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TASTING REPORTS

California Rhône Rebound

The 2021 Rhône-style wines show richness and structure, moving on from the struggles of 2020



Saxum's Justin Smith walks through his James Berry Vineyard, the source for 2020's top Rhône-style red. (Acacia Productions)



By Tim Fish

From the Oct 15, 2023, issue

The future of California Rhône-style wines has been the subject of debate since the late 1990s, when many predicted that Syrah, Viognier and others were poised for stardom. Although that level of prominence failed to arrive, the category has come to occupy a satisfying niche in the market similar to Zinfandel. The top players make small lots of meticulously crafted wines whose devoted fans buy off mailing lists, while the rest offer an eclectic range of styles at multiple price points.

Despite challenges such as drought and extreme heat, California Rhônees have been on an eight-vintage winning streak, with the 2012 through 2019 vintages receiving outstanding scores of 90 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale. The 2020 vintage threw vintners a curveball, **as wildfires sent smoke over many wine regions in the state** [<https://www.winespectator.com/packages/2020-wildfires>]. A late-ripening grape, Syrah was still hanging on the vine in August and September when the fires raged.

Napa, Sonoma and Monterey were the hardest hit, and many producers in those areas made little to no red wine in 2020 because of potential smoke taint. Smoke was scarcer in Paso Robles and Santa Barbara, so those regions dodged a major crisis. With few 2020s to sell, a number of producers stretched out the release of their 2019s or hurried the 2021s onto the market.

What does all this mean to consumers? With three different vintages in current release, it can be confusing to know which year to focus on. You can't go wrong by starting with the still-plentiful 2019s, a vintage I rate 95 points for Paso Robles and Santa Barbara. Next up would be 2021, to which I give a preliminary rating of 94 points in Paso and Santa Barbara, 93 in Sonoma and 92 in Napa. Finally, there's the 2020 vintage, which gets a mixed review, with Paso and Santa Barbara each rating 92 points and Napa and Sonoma only 84. That's my takeaway after reviewing more than 175 Rhône-style reds and whites in blind tastings at our Napa office **since my previous report** [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/tasting-report-california-rhones-101522>] (Oct. 15, 2022).

Among this report's highest-rated offerings is a trio of classic-scorers from California Rhône icon **John Alban**

[\[https://www.winespectator.com/articles/2017-new-york-wine-experience-wine-star-california-john-alban\]](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/2017-new-york-wine-experience-wine-star-california-john-alban) , who gives his reds extra time in the cellar and only recently released his 2018s. The results are stellar. The Alban Grenache Edna Valley Alban Estate Vineyard 2018 (96 points, \$115) shows breadth and detail, while the Syrah Edna Valley Lorraine Alban Estate 2018 (96, \$195) is a wine of precision, torque and personality and the Syrah Edna Valley Reva Alban Estate 2018 (95, \$115) is dark and brooding yet light on its feet.

The top-scoring wine of the 2020 vintage is Saxum's James Berry Vineyard Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2020 (96, \$132), which is consistently among the finest Rhône reds in California. This polished yet potently built wine offers dynamic blackberry and raspberry flavors laced with notes of *garrigue*, loamy mineral, fruitcake spices and smoked meat. "2020 was not as bad for us as a lot of areas," says Saxum winemaker Justin Smith. "The closest fire was about 100 miles away in Monterey. Still, the smoke blew this way for a short time and it got quite smoky out. So it wasn't ideal for sure."

A handful of other producers achieved impressive results in 2020. Linne Calodo's Overthinker Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2020 (93, \$98) is a sleek and multilayered red based on Syrah, Dehlinger's Syrah Russian River

Valley Goldridge 2020 (92, \$50) is refined and agile in structure, and Tablas Creek's Esprit de Tablas Adelaida District 2020 (92, \$65) is a gutsy blend of primarily Mourvèdre, Grenache and Syrah that retains a sense of finesse.

DuMol winemaker [Andy Smith](#)

[\[https://www.winespectator.com/articles/dumol-and-the-great-scot\]](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/dumol-and-the-great-scot) made a small amount of 2020 Syrah, sold it quickly and then moved on to his 2021s. "2021 is an epic vintage," Smith says. "It's my single favorite vintage in my 25 years at the winery." The DuMol Syrah Russian River Valley Eddie's Patch 2021 (94, \$100) shows detail and dimension, delivering raspberry and smoky meat accents that build tension and richness, while the DuMol Syrah Russian River Valley Wild Mountainside 2021 (93, \$65) is potent yet handsomely structured, offering expressive flavors of huckleberry, crushed stone and smoked pepper.

Other 2021s worth noting include the Margerum Grenache Santa Barbara County 2021 (95, \$40), a knockout wine from Doug Margerum that's sleek and dynamic, as well as the winery's M5 Santa Barbara County (94, \$30), a full-bodied red showing notes of blackberry, licorice and *garrigue*. From Joey Tensley comes the Tensley Syrah Santa Barbara County BMT 2021 (95,

\$105/1.5L), a compelling version that's boldly structured yet retains finesse, with rich blackberry, crushed stone, black olive and anise notes.

Winemaker Jason Joyce also had a good 2021, with three wines at 94 points and another pair at 93. His **Calcareous Trés Violet** Paso Robles 2021 (94, \$70) is an expressive Mourvèdre blend showing accents of cherry, crushed stone and cured meat. Mike Officer scores again with the Carlisle Syrah Russian River Valley Papa's Block 2021 (94, \$48), a deeply structured red with a simmering intensity that demands time in the cellar. Finally, Carol Shelton continues to make the most notable wines of her long career with the spry and vibrant Coquille Rouge Central Coast 2021 (93, \$28), offering cherry and sweet plum flavors laced with savory pepper and anise.

One of California's original Rhône Rangers, **Randall Grahm** [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/randall-grahm-goes-doon-a-new-road-101522>] , is already finding success with his new label, The Language of Yes, which he launched in partnership with E. J. Gallo shortly **after selling Bonny Doon in 2020** [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/randall-grahm-sells-bonny-doon-vineyard>] , with the aim of producing a collection of Central Coast wines. The debut 2021s are already earning high marks, led by the deftly structured Cinsaut-Syrah Central Coast En Passerillage 2021

(93, \$75), which features sleek raspberry and cherry flavors highlighted by spiced cinnamon and savory herbs.

“It’s just the opportunity to work with seriously cold-climate fruit, which is a pleasure,” Grahm says of the Gallo vineyard he works with for the project. Always the innovator, Grahm approaches Rhône wines from a distinctive perspective. When the climate and vintage allow, for example, the harvested grapes are left to air-dry on paper trays under the vine. “You can only do this particular technique in a cool site,” he says. “After three days you get a lignification, the stems turn from green to brown, which really eliminates all the green herbaceous taste and gives a really nice quality of tannin to the wine.”

In the cellar, Grahm takes a **reductive** [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/what-does-the-term-reduction-mean-in-wine>] fermentation approach, limiting the amount of oxygen to which the juice is exposed to preserve fruit qualities. “Reduction is a beautiful thing and we fear that not. However, you want a clean fermentation. We’re particularly careful to make sure we don’t have any off characters.” I look forward to tasting more of these wines in the future.

As for value wines from recent vintages, the limited supply of 2020s due to [smoke taint \[https://www.winespectator.com/articles/understanding-smoke-taint-in-wine\]](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/understanding-smoke-taint-in-wine) means there's less to choose from than usual, but there are a handful worth seeking out. Look for Carol Shelton's supple Viognier Central Coast Wild Thing 2022 (93, \$22), McPrice Myers' zesty Syrah Central Coast Right Hand Man 2021 (91, \$25), Foppiano's briary Petite Sirah Russian River Valley 2021 (90, \$28) and Hahn's generous GSM Appellation Series Arroyo Seco 2021 (87, \$25).

For many winemakers in California, the 2020 vintage was the toughest on record. It was already a difficult growing season—a hot drought year with heat spikes throughout the summer—when freak lightning storms in mid-August ignited more than 360 fires across the state. Winemakers struggled to determine which vineyards to pick and which to write off.

Several of the 2020 reds I tasted clearly had smoke taint, but it was generally limited to value brands. There were also many Syrahs and Syrah-based blends that were clean yet had muted aromas and flavors, perhaps affected by the various techniques winemakers used to removed taint. "It's going to be a mixed bag," Saxum's Smith says. "There's going to be some good stuff and there's going to be some crap. It's not going to be uniform."

The 2021 growing season was an entirely different story. California's ongoing drought remained an issue and yields were low. Temperatures in June and July were seasonally warm, with few extended heat spikes, and though early September was hot, temperatures moderated later in the month.

"It was such a lovely mild season, dry but cool. It was one of the vintages that the wines knew exactly what they were doing—we really didn't have to do much," says DuMol's Smith, who used **whole-cluster fermentations** [<https://www.winespectator.com/glossary?page=1&submitted=Y&word=cluster>] for about a third of his Syrah, which he aged in 25% new French oak. "They have a sort of density and vibrancy that's pretty rare. They're concentrated for sure, but they have a lift at the end just like Pinot Noir."

I'll continue tasting the 2021 California Rhône's over the coming months and I won't be surprised if my preliminary ratings of the vintage improve as more of the top-tier producers like Saxum and Alban release their wines. In the meantime, look for the 2019s and available 2021s, while shopping carefully for the 2020s.

Senior editor Tim Fish is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California's Rhône-style wines.

Tim Fish's Recommended California Rhône-Style Reds



Randall Graham has embarked on a new chapter in his long career, partnering with Gallo on The Language of Yes to produce Rhône-style wines from the Central Coast. (Helen Cathcart)

More than 175 wines were reviewed for this report. A [free alphabetical list \[https://www.winespectator.com/articles/alphabetical-guide-to-california-rhone-wines-101523\]](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/alphabetical-guide-to-california-rhone-wines-101523) is also available. **WineSpectator.com** members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online [Wine Ratings search. \[http://www.winespectator.com/wines/search\]](http://www.winespectator.com/wines/search)

SAXUM

Bone Rock James Berry Vineyard Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2019

Score: 97 | \$156

WS Review: This shows verve as well as a bold, deep structure, yet retains finesse and detail, with tiers of flavors that slowly unfold. Syrah blend.

ALBAN

Grenache Edna Valley Alban Estate Vineyard 2018

Score: 96 | \$115

WS Review: A wine of breadth and detail, with vivacious raspberry, smoked meat and *garrigue* aromas that lead to plum, cherry and licorice flavors.

SAXUM

James Berry Vineyard Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2020

Score: 96 | \$132

WS Review: A knockout wine, polished yet potently built, with dynamic blackberry and raspberry flavors laced with mineral and spices. Grenache blend.

ALBAN

Syrah Edna Valley Reva Alban Estate 2018

Score: 95 | \$115

WS Review: Dark and brooding yet light on its feet, with multilayered flavors of black raspberry, smoked meat, river stone and peppered mocha.

MARGERUM

Grenache Santa Barbara County 2021

Score: 95 | \$40

WS Review: Sleek and dynamic, with refined raspberry, spiced cinnamon and cured meat accents that sprint toward the long, polished finish.

TENSLEY

Syrah Santa Barbara County BMT 2021

Score: 95 | \$105

WS Review: This compelling red is boldly structured yet retains detail and finesse, with rich dark berry flavors laced with stone, black olive and anise. 1.5L.

CALCAREOUS

Moose Paso Robles 2021

Score: 94 | \$70

WS Review: Robust yet shows finesse, with dynamic raspberry and kirsch flavors laced with white pepper and black olive notes. Syrah and Petit Verdot.

CARLISLE

Syrah Russian River Valley Papa's Block 2021

Score: 94 | \$48

WS Review: Deeply structured and simmering with intensity, this unfurls with blackberry and raspberry flavors, backed by broad-shouldered tannins.

DUMOL

Syrah Russian River Valley Eddie's Patch 2021

Score: 94 | \$100

WS Review: A Syrah of detail and dimension, this unfurls with black raspberry, espresso and smoked meat accents that build tension.

LAW

Aspire Adelaida District 2019

Score: 94 | \$82

WS Review: Generous and richly structured, with raspberry and blueberry flavors accented by dark chocolate and smoked pepper. Syrah and Grenache.

LINNE CALODO

Level Headed Paso Robles Willow Creek District 2019

Score: 94 | \$95

WS Review: Vivacious, with fragrant aromas that lead to generous, multilayered raspberry, cherry and spiced cinnamon flavors. Grenache and Syrah.

PLUMPJACK

Syrah Napa Valley 2019

Score: 94 | \$74

WS Review: Rich and alluring yet well-built, with polished black raspberry, *garrigue*, espresso and black pepper flavors that build tension.

RELIC

Syrah Coombsville Scarpa 2019

Score: 94 | \$75

WS Review: A handsome red, rich and stylishly structured, offering kirsch and raspberry flavors flanked by pepper beef and *garrigue* accents.

ROAR

Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands Rosella's Vineyard 2021

Score: 94 | \$55

WS Review: Rich and polished, yet agilely structured, with blueberry and raspberry flavors that gather tapenade, smoked meat and spice accents.

TENSLEY

All Blocks Tensley Vineyards Santa Barbara County 2021

Score: 94 | \$38

WS Review: Shows subtle power and refinement, with vibrant raspberry and kirsch flavors laced with *garrigue*, espresso and pepper. Grenache blend.

BIEN NACIDO ESTATE

Mourvèdre-Syrah-Grenache Santa Maria Valley Succession Reserve 2020

Score: 93 | \$125

WS Review: Tightly focused and appealingly gamy, with dried cherry, cured meat and savory spice flavors that build richness. Mourvèdre blend.

BOOKER

Syrah Paso Robles Fracture 2021

Score: 93 | \$98

WS Review: Showing precision and torque, this features blackberry, stony mineral, espresso and pepper flavors backed by broad-shouldered tannins.

CATTLEYA

Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands The Initiation 2021

Score: 93 | \$70

WS Review: Dark and deeply structured, yet light on its feet, with black raspberry and blueberry flavors laced with pepper and bitter chocolate.

DEHLINGER

Syrah Russian River Valley Goldridge 2019

Score: 93 | \$50

WS Review: This Syrah agilely balances polished raspberry, smoky meat and mocha flavors with a lively, refined core of acidity and tannins.

EX POST FACTO

Syrah Sta. Rita Hills Perilune 2021

Score: 93 | \$50

WS Review: Vibrant and snappy, with cherry and pomegranate flavors accented by pepper, meat and grilled anise as this builds richness and focus.

THE LANGUAGE OF YES

Cinsaut-Syrah Central Coast En Passerillage 2021

Score: 93 | \$75

WS Review: Deftly structured, with sleek raspberry and cherry flavors highlighted by spiced cinnamon and savory herbs. Cinsault and Syrah.

RAMEY

Syrah Sonoma Coast 2019

Score: 93 | \$40

WS Review: A handsome red, showing elegant red currant and raspberry flavors highlighted by savory pepper and a whiff of *garrigue*.

RED CAR

Syrah Sonoma Coast 2019

Score: 93 | \$40

WS Review: Graceful and refined, with elegantly layered plum and raspberry flavors that take on forest floor, lavender and spice accents.

TABLAS CREEK

Grenache Adelaida District 2021

Score: 93 | \$45

WS Review: Vibrant and racy, yet light on its feet, with floral raspberry and cherry flavors accented by red licorice, baking spices and savory pepper.

TURLEY

Petite Syrah Paso Robles Pesenti Vineyard 2021

Score: 93 | \$44

WS Review: Potent and powerfully built, with concentrated blackberry, licorice and mincemeat flavors that turn firm and brooding on the finish.

Top Values

MARIETTA

Christo North Coast 2019

Score: 92 | \$29

WS Review: Deeply structured and youthful with torque, this slowly reveals dark cherry, bittersweet chocolate and black olive flavors. Syrah blend.

MCPRICE MYERS

High On The Hog Paso Robles 2021

Score: 91 | \$25

WS Review: Generous and juicy, with frisky black raspberry and currant flavors accented by roasted sage and savory white pepper. Grenache blend.

SANS LIEGE

Côtes-du-Coast Central Coast 2021

Score: 91 | \$26

WS Review: Supple and floral, with honeysuckle, mango and peach flavors that finish on a dry but succulent accent. Viognier blend.

FOPPIANO

Petite Sirah Russian River Valley 2021

Score: 90 | \$28

WS Review: A zesty, old-school version, with energetic blackberry, licorice and mincemeat accents that perk along toward fine-grained tannins.

MORGAN

Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands G17 2021

Score: 89 | \$27

WS Review: A generous red, with cherry and raspberry flavors highlighted by toasty spices and savory herbs, finishing with plump tannins.

EPIPHANY

Inspiration White Santa Barbara County 2021

Score: 88 | \$28

WS Review: Refined and precise, with lively Asian pear, citrus and jasmine blossom accents. Grenache Blanc blend.

HAHN

GSM California 2021

Score: 86 | \$15

WS Review: A jammy quaff, this red features easygoing cherry and spice flavors. Grenache blend.
