



America's greatest Rhone wines

By Pierra DuMont

They're back in the saddle again. The Rhone Rangers is a trade organization of California wineries that feature wines made from the grapes of France's Rhone region – Syrah, Petite Sirah, Grenache, Carignan, Mourvedre for red wines; Viognier, Marsanne, Roussanne, Grenache Blanc for whites. Every year they put on a huge tasting in San Francisco where you can sample some of the most innovative, cutting edge wines in California. For those getting tired of Cabernet, Zinfandel and Chardonnay, these wines are a treat. They are also often better values than California's more famous varietals.

It's always hard to decide between the hundreds of fine wines presented at the tasting,

but this year the following wines really stood out among the crowd. They truly represent

America's greatest Rhone wines. So in no particular order, the Piedmont Post gives its highest recommendation to:

- **2014 Andrew Murray "Roasted Slope"**

Andrew Murray has long been one of California's greatest producers of high quality Syrah. The name of this wine comes from France's Cote Rotie region where Syrah is king and it is remarkably similar to its namesake. The beautifully perfumed nose hints at the blending in of some Viognier for floral notes. The wine is full bodied but not overblown with great structure and layers of blackberry and plum fruit. While the wine drinks beautifully now it also has the structure to last for two decades in the cellar. www.andrewmurrayvineyards.com

- **2012 Pull "CdR" (Best Value)**

This is an attempt to replicate France's working man's wine – Cotes Du Rhone, and they have succeeded remarkably. This is the kind of wine the world needs more of. Robust fruity nose of cherries and plums with medium bodied fruit on the palate and a bright clean finish. It is a straightforward well-made wine at a great price. The perfect accompaniment to this summer's barbecues. Produced by Broken Earth Winery in Paso Robles. www.pullwines.com

- **2012 Qupe Syrah Sawyer-Lindquist Vineyard "Sonnies"**

Bob Lindquist is one of the true pioneer Rhone Rangers. He has been crafting

magnificent Syrahs for two decades from the Edna Valley region. This wine is no

exception. It has a huge perfumed nose of violets and cherries and in the mouth it is

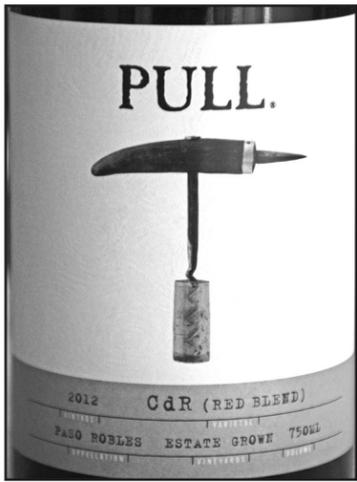
bursting with dark berry fruit flavors, earth and spice. The finish is intense and drawn

out. The beautiful wine will last for decades in the cellar. www.qupe.com

- **2012 Pax Syrah Castelli-Knight Ranch**

Pax Mahle has gained a reputation as an extremely talented vintner of Rhone varieties. The wine shows a succulent nose of blackberries, leather, tar and earth and accompanies a huge mouthful of dark berry fruit. This highly extracted wine is one of the "biggest" Syrahs I have ever tasted yet it is in no way jammy or tiring on the palate. Bottled unfiltered and unfiltered this Hermitage-like wine is not for the timid. Splendid. www.paxmahlewines.com

• **2011 Four Brix "Rhondevous"**
An outstanding Rhone blend this wine is made from Syrah, Grenache, and Mourvedre. Complex nose of olives, meat,



Pull CdR is an inexpensive California Cote du Rhone style wine that was the tasting's greatest value.

and pepper. Blackberry fruit, vanilla oak and earth on the palate. The huge fruit is balanced with good acidity and structure, and while delicious now it will last for five to eight years. www.fourbrixwines.com

- **2014 Skinner Mourvedre**

I have written about this El Dorado County wine before, as it is a consistently good example of Mourvedre. The nose has a mixture of strawberries and rich earth. It is medium bodied on the palate with cherry fruit and some spice notes. Clean and pure on the finish. Great BBQ wine. www.skinnervineyards.com

- **2012 Mitchell Syrah**

This wine boasts a dense ruby/purple color in addition to deep, chewy blackberry fruit mixed with flowers and loamy, earthy notes. Dense and supple with sweet tannin, it will provide delicious drinking over the

next 5-6 years. www.mitchella.com

- **2012 Carica Syrah Jemrose Vineyard**

I love to see our East Bay wineries thriving and Alameda's Carica Wines has once again made a stellar Syrah. It shows lovely floral aromas of violets and roses that merge on the palate with blackberry, cassis and plum fruit flavors. It has a good amount of tannin and will improve with time in the cellar lasting up to twenty years. www.caricawines.com

- **2013 Halter Ranch "CDP"**

The "CDP" name must be a reference to Chateaufeuf du Pape the most famous of France's Rhone wines. And it's a pretty good approximation with a little more fruit and a little less earth and tobacco. They add 6% Tannat to the typical blend of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvedre which gives more body and strength. Great balance and structure and a long, compelling finish make this a great candidate for pairing with a good rib-eye steak. www.halterranch.com

- **2012 Caliza "Azimuth"**

Composed of 36% Mourvedre, 34% Grenache and 30% Syrah and as with most blends, the result is a more interesting, complex wine than if either grape were bottled by itself. Aromas of cherries, perfume and oak on the nose. Medium-bodied with luscious mouthful of berry fruit and a long lingering finish. Ready to drink now, this wine would be great with grilled chicken. www.calizawinery.com

- **2014 Adelaida "Anna's White"**

An interesting mixture of Roussanne, Viognier and Picpoul this was one of the finest white wines of the RR tasting. It has a lovely nose of peaches and apricots with good supple fruit on the palate backed up by plenty of acid to keep it from being too cloying. A refreshingly different alternative to Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc. www.adelaida.com

- **2013 Seven Oxen Grenache**

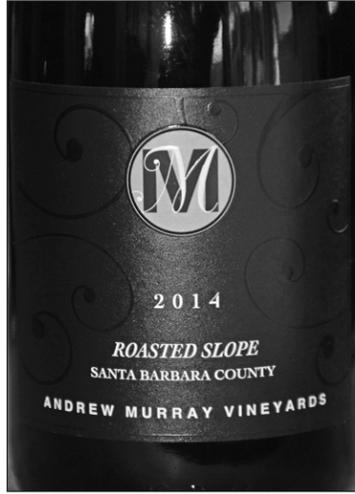
Grenache is an interesting grape varietal that falls somewhere between Pinot Noir and Syrah in color and intensity. It is often used for blending in France, but as this wine shows it can be great on its own. This Paso Robles wine has a lovely cherry fruit nose and soft lush fruit on the palate with the perfect touch of vanilla oak. This wine should drink well for the next 5 years. www.sevenoxen.com

- **2013 Cass "Barefoot Syrah"**

Impressively Hermitage-like in its proportions, restraint, and intense earthiness and minerality. An opaque, purple color is accompanied by scents of ground pepper, espresso, and dark fruits. This massive tight wine could use 5 years of aging to bring out its potential and will cellar well for many years.

- **2012 Epiphany "Revelation"**

A blend of mostly Syrah and Grenache with a touch of Petite Sirah this is one of the brands of the Fess Parker Winery in the Santa Maria area. Dense black color is accompanied by massive



Andrew Murray produces a dead ringer for France's Cote Rotie.

flavors of blue and black fruits, spice, flowers and earthy undertones. Full-bodied and rich with sweet tannin, this wine should last for decades. www.epiphanycellars.com

- **2013 Summerwood "Diosa"**

Summerwood is a very high quality Paso Robles producer and this wine shows why Paso Robles has become the premier area in the US for Rhone style wines. The high 16% alcohol is hidden by a massive body of blueberry and plum fruit with layers of earth and mineral notes. It is huge and full in the mouth with a long intense finish. Drink this big beauty with grilled lamb or beef. www.summerwoodwine.com

- **2013 Wrath Syrah Doctor's Vineyard**

This wine is a chocolaty, earthy effort revealing a saddle-leather scent, full-bodied flavors and an exuberant, typically California personality with its up-front fruit and precocious personality. Still, it has enough tannins to allow for moderate aging. A beautiful example of Santa Lucia Highlands Syrah. www.wrathwines.com

- **2014 Leverage "Tragectory"**

This is a rich Grenache, Syrah, Mourvedre blend from Paso Robles. It has the typical Paso ripe fruit nose of plums and raisins followed by gobs of dense, sweet fruit on the palate with just a touch of spice and earth. This full-bodied wine will improve with a few years of cellaring. www.leveragewines.com

- **2014 Morgan Syrah Double L Vineyard**

While the Santa Lucia Highlands is usually thought of as Pinot Noir territory, this bottle shows it is also perfect for growing Syrah. This opaque, purple colored offering is a wine of tremendous intensity as well as a big, smoky blackberry scented nose with hints of anise. Dense,

opulent and voluptuous, it is a hedonistic Syrah to enjoy over the next 7 to 8 years. www.morganwinery.com

- **2013 Stolpman Originals Syrah**

This was my first introduction to this Lompoc, CA based winery and it is doing an impressive job. The wine's opulent aromatics jumped out of the glass (blackberry liqueur, honeysuckle, truffles, and a bit of bacon) Full bodied on the palate with great intensity and purity. This is a winery to watch. www.stolpmanvineyards.com

- **2012 Sierra Vista Syrah Ancient Vine Reserve**

The perfect touch of oak gives a lovely vanilla scent to the nose. Inky purple in color it possesses excellent blueberry fruit intermixed with licorice and earth characteristics. Moderately tannin, full bodied and concentrated it should have many years ahead of it. www.sierravistawinery.com

- **2013 Austin Hope Grenache**

I have always admired Austin Hope's Grenache but almost missed the wine this year. They have changed the label and the new "colorful" one, according to the back label, was painted by an elephant in Thailand. I am not kidding. What matters is that the wine is still excellent. A hedonistic mouthful of bright cherry fruit with a nice spicy touch. Crank up the BBQ. www.austinhopewines.com

- **2014 Hearst Ranch "Randolph"**

Though not technically a Rhone wine this unusual, intriguing blend was outstanding. Made of Tempranillo, Petit Verdot and Zinfandel it is named in honor of William Randolph Hearst and made from Paso Robles grapes. It is bursting with dark berry fruit and a hint of spicebox and a smooth, satisfying finish. Would make a great partner to roast chicken. www.hearsthranchwinery.com

- **2014 Westwood Cunoise**

Gotta love it when a winery takes a chance on a basically unheard of grape. Cunoise is a minor French variety and one of the 13 grapes that can go into Chateaufeuf du Pape. A good lashing of new French oak gives a sweet vanilla aroma to go with the blueberry and plum fruit. It is medium bodied with great structure and balance. A great effort. www.westwoodwine.com

- **2014 Brecon Mourvedre**

This Paso Robles winery was new to me so I was delighted to find another high quality Mourvedre producer. This bottle has the kind of wild, gamey flavors the French call "animal" that are characteristic of the grape. It has notes of tobacco and rich earth along with the berry fruit. Reminds me on a nice Bandol from the south of France. www.breconestate.com