

Wine Spectator

9 Striking Rhône-Style California Reds

New reviews of Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre for \$40 or less



Photo by: Andy Schocken

Kevin and Kathy Skinner started their wine venture after they came across the historic winemaking town of Skinners, Calif., in El Dorado County, whose founder they found out Kevin was related to.

Tim Fish

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Tasting Highlights' wine reviews are fresh out of the tasting room, offering a sneak peek of our editors' most recent scores and notes to WineSpectator.com members.

There's no such thing as a typical California Rhône-style red. Syrah, the key grape, is distinctly pliable to a range of growing conditions and winemaking styles, making everything from potent and dark gamy reds to jammy and soft fruit bombs. This week's selection of new releases proves that point with a lively cross-section of personalities, regions and grapes.

To truly appreciate the eclectic range of wines in this category, it helps to understand France's Rhône Valley, whose grapes are now planted in California. Syrah is the dominant grape in the Northern Rhône, while appellations in the Southern Rhône like Châteauneuf-du-Pape generally blend various grapes together, often led by Grenache.

Syrah is the backbone of most Californian Rhône reds, but as with France, other grapes add nuance in blends or are compelling on their own. (They also ripen on different schedules, which is handy in difficult years.) Syrah lends structure, color and dark fruit, often with spice and smoky elements, while Grenache is generally lighter in color and shows more red fruit. Mourvèdre is typically more tannic and often has game and earth notes.

Two of this week's wines contrast the two main styles of Rhône reds in California. Le P'tit Paysan is distinctly Old World, with fresh acidity and a smoky meat element, while Jeff Cohn's #PureYum is big, gutsy and ripe, in the New World mold.

JEFF COHN #PureYum Sonoma County 2016 Score: 92 | \$40

Plump, with gutsy fruit and just enough polish to make it sing, offering distinctive blackberry, *garrigue* and smoky pepper flavors that anish with broad-shouldered tannins. Syrah and Grenache. Drink now through 2023. 222 cases made.—*T.F.*

AMPELOS Grenache Sta. Rita Hills Delta: The Difference Ampelos Vineyard 2015 Score: 91 | \$37 Lively and well-built, with expressive raspberry, spicy cinnamon and smoked meat flavors that race toward zesty tannins. Drink now through 2024. 250 cases made.—*T.F.*

CARLISLE Grenache Sonoma Valley Rossi Ranch 2016 Score: 91 | \$40

Sleek and structured, with expressive raspberry, smoky anise and cracked pepper flavors that speed toward reared tannins. Drink now through 2024. 235 cases made.—*T.F.*

SKINNER Mourvèdre El Dorado 2016 Score: 91 | \$30

Distinctive, plump and showing personality, this offers flavors of dried cherry, fruitcake spices and orange peel that end with zesty tannins. Drink now through 2024. 388 cases made.—*T.F.*

LE P'TIT PAYSAN Le P'tit Pape Central Coast 2016 Score: 90 | \$22

A lanky red, laced with an appealing gamy quality and offering sleek and lean cherry, smoky anise and spice flavors. Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre and Cunoise. Drink now through 2023. 1,800 cases made.—*T.F.*

AMPELOS Syrah Sta. Rita Hills Gamma: The Complex Ampelos Vineyard 2015 Score: 89 | \$35 Dense and racy, with blueberry, bitter chocolate and pepper beef flavors that anish with snappy tannins. Best after 2019. 300 cases made.—*T.F.*

TABLAS CREEK Mourvèdre Adelaida District 2016 Score: 89 | \$40

Supple and discreetly racy, with expressive dried cherry, licorice and smoky mincemeat flavors. Drink now through 2023. 825 cases made.—*T.F.*

SKINNER Syrah El Dorado 2015 Score: 88 | \$30

Dense and tightly wound, with dried blueberry, bitter chocolate and licorice flavors. Best after 2019. 391 cases made.—*T.F.*

MICHAEL DAVID Syrah Lodi 6th Sense 2016 Score: 87 | \$16

Zesty and loaded with spice, plus low-key raspberry and smoky herb flavors. Drink now through 2022. 25,000 cases made.—*T.F.*