on a par or superior to those of the sunshine state. **D**

'The best wines will give a lot of pleasure with primary fruit over the first couple of years'

Stephen Brook

Turn the page to see the results



US SYRAH: THE BASICS

- 1999** California: well-structured wines. Washington: cool and structured
- 2000** California: uneven wines. Washington: good but drink soon
- 2001** California: ageworthy wines. Washington: Syrah was the vintage star
- 2002** California: early-drinking wines. Washington: Balanced and ripe
- 2003** California: high alcohol. Washington: warm and concentrated
- 2004** California: vintage to look out for. Washington: erratic, mixed results
- 2005** California: light, structured wines. Washington: Great vintage

Hectares under vine:

California 7,085 (2005); Washington 1,130 (2006); Oregon 175 (2006)

THE TASTERS

Stephen Brook *Decanter contributing editor*; Nick Dumergue *wine educator and consultant*; David Furer *wine writer*; Matthew Hemmings *wine advisor, Avery's*; Robin Knapp *director of wine, Matthew Clark*; Pierre Mansour *wine buyer, The Wine Society*

US Syrah: the results

Despite a 'difficult' tasting, the panel was impressed with the Syrahs from Washington and Oregon, which had clarity and freshness, writes **ADAM LECHMERE**

Was the panel positive about US Syrah?

In truth, the panel didn't know what to think. Pierre Mansour's comment, 'I found this one of the most difficult tastings I remember attending' was echoed by other tasters. The chief problem, as Stephen Brook said, was that it 'was really very random'. He went on: 'There were some commercial California bottlings, and clearly some superior wines from places like Russian River, but I couldn't draw any conclusions because there weren't enough wines.' Mansour had the same problem but managed to see 'three aspects to the wines': the mass market, the centre ground, and the super-premium end. At the bottom end there were many underperformers, at the top end there were some 'exceptionally good wines', and there was very little to show in the centre ground. In terms of quality across the whole tasting, those conclusions are more or less those of the entire panel.

What regional variation did the panel find?

This was much clearer cut. Nick Dumergue singled out Washington and Oregon's cool climates as producing 'lovely clarity, freshness and good definition of tannins'. He was not alone. The panel generally was dismissive of the wider California appellation, which produced what Dumergue called 'a lack of any clearly defined personality'. But they were delighted by the more northern cooler regions. David Furer thought that 'Washington showed up extremely well', Matthew Hemmings found it 'exciting', and wondered if 'maybe California as a generic region is just not suited to Syrah'. Brook was 'very surprised' by how good the Oregon wines were – 'fleshy and balanced with a freshness and a lot of weight of fruit'.

So is Syrah a hot- or cool-climate grape?

An interesting question. Though there is no doubt that when well handled it works superbly in hot climates, the panel was most impressed by the wines from the cooler regions – Dumergue mentioned New Zealand as a region where Syrahs shine. Brook said the northern states have a longer growing season than

THE SCORES:	
72 WINES TASTED	
★★★★★ Decanter Award Outstanding (18.5–20pts)	4
★★★★ Highly recommended Very good to excellent (16.5–18.49pts)	4
★★★ Recommended Good (14.5–16.49pts)	34
★★ Fair (12.5–14.49pts)	24
★ Poor (10.5–12.49pts)	4
Faulty	2

California, and cooler nights, which retains acidity' and obviates the danger of 'heavy-handed, over-plump wines.' Restraint – which is so much easier to achieve in cooler climates – was praised over and over again.

What about the familiar US bugbears: oak, over-extraction and alcohol?

The panel had a lot to say about this. On the first day (the generic appellations) there was 'an over-ripeness of the confection' as Dumergue put it, and Brook – who tasted the second day only – found 'too many wines which had a really alcoholic burn on the finish.' But for all the unbalanced wines, tasters were in fact pleased by the lack of over-made wines. Mansour was 'encouraged by the

amount of restraint... I didn't see too many overworked wines across the range', and Brook 'thought oak was very well handled in both California and Washington'. Robin Knapp, too, was impressed: 'There was generally a lack of completely over-the-top, soupy or over-extracted styles.'

The wines sound as if they are accessible and ready to drink. How long should they be kept?

Vintages tasted went back to 2002/3. Dumergue reckoned some have 'quite good ageing potential', though they were in the minority. Brook found 'very few that you would have to put away for four or five years' before they would show their best, though there were a couple that would benefit from one or two years. He voiced the consensus when he said the best wines were 'medium-termed, and would give a lot of pleasure with that primary fruit over the first couple of years.'

And are they worth the price?

The cheaper wines – retailing in the UK for under £10 – tend to the more commercial, jammy end of the scale. Brook said he had drunk 'perfectly drinkable' wines at £7, but go slightly more expensive and you are into 'some very good wines coming out of Washington around the £10–12 mark'. He was more doubtful about the value of the £20–25 wines. Dumergue counsels steering clear of anything under £8, where you're not going to find 'any great character', but suggested at £10–15 'you would probably be able to get something pretty decent'.

So – what are the conclusions? Should we be buying US Syrah?

Like all American wines, the best are hard to find on the shelves in the UK. The best stuff, as Furer said, tends to stay at home. Add to that the fact the Americans don't have a great reputation for Syrah, and you are going to have to work to find what you want. But, as the results show, look wider than California, go to the cooler climates, and you'll find some wonderful expressions of the grape.

BEST VALUE

AVILA, SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA 2004

★★★★★

£8.75

Fresh, lifted, perfumed nose. Attractive palate with buoyant berry fruit and acidity. Good harmony with ripe tannins. Long length and delicate. Up to 3 years. **Evy, FIC, FMV, WAI**



5 STAR WINES

DECANTER AWARD WINNER ★★★★★



AVILA, SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA 2004
£8.75

'Fresh, lifted, perfumed nose. Attractive palate with buoyant berry fruit and acidity. Good harmony with ripe tannins. Long length and delicate. Up to 3 years.' (ND)

Stockists: Evy, FIC, FMV, WAI



LONGBOARD VINEYARDS, SONOMA-RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY, CALIFORNIA 2004
£18.99

'Spicy, herbal nose, elegant and defined – discreet reduction. Earthy, full, generous fruit, fresh acidity, lifted, integrated tannins, full of personality. Up to 5 years.' (PM) Stockist: Ply



ROCKBLOCK, DEL RIO VINEYARD SYRAH, ROGUE VALLEY, OREGON 2004
N/A UK

'Complex expansive oak present. Touch of spice, mint and citrus. Terrific big, rich fruit. Hidden tannins – structure is there but all in balance. Great texture. Up to 10 years.' (RK) +1 503 864 4600



VA PIANO VINEYARDS, WALLA WALLA VALLEY-COLUMBIA VALLEY, WASHINGTON 2005
N/A UK

'Plum, caramel, vanilla. Medium body, dense, plenty of fruit beneath the high tannins. 2–8 years.' (DF) +1 509 529 0900

4 STAR WINES

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED ★★★★★



BUENA VISTA, ESTATE VINEYARD SERIES, RAMAL VINEYARD SYRAH, CARNEROS, CALIFORNIA 2004 (17.25pts/20)
N/A UK

'Dense, serious and oaky. Toasted black fruit and bitter chocolate. Ambitious, long. Up to 3 years.' (MH) +1 800 678 8504



ROCKBLOCK, SEVEN HILLS VINEYARD SYRAH, WALLA WALLA VALLEY, OREGON 2004 (16.83/20)
N/A UK

'Reticent dark cherry fruit. Attractive, savoury, crisp acidity gives focus. Ripe tannins, chewy finish, good length. 2–5 years.' (MH) +1 503 864 4600



BAILEYANA, GRAND FIREPEAK CUVÉE SYRAH, EDNA VALLEY, CALIFORNIA 2005 (16.5/20)
£18.95

'Classic meatiness. Rich and modern. Smoky bacon and rich damson. Velvet texture and firm tannins. Long. 2–5 years.' (MH) Stockist: Trt



FETZER, VALLEY OAKS UNOAKED SHIRAZ, CALIFORNIA 2006 (16.5/20)
£6.49

'Fresh, slightly floral – bubblegum and pears. Fresh and juicy. Clean fruit, good acidity. A well-balanced fruity red. Finishes soft and clean. Nice modern wine. Drink now.' (RK) Stockist: Tes

'Washington and Oregon's cool climates produce lovely clarity, freshness and good definition of tannins'

Ed Adams

RECOMMENDED ★★★

Wine name	Price	Tasting note	Drinkability	Stockist	Mean score
Fess Parker, Syrah, Santa Barbara, California 2003	£16.99	'Reserved nose. Light plummy fruit. Medium bodied but concentrated, robust, tannins. This has personality. Quite good length. 1-5 years.' (SB)		Ply	16.33 pts/20
Sheridan Vineyard, Yakima Valley, Washington 2004	N/A UK	'Spicy, earthy, very concentrated. Massive, exuberant, powerfully structured. Extraordinary. Really characterful. Up to 5 years.' (PM)		+1 509 829 3205	16.33
Bonny Doon, Le Pousseur Syrah, Santa Cruz, California 2004	£13.50	'Mulberry, raspberry, a touch of succulence. Medium body and tannins, elevated acidity. 2-5 years.' (DF)		Evy, HvN, P&S, ScC, Whb	16.25
Dutton Goldfield, Syrah, Sonoma, California 2004	N/A UK	'Attractive, elegant nose with gentle blueberry notes. Fine fruit with generous tannins and a freshness to the finish. 1-3 years.' (ND)		+1 707 823 3887	16.25
St Francis, Sonoma County Syrah, Sonoma, California 2004	£9.99	'Elegant, harmonious, ripe yet restrained. Well made, deep fruit and seamless integration. Attractive balance and length. Up to 4 years.' (ND)		C&H	16.25
Beresan, Walla Walla Valley, Washington 2005	N/A UK	'Rich, broad, plump plums and chocolate, very concentrated, hefty fruit balanced by sound acidity. Long, peppery finish. Up to 5 years.' (SB)		+1 509 522 9912	16.16
Betz, La Côte Rousse, Red Mountain, Washington 2005	N/A UK	'Smoke, black pepper nose. Full body, bright acidity, dense, chocolate, black raspberry, expensive crisp finish. 2-10 years' (DF)		+1 425 861 9823	16.16
Columbia Crest, Reserve Syrah, Columbia Valley, Washington 2004	N/A UK	'Spicy oak. Chunky and spicy fruit, medium tannins and acidity, lots of puppy fat, pleasantly long finish. Up to 5 years.' (DF)		+1 509 875 2061	16.16
The Bunnell Family Cellar, Boushey-McPherson Vineyard Syrah, Yakima Valley, Washington 2005	N/A UK	'Quality oak and real complexity. Really good, structured fruit. Finish is long with citrus/orange and herb touches. Up to 5 years.' (RK)		+1 509 973 4187	16.16
Zaca Mesa, Estate Syrah, Santa Ynez Valley, California 2003	£13.95	'Harmonious, complex and slick aromas. Rich, dark fruits, broad tannins and backbone from oak. A well-crafted wine. Up to 5 years.' (ND)		Trt	16.16
Wattle Creek, Alexander Valley, California 2002	£19	'Fine smoky rose, ripe black cherry too, very focused. Round gentle palate, balanced acid, long chewy tannins, highly elegant. Up to 3 years.' (PM)		McK, Wea	16
L'Ecole No 41, Seven Hills Vineyard, Estate Syrah, Walla Walla Valley, Washington 2005	£24.99 (2003)	'Blackberries and black pepper. Poise and intensity with ripe berry fruit. Grainy tannins and refreshing crispness. Long, spicy. 2-5 years.' (MH)		You	15.83
Bonterra, Mendocino, California 2004	N/A	'Mature, leathery, touch of Brett. Complex. Concentrated blackberry fruit. Fruitcake complexity. High but balanced alcohol. 2-5 years.' (MH)		BFm	15.75
Signorello, Napa Valley Syrah, Napa Valley, California 2005	N/A UK	'Fine nose, hearty, real character, creamy. Full, dense fruit, ripe tannins, powerful, youthful with spicy alcohol, high quality. 1-5 years.' (PM)		+1 707 255 5990	15.75
Betz, Chapitre 3, Columbia Valley, Washington 2005	N/A UK	'Some sweet/sour citrus notes. Very high-quality new oak. Coffee. Not a blockbuster but subtle and pure. Very well made. Up to 10 years.' (RK)		+1 425 861 9823	15.66
Wente, Livermore Valley, California 2003	£7.50-8.95	'Attractive smoky Syrah quality, discreetly herbal. Fresh acid, plump and dense, muscular backbone. Very correct. Up to 10 years.' (PM)		StG	15.66
Chateau Ste Michelle, Ethos, Columbia Valley, Washington 2004	N/A UK	'Bright deep red fruit nose. Grippy at present with attractive fruit underneath and moderate complexity. 1-2 years.' (ND)		+1 425 488 1133	15.33
Doyenne, Yakima Valley, Washington 2004	N/A UK	'Rich, spicy, smoky nose, cherries, blueberries, intense and elegant. Dense, tannic, assertive. Has power and verve, fair acidity. 1-6 years.' (SB)		+1 425 489 0544	15.33
Gordon Brothers Cellars, Columbia Valley, Washington 2005	£18.95	'Black cherry, earth. Medium body, light red fruits and some oak, bright acidity. Up to 3 years.' (DF)		You	15.33
Long Shadows, Sequel, Columbia Valley, Washington 2004	N/A UK	'Smoke, cocoa. Supple tannins, medium body, oak-driven chocolate notes, black pepper, plummy. Up to 5 years.' (DF)		+1 425 454 3918	15.33
Cline Cellars, Los Carneros Syrah, Carneros, California 2003	£15.20	'Mature with vanilla oak and bacon aroma. Dry and complex, leather, berries and meat - classic coffee and supple tannins. Drink now.' (MH)		Evy, WTr	15.25
Longboard Vineyards, Dakine Vineyard Syrah, Sonoma-Russian River Valley, California 2004	£25.99	'Restrained ripeness of berry fruit. Deep fruit yet fresh on the palate with balanced tannins and long, elegant finish. Up to 3 years.' (ND)		Ply	15.25
Syndline, Columbia Valley, Washington 2005	N/A UK	'Rich, damsony nose, very ripe with a hint of figs and olives. Ripe, lush, broad, juicy, a bit porty but attractive and generous. Up to 4 years.' (SB)		+1 509 365 4361	15.16
Waters, Pepper Bridge Syrah, Walla Walla Valley, Washington 2005	N/A UK	'Tight, youthful nose, perfumed red fruit, herby. Elegantly poised, fine fruit, soft, sweet, lovely structure, fresh, good length. Up to 5 years.' (PM)		+1 509 525 1590	15.16
Montevina, Terra d'Oro Syrah, Armador County, California 2003	N/A UK	'Mature with complex barnyard notes. Ripe but savoury, nice poise and focused berry fruit. Understated and balanced. Long. Up to 3 years.' (MH)		+1 209 245 6942	15
Norman Vineyards, Paso Robles Syrah, Paso Robles, California 2003	£15-17	'Opulent smoky nose, plums, black cherries, touch of mint, has charm and vibrance. Fresh, juicy, ripe, peppery fruit. Up to 2 years.' (SB)		Ess, PWW	15

RECOMMENDED (cont...) ★★★

Wine name	Price	Tasting note	Drinkability	Stockist	Mean score
Bell Wine Cellars, Canterbury Vineyard Syrah, Sierra Foothills, California 2005	£19.95	'Fruity/citrus/thyme notes. Clean and soft. Good modern fruit, good commercial wine with character. Drink now.' (RK)		GWW	14.83 pts/20
Coppola, Diamond Series Syrah, California 2004	N/A UK	'Complex tar and mineral, smoke. Big, soft wine with power and tannins. Finish is long and enjoyable. Big and balanced. Up to 5 years.' (RK)		+1 707 857 1400	14.83
Parker Station, Syrah, Santa Barbara, California 2003	£9.69	'Rich nose. Dense, very concentrated, robust, tannins, this has personality and a slight jamminess. Quite good length. Up to 2 years.' (SB)		Ply	14.83
Buena Vista, Carneros, California 2005		'Light brown spice. Medium body, light tannins, raspberry, black pepper, light but pleasant finish. Drink now.' (DF)		+1 800 678 8504	14.75
Cline Cellars, California Syrah, California 2004	£9.40	'Meaty Syrah quality, perfumed, northern-Rhône-esque, real purity. Succulent, long finish, grainy tannins, harmonious. Drink now.' (PM)		DWS, Evy, Har, WSo, WWin	14.75
Qupé, Central Coast Syrah, Central Coast, California 2004	£15	'Some meaty notes. Satin soft, quite voluptuous and very Californian. Savoury meat and berry tones. Drink now.' (MH)		F&M, FIC, FMV, WFM	14.6
Cycles Gladiator, Central Coast, California 2005	£6.99	'Cocoa. Medium bodied, plum, cocoa, black cherry, medium acids and tannins. Pleasant finish. Up to 3 years.' (DF)		Pat	14.5
J Lohr, Estates South Ridge Syrah, Paso Robles, California 2005	N/A UK	'Fresh fruity nose, black cherry. Round, supple, juicy, with soft, ripe tannins and medium finish. Well made. Up to 3 years.' (PM)		+1 408 288 5057	14.5

FAIR ★★

■ Columbia Winery, Red Willow Vineyard Syrah, Yakima Valley, Washington 2003 (14.33); ■ HRM Rex Goliath!, Central Coast, California (14.25); ■ Montera, Monterey County, California 2004 (14.25); ■ Robert Mondavi, Woodbridge Shiraz, California 2004 (14.25); ■ Trincherro, Family Syrah, Monterey County, California 2005 (14.25); ■ Chateau Ste Michelle, Columbia Valley Syrah, Washington 2002 (14.16); ■ Marmesa Vineyards, Cerro Romauldo Syrah, Central Coast-Edna Valley, California 2005 (14); ■ McCrea, Boushey Grande Côte Vineyard Syrah, Yakima Valley, Washington 2004 (14); ■ Wattle Creek, The Triple Play, Mendocino, California 2004 (14); ■ Blackstone Winery, California 2002 (13.83); ■ Ironstone, California 2002 (13.83); ■ Wild Hog, Orchard View Syrah, Sonoma-Russian

River Valley, California 2004 (13.83); ■ Bridlewood, Central Coast, California 2004 (13.75); ■ Don Sebastiani & Sons, Pepperwood Grove Syrah, California 2005 (13.75); ■ Honeywood, California Hills Shiraz, Lodi, California 2006 (13.75); ■ Night Harvest by RH Phillips, California 2004 (13.75); ■ Qupé, Bien Nacido Syrah, Central Coast, California 2003 (13.75); ■ Garretson, The Craic' Syrah, Paso Robles, California 2004 (13.5); ■ Columbia Crest, Two Vines Shiraz, Columbia Valley, Washington 2003 (13.33); ■ Beringer, California Collection Shiraz, California 2005 (13.25); ■ Clos du Bois, North Coast Shiraz, California 2004 (13.25); ■ Wenthe, Shorthorn Canyon Syrah, Livermore Valley, California 2004 (13.25); ■ Hahn Estates, Central Coast, California 2005 (12.75); ■ Delicato, California 2004 (12.5)

POOR ★

■ Stephenson Cellars, Walla Walla Valley, Washington 2004 (12.4); ■ Cayuse, Cailloux Vineyard Syrah, Walla Walla Valley, Washington 2004 (12.33); ■ J Lohr, Cypress Vineyards Shiraz, Central Coast, California 2005 (12.25); ■ Hayes Ranch, Hats Off Shiraz, Central Coast-Livermore, California 2004 (11.75)

NEXT MONTH

CHIANTI CLASSICO RISERVA 2004, AND CORNAS, HERMITAGE & CROZES-HERMITAGE 2005

For full UK stockist details, see page 131.