

California



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CALIFORNIA HAS A lot of not-very-funny jokes about Syrah. We'll toss aside the popular winemaker one that it's easier to get rid of a social disease than a case of Syrah, but let's dwell for a second on the one about how much Californian Pinot Noir tastes like northern Rhône Syrah.

This particular joke stings not because it contains truth — even in these enlightened days, Californian Pinot can be as thick as a ripe Barossa Valley specimen — but because it reveals just how blurry the Californian view of Syrah has often been: as a big, dense, jammy wine with none of Pinot's finesse.

Whatever. That might have been true in an earlier era, but today's best Syrahs bring forward all the savour and spice of the finest northern Rhône models, with just a bit more sunshine in the mix. Among the top tier of today's Californian producers — names like Arnot-Roberts and Wind Gap, whose wines I've recommended here — I'd assert that the hit rate is actually much better than in the Rhône right now, which is struggling through its own stylistic issues. While vintages like 2009 or 2011 showed the more marginal, lean side of Syrah, robust years like 2012 and 2013 highlight its spice and full, charming fruit.

There's one other connection: many of California's best Syrah producers also work with Pinot Noir, namely because many ideal vineyards for Syrah sit on the edge of viable ripeness. That, too, is a change from 20 years ago, when misconceptions about the Rhône guided too many hopefuls to warmer spots.

You'll locate some of the best wines in California's colder corners. The western part of the Sonoma Coast, for example, where fog and chill can extend the harvest into November, underscoring all the spicy, peppery character that evokes — but doesn't imitate — the French originals.

The same can be found in parts of

Santa Barbara, including places like Ballard Canyon, which have similar climates to the northern Rhône.

Do these locations sound familiar in terms of another grape? That great Syrah and great Pinot Noir are often grown near each other in California is testament to the realisation that the northern Rhône is not really a warm place. (Note how many examples are shy of 14% alcohol.)

That's a complicated concept for Californians to swallow. And yet, while there's less Syrah being planted these days, there are far more great examples being made. No joke.



The Ojai Vineyard, Solomon Hills Special Bottling, Santa Maria Valley 2012 19 (96)

£54.63 **Farr Vintners**

Long-time vintner Adam Tolmach consistently turns out one of California's best Syrahs from this little-known parcel. A savoury onslaught, full of whole-bunch aromas of bay, black olive, liquorice and green peppercorn, with a ripe carpet of black fruit. **Drink** 2015-2024 **Alc** 13%



Wind Gap, Syrah, Sonoma Coast 2012 18.5 (95)

£33.63 **Roberson**

Pax Mahle is one of California's Syrah masters and this, from the Armagh, Nellessen and Majik vineyards, has a perfect balance of spice and fruit — bright plum, black olive, fine pepper, coppery mineral notes. Tangy and sappy and very refined. **Drink** 2015-2024 **Alc** 12.8%

Drew Family, Valenti Ranch Syrah, Mendocino Ridge 2012 18.25 (94)

N/A UK www.drewwines.com

High on a Mendocino mountain, Jason and Molly Drew receive attention for Pinot Noir, but their sleek, fresh Syrahs are astonishing. Here, mint leaf, black and green peppercorns and a firm mineral side underscores gorgeous fruit.

Drink 2015-2023 **Alc** 12.8%

Failla Estate, Syrah, Fort Ross-Seaview 2012 18.25 (94)

£44.90 **Flint**

Ehren Jordan was one of the first to realise the climatic misconceptions about Syrah and his low-yielding estate parcel

almost at the edge of the Pacific offers one of the state's most powerful specimens: candied lavender, salty and oily black olive and a thicket-like herbal side, with luscious red and blue fruit.

Drink 2015-2023 **Alc** 14.1%



Sandlands, Syrah, Santa Lucia Highlands 2012

18.25 (94)

N/A UK www.sandlandsvineyards.com

Turley winemaker Tegan Passalacqua is better known for Zinfandel and Chenin Blanc, but his Syrah is so good it challenges this Monterey appellation's reputation for Pinot. Fleshy fruit and olive notes play counterpoint to cherry stone, tar and cocoa, with a dense, subtle, tannic carpet underneath. **Drink** 2015-2023 **Alc** 13.2%

Ledge Vineyards, Adams Ranch Syrah, Paso Robles, 2012 18 (93)

N/A UK www.ledgevineyards.com

Mark Adams finds an elegant path between Rhône restraint and Paso's boundless fruit. There's magnitude and grace: a shaker's worth of peppercorn and tarry plum and blueberry fruit that signals its brooding, earthy countenance

Drink 2015-2022 **Alc** 14.5%



Arnot-Roberts, Clary Ranch Syrah, Sonoma Coast 2012

17.75 (92)

£39.95 **Roberson**

This very cold site in dairy country outside the town of Petaluma had a relatively ripe year, with more juniper and Christmas spice than pure pepper, plus fresh mulberry, damp leaves and a hint of seaweed to nearly overwhelm you with that multifaceted aspect great Syrah can offer. **Drink** 2015-2021 **Alc** 12.3%



Peay Vineyards, Les Titans Syrah, Sonoma Coast 2011

17.75 (92)

£32.04 **Justerini & Brooks**

The Peay family may be focused on Pinot, but its Syrah is a standout. This cooler vintage has brought a juniper note to this typically deep, tannic effort, with mulberry fruit and a tea-like aspect to the tannins. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 12.4%