

CONNOISSEURS' GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA WINE



Darwin would have loved it. Syrah is a drag on the market and the number of new wines coming to market has fallen. Only the strong, the successful are maintaining their release schedules. Those whose offerings have been below par, or even not sufficiently exciting, are having to cut back because their wines are not being absorbed. Only the strong survive. Where's Darwin now that we need him?



In the meantime, one sees Syrah slipping in everywhere as a blending wine for grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir, Zinfandel and Petite Sirah. Okay, blending Syrah into Petite Sirah is not such a problem since Syrah is Petite Sirah's daddy, but the reason that Syrah may now be California's favorite blending grape is that we have so much of it. Part of the reason is massive overplanting that saw acreage triple in the last decade, and part of the reason is that not enough of this newly planted Syrah has turned out to give us wines that people want to drink.




It is not all that farfetched to suggest that Darwin could have predicted the results in this issue. With so many wines not crowding in to be heard, those that remain

are among the cream of the crop. Places like Stagecoach Vineyard in Napa and the far reaches of the Rockpile AVA west of and above the heart of the Dry Creek Valley have less competition, and while that does not make their wines any better than they have been previously, it does allow them to stand out in a smaller crowd.

The fact is that there has always been a supply of good Syrahs. The wines that stand out in this issue are not Johnny-come-latelies. They have been on the market in the past years, but the Syrah market has had so many ordinary wines that these worthies have somehow been forgotten by large swaths of the wine media, some of whom have fallen all over themselves to denigrate everything with a Syrah label. We saw the same thing happen to Merlot years ago, and the result was that the worst of the grapes were pulled out. But somehow, Merlot survived and never lost its place. Syrah has not been so lucky.

Even the makers of very good Syrah report increased difficulty in moving their wines. Retailers who admit to liking the grape won't stock it because it is not moving. Yet, issue after issue of *Connoisseurs' Guide* finds very good and priceworthy examples of the grape. If you have not paid much attention to Syrah lately, perhaps this is the time to start.

86 EDUCATED GUESS Napa Valley 2008

If just missing out on higher commendation, this full-bodied wine counts richness and green apple fruit as major assets in its quiet but nicely focused, briskly balanced personality. Its finish is firm, clean and holds on well, and this one will show at its best with grilled white fishes or broiled chicken.    **\$17.00**