This year brings a change in the timing of our broad-based Rhône varieties issue. It was originally conceived to correspond to a now defunct event in July, and while that event was a big deal which saw Rhône-interested folks assemble from all over the globe, it is gone and the new best thing in Rhône focus is the March event here in San Francisco called Rhône Rangers. You can find out more about this broad-based tasting at http://www.rhonerangers.org/. There are also Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. events hosted by Rhône Rangers later in the year.

For most of California’s vinous history, it had a Rhône grape called Petite Sirah that was believed to be a version of the real Syrah. There were some scattered stands of the real Syrah but there were no reports of acreage or reviews of wines with that name until the confusion was undone fifty years ago. That new understanding led first to some further Syrah plantings along with a smattering of Viognier. The story goes, and it has been repeated often enough to possibly be true, that Viognier in France had dropped to under 100 acres while California acreage, spearheaded by folks like Joseph Phelps and Calera shot past that mark and showed that Viognier was indeed a grape worthy of keeping around.

Over the past four decades or so, we have had dribs and drabs of other heretofore unseen Rhône varieties go into California vineyards and we have seen a minor boom in Grenache enthusiasm that may or may not finally bring that variety into prominence here.

**Syrah**

The cold-climate/warm climate Syrah debate is being won by the wines from warmer locations because its followers seem not to mind expressive wines from places like Paso Robles and Ballard Canyon.

**Petite Sirah**

No longer the tannin-driven behemoths that they were a few decades ago, Petite Sirah may be more approachable but it is still pretty sturdy in most versions on the market.

**Grenache**

Long projected to be one of the next big things, Grenache is still keeping us waiting. There is progress, but the pace is slow.

**Mourvèdre**

Its reputation as a blending grape is in no danger of being eclipsed by the few varietal bottlings on the market.

**Viognier**

It came. It succeeded. It never really became a major player, yet the best editions of Viognier are so good that they deserve more attention than they get.

**Grenache Blanc/Marsanne/Roussanne**

These lesser followed white grapes from the Rhône region remain the curiosities they have been for the last couple of decades.
The "cold-climate Syrah" vs. "warm-climate Syrah" debate that raged for years may not be over and gone forever, but one hears less of it these days for all kinds of reasons—good and bad. It was the kind of debate that tended, whether intentionally or not, to pit those who believe that the California climate is, in fact, California's and that our wines ought to reflect that climate in all of its range and majesty versus those who, for whatever reason, long for wines that have a European inflection. Some folks in that latter group believe (desire, if you will) that all Syrahs should reflect the tightest, most nuanced wines coming out of the most northern of the northern Rhône appellations while others will only allow that they prefer lower alcohol wines of every stripe.

We have no argument with anyone who has a personal taste profile preference. If they don’t like oysters or caviar or fois gras, then, fine, don’t like them. If you find our grandmothers’ boiled chicken to your liking, go for it. But, those with strong taste preferences for less demonstrative wines, inflexibly expressed, are one of the bad reasons why the Syrah debate existed in the first place, and we would posit that their current preoccupation with Pinot Noir and Chardonnay has left them looking at Syrah with less fervor.

Of course, a second reason, and one that is far more difficult to combat, is the general loss of status of Syrah. It is no longer seen as worth fighting over. Any number of makers have pulled back their styles from those “get all you can get” behemoths and are offering wines that may or may not make the low-alcohol, high-acid crowd happy, but since those folks don’t seem to care as much, it seems to us that very few wineries are now incented to keep cutting back on the depth and expressiveness of their Syrahs.

And that is the good side to the reduced debate. It would appear, looking at Syrah prices in general, that the big wine crowd has won the argument—for the moment at least. Whether in the hands of JC Cellars and DuMOL or Adelaida, Sutro, Saxum or Epoch in the southern end of the State, the most popular and pricey Syrahs are full of character and are little or not at all pulled back. That may not be the au courant style among San Francisco and New York sommeliers, but it seems to be pleasing everyone else in the world.

There is an underlying story here, of course. More and more frequently, the leading Syrahs are coming from areas where there is not one-hundred years of Cabernet Sauvignon history. In places like Paso Robles and Santa Barbara County, there are many fine Cabs being made, but the grape does not dominate at it does in Napa, and while Pinot can work well in the cooler parts of those locales, it is probably not as well suited on a broad, area-wide basis as Syrah. The bottom line here, of course, is that debate or not, the market tells us all what wine drinkers like and want. And there is plenty of evidence that fully expressed Syrah is well regarded by a very large swath of the wine drinking crowd.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTSTANDING WINES</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS &amp; TRADITIONAL USE WITH FOOD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>THREE STARS:</strong> (95-98 points) An exceptional wine. Worth a special search of the market.</td>
<td>★ Soft and fruity wine. Quaffable by itself or with light foods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TWO STARS:</strong> (91-94 points) A highly distinctive wine. Likely to be memorable.</td>
<td>▶ Crisp white. Medium acid and dry. Fish or delicate flavored foods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ONE STAR:</strong> (87-90 points) A fine example of a type or style of wine. Without notable flaws.</td>
<td>□ Mellow white. Dry to slightly sweet. Enough acid for white meats.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Wines not marked with stars are often delightful wines. Each has unique virtues and any of these wines may be the best wine to serve your needs based on value, availability or for your dining and taste preferences. *Prices – Approximately California full retail prices.

Tasting Note Legend

### AVAILABILITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Availability</th>
<th>Drinkability</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generally available in most market areas.</td>
<td>DrinKable now. Unlikely to improve with further aging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited production and/or limited geographic distribution.</td>
<td>DrinKable now. Further bottle aging can improve this wine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very limited availability.</td>
<td>Cellar for future drinking. Wine will improve with bottle aging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GV</td>
<td>Not suitable for drinking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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ADELAIDA Reserve Viking Estate Vineyard 2010
Paso Robles. No holds barred Syrah, this big, ripe, intense wine may not please all palates, but for those who want their spicy reds to be bold and expressive, this one will be just the ticket. Loaded with blackberry and black stone fruit aromas and filled out with hints of black pepper, this wine follows on the palate in a similar fashion starting with a mouthfilling, supple, slightly fleshy texture and ending with a long, dense, ripe, tannic and very promising finish. Along the way, its flavors are youthfully direct and so very deep and convincing, and while the wine draws you in now, it should be kept in the cellar for five years or more while it rounds out and gains added complexity.

ADELAIDA Reserve Anna’s Estate Vyd Block 6 2010
Paso Robles. Not without its own brand of potency, this wine is nominally less ripe than its mate above but has both depth and its fair share of concentration on the positive side of the ledger. With both roasted meats and hints of dark chocolate in its nose and flavors and its solid, tannin-driven sense of brawn, it brings varietal character and nowness into play, and despite its boldness, it is decently balanced as well.

ADELAIDA Anna’s Estate Vineyard Paso Robles 2011
A tad more direct at its heart than its year-older partners above but very well-endowed with generously laid-on Syrah fruit and plenty of range, it brings hints of forest floor, roasted meat, dark chocolate and creamy oak together in an outgoing package. It is viscous in feel, and its expressive flavors are nicely balanced by underlying acidity. Still, this is one that we would suggest for current and nearer-term enjoyment while its mates enjoy some quite time in the cellar.

ALEXANDER VALLEY VINEYARDS 2011
Alexander Valley. 12% Grenache; 6% Mourvedre; 3% Viognier. Smelling at first more of dried stems and stalks than it does of fruit then slowly taking on a slightly peppery cast, this wine is always a bit on the outs with regard to the fruity muscle that good Syrah needs, and it comes up a bit muddled and thin in spite of its evident ripeness.

BAIOCCHI Sprezzatura Fair Play 2010
60% Syrah; 40% Tempranillo. There is so much to like in this wine’s very deep and outgoing aromas of sweet berries, vanilla and milk chocolate that we confess to real disappointment in its excessively ripe flavors. Its brand of close-to-sweet richness will appeal to those who have never met a wine that is too ripe to their taste, but it loses all clear fruity direction and dramatically heats up at the finish.

CARICA Kick Ranch Sonoma County 2009
From its dense and substantial aromas to its gutsy, impressively extracted flavors, this broad-shouldered offering is all Syrah in character, and, if never less than fully ripe, it wants for nothing in the way of deep and constant fruit. It is still fairly coarse and sufficiently tannic to dissuade drinking soon, but it has the right stuff to grow on, and it should be put away well out of sight for a minimum of four or five years.

CARICA Siren Kick Ranch Sonoma County 2010
75% Syrah; 12.5% Grenache; 12.5% Mourvedre. Occasionally suggesting a bit of Syrah spice but never with a great deal of conviction, this rounded, fairly ripe wine is fundamentally more ripe than it is keenly fruity. It is soft and a touch sluggish before acidity steps in at the very last minute and unhidden heat makes its mark at the finish.

CASTLE ROCK Columbia Valley 2010
It may be priced for everyday drinking, but this wine is not so easily approached, and, while showing a bit of slightly woody spice that might be charitably described as being varietal, it is deficient in fruit, fairly gruff in manner and gradually gives up to chalky dryness and unbuffered heat.

CHACEWATER Sierra Foothills 2011
Moderately berry-like in its fruit character and painted with brush and brio and hints of jam, this clean, useful Syrah takes a turn into unsweetened chocolate as it airs. Medium full on the palate and somewhat round in texture even as tannin makes itself part of the picture, this is a reliable Syrah at an accessible price. It is in need of but a year or two of aging to be at its best.

CLOS LA CHANCE Reserve Central Coast 2009
There is so much obvious fruit and readily perceived complexity to this meaty, incisively varietal Syrah that it impresses at first as a wine that requires no aging at all, but, as its flavors unfold, it takes on a fairly substantial measure of tannin that makes early drinking unwise. It is not so rough and ragged that it should be hidden away for a decade, and it is admittedly tasty right now, but real continuity and extension depend on a further few years of patience.

CLOS LA CHANCE Reserve Red Wine 2011
Central Coast. 85% Syrah; 9% Grenache; 4% Petite Sirah; 2% other. As this uneven effort demonstrates, there are times when a wine is not at all that it first seems. It starts out on fairly good footing with an attractively spiced, blackberry-like nose, but its nervy, sparsely filled flavors are framed by acid and tannin, and they quickly fade into dryness having failed to deliver as much fruity stuffing as promised.
**Syrah**

**DEHLINGER**

**DEHLINGER Altimont Russian River Valley 2010**

There is no question that this outgoing Syrah runs to ripeness rather than away from it, but, along with its intimations of dark-berry jam and milk chocolate, it has a continuous line of well-defined fruit and plenty of spicy varietal authority. It is big, rich and extracted as Dehlinger's red wines usually are, and it does not care much about cold-climate delicacy. While a bit tough at edges, it is never more than appropriately tannic, and, once a few years have passed, it will do the trick when dinner calls for a Syrah of substance and size.

**DIERBERG**

**DIERBERG Santa Ynez Valley 2010**

Dierberg follows up its outstanding 2009 offering with another splendid Syrah that hits one high point after the other. It is rife with deep and exceptionally well-defined fruit, and its insistent themes of blackberries, spice and cured meats do not ease up even as a fair bit of grippy young tannin takes hold. It is ripe but eschews jamminess and shows very good structure and balance for the solid, rather gutsy wine that it is. While sure to impress in the short term, it is not meant for hasty drinking, and it can be held for eight to ten years before reaching what is certain to be its considerable best.

**DOBBES Fortmiller Vineyard Rogue Valley 2010**

Hailing from the warmer climes of Oregon's Rogue Valley, this initially outgoing wine leads with a rich and well-ripened nose of caramel, blackberries and chocolate, but it takes a sharp turn to acidity and tightens up straightaway in the mouth, and its rough-cut finish is marked by more astringency and heat than its fruit can comfortably buffer. While a stay in the cellar will be some value, there is no guarantee that its disparate parts will seamlessly mesh.

**DRAGONETTE**

**DRAGONETTE Seven Central Coast 2011**

95% Syrah; 3% Grenache; 2% Mourvedre. Plentiful spice and suggestions of game are set against a substantial backdrop of mixed berries and sweet oak in the involving aromas of this big, rather obviously ripened Syrah, and, in the mouth, the message is one of varietal richness and ongoing fruit. The wine is fleshy and full and arguably a little brusque and blunt at present, but it is so deeply endowed in essential fruit that we have no qualms in predicting that it will grow and unfold impressively over the next half-dozen years.

**DuMOL**

**DuMOL eddie's patch Russian River Valley 2011**

Noticeably ripe at first glance, then a touch pulled back in both nose and flavor, and if on the mannerly side because of it, this bottling gets its props more for keen varietal character than for the fully developed potency for which DuMOL is often known. Its focused blackberry fruit is joined by wisps of smoked meats and a dollop of rich oak, and while the wine has more than its share of tannin, it is never coarse or hard and promises to age out well over the next five to seven years in the bottle. It is an admirable Syrah from a vintage that is not noted for its kindness to the late-arriving varieties.

**DuMOL Russian River Valley 2011**

Red berries with a touch of blackberry concentration and a light, airy wildflower note backed up by crème brulée oak sets this one off on the right aromatic path, and its balanced, supple texture, its moderate but evident tannins and its long finish all speak to Syrah. There is a slight bit of dried grape sweetness at the end, but, here again, this edition is more about comfortable character than it is about power. It will come into its own in just a couple of years but can hold longer.

**ERIC KENT**

**ERIC KENT Kalen’s Big Boy Blend 2011**

Sonoma County. If softer and riper and a little less keen in Syrah spice than its cellarmate from the Las Madres Vineyard, Kalen's Big Boy Blend is a bit better endowed with basic fruit and thereby earns the nod in 2011. It is fairly full-bodied and slightly plush on the palate with nominal tannins for structure, and its richness goes a long way in making up for what it may lack in varietal precision.

**ERIC KENT Las Madres Vineyard Carneros 2011**

The fruity shortfalls imposed by the 2011 vintage appear to be at work here, for, while the wine exhibits lots of Syrah's gamy...
and peppery spice, it is a more than a bit sparing in essential fruit. Its dry, slightly stalky, moderately tannic finish contrasts its glycerin-smoothed beginnings, and its empty spaces cannot be adequately filled by aging.

**FOSS PARKER Santa Barbara County 2011**

Going a bit past the point of being simply gamy and spicy and becoming barky and earthy instead, this noticeably hot, very dry wine may be ripe, but it is far from fruity. It is a bit soft on entry and a bit hard at the finish, and its loosely defined flavors are both muddled and blunt.

**GREENWOOD RIDGE Mendocino Ridge 2011**

Fairly lean and quite tight-fisted in fruit with a hard edge of acid running its length, this ungainly effort is never as defined or as well-filled as successful Syrah wants to be, and while it is not an especially big wine, it is all sorts of ragged and loses its way to chalky astringency.

**KRUPP BROTHERS Black Bart Stagecoach Vyd. 2009**

Napa Valley. Regardless from which grape they may be made, wines from the Stagecoach Vineyard are rarely retiring, and this one delivers richness and very deep fruit to spare. It may be ripe beyond question, but it is absolutely brimming with berries, and it hits the mark smartly with regard to game and smoked meat and peppery spice. If it is very full-bodied with a bit of baby fat on entry, it firms up and finds a fair measure of grip as it goes, and we would let it sit for a few years before pouring it as a foil to juicy beef roasts.

**LEONESS Vista Del Monte Vineyard 2011**

Temecula Valley. Solidly Syrah in its attractive blending of ripe blackberry fruit, gamy and spicy nuances and sweet oak all filled out and enhanced by a whiff of dried violets, this wine is very full in body but surprisingly balanced after its supple, somewhat fleshy entry. Its tannins provide a bit of backbone and allow for a few years of aging potential, and we would not be surprised if it held up in bottle for up to a decade.

**LEONESS Signature Selection Temecula Valley 2011**

Deeply drafted in its dense, game and spice overlays to expressive blackberry fruit in both its aromas and flavors, this one plays the varietal card with a touch of roasted, caramelized meat as well. What it does somewhat less well than its mate above is deliver a full measure of fruit and thus it weighs a bit heavily at the front of the palate and then runs into firming and somewhat stiffening acidity at the back. It has time on its side, and while we find the wine above to be at least somewhat ready in the nearer term, we would counsel waiting on this one.

**LEONESS Fitzpatrick Vineyard Temecula Valley 2011**

On the one hand, soft and a bit fleshy, almost flabby in feel, and on the other, a touch narrow and somewhat reedy at the finish, this wine follows the familial model of big but not overweight, and if it had come with the central stuffing of its cellarmates, it could have received full commendation. But, even without that, it is worth a look if you are a fan of the winery and have a bit of time on your hands and can let it age.

**MARIMAR Don Miguel Vineyard 2010**

Russian River Valley. 80% Syrah; 20% Tempranillo. Showing a persistent streak of dry, dusty soils and always a bit obscure in fruit, this moderately full-bodied wine has more size than filling, and is never wholly convincing in varietal character. It may not be a tannic behemoth, but it is rustic and rough cut, and its lack of fruity expression suggests that it will not significantly change its stripes with aging.

**MORGAN G17 Monterey 2011**

83% Syrah; 14% Tempranillo; 3% Grenache. It may not be all Syrah in composition, but in both scent and taste, this bottling is striking in its varietal precision, and its combination of fruity depth, vitality and impeccable balance makes it one not to miss. It is full-bodied and supple with but a light touch of tannin that lends grip without toughness, and its enlivening, seamlessly fit acidity assures that it will be fresh and buoyant for a good many years to come. Drink it now if you will, or let it sit for a while in the full knowledge that it will charm both now and later.

**MORGAN Double L Vineyard 2011**

Santa Lucia Highlands. As a group, the 2011s from Morgan stand as a decided success in a sometimes difficult vintage, and, as the case with its mates, this wine exhibits a very fine sense of structural solidity and deep inner fruit. Its blackberry themes are overlain by lots of explicit varietal spice, and it is both weighty and quite firm in feel. It comes with more than a few youthful angles and acidy edges, and its recommendation carries the full and important proviso that it be allowed to mature for another four or five years.

**MORGAN Cotes du Crow’s Monterey 2011**

60% Syrah; 40% Grenache. While it is possible to discern more than a few scattered glimmers of Syrah in both the nose and the flavors of this juicy, fruit-driven working, the wine’s dominant themes of fully ripe strawberries owe much to Grenache. Low in tannin, slightly rounded in feel and very approachable stuff right now, it invites drinking with no need of delay but is balanced to keep comfortably for several years if that be your choice.

**OJAI VINEYARD Melville Vineyards 2010**

Sta. Rita Hills. This show-stopping effort stands with the very deepest, most concentrated and best-defined Syrahs we have tasted from 2010, and that is enough to win it a place among those at the head of the class, but it is equally praiseworthy for its balance and keen sense of proportion. It is at once sizeable and sleek, and it unfolds to show layer upon layer of fruit and savoy spice in its potent, but ever so polished flavors. It is not high in alcohol, yet it is as rich as they come, and it will take real willpower to summon the patience to let it rest for the full half-dozen years that it deserves.
Syrah

**OJAI VINEYARD Roll Ranch Vineyard 2010**
*California.* Year in and year out, the Ojai Vineyard's Roll Ranch Syrahs rank with our favorites, and, yet while this one is as rich and as deep as the best, it is a bit more obvious and not quite as complex as the top iterations of the past. Make no mistake, it is a very good wine, and one whose sinewy spine assures that it will age into better, but it also shows a certain plumpness and juicy accessibility that is sure to incite impatient Syrah devotees into drinking it up far too soon, and we would counsel that a bit of patience will be well rewarded.

**OJAI VINEYARD Santa Barbara County 2012**
Charged with lots of winsome young fruit and in ways begging comparison to a juicy Grenache, this buoyant, minimally spiced Syrah shows less compelling range than the winery's single-site bottlings, but it is an eminently tasty wine nonetheless and its turn of back-palate acidity is certain to keep it lively and fresh for several years.

**OJAI VINEYARD John Sebastianio Vineyard 2011**
*Santa Barbara County.* 70% Syrah; 30% Grenache. This wine can easily be called complex, but it is far more reedy and earthy than it is fruity, and, after starting out fairly rounded and ripe, it takes on a fair bit of lemony sourness that simply runs it off the rails and argues against any great optimism about just where it is ultimately headed.

**OWEN ROE Red Willow Vineyard Chapel Block 2011**
*Yakima Valley.* Given its stated alcohol, there is no question of ripeness in the grapes, but the narrow fruit that sits beneath the somewhat chocolaty overlay speaks to a lack of varietal definition and depth in no uncertain terms. That this wine hails from one of the storied Syrah vineyards up in Washington is no help either, and admired provenance or not, this wine comes across as too thin and incomplete.

**PALMERI Dark & Brooding Sonoma County 2011**
Subtle suggestions of pepper and woody spice sit to the rear of well-defined, blackberry fruit first in the nose and then again in the flavors of this ripe and nicely filled wine. It is balanced and fairly weighty in feel and well-sustained on the palate, and, if a little rough around the edges just now, it is no more so than a young Syrah should be. While it is not a brute, it clearly wants a few years of age, and it may well not reach its peak until six or seven have passed.

**PALMERI Van Ness Vineyard High Elevation 2011**
*Alexander Valley.* A bit richer in oak than its mate and more savoy than sweet in its array of meaty spice and ripe berries, Palmeri’s High Elevation Syrah is another solid success in 2011 and hits all of the varietal marks. It is broad on the palate and supple in feel with comparatively muted tannins doing little to obscure its ongoing fruit, and, while firm enough to withstand a few years in the cellar, it is easy to access and will arrive at peak drinkability fairly soon.

**PEJU Napa Valley 2011**
Despite the fact that it leads with a touch of pert, berry-like fruit in the nose, this wine is always one of real limits, and it steadily stiffens as it struggles to find enough inner richness to fill out its relatively narrow frame. It wants for clear varietal focus and is firm without being lively, and it comes to a fairly abrupt halt at the finish.

**RAMEY Sonoma Coast 2011**
There are suggestions of dried fruits in this wine’s jammy aromas, but both here and on the palate, it is concentration and polish that overcome the slight shortfall of inner fruitiness. Notions of game and spice clearly put this one in the varietal camp, and its supple entry, admittedly a touch on the soft side at the margins, is buttressed by a solidifying streak of firming, grippy tannin. Time is on its side for the moment, and we would allow it three to five years in the cellar.

**SEQUEL Columbia Valley 2010**
By Long Shadows. 7% Cabernet Sauvignon. Here is a strapping, full-bodied take on Syrah that does not shy away from ripeness, yet it wants for nothing in the way of gummy varietal spice, and it is endowed with a wealth of deep, dark-berry fruit. It is a vocal proponent of big flavor, and it may or may not show significant nuance with time, but it has the muscle and richness to last for the long haul and is sure to find favor with fans of brumy, very demonstrative Syrahs.

**SONOMA COAST VINEYARDS Sonoma Coast 2010**
Occidental Road Vineyard. Although fairly ripe-seeming and showing accents of dark chocolate in its spicy, vaguely woody aromas, this wine pulls back a bit on the palate and steers away from the opulence of high ripeness. It is balanced to firmness, keeps tannin check and shows the first inklings of polish, but, even if not coarse or astringent, it is just tight enough to commend a few years of patience.

**STARK Cuveé Julian Mendocino County 2012**
100% Syrah. Setting youthful black stone fruits and red berries against the somewhat intrusive seasonings of dried twigs, bark and a light dusting of varietal black pepper, this offering similarly plays off admirable and offsetting qualities in palatal impressions that are at once rounded at the center and tart and narrow at the margins. That said, the overall effect is a wine that has more than enough energy for current enjoyment but might not fully reward the aging need to soften its tannins.

**STARK Eaglepoint Ranch Mendocino County 2011**
We are less enamoured of this wine from Stark than its younger
mate above, and that is because it shows the difficulties of a hard vintage. Its middling fruit makes a decent first impression in aromas that are both lively and varietally gamy, but the joy found there does not come across in the mouth where the wine drifts from early roundness to latter palate hardness and ends with acid and tannin in charge.

**STICKY BEAK** 75% Monterey County 2010 25% Napa County. If at first faintly suggestive of herbs and a note of green peppers and a little stingy in ripeness, this wine musters a fair sense of fruit as well and follows with more size on the palate than its initial aromas predict. It is slightly supple and rounded with a welcome spot of freshness to its acidity to its finish, and, while we might wish for a bit more varietal precision and spice, it is a likeable, fairly priced, very easy-to-taste wine. GOOD VALUE

**STOLPMAN**

**STOLPMAN La Croce California 2011** 50% Syrah; 50% Sangiovese. Once again, Stolpman has joined these two disparate varieties into a most enticing and somewhat different wine from the norm. There is more red berry fruit here than one expects of Syrah and more pert energy to boot, and if the Syrah is boosted by the Sangiovese, the Sangiovese is filled out by the Syrah with notes of ripe blackberry and graphite and a touch of underlying fullness. This new edition may be a touch less polished than Stolpman's brilliant 2010 version that earned three stars and was one of our wines of the year, but it is still a fine lesson in virtuoso winemaking.

**STOLPMAN Hilltops Santa Ynez Valley 2011** Favoring ripeness and a touch of dark chocolate in orientation, this generous wine may lack a touch of the structural nerve that would mark the best of its variety, but it is open, rich and inviting from first sniff to lasting aftertaste. Its rising edge of tartness at the very last brings a spot of energy to its admittedly “slurpy”, drink-me sooner than later message.

**SWIFTWATER Columbia Valley 2010** Although hinting at a touch of chocolate and a bit of graphite in the nose and following up with the same in the mouth, this relatively thick and weighty wine seems far less concerned with presenting a clear sense of fruit. It is big and very ripe but is a bit slow on its feet, and it could do with a spot of brightness to lighten its way.

**TABLAS CREEK Patelin de Tablas Paso Robles 2012** 53% Syrah; 27% Grenache; 18% Mourvèdre; 2% Counoise. Its nominal ripeness (13.8% alcohol) notwithstanding, this wine is a little too light overall, and after a youthfully fresh start, it loses its way and washes out a bit. Medium-full in body and slightly tilted to the round side but not much possessed of mass or muscle, it is at best a light and simple quaff.

**TERCERO** Larner Vineyard Santa Ynez Valley 2009 Clean and nicely stated in fruit with somewhat subdued spice off to the side, the 2009 Tercero Syrah rests comfortably within varietal lines without being especially pushy or bold. It is firmly by fairly obvious acidity and tightens as it crosses the palate, but it holds on to its fruit even if slightly tangy and should relax and smooth with several years of age.

**TERCERO The Climb Santa Barbara County 2010** 67% Syrah; 33% Petite Sirah. While putting a good first foot forward with its compelling, moderately rich aromas of cocoa, cinnamon and plentiful berries, this wine proves to be one of rather mixed messages as its flavors run from plumpness to eerie dryness and are interrupted by acid-pushed astringency. It is not a flashy wine, yet it winds up fairly puckery all the same, and it will need both time and a bit of good luck if it is to find fruity length and cohesion.

**TERRE ROUGE High Slopes Sierra Foothills 2010** With its focus firmly fixed on varietal game, rich soils, stones and a solid underpinning of blackberry jam with more than enough vital fruit in tow, this fairly full-bodied offering is both direct and subtle at the same time, and it manages to carry its character all the way from first sniff to ripe and acid-firmed finish. Deep yet not at all overdone at any stop, this Syrah keeps its grippy, latter-palate tannins under control by virtue of its balanced blending of central fruit and age-rewarding structure, and we are content to wait a half decade for it to mature.

**TERRE ROUGE DTR Ranch Fiddletown 2010** Savory to the point of suggesting overly charred roast beef, the aromas of this full-bodied effort find enough fruit underneath to keep themselves on track and to take full advantage of their hardwood background notes. Supple at entry and very much in sympathy with its aromatic beginnings, this one does run a touch towards a blocky latter palate and finish and will reward a few years of bottle aging.

**TERRE ROUGE Monarch Mine Vineyard 2010** Sierra Foothills. Its early suggestions of varietal roasted meats and game are joined by ripe, slightly dried berry notes in the nose of this cellar-demanding wine. For, while it is not without a fair dollop of ripe fruit in the mouth, it quickly gives up any pretense of early drinkability in the face of overwhelming abrasiveness and a drying, alum-like mix of tannin and acid in the finish. Its tough exterior will deter many, but there are those who will find it to be their kind of decade-long wine.

**TERRE ROUGE Sentinel Oak Vineyard 2010** Pyramid Block. Shenandoah Valley. Ripe to the point of dark chocolate excess and somewhat sour/sharp-smelling for its sins, this full-bodied, viscous wine might still have passed muster had it not run into a wall of abrasively drying tannins that call for up to a decade of cellaring. A massive gamble is called for here but is not recommended.

**TESTAROSSA Garys’ Vineyard 2011** Santa Lucia Highlands. Everything about the first aromas says that we are going to like the wine, and we do. Its youthful fruit comes seasoned with varietal hints of black pepper and roasted meats, and the wine is supple and somewhat polished at entry. Its tannins are well-managed, and while evident, and contributing to a certain latter palate narrowness, are not at all intrusive even at this point. A couple of years in the cellar will see it open up a bit, but long-aging is not needed.
**Syrah**

**TUXEDO Paso Robles 2011**

Its label reads 16.5% alcohol by volume, but its character comes across as lighter and less dramatic than that, and, indeed, for all of its ripeness, it also has a snappy, bright fruit quality and a wee touch of latter palate thinness. Suggestions of roasted beef are accompanied by notes of ripe plum and berries before a touch of finishing tartness arrives.

**VIE**

**VIE Las Madres Vineyard Los Carneros 2010 Sonoma County.** Inclined more to peppery spice than to the grape's gamy side and sporting a good measure of very solid, ripe-berry fruit, the Las Madres bottling leads the way among the Vie Syrahs. It is full-bodied and balanced with but a slight touch of youthful toughness owing to its nominal tannins, and it should grow into its very best with no more than three or four years of rest in the cellar.

**VIE White Hawk Vineyard Santa Barbara County 2010**

Its complex, deeply draughted aromas of bright berries, sweet oak, caramelized meat and milk chocolate may offer much to like, yet, once in the mouth, the push and pull of very obvious ripeness and equally obvious acidity becomes the point of focus and leaves this wine both hot and tangy. It may be filled, but it is at war with itself, and there is no guarantee that it will ever be as balanced as it is rich.

**VIE Melange Maison I California**

This non-vintaged blend of red Rhône varietals hints variously at berries and spice yet could do with a boost in both richness and depth, and its uncomfortable confluence of drying tannins and biting acidity leaves it tangy and tough and thoroughly lacking in beauty or charm.

**VINA ROBLES Syrée Paso Robles 2009**

82% Syrah; 18% Petite Sirah. Excess is the name of the game here in all things save the expression of fruit, and the wine finds itself burdened by a little too much ripeness, far too much heat and so much tannin that it wholly loses its way. We could see it needing more than a decade of age, but we do not see the fruit to really make waiting worthwhile.

**VINA ROBLES Red! Paso Robles 2011**

35% Syrah; 25% Petite Sirah; 25% Mourvedre; 15% Grenache. Bothered at first with the smell of a dusty old attic and then a touch pruney and vaguely suggestive of dried fruit, this diffuse and utterly directionless mish-mash of grapes summarily dries up, and its flavors quickly wash out with nothing but heat and bitterness remaining.

**WESTWOOD Sierra de Montserrall Vineyard 2010 Placer County.** Wandering a bit wide of classic Syrah definition, but not the worse for it, this fairly full-bodied offering combines scents of ripe berries with hints of earth, evergreen, green olives and evident but not controlling ripeness. A tad soft in the underbelly and firmed up in the late going by rising acidity and light-to-medium tannins, it drifts into finishing coarseness and will want some few years of cellaring.

**WISE VILLA Sierra Foothills 2011**

Youthful and lighter at first pass and a tad higher in acidity than most of the competition, this wine is certainly likeable, but it takes Syrah-light a bit too far and winds up on the thin, basic side in texture and wanting for Syrah definition as well. It may be wholly serviceable as a red wine, but, at the price, we would like to find a little more “soul”.

**WORKMAN AYER de facto Central Coast 2010**

92% Syrah; 7% Grenache; 1% Mourvedre. Although never wanting in ripeness and a Syrah of considerable size, this one shows a fair sense of polish and refinement before its slightly sturdier, youthfully rough-edged qualities arrive. It has the structure and stuffiness to get better and better, and we would argue against drinking it up too soon. Let it sit for at least three or four years, and do not be surprised if it improves for twice as long.

**WORKMAN AYER de facto Central Coast 2011**

75% Syrah; 15% Mourvedre; 10% Grenache. Starting out in the nose with a curious but interesting combination of bacon fat, caramel, roasted meat, leather and raspberries, this wine disappoints on the palate by being surprisingly bereft of fruit. It is decently balanced but steadily slides to powdery dryness and pulls up short at the finish.

**ZACA MESA Chapel G Santa Ynez Valley 2011**

Its youth keeps this one a touch on the simple side at first sniff, but, with airing, it opens up and reveals spicy, gamy and meaty nuances that promise to gain in prominence over time. And time is exactly what this wine needs. It is polished yet tight in feel, full of character and nicely balanced in a way that its ripeness never pushes fruit or vitality from center stage, and its continuity from front to back suggests a level of early drinkability that should be shunned lest its best years be missed. We would put this one in the cellar for at least five years.

**ZACA MESA Z Three Santa Ynez Valley 2010**

50% Syrah; 35% Mourvedre; 15% Grenache. Here is a rich and generously filled wine that from start to finish conveys insistent impressions of fruity substance and depth, and it is a complete and singular piece of its own that, as is the case with the better Rhône blends, is a very well-meshed combination of pieces. It is rife with blackberries and long on sweet spice, and, while it is sure to tempt near-term drinking with braised meats and sundry savory stews, it can safely sit for awhile in the cellar and should gain more richness yet.

**ZACA MESA Santa Ynez Valley 2010**

6% Viognier. It may not be the deepest or most serious Syrah to be had, but this very accessible wine wins endorsement for its available fruit and overall affability. It is ripe and rounded and fairly supple in feel, and it keeps ripe berries in sight at all times. It makes a smooth passage over the palate, and, even if finished with a slight tannic pucker, it is not a wine that demands a long stay in the cellar.
PETITE SIRAH

Someone mentioned the 1971 Freemark Abbey Petite Sirah from the York Creek Vineyard on the internet the other day, essentially referring to it as the seminal wine in that variety’s rise to prominence. It turns out that we also mentioned it a couple of times in our blog and elsewhere because we had just opened a bottle the night before and, after forty years and counting, it pretty much stole the show amongst a group of Syrahs and Petite Sirahs young and old.

What is most remarkable about that wine has only a little to do with the fact that it has survived forty years in good shape, but that Petite Sirah got our attention back in the early seventies because it had massive tannins. So did other wines like 1968 Ridge Monte Bello Cabernet and 1970 Mayacamas Cabernet. All of a sudden, we wanted our wines to have longevity, and those early Petite Sirahs with their tongue-curing tannins and palate-staining colorations certainly met that bill.

Today’s Petite Sirahs still have tannin as one of their premier calling cards, but very few of them can match the cellar-challenging status of the 71s from Freemark Abbey and Ridge. And some of the wines reviewed below are practically drinkable in their youth. Petite Sirah has grown up and now offers something for all palates. And what it offers most of all is the uncanny ability, even when young and unruly, to be a fine mate to grilled roast leg of lamb.

BOGLE Essential Red California 2011
17% Cabernet Sauvignon; 2% Merlot. Nicely ripened without going overly far and fixed on fairly deep fruit from beginning to end, this sweetly spiced Petite shows the peppery, slightly earthy traits we expect of the grape and does so while conveying a bit of winemaking polish. It is no more than moderately tannic, and it is not at all tough or unruly, and, while it can be enjoyed with minimal aging, it has clear potential for a few years of growth.

GOOD VALUE

ANCIENT PEAKS

ANCEINT PEAKS Paso Robles 2010
Here is a wine for those who revel in richness and have never met one that they consider too big. It is a swaggering, very full-bodied working that makes no apologies for ripeness, and it is underpinned by a decade’s worth of tannin, yet its big bones are thickly padded by lots of fruity flesh. It is, in short, a Petite Sirah that seems conceived with the most devoted, dyed-in-the-wool Petite Sirah lovers in mind, and we would not be surprised if it were to last for a generation.

GOOD VALUE

BOGLE California 2011
Curiously woody with suggestions of coffee and a bare bit of red-berry fruit in both its loosely defined aromas and underfilled flavors, this dull and lackluster wine never quite works its way into varietal territory, and, although unburdened by tannin, it is unrefined and dry all the same.

GOOD VALUE

CARICA Kick Ranch Sonoma County 2010
Although we very much like this full-scaled wine’s well-focused aromas of pepper, dark earth and concentrated blackberry fruit, we find ourselves wishing for a little more fruit and a less overt ripeness in the big and highly extracted flavors that follow. Still, the wine stops just short of over-the-top excess, and its tough-guy personality is all Petite Sirah, but it is bound to overpower most any entrees that are lighter than the likes of garlic-infused, roast leg of lamb.

GOOD VALUE
There is no question but that this is powerful stuff, and it is not a wine for the timid, but it is much more than a simple, tannin-bound brute. It is dense and deeply fruity with distinct elements of smoke, pepper and caramelized meat in league with its very solid measure of well-ripened berries, and, while rough at the edges and not sparing in varietal tannins, it never bends under their weight, and its very tenacious fruit emerges unscathed at the end. Hard-core devotees of Petite Sirah are likely to enjoy it without waiting, but the rest of us might be happier five or six years down the line.

This rustic, fairly full-bodied offering does not say a great deal about Petite Sirah other than reminding that the grape can yield decidedly tannic red wines, and, while reasonably well-balanced and very clean, it lacks the fruity substance and depth to rise above innocuous simplicity.

If a little less than keenly fruity and fairly mute with regard to specific varietal spice, this extracted, chocolate-tinged offering does not stint in the least on richness or formidable tannins, and it has just enough fleshy richness to at least partially mitigate its tannin-bound working is not so quick to show its fruit, yet ever so slowly an ample measure of dark berries emerges, and the wine proves to be more complete than it at first seems. It may find favor now with those who like their Petites rough and unruly, but it is very much a wine that needs waiting if its best is to be seen. Eight to ten years may not be too many, and five is likely to be too few.

Here, again, is a much scaled down version of Petite Sirah that fully demonstrated the potential shortfalls of the vintage. While unstinting in tannin, it is bit bony and hints at a note of stalky greenness that becomes increasingly apparent as it stiffens and takes on far more finishing astrignency than its slender, short-winded fruit can support.

More of a basic, hearty red wine than one that speaks with an especially clear varietal voice, this moderately full-bodied effort is a touch soft in balance with modestly fruity flavors that are underpinned by accordingly modest tannins. It is clean, free of fault and will make useful drinking with sundry roasted meats, but those looking for expressive Petite Sirahs are best advised to look elsewhere.

There is no lack of ripeness at work here, yet the wine's very full frame is a bit lacking in fruit, and, while long on Petite Sirah's briary spice, this one comes up a bit less than fully complete. It has plenty of mass but is not bludgeoned by typical tannin, and it has just enough fleshy richness to at least partially mitigate its hard-to-ignore finishing heat. Lengthy aging is not mandatory, yet a few years of waiting is advised.

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**Langtry**

Good tannic grip without being at all severe, and, while many of its kin demand lengthy stays in the cellar, it should be at its best in four or five years.

**Line 39 North Coast 2012**

Fruit is woefully absent at every stop here, and the wine smells of cardboard, dried reeds and something closer to plastic than to grapes. It is off-putting in too many ways, and it fails to make the cut as even a cheap, every day pour.  

**Michael & David Earthquake Lodi 2011**

Defined first and foremost by ripeness with a strong theme of chocolate running its length and an extravagant oak presence that pushes real fruit to the side, this fleshy, full-bodied wine is hot right from the start, but it is rich and immensely flavorful as well. While it achieves a certain measure of success by avoiding the pitfalls of hazardous varietal tannins, it is singularly lacking in grace and refinement, and only fans of unrestrained ripeness need apply.

**Michael & David Petite Petit Lodi 2011**

85% Petite Sirah; 15% Petit Verdot. Although showing a bit of dried blackberry fruit here and there, this wide-open wine is far more concerned with ripeness and rich oak than with anything else. It is laced with milk chocolate and at times hints of smoke, and it is fat and full on the palate. It tannins are modest, and it is far from a classic expression of Petite Sirah, but it is flavorful stuff all the same and will satisfy with simple, barbecued meats.

**Good Value**

**Parducci**

In some ways an old-fashioned Petite Sirah of real muscle and weight but exhibiting the depth that only the very best bottlings manage to show, Parducci’s latest True Grit is a very big, broad-shouldered version whose considerable toughness never once obscures the confident fruit that lies at its heart. It is gusty and grippy, but it displays marvelous length, and its constant themes of blackberries, pepper and savory earthiness power their ways past what is no small measure of varietal tannin. It wants to be left alone for at least a half-dozen years, and it should be in fine form for a good many more.

**Parducci True Grit Reserve Mendocino 2010**

As much as we may like Parducci’s True Grit, this shallow and sere, near-empty offering is a horse of a different color. It is dry as can be with nowhere near enough fruit to counterbalance its tongue-curing tannins, and its abrasive, alum-like finish is sure to dissuade more than a few sips.

**Parducci Small Lot Blend Mendocino County 2010**

As this very inviting wine can attest, Petite Sirah need not be an unmanered brute. It is deep and nicely fruited with scattered notes of chocolate and spice joining in with articulate dark-berry fruit, and, while moderately tannic, it manifests an uncommonly careful hand and is never overly tough. That said, it is hardly a wine for gulping down in its youth, and it promises to gain in complexity and find an uncustomary measure of polish over the next half-dozen years.

**Proulx Jack Barrett Paso Robles 2011**

47% Petite Sirah; 23% Grenache; 21% Syrah; 9% Zinfandel. While it may show some of Petite Sirah’s sinew and tannic grip, this very rich, fully ripened, big-bodied red ranges well outside of simple varietal lines with plenty of spicy complexity and very deep, blackberry fruit to spare. Creamy oak adds its own brand of sweetness and brings a touch of caramel to mix, and, rather than being tough and tannic, the wine is rounded and fleshy in feel. It coarsens a bit at the finish, but it is never defined by its tannins, and it shows excellent promise for a half-dozen years of positive growth.

**Quivira Dry Creek Valley 2010**

15% Zinfandel; 5% Syrah; 5% Cabernet Sauvignon. A bit of departure from its burlier cousins and built along comparatively tighter lines, this bottling manages to be both very ripe and a bit stiff in structure and is presently reined in by its fairly obvious acidity. Whether or not it fills out with age is a question that will be answered only with time, but the odds seem fairly high that it will remain firm and ungainly.

**Rhiannon California 2012**

44% Petite Sirah; 42% Syrah; 14% Barbera. Edging slightly to sweetness in both smell and taste and hinting one moment at strawberries and the next at cherries, this simple middleweight conveys little in the way of Petite Sirah or Syrah character, but it is rounded, well-scrubbed and light in tannin, and it goes down without much of fuss.

**Ridge Lytton Estate Dry Creek Valley 2011**

Close to anomalous in its muted impressions of ripeness and at first a bit stalky and vegetative in smell, this bottling gradually grows ever more complex as it sits open with an ample dose of dark berries joining elements of graphite, dill and dusty soils. It is both solid and quite nicely balanced with nominal tannins and a fine sense of solidity on the palate, and, while still very young and in need of four or five years of cellaring, it already hints at polish rarely seen in Petite Sirah.
PETITE SIRAH

**SILKWOOD Vintners Select Stanislaus County 2007**
Fairly intense on the nose with elements of dark earth, toasted herbs and smoky, burnt bacon far in advance of anything that might be called fruit, this tough, coarsely textured effort in no more appealing in taste. Sourness and heat quickly become its most lasting traits, and its ridiculously prideful price is the stuff of pure hubris.

**SILKWOOD Stanislaus County 2007**
There is nothing about its very ripe, slightly-too-sweet aromas that might warn off a subsequent sip, but this thick and rather syrupy wine proves a difficult one on the palate. Its altogether discordant mix of sweetness, tannin, sourness and heat makes it hard to like now, and every sign suggests that it can do nothing other than get worse with time.

**SPELLBOUND California 2012**
If a bit candied and fairly frontal with respect to fruit and not at all varietal as far as substance and size goes, this medium-full-bodied working musters just enough tannic grip to quietly claim the varietal name. It dries and pulls up short at the finish, and it cannot grow into beauty, but it will get the job done in washing down hunks of meat.

**STAGS’ LEAP WINE CELLARS**

**STAGS’ LEAP WINERY Napa Valley 2010**
12% Syrah; 6% Grenache; 5% other. Ripe, blackberry-like fruit is teamed with a fair bit of oak in this very solid look at Petite Sirah, and, if the wine is arguably a bit simple and light on the peppery spice that the grape sometimes shows, it is deep and gutsy with plenty of essential extract. It is fairly tannic, yet it is never abrasively so, and its continuous, well-fruited finish shows the stamina to guarantee that many years of positive growth lie in its future.

**STANTON St. Helena Napa Valley 2011**
There is no getting around the fact that this hefty wine trades on very high ripeness, but for all of its near unctuousness and considerable weight, it is unmistakably varietal and ripe with pepper and dark, earthy spice. Undisguised heat comes on at the finish as does a full dose of grippy tannins, and, if not out and out abrasive, it is a rough-cut working that will last for a decade or more. Fans of Petite Sirah’s brawny side are going to find their wishes fulfilled here.

**STARK Damiano Vineyard Sierra Foothills 2012**
Sweet and meaty in scent with a strong sense of blackberry fruit that carries on through in its very deep, well-composed flavors, this young, rather rugged rendition is varietally precise without being prohibitively tough, and its fruity length is striking. Please do not take that to mean that it should be poured for dinner tonight, for it has the broad shoulders and big bones that good, long-lived Petite Sirah should, and it fully deserts at least four or five years in the cellar.

**TERCERO Santa Ynez Valley 2009**
“Control” is a word rarely used when describing Petite Sirah, but this one is far less potent than most and is as close to being reined as Petite is likely to get. It hits the right marks in terms of peppery spice and concentrated, blackberry fruit without being relentlessly tannic or particularly tough, and it deserves notice from those who typically find the grape to be interesting but a little too unruly for their tastes.

**URSA Syrah - Sirah Sierra Foothills 2010**
50% Syrah; 50% Petite Sirah. Given its equal parts of Syrah and Petite Sirah, it should be no surprise that this offering is far less tannic than the latter might predict, and it follows a path all its own with elements of pepper, dried flowers, berries and plums and touches of game all framed in a soft bit of sweet oak. It is weighty without being heavy and exhibits fine overall balance, and, if slightly abrasive and taking on a little more heat than it needs at the end, it hangs on to its fruit and should round into fine shape in a couple of years. It is a lot of wine for the money.

**URSA Thor Vineyard Sierra Foothills 2008**
The trick to making good Petite Sirah is in finding just the right balance of fruit and tannin, and, while this one raises fairly high hopes with its nicely extracted, blackberry and pepper aromas, it is a touch heavy-legged, and its hoped-for fruit is never quite up to handling the heat and very abrasive astrignency that dries out its finish.

**VINA ROBLES Paso Robles 2010**
22% Syrah. While some Petite Sirahs are tannic, backward and brooding, this one is both tannic and surprisingly accessible at one and the same time. It leads with fairly sweet, unabashedly ripe aromas of blackberries and chocolate, and it begins on the palate with a plush feel before its ample tannins kick into gear. Its evident fraction of Syrah lends a twist of gamy spice, and oak provides an ongoing trim of extra sweetness to its flavors before back-palate astrignency and palpable heat conspire to coarsen its rather inelegant finish.

**WISE VILLA Sierra Foothills 2011**
Wispy suggestions of berry-like fruit are met with but a passing suggestion pepper in the underplayed aromas of this decidedly low-keyed look at Petite Sirah, but the flavors that follow lean hard to greenness and are so thin and angular as to miss any and all varietal marks.
Grenache

There are many wine speakers who believe that California Grenache will soon become an important staple in our pantheon of desirable red wines. This is not, however, a new sentiment, and it is fair to say that progress has been slow and slower. But progress there is, and the potential still exists and beckons fans of the grape with the siren call of supple, flavorful wines that offer a unique flavor profile. Fingers remain crossed because we simply have not crossed the tipping point into greatness as the very good but not remarkable group of wines below demonstrates.

**ADELAIDA**

**ADELAIDA Version Anna’s Estate Vineyard 2011 Paso Robles.** 33% Grenache; 32% Syrah; 29% Mourvedre; 3% Cinsault; 3% Counoise. Here is a fairly big and unabashedly ripe, Rhône-style blend that does a very good job at being rich, generously fruited and very well-balanced. Showing a touch of dried brush, a quiet suggestion of game and a trim of chocolate to its ongoing themes of strawberry preserves, it is buoyed by a nice streak of fruity acid with little in the way of obvious heat, and it will serve as a fine foil to spicy stews and braised meats over the next four or five years.

**BAIOCCHI del Maggio Fair Play 2011**

80% Grenache; 20% Syrah. This one too quickly abandons its first impressions of strawberries and rushes to simple ripeness and heat. While it achieves a measure of richness, it is a bit of a blunderbuss, and it is at once both sluggish and fairly coarse on the palate.

**CLOS LA CHANCE Reserve Central Coast 2011**

Grenache can come in a good many guises, and, while some are bright and directly fruity, others can be downright gusty and gruff. This bottling joins those in the latter camp and inclines to tannic toughness, and, if a bit too hot and coarse to be quaffed easily, it will nonetheless make useful drinking with the likes of marinated chunks of grilled lamb if allowed to soften for three or four years.

**DRAGONETTE Cellars**

**DRAGONETTE Santa Barbara County 2011**

It is hard not to make comparisons with Pinot Noir here as this graceful middleweight steers well away from the high ripeness and heft seen in so many of its mates. It is bright and lively and very well-mannered, and it is free of any tactile angles or edges. It may not be the deepest or richest Grenache to be found, but it is balanced and keenly fruity throughout, and it will prove a versatile partner to dishes ranging from smoked pork chops to a garlic-laced ratatouille.

**ERIC KENT**

**ERIC KENT The Barrel Climber 2011 Russian River Valley.** It is hard to miss the role of sweet oak here, but the wine is quite deep and so confidently fruity that it is much improved by its inclusion. There is a strong and specific message of strawberries to this one that persists even as a bit of challenging tannin comes on at the end, and, if still a bit rough to quaff down now, this is a Grenache that will pay dividends with three to five years of cellaring.

**LAW**

**LAW Audacious Paso Robles 2010**

44% Grenache; 26% Cabernet Sauvignon; 20% Syrah; 10% Petite Sirah. Appropriately named and definitely not a wine for those in search of constraint, this lusty, mouthfilling bottling is one for fans of unbridled richness. It is very ripe, but it is also brimming with well-defined, oak-sweetened blackberry fruit. It stops just short of being heavy and overly jammy in character, and, while it is not free of heat, it has more than enough depth and such sheer fruity potency that its minor excesses are easily forgiven sins.

**LEONESSE Grande Mélange Temecula Valley 2011**

41% Grenache; 37% Syrah; 14% Cinsault; 8% Mourvedre. If leading with attractive aromas of strawberries and raspberries, and very much keyed in on juicy Grenache to start, this weighty working surprises with fairly thick flavors that are far less fruity than advertised, and unrestrained ripeness turns out to be the compass by which the wine sets its course. It is palpably hot at the finish and consistently a bit crude in manner, but it counts real richness as an asset and should make a passable partner to hearty hunks of lamb or beef.
**Grenache**

**LORING Russell Family Vineyard Paso Robles 2012**

This wine barely hangs on to a bit of vaguely berry-like fruit as it goes right to the brink in terms of high ripeness. It is quite full and fairly viscous in feel with little in the way of evident tannin, and its finishing combination of souring sharpness and heat is far from attractive.

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**TERCERO Cuvée Christie Santa Barbara County 2009**

Santa Ynez Valley. 75% Grenache; 25% Syrah. Slightly lower in fruity drive than the other Tercero offerings and a somewhat more tightly constructed wine as well, the Cuvée Loco could do with a little more fruity flesh to cover its fairly stiff bones. Yes, it is young, but its acidy edges and its stark tannic pucker leaves us less than fully convinced that it will find the polish it needs even with a lengthy stay the cellar.

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**TERCERO Cuvée Loco Larner Vineyard 2009**

65% Grenache; 15% Mourvedre; 10% Syrah; 10% Petite Sirah. This lively, strawberry-like qualities of its nose immediately tag this one as owing much to Grenache, and the wine picks up on the same juicy and energetic young fruit in its vibrant flavors as well, but it runs up against a little more acid-pushed tannin than we would like to see. Age will be a big help, to be sure, and the wine has the vigor to last, but real beauty might well be elusive in the long run.

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**SUMMERWOOD GSM Paso Robles 2010**

59% Grenache; 27% Syrah; 14% Mourvedre. After throwing a quick look in the direction of Grenache’s strawberry-like fruit, this hefty, full-bodied blend keys more on ripeness than on any singular varietal theme. It smacks of blackberries and cocoa with a touch of peppery spice, and, while a big, brawny wine, it is always well-filled with enough inner fruit to support the three or four years of aging it needs.

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**TERRE ROUGE L’Autre Sierra Foothills 2010**

73% Grenache; 14% Mourvedre; 13% Syrah. Loosely fruity, if not especially well-focused and showing a reedy touch of dried brush to its suggestions of red fruit in the nose, this weighty but rather ragged wine is no better defined once in the mouth and is overtaken by heat and stalky astringency before ever finding its fruity feet. Time in the cellar certainly cannot hurt, but it is unclear just how much it may help.

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**TERCERO Watch Hill Vineyards 2009**

Santa Barbara County. Although the ripest of the Tercero lot, this one is also arguably the richest and most deeply fruity, and its very articulate message of strawberries and cherries is not in the least compromised. It is full and slightly fleshy in feel with a good tannic frame and ample integral acidity, and, while it does get a little too rough and puckery for drinking right now, it has all the right pieces in place to grow into better with four or five years of patience.

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**V. SATUI Napa Valley 2011**

10% Syrah; 4% Petite Sirah. Wispy notes of dried herbs overlie quiet, but fairly well-defined fruit in the clean, nicely composed nose of this wine, and its flavors follow suit in showing savory touches of bay leaf and sage to their central theme of fully ripe strawberries. There is a slight streak of tannin that affords a bit of tactile grip and ensures a few years of keeping, but it does not preclude early drinking.

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**TERCERO Larner Vineyard Santa Ynez Valley 2009**

Nicely fit acidity goes a long way to tempering this ample wine’s penchant to ripeness and brings a nice spot of brightness to its central themes of strawberries and sweet plums. There is just enough late-arriving heat to be noticeable, and things do get just a bit rough at the end, but the fruity essentials are in place to ensure good things ahead, and hasty drinking will not do this one justice.

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**WESTWOOD Ella’s Vin de Granit Placer County 2010**

Sierra de Montserrat Vineyard. 55% Grenache; 10% Syrah; 35% Mourvèdre. On the one hand reminding of berry preserves and on the other suggestive of dried fruit, this blend ultimately runs to ripeness with blunting tannins and heat coming on a bit strong. It is structured along slightly tougher lines than its inner fruit can support, but even a couple of years of smoothing could make a marked difference.

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**WESTWOOD Grenache Blend Placer County 2011**

Sierra de Montserrat Vineyard. 60% Grenache; 20% Syrah; 20% Mourvedre. It is unlikely to win accolades for great fruity depth or compelling complexity, but this solid, slightly rustic red blend has a fair bit of mass and palatal grip, and it flirts with a bit of Rhône-like spice. It is not overly tannic, but it is sufficiently astringent to want a few years of age or pairing with the likes of well-seasoned roasts and stews if drunk now. GOOD VALUE

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Mourvèdre

Truth be told, we are not all that fond of Mourvèdre. On its own, it can be rustic, earthy and occasionally downright funky. Yet, used as a blending grape, it can provide added perfume and tannic backbone while adding roundness to the underside of stiffer wines. In short, it is a bit of a mess.

Yet for all that, it has many followers around the world, and while the stand-alone California versions below are not objects of intense desire, they do give us a look at why the grape is so widely planted in Spain and in the southern regions of France. And, because half the wines below are blends in which Mourvèdre comes first but is not over 50% of the whole, we can also taste its role mixed-variety bottlings.

**88 ADELAIDA Version Reserve Anna’s Estate Vyd 2011**
Paso Robles. 50% Mourvèdre; 38% Syrah; 12% Grenache. A decidedly different wine than the winery's non-reserve Version and showing a big dose of Syrah spice after its first flourish of fully ripe, blackberry fruit, this well-muscled wine nonetheless mimics its mate in that it is balanced and brighter than its ample alcohol might predict. It is, in fact, a touch edgy and tart at the finish and could, if anything, do with a couple of years in which to knit wholly together.

**87 ADELAIDA Keeper Paso Robles 2010**
35% Mournvèdre; 33% Syrah; 15% Grenache; 15% Counoise; 3% Cinsault. Yet another fairly generous wine from Adelaida that sports a welcome streak of port acidity amidst its obvious ripeness, this one keys of berries and plums with a fair dollop of creamy oak to sweeten the mix. Its supple beginnings give way to firmness, and its frontal flavors tend to tighten and take on a twist of last-minute tannins that makes a good case for waiting another year or two.

**87 BONNY DOON Old Telegram California 2010**
Dark and well-ripened with a fair sense of palatal heft and an ample measure of plum and blackberry fruit at its heart, Randall Graham's latest Old Telegram is a complex, multi-faceted effort that hints at tobacco and coffee one moment and dusty soils and dried meadows the next. It is full-bodied and balanced but gets a little taut and chalky at the end, and, unless paired in the short term with very rustic, full-flavored fare, it is a wine best set aside for three to five years.

**88 CLINE Cashmere California 2012**
35% Mournvèdre; 24% Syrah; 23% Grenache; 18% Petite Sirah. Although starting out a bit muddled and murky in aroma with a bare hint of strawberries sitting behind its smells of dried brush and earth, this slightly viscous, minimally tannic middleweight is nicely balanced and always allows fruit to occupy center stage and is a solid, moderately full-bodied, well-ripened wine, but it is nicely balanced and always allows fruit to occupy center stage while less forcefully showing the grape's inclination to woodsy spice and unsweetened chocolate.

**88 JC CELLARS Twist of Fate Paso Robles 2011**
As ripe and outgoing as the wines of its maker typically are, this very full-bodied Mourvèdre in undeniably rich and sports a full measure of fairly sweet oak with accents of chocolate and dark-roasted coffee, but it wanders away from defined fruit and is, in the end, burdened by a little too much tannin and heat for its own good.

**88 LORING Russell Family Vineyard Paso Robles 2012**
Brian Loring is a winemaker who is not wary of ripeness as this very wine will attest, and, if always in need of convincing fruity credentials, there is no questioning its richness. It is anything but simple and runs off in all sorts of directions with elements of bacon, smoky spice, a woody hint of dried bark and a note of sweet berry compote, but it is thick and a bit plodding with more evident heat than it needs.

**87 TABLAS CREEK Paso Robles 2011**
Smelling or red berries and plums with a bit of dried brush just off to the side, this rounded, slightly soft-leaning Mourvèdre is fairly fruity and less heavy-footed than the grape sometimes gets. Its modest tannins afford a nice bit of grip without lessening its easy accessibility, and it does not want to be hidden away for too many years.

**87 TERCERO Santa Barbara County 2010**
At times, Mourvèdre seems too quick to hide its fruit behind a deadening muddle of earth and browned brush, but this fresh, nicely framed offering does not and is defined first and last by its themes of cherries and red berries. It is far from a lightweight and is a solid, moderately full-bodied, well-ripened wine, but it is nicely balanced and always allows fruit to occupy center stage while less forcefully showing the grape's inclination to woody spice and unsweetened chocolate.

**88 TERRE ROUGE Sierra Foothills 2011**
If showing a bit of the brushiness that more strongly influences the winery's Tête-à-Tête bottling, this wine has a much better foundation of basic fruit and is a bit lighter on its feet as well. It is ripe, but not overly so, and its modest tannins and fairly well-balanced acidity make for an easy-to-drink offering suited for near-term enjoyment.

**88 TERRE ROUGE Tête–à–Tête Sierra Foothills 2011**
45% Mourvedre; 28% Syrah; 27% Grenache. Smelling of dried leaves and brown brush and never showing more than a whiff of vague and indistinct fruit at any point, this ripe and slightly viscous wine comes up fairly empty in flavor and winds up a bit hot and washed out.

**84 WESTWOOD Natalie’s Cuvee Placer County 2011**
Sierra de Montserrart Vineyard. 43% Mourvèdre; 36% Syrah; 21% Grenache. Loosely fruity at best and on the skimpy side from first sniff through to its very narrow, acid-edged finish, this muddled working goes wanting for any clear sense of direction, and, while it is clean and has no winemaking flaw, it is coarse and underfilled at most every stop.

**85 ZACA MESA Santa Ynez Valley 2011**
This amorphous and rather rough-hewn Mourvèdre is singularly in lacking in polish, and its distant suggestions of berrysih fruit are quashed in no time at all by gruff, unwelcoming tannins. It is stout and stolid but decidedly dry at its heart, and aging will not bring it beauty.
Viognier

As a group, the white Rhône grapes have struggled to gain a foothold here in California. Viognier has had the most success, both in terms of acreage and in terms of qualitative recognition. We are not much concerned in these parts with numbers of vines in the dirt, but we do care a great deal about wine quality, and Viognier has, for us, shown a very attractive personality and regularly finds its way into our cellars. The wines below offer some very inviting choices both for fans of the grape and for those willing to seek out something new and exciting.

Finding Viognier character in either the weedy, wet-paper nose or the sugary, palpably bitter flavors of this unpleasant offering is a next-to-impossible task, and the little that fruit manages to peek through on the palate is swept aside as soon as it appears by chemical heat and bitterness.

This rather gangly, young Viognier presently lacks for prettiness and polish, but, while it is quite firm and given to coarseness, it is convincingly keyed on the peachy, slightly flowery fruit that is the hallmark of good Viognier. It is a wine that begs for a bit of the polish that only patience will bring, and we urge that it be left alone for another year at the least.

48% Viognier, 29% Grenache Blanc, 23% Roussanne. Marked more by a certain sense of youthful energy than by anything in the way of specific fruit, this faintly floral, distantly citrusy effort is fairly tight and a bit sparse at its heart with more than a few acidy edges, and it ultimately lacks the fruity flesh to fully cover its structural bones.

We continue to be impressed with Daniel Daou’s capable ways with white Rhône varieties, and this latest Viognier is both rich and wonderfully deep with a fine sense of crafting that sets it apart from the crowd. It sports a careful, yet significant trim of sweet oak along with freshening top notes of wildflowers, and its ample fruit takes on a slightly tropical tone that goes beyond the varietal norm. It is immensely flavorful without threatening to be too much of a good thing, and it will age effortlessly for four or five years.

If among the fuller and fleshier Viogniers in this month’s survey, Du Mol’s lia bottling takes a place at the head of the class for its fine balance and fruity depth above and beyond anything else. Yes, it is rich, and it is generously stuffed, but it is never a wine that verges on losing control, and, for all of its size and largesse,

it is still structured and surprisingly composed. We would not argue with those who would drink it now, but it is not showing all that it has, and it seems a sure bet to grow for another few years with ease.

Sufficiently fruity to weather a briefly lived sniff of matchsticks and showing no such distractions anywhere in its flavors, this clean, slightly supple, mid-sized Viognier may not be a wine of great potency and depth, but it sits comfortably in the middle of the varietal path, and only a slight edge of bitterness at the end holds it back from endorsement.

As big and blustery as any Viognier in this issue but a wine that is not limited to simple ripeness, this deep and impressively filled offering shows layer upon layer of sweet peaches, honey and hardwoody spice with a top note of toast. Its richness comes at the cost of slight finishing heat, but the bargain is a good one, and it will rise to the occasion when dinner demands something of substance and size.

Not so specific and far lesser in fruit with a curious vitamin pill note in the nose, this version of Viognier most definitely departs from the flowery norm and is all frame without filling. It is fairly rigid and stiff to start and then narrows from there with a bitter, slightly grapefruity edge to its otherwise chalky finish. It may be a wine with the structure to last, but it lacks the juicy fruit that makes Viognier so appealing.

A whiff of jasmine joins more prominent notes of ripe peaches in the lime-tinged aromatic array here, and that set of goodies continues unabated in the mouth. Supple and somewhat on the rounded, glyceriny side in texture, but steering clear of excess and finishing heat at every stop, this wine can be enjoyed today yet can also be held for a bit.

Rich and ripe, and a touch on the dried, peachy side for its sins,
this full-bodied effort also finds a bit of tropical fruit and hints of pear in its aromas, and with full butressing from hardwood oak notes, it makes a fairly dramatic if still youthfully direct statement on the palate.

**SÉKA HILLS Capay Valley 2012**
Here is Viognier at its juicy and accessible best with lots of fresh flowers and peachy fruit to the fore. It is moderately full-bodied and a touch soft at the edges, but it is no slave to ripeness and steers clear of the heat that its more dramatic cousins too often show with a crisp, citrusy bite coming on at the end. While it gets good marks for balance, it is a wine that we would choose to drink sooner than later, and its mannerly style makes its easy to pair with a wide range of foods.

GOOD VALUE $16.00

**STARK Damiano Vineyard Sierra Foothills 2012**
Faintly matchstickly on first sniff and restrained to the point of being barely varietal, this slightly viscous, medium-full-bodied Viognier fares slightly better once in the mouth, but bitterness appears as its early impressions of peaches fade and its finish is marred by a bit of evident heat.

$28.00

**STORYBOOK MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS 2012**
Napa Valley. Well away from classic Viognier definition with an odd mix of wax, underripe peach and a vaguely piney quality to its odiosyncratic aromas, this uneven wine fared slightly better once in the mouth, and its coarsens quickly after a fairly viscous start with bitterness and hard-to-ignore heat getting the best of its sparing fruit.

$36.00

**TABLAS CREEK Côtes de Tables Blanc 2012**
34% Viognier; 30% Marsanne; 30% Grenache Blanc; and 6% Roussanne. Scattered touches of peach and pear may appear here and there, yet fruit remains largely hidden throughout this clean, slightly rounded, medium-full-bodied wine's length, and there is little in the way of anything else to take its place. Aging is unlikely to afford improvement.

$27.00

**TANGENT Paragon Vineyard Edna Valley 2012**
If at first bothered by a momentary touch of matchstick in the nose, this lively youngster quickly fixes on delicate, mildly floral, distinctively varietal fruit, and it stays true to that fruit straight through to the finish. If moderately full and slightly viscous on entry, it is balanced with a nice sense of energy and back-palate crispness that suggests it will improve for a bit.

GOOD VALUE $17.00

**TERCERO White Hawk Vineyard 2012**
Santa Barbara County. Tercero hits the mark smartly with all of its 2012 whites, and, like its cellarmates, this Viognier is less concerned with flamboyant ripeness and more with brightness and fruity precision. It offers up a nice bit of mildly peachy fruit and is rich without being in the least overblown. It is never an especially potent or aggressive wine, but it is very well-balanced and constant in fruit, and, it is a carefully made Viognier that is likely to improve with age.

$25.00

**TERRE ROUGE Reserve Fiddletown 2012**
The extra time that it has received in barrel makes this one a far richer and more tactilely polished package than its somewhat simpler partner below, and its continuous, well-focused flavors show a little more complexity as well. It is never bombastic, but it stays the course with easy confidence, and it will show at its best in the relatively near term.

GOOD VALUE $16.00

**TERRE ROUGE Fiddletown 2012**
In most every way a Viognier that leans to the lighter end of the varietal spectrum, this lightly floral middleweight hints at fresh pears and peaches, but it is slightly diminished as far as fruity substance goes, and, while fairly pleasant, it needs to be paired with slightly lighter fare rather than the richer foods that bigger Viognier requires.

GOOD VALUE $20.00

**TUXEDO Paso Robles 2012**
If deserving at least some recognition for its intent and obvious ambition, this undeniably rich version of Viognier could do with a better sense of cohesion and fruity direction. It is hot and high in acid, and it comes with angles and harsh edges galore, and, if aging might possibly temper its coarseness, fruit is not poised to become a positive player.

$38.00

**URSA Hidden Mesa Vineyards Sierra Foothills 2012**
A whisper of half-candied fruit just barely manages to make its way past a streak of matchstick pungency in the nose of this coarse and muddled wine, and the sparse, bitter-edged flavors that follow are stiffened by acidity and summarily cut short by chemical heat.

GOOD VALUE $17.00

**VINA ROBLES White Paso Robles 2012**
61% Viognier; 33% Verdelho; 3% Vermentino; 3% Sauvignon Blanc. Its mix of grapes costs it a bit of varietal focus, but, taken as a blend, and appreciated for its fruity, somewhat pechy first nose and its direct style, the wine turns out to be likeable both as to its aromas and as to its youthful, fairly vital flavors. Its medium weight and evident energy separate it from the more dramatic offerings in this section, but its price makes it one to remember.

GOOD VALUE $16.00

**WORKMAN AYER Ipso Facto Central Coast 2010**
100% Viognier. Heading off in a semi-floral, honey and beeswax direction in its nicely fruited aromas, this rich, deep effort leaves little behind in its expressive display of character. It is full in body, viscous and fairly mouthfilling on the palate with rich, fully ripe flavors that linger on and on and never stray from their juicy and still developing complexity. The wine is invitingly open yet time in the cellar will only add to its charms.

GOOD VALUE $16.00

**ZACA MESA Santa Ynez Valley 2012**
Very much on the mild side with respect to defined varietal fruit and drawn along comparatively leaner lines with but a passing bit of roundness on entry, this briskly balanced working is high in acid and trimmed with heat, and its youthful energy is never matched by clear fruity purpose.

GOOD VALUE $16.00
Marsanne

Marsanne, and its running mate below, Roussanne with which it is often blended, seem destined to remain mostly below the radar of most wine drinkers and prominent wine lists. Yet, as the wines themselves show, there are versions of them worthy of attention, and when one comes across the wines or is looking for a nice, rich alternative to the usual suspects, the better versions are bound to please.

**JC CELLARS Stagecoach Vineyard Napa Valley 2011**

Year in and year out, Stagecoach Vineyard has been the source of a considerable number of the very richest, most expressive renditions of Rhôneish whites to come our ways, and, here in the coolest, most challenging year we have seen in some time, this combination of vineyard and vintner makes for a deep, close-to-opulent wine that wants for nothing in the way of substance or size. It is a very big wine by any white measure and is not built with an eye to lengthy aging, but, when chilled, it will succeed wonderfully with dishes calling for the richest white wines and will match very well with most white meat recipes regardless of how richly seasoned.

**TERRE ROUGE Enigma Sierra Foothills 2012**

50% Marsanne; 29% Roussanne; 21% Viognier. Although it shares much of the peachy, slightly flowery aromatic appeal of its year-older mate, the 2012 Enigma is both deeper and more constant in flavor and is the much better balanced wine of the two. It is rounded but owes less to glyceriny viscosity, and it is brightened by integral acidity, yet it is still one that we would tag for drinking over the next year or two before its youthful vitality starts to wane.

**TERRE ROUGE Enigma Sierra Foothills 2011**

44% Marsanne; 28% Roussanne; 28% Viognier. If making a good start with its intriguing aromas of apricot, peach, jasmine and hardwood, this wine achieves a bit less in the mouth than advertised and is never so richly fruited. It is quite viscous in feel and runs into a spot of heat at the finish. It is not a wine that wants or needs aging, and it will show at its best if chilled and enjoyed in the near term.

Roussanne

Perhaps because it is slightly more aromatic than Marsanne, this partner of that grape in the northern Rhône, has gained a bit more traction here. But, “a bit” is really the operative phrase and both varieties, whether on their own or in blends, remain on the curiosity side of the ledger. As with any of the white Rhône grapes, this one does succeed on a quality basis and thus is worth a look.

**ADELAIDA Version Reserve Paso Robles 2012**

Anna’s Estate Vineyard. 70% Roussanne; 25% Grenache Blanc; 5% Picpoul Blanc. Deeply fruity and fairly outgoing with layered aromas of fresh apple, ripe peaches and gentle oak spice that are overlain by a touch of bakery shop sweetness, this wine is a little coarse and pulled back just now on the palate, and its flavors are a bit simple and hesitant when compared to its very promising nose. That said, it is reasonably well-balanced, and its youth earns it a degree of forgiveness. Set it aside for another year or two, and expect it to both broaden and acquire a valuable measure of much needed polish.

**ALDER SPRINGS Apex 39 Mendocino 2012**

54% Roussanne; 29% Marsanne; 17% Viognier. We like the lightly floral, mildly citrusy aromas of this one, and we like its initial palatal impressions of slight suppleness and its open and outgoing, fresh-apple fruit, but the wine loses sight of fruit as it goes, and it gets a little too coarse at the finish with a lingering catch of heat in the throat.

**JC CELLARS The First Date California 2011**

60% Roussanne; 40% Marsanne. As rich and well-ripened a wine as we have come to expect from winemaker, Jeff Cohn, the latest First Date is a full and close to extravagant wine that features plentiful, distinctly peachy fruit that is accented with a touch of vanilla and scattered suggestions of apricot and sweet tropical fruit. It is full and fairly coating, and it is a fully expressive working by most any measure, and it is loaded with character, absolutely bursting in flavor and is sure to be a near-perfect match with intensely flavorful poultry running from roast goose to Moroccan chicken.

**STOLPMAN L’Avion Santa Ynez Valley 2010**

Despite showing a fine sense of youthful brightness and vigor, this bottling hints at a bit of aged complexity in its mildly toasty, lightly honeyed aromas, and, while not without fruit, its flavors go well past simple fruitiness and show an oaky trim and hints of minerals to its slightly withdrawn elements of peaches and green plums. While there is much to like here now, the wine’s combination of energy and reserve makes us want to wait on it for another year or two.

**TABLAS CREEK Esprit Blanc Paso Robles 2011**

64% Roussanne; 26% Grenache Blanc; 10% Picpoul Blanc. If judged alone on its generous and well-composed aromas of peaches, white melons, sweet lemons and soft spice, this wine would move up several steps in rank, but its frontal flavors are never quite so expressive and drift to coarseness while a late-arriving edge of heat becomes evident. We suspect that more time in the bottle will make a good thing a bit better, but we would be more upbeat about its future if it finished with just a little more fruity stamina.

**TERCERO Camp 4 Vineyard Santa Ynez Valley 2012**

From its compact, mildly mineral, green-peach aromas straight through to its like-minded flavors and long, near-steely finish, Tercero’s Camp 4 bottling is at once ripe and fruity but bristles with energy and displays the depth and the tight structure of a
wine that will age. We like it now, but we are certain that we will like it more a year or two hence.

**TERRE ROUGE Monarch Mine Vineyard 2011 Sierra Foothills.** Wispy suggestions of roasted nuts and hints of oaky spice are a step ahead of defined fruit in the rich, but slightly dry aromas of this fairly mouthfilling wine, and, while it exhibits plenty of palatal presence and a good sense of richness, its flavors are similarly vague regarding evident fruit and come up less than complete.

**TERRE ROUGE Reserve Sierra Foothills 2011** Smelling of a good deal of vanilla and more faintly of toast but a bit lacking for a clear sense of fruit, this viscous, moderately full-bodied wine is quite viscous in feel and fairly dry in flavor, and it is very much lacking in vigor and verve. It seems to be tiring and has nowhere good to go, and it should not be held any longer than need be.

**TERRE ROUGE Reserve Sierra Foothills 2011**

**TRUCHARD VINEYARDS**

**TRUCHARD Carneros Napa Valley 2012** Clean as can be and a bit lighter in gait with a good acid spine to its slightly stony, green-peach flavors, this bottling might be a little stiff at the edges, but its sins are nothing more than those of youth. It is constant in focus, its course is fixed on fruit, and its movie will run for a long time.

**ADELAIDA Finder Estate Paso Robles 2012**

**NADIA Highlands Vineyard Santa Barbara 2012**

**ZACA MESA Santa Ynez Valley 2010**

Although its very rich, faintly waxy nose of sweet peaches and honey raises expectations of a full, slightly unctuous wine, this one does not head down the anticipated road to high ripeness and is far less obvious in flavor than scent. It is, in fact, on the firm side as far as balance goes and drifts to slight hardness on the latter palate, and, even if nearing its fourth birthday, a bit more time is still in order.

**ZACA MESA Z Blanc Santa Ynez Valley 2011**

**TERCERO Camp 4 Vineyard Santa Ynez Valley 2012**

**TERRE ROUGE Grenache Blanc Sierra Foothills 2011**

**ZACA MESA Santa Ynez Valley 2012**

Although less than effusive and a bit slow to show in the nose, this one gradually opens and takes on a light floral edge to its nicely formed aromas of sweet peaches, and the same peachy qualities comes through again in the mouth. The wine is fairly rounded and a touch oily in feel with a good sense of body and overall weight, and, while it is balanced to keep for a couple of years, it is wholly likeable now.

**GOOD VALUE**

**ZACA MESA Santa Ynez Valley 2012**

Bright and zester than a good many of its mates and redolent of green apple and limes, this lively, acid-charged middleweight is good

Grenache Blanc

Its floral perfume, something reminiscent

of peach and honeysuckle, makes Grenache

Blanc a variety with potential. But, like other Rhône whites and wines that are more aromatic than sturdy, it does not have much of a following. It is still early days, of course, but even if the grape does not break into the top tier of white varieties in this country, its best versions are easy to drink and inviting.
Best Buys in the Market

PINOT NOIR

There have always been good values galore to be found among such varieties as Zinfandel and Sauvignon Blanc, and a careful eye can regularly find a few bargains among even Cabernet Sauvignon, but the pickings have always been slim when the topic turns to good, inexpensive Pinot Noir. That is not to say that the cupboard is bare when it comes to Pinot at a price, but the hunt usually demands a little more diligence. The search may or may not be any easier as the 2012s come to market, but we have been pleased at the number of bona fide Best Buys that have recently come our way. Heading up this month’s roster of worthies, the not-to-missed SANTA BARBARA WINERY Santa Barbara County 2012 ($17.00) is a deep, well-defined effort that shames a good many bottlings at two and three times the price. The nicely balanced and very precise LAETITIA Estate Arroyo Grande Valley 2012 ($20.00) hits the Best Buy mark smartly with its polished delivery of keen Pinot fruit, while the distinctly cherry-like CASTLE ROCK Reserve Russian River Valley 2012 ($18.00) earns the nod for its brightness and continuous fruit. So, too, do the firmly balanced PICKET FENCE Russian River Valley 2012 ($18.00) and the surprisingly well-focused RED ROCK Reserve California 2012 ($14.00), and, if neither quite wins full recommendation, both are honest, well-made Pinot Noirs well worth considering when keeping a cap on the budget.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

New Cabernets will be the lead story in the April issue of CGCW, but a few tried-and-true favorites still rank high on our roster of good buys. The MILBRANDT The Estates 2010 ($25.00) from Washington’s Wahluke Slope shows a refined winemaking hand, and the solid and expressive WELLINGTON Sonoma County 2009 ($22.00) delivers surprising varietal depth at the price. Both the ripe and generous fruit Sextant Paso Robles 2010 ($25.00) and the similarly open and inviting ROUTE STOCK Napa Valley 2010 ($22.00) remind that good Cabernet need not break the bank. The lush GHOST PINES 70% Napa County/30% Sonoma County 2010 ($23.00) earns the nod as well, and, if coming up just a step short of endorsement, Bonny Doon’s A PROPER CLARET California 2012 ($16.00) is a affable, well-fruited offering of ready appeal. It may turn out that notable Cabernet values will be far and few between from the difficult 2011 vintage, but the LOUIS M. MARTINI Sonoma County 2011 ($18.00) and the COLUMBIA CREST H3 Horse Heaven Hills 2011 ($15.00) confirm the notion that good wines always await the informed shopper, and the latter’s companion bottling, the COLUMBIA CREST Columbia Valley 2011 ($12.00) is as tasty a Cabernet as can be found at the price.

RIESLING

The calendar says that Spring is set to arrive later this month, and that hopefully means that al fresco wining and dining is not far behind. Riesling is especially well-suited to warm-weather drinking, and the wonderfully fragrant, slightly sweet CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Cold Creek Vineyard Columbia Valley 2012 ($18.00) is just the thing to welcome the season. On the drier end of the varietal spectrum, the CLAIBORNE & CHURCHILL Dry Edna Valley 2011 ($18.00) is still our top pick, but the CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Dry Columbia Valley 2011 ($10.00) delivers plenty of pleasure at a rock-bottom price and will make a most welcome mate to all sorts of Asian cuisine.

Connoisseurs’ Series

Created by the California Wine Club exclusively for Connoisseurs’ Guide readers, and featuring only our two-star and three-star selections, the CONNOISSEURS’ SERIES wine-of-the-month club makes hard to get wines available for you. Featured this month are: BACIO DIVINO

For more information about CONNOISSEURS’ SERIES, please call the California Wine Club at 1-800-777-4443 or visit www.cawineclub.com/connseries
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### Notes
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