

AN INTRODUCTION TO SYRAH AND SHIRAZ

BACKGROUND:

Syrah, or Shiraz as it is sometimes called, has obscure origins, although it may be a direct descendant of the *Vitis allobrogica* wine family. Other theories suggest it came from either Syracuse in Sicily or Shiraz in ancient Persia, as much from the similarity of the name than any scientific evidence. Whatever its origins, Syrah has been a stellar grape for the Rhone region of France ever since the time of the Romans. Indeed, the Syrah was so famous that many 18th and 19th century Bordeaux wines were actually “hermitage” Syrah from the Rhone.

Syrah is relatively productive and resistant to disease. It is late budding (avoiding the risk of spring frosts) but not equally late in ripening. The grape grower must keep the yields on Syrah down or the quality of flavour is significantly reduced. If left too long at the vine after ripening, the grapes quickly lose acidity and aroma – harvest must be carefully timed with Syrah.

Syrah in the south of France can actually be made from two grapes – the small-berried superior version is called Petite Syrah (nothing to do with the California grape by the same name) while the larger-berried Syrah is Grosse Syrah.

REGIONS:

Syrah in the Rhone region falls within two broad ranges. In the north is the dense, thick, pure version of Hermitage and Cote Rotie – famous for longevity of up to 40 or 50 years, and lighter versions such as Crozes-Hermitage. In wines such as Chateauneuf du Pape, Syrah was simply one of a number of components to the wine, but the success of Syrah and the winemakers wish to see more longevity to some of their wines has resulted in increased use of Syrah in the blends.

The success has not been restricted just to the Rhone region. While the French plantings are far overshadowed by the huge plantings in Australia, Syrah has seen explosive growth in the last few years. Plantings have grown from 2,7000 ha (6,670 acres) in 1968 to 30,000 ha in 1993 and thousands more on the way. Languedoc-Roussillon alone now has over 24,000 ha. The major concern about these plantings is the amount of wine being produced from the vineyards with over-cropping leading to some very plain examples of the Syrah grape.

Syrah in France can range from simple red with innocuous flavours or even a baked prune quality to full flavoured and complex examples. At its worst it is thin and astringent. But good producers with reduced yields can produce wonderful examples; Syrah Domaine de Salices from Lurton has mint, currant, plum and meat aromas and flavours, perhaps even a touch of eucalyptus. While burnt rubber would be considered a fault in Syrah, there is no question that a tar/smoke character often comes through in some of the best examples of this grape.

AUSTRALIAN SHIRAZ:

Australia is the “other” home of Syrah. In 1990, one quarter of the Australian red grapes was Syrah alone. 1998 figures show Australia with over 9126 ha – 13% of ALL grape plantings in the country. But the Australian’s approach to Syrah has been different than that of the French in two ways. The Australians saw Syrah as a workhorse grape variety rather than a one of the great grape types of the world. As well, they found a different character to the wine as compared to the French wines and named the grape in a way that illustrated the relationship as well as the differences in flavours. The Australian version is called “Shiraz”, which neatly points out the similarity and differences at the same time.

As Australia’s plantings of Shiraz have increased, the need to diversify the style of wine has also increased. Winemakers have begun experimenting with a wide range of styles. The basic Shiraz

style is light and fruity – strawberry jam with just a touch of spice. Lowering the yields as well as finding the right mesoclimates has resulted in very structured, fruity and spicy Shiraz wines of medium to full concentration. The greatest Aussie wine of all is the Shiraz Grange Hermitage. A great Australian Shiraz can simply be described as “Glorious!”

Another trend in Australia is the use of “old vines” or “bush vines” versions of Shiraz in making their wines. These old vines may be 40 to 80 years old with the oldest versions being over 100 years old. The older vines produce fewer grapes, naturally limiting the production off the vineyard. Almost despised 20 years ago for their low production and the fact “They aren’t Cabernet”, they are now national treasures.

The wealth of plantings in Australia has also helped identify specific regions that produce superior Shiraz wines. Hunter Valley, Coonawarra and Barossa all built their reputations for red wines with Shiraz. Victoria is now coming along strong with Great Southern and McLaren Valley building reputations for individuality. But Australia is not simply dominated by single vineyard wines – blending Shiraz across vineyards, valleys, and regions has resulted in some of Australia’s best Shiraz wines, such as the Wolf Blass Green Label, Brown Label and Premium Selection Shiraz bottlings.

OTHER REGIONS:

As Australia wines have gained acclaim, acceptance, and most importantly, sales around the world, other countries have begun to warm to the idea of Syrah/Shiraz. In the last five to seven years, experimental plots have been planted in California, Chile, Washington State, South Africa, the southern Okanagan, and in a number of other regions in France aside from the Rhone. In each of the areas, the Syrah must be planted in warm climates in order to fully ripen. While most of these regions have decided to call the wines made “Syrah”, South Africa has stuck with the Australian description of “Shiraz” to label their wines. The Washington State versions are particularly complex with Christmas pudding spice and raspberry-plum flavours supporting a strong red currant fruit. Chile is just beginning to export its first examples of Syrah and the wines are showing strong, meaty characters to back up the fruit. In all cases, the Syrah has less tannin than a Cabernet which makes the Syrah an approachable and flavourful wine for people to enjoy.