

Fifty Shades of Syrah



© iStock | Syrah comes in a multitude of guises from cool and peppery to rich, deep and powerful. Syrah's ability to shapeshift can make it difficult to understand.
By Margaret Rand | Posted Friday, 02-Apr-2021

If there were air miles for grape varieties, Syrah would be up there second only to Chardonnay. A variety that was only really valued in the northern Rhône is now everywhere.

From being regarded as a weed in Australia, it's now ubiquitous and prestigious. Peter Vinding-Diers makes it in [Sicily](#). Quinta do Crasto makes it in the Douro; [Quinta do Monte d'Oiro](#) makes it in Lisboa. It's all over the USA. It's in Argentina and Chile; [Chateau Mercian](#) grows it in Japan. In [Brazil](#) it can be interesting at 1000m up. It's even being tested in Germany.

In [New Zealand](#), some of the most respected and expensive reds are [Syrah](#). Yet Steve Smith – formerly of [Craggy Range](#) and now managing partner at AONZ – remembers that after he'd first planted it, in 1999, he walked away from the vineyard saying to himself: "You stupid bastard, why did you plant Syrah in that place?"

As a flexible international traveler, it beats Cabernet Sauvignon hands down. It's more adaptable to climate and, crucially, it's always complete on its own. [Cabernet Sauvignon](#) may be everywhere, but there are few places in the world where it's really successful as a varietal wine. (By which I mean 100 percent, not blended with 15 percent of something else but saying Cabernet Sauvignon on the label.) For a while, to be sure, Syrah traveled happily with [Viognier](#), and no Syrah was complete without a small percentage of co-fermented Viognier to lift the aromas and set the color. Some still do that, though the fashion has waned.

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Cool climates? It'll give you flowers, spice, stones, wild herbs, pepper, freshness. Warm climates? Richness, chocolate, stones again. Not so much prunes these days, thank goodness. Not such a whack of oak, either: fashion favors less oak, more freshness, so in places like the Barossa, where the tide of extraction has receded, we see plenty of proof that in warm climates as well as cool, soil influences style. Syrah is like "putting a magnifying glass on a site", says Andrea Mullineux of [Mullineux Wines](#) in South Africa's [Swartland](#). "It's absolutely there in the glass."

Terroir is of course more than just soil. Which matters more to [Syrah](#), soil or climate? This is where winemakers hedge their bets. "As a French oenologist, I would answer 'both'," says Philippe Guigal from the northern [Rhône](#). On climate, he says: "My feeling is that the expression of Syrah varies with hydric stress, providing interesting but very different balances between [Coonawarra](#) and [Saint Joseph](#), for example. I have never tasted Syrah under 'humid' climates and my feeling is that there should be a kind of 'freshness' (at night or during the ripening season) to ensure the production of a qualitative Syrah."

So let's look at climate first, even if we do have to veer underground from time to time.

The most obvious point, to anyone who has tasted the odd dry, earthy Syrah from hot, dry climates (I remember one from [Spain](#), and even though Syrah has long been a cépage ameliorateur in the south of France, it doesn't work everywhere there) is that Syrah and [Grenache](#) don't like the same places. Grenache is drought-resistant; Syrah perhaps not so much. In many places in the world, Syrah will be irrigated, although it's a vigorous variety and too much water just sends it growing in all directions. At the same time, says Andrea, it can dehydrate easily. "There's a very fine line between too much water and not enough water," says Steve – and in [Gimblett Gravels](#) there is no option but to irrigate.

One reason it dries out so much is because it has fairly thin skins – thinner than Grenache. Another is that come evening, when other vines close their stomata for the night, Syrah doesn't. So it keeps losing water even after dark. "[Cabernet Franc](#) has the same issue," says Steve; and a stressed vine has an impact on wine quality: those delicate volatile aromas vanish.

Yet some of the oldest [Shiraz](#) vines in the world are in the dry Barossa, where there is hardly any rain in the summer, and where they have never been irrigated in their lives. Felipe Tosso of [Chile's](#) Vinas Ventisquero, who works with John Duval, who used to make Grange, points out that "top Shiraz in the Barossa always has clay deep down. It can grow in dry places, but the soil needs moisture."

We'll get back to Barossa soils later; let's stay above ground for the moment. Cool climate or warm climate? Again, obviously, both. Cool climates favor rotundone, the black-pepper molecule that some would say defines the difference between cool-climate Syrah and warm-climate Syrah. Louisa Rose of [Yalumba](#) wouldn't say that, mostly because she is one of the 20 percent of people who are not sensitive to rotundone; Andrea is another. So to Louisa, cool-climate Syrah is "sage, rosepetals, more acidity". But rotundone is not only about climate, she says: "Heathcote and Grampian can have higher rotundone than other places that may be cooler. And you can get different levels of rotundone in different berries in the same bunch, so it's sensitive to other things as well."



© iStock | Syrah has never quite boasted the popularity of Cabernet Sauvignon but, maybe, its time is coming.

Cool nights are a big factor in style. Chateau Mercian's [Mariko Syrah](#), which is beautifully crunchy and red-fruited, grows at 600m, surrounded by mountains. Summer temperatures are about 30 degrees in the daytime, but 15 degrees at night; and it has over 300 ppm of rotundone, which is more than you'd typically find in [Hermitage](#) or [Côte Rôtie](#).

Light intensity is a factor in style, as well. Says Andrea, "Swartland is closer to the equator than is the northern Rhône. In the northern hemisphere it would be nearer to Sicily. In peak summer, in the Rhône, the sun has a longer, slower angle throughout the day. You can feel it on your skin: in France, I'll get some color. Here in Swartland, I'll burn in 10 minutes." Her answer, for Syrah rather than for herself, is Swartland Sprawl – like California Sprawl, but in Swartland. Ideally she'd have bush vines, which give diffused light

throughout the day, but Syrah is a floppy grower and doesn't grow into a bush very easily. So for trellised vines, a lot of growth and shade is her answer – and of course enough aeration to let the Swartland breezes through.

You can't mention climate without moving to climate change. For Philippe Guigal, "global warming is more an opportunity than a real issue in the northern Rhône. Our feeling is that phenolic maturity is more in phase with physiological maturity these past years than 30 years ago." As an illustration he compares the 2015 vintage with the 1985 – both excellent years. In 1985 they picked in early October, after the heavy rains of the equinox, at about 11.5 percent alcohol and chaptalized to 13 percent. The wines had "good phenolic ripeness and great ageing potential". In 2015, though, look at this: picked in mid-September, before the equinoctial rains, the potential alcohol was 13-13.5 percent, with full phenolic ripeness and again, great ageing potential. Bad for the sugar merchants, good for the growers.

Nights in the northern Rhône are cool; acidity levels are good. Only in very hot vintages does more shading, via canopy management, become necessary. But at the same time, Guigal is investing in cooler sites in the north of Côte-Rôtie – Philippe mentions Saint-Cyr sur le Rhône, which was "considered too cold 10 years ago, but we feel that [it] could become interesting to very interesting in the future and in warm vintages".

In warmer climates you lose the rotundone character of Syrah, and the spectrum veers towards richer characters. But it doesn't have to be jammy. Jamminess, says Andrea, comes from warm nights. "We have a hot, dry climate in Swartland, but a cool-climate style." Not analytically – if you go by the figures, she says, the acidity in her Syrah would point to a hot climate. But it doesn't taste hot-climate. "The cool-climate taste is soil-driven."

So okay, let's turn to soil. "If you're tasting the style, you're tasting the soil type," she goes on. "We grow on schist, iron, granite – in Swartland we have very ancient soils, from weathered mountains that pre-date plant life. It's poor in nutrients, very decomposed." Poor soils suit Syrah: everyone agrees on that. It's that vigour; it needs to be restrained. "The soil must be well-drained, but you want soil that holds moisture slightly longer into the season", adds Andrea; that dehydration problem again.

In the Barossa, the Barossa Ground Project has been mapping soils and revealing just how varied it is. "Fertile, alluvial soils give fresh fruit, more red fruit, and depth," says Craig Stansborough of [Grant Burge](#). "Clay give more depth and tannin; physically, berry size has a lot to do with that, too. Sandy soil gives lighter structure." Louisa adds that "the deep sands are not really Shiraz country." Nobody yet has mentioned limestone – yet in [Coonawarra](#), on terra rossa over limestone, Shiraz does pretty well. As long as there's good drainage, some moisture, and not too much fertility, Syrah will be happy. That's one definition of a good traveler.

As is its ability to reflect its terroir. We've touched on this before, but Felipe Tosso adds that yes, it's easy to manipulate in the winery, and will obligingly respond to new oak, old oak, big oak, small oak, [French](#) oak, US oak, concrete, steel, even amphora – "but it will be bigger than how you age it. The ageing makes a difference, but the terroir is bigger than how you age it."

But is Syrah just one thing? How much clonal variation is there, and how important is that in deciding how it travels?

There seem to be different answers to this. Steve Smith says that "clonal variation is enormous; not less than Pinot Noir and probably more. There are eight or nine selections in New Zealand, and if you put them together they look like different varieties." But Philippe Guigal doesn't think it's very prone to mutation. Serine (a local variation that is sometimes claimed to be a separate variety), he reckons, is Syrah, "but one 'mutation' in centuries is not exactly often." He thinks there might be about 650 clones around, "but truly around 10 recommended clones available to produce decent wines", of which three, probably, are most interesting.

But epigenetics – now, there's a subject. This is the capacity of a plant to adapt to its environment. Says Steve Smith, "the DNA stays the same, but genes on the DNA will turn off and on in response to the environment. If you take a clone from France and plant it in New Zealand, over time genes will turn on and off. It could explain how some clones can behave differently in different places." How long does it take? "I don't know. Probably a really long time. Maybe the second or third generation from that vine, or in a sport in a bud or a shoot."

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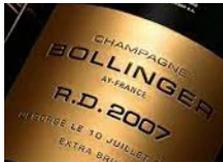
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