

Tasting Highlights: California Syrah

The success of Syrah offers wine lovers diversity and quality

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The ascent of California Syrah is in many ways similar to the rise of Pinot Noir in the Golden State.

It's a rather recent phenomenon that is rapidly gaining momentum. The wine is successful in many appellations throughout the state and it is yielding wines with unique appellation and vineyard characteristics.

But one area where it's clearly different is that Syrah is still feeling its way in the market. It has not become the hot ticket that Pinot has.

There are a lot of terrific Syrahs available, and I suspect that one reason they haven't yet caught fire is that they can be more challenging wines to drink young. That is, Syrah is typically intense and can be tannic, and the flavor profile—often beefy spice and berry flavors—is not as familiar to many wine drinkers as those of other wines.

That said, I strongly recommend you take a look at what's happening with Syrah these days.

One tip: These young wines need lots of time; sometimes they continue to develop over days, which is unusual. So I suggest you open a few bottles and make note of what you like and find in each and then revisit them over a period of two or three days. You'll be fascinated by how much they change.

Here's a mix of newbies—Alesia, Big Basin, Kaena, Edward Sellers and Vagabond—along with a few dependables, such as DuMOL, Phelps, Ojai and Jaffurs.

A quick word on Alesia. These two Syrahs are among the most exciting new wines I've tried. The DuMOL Jack Robert's Run is a new vineyard for this producer, and for my taste, the Jaffurs Syrahs have more polish and finesse, especially in regard to tannins, than any wine that's been produced from this Santa Barbara winery.



Jerry Alexander/Cephas

Wine

Score Price

ALESIA Syrah Sonoma Coast Chileno Valley 2004

93 \$40

Fascinating fruit, dark, rich, vivid and concentrated, with wonderful layers of blueberry, blackberry and boysenberry that are sharply focused and smooth, well-structured and

finishing with a long, harmonious finish that keeps repeating the berry medley, joined by a touch of herb and spice. Drink now through 2012. 200 cases made. —J.L.

DUMOL Syrah Russian River Valley Jack Robert's Run 2004 93 \$68

A real mouthful of Syrah. Ripe, rich and plush, with dense layers of pepper, wild berry, sage and mineral flavors that, while powerful, unfold gracefully on the palate. Rich, ripe tannins hold on the finish. Drink now through 2013. 192 cases made. —J.L.

RED CAR Syrah California Shake Rattle Roll 2005 93 \$55

A riveting red, dense, rich and complex, with deep, concentrated plum, currant, smoke and blackberry fruit that's plush and persistent. Fans of full-throttle Syrah will love this. Drink now through 2011. 1,493 cases made. —J.L.

BUONCRISTIANI Syrah Napa Valley Artistico 2004 92 \$60

Ripe and chewy, with plump, well-centered, complex and concentrated wild berry and blackberry fruit, finishing with ripe tannins and a burst of dark fruit. Drink now through 2011. 265 cases made. —J.L.

CULLER Syrah Napa Valley 2004 92 \$35

Intense yet supple, with rich, restrained wild berry, black cherry and spice. Well-focused, graceful and balanced, ending with rich fruit, hints of earth and firm, ripe tannins. Drink now through 2011. 140 cases made. —J.L.

JAFFURS Syrah Santa Barbara County Ampelos Vineyard 2004 92 \$42

Big, rich and expressive, with ripe, vivid, intense wild berry and blackberry that, for all its size and density, is remarkably supple and smooth, finishing with mocha and espresso notes. My favorite of the new Jaffurs Syrahs. Drink now through 2011. 74 cases made. —J.L.

JC CELLARS Syrah Santa Barbara County Fess Parker's Vineyard 2004 92 \$29

Rich yet elegant and spicy, with pepper, wild berry, red plum and currant notes that turn supple and harmonious, ending with ripe, plush tannins and great length. Drink now through 2011. 663 cases made. —J.L.

KAENA Syrah Santa Ynez Valley 2004 92 \$27

Dark, rich and plush, with layers of ripe plum, pomegranate and blackberry fruit that's deftly balanced, offering depth and length, with ripe, fine-grained tannins. Drink now through 2010. 100 cases made. —J.L.

OJAI Syrah Santa Barbara County Bien Nacido Vineyard 2003 92 \$38

Dark in hue, intense and spicy, with rich layers of wild berry, sage and herb, picking up a hint of chocolate and espresso on the finish, where the tannins are rich and tight. Drink now through 2011. 871 cases made. —J.L.

JOSEPH PHELPS Syrah Napa Valley 2003 92 \$35

Dark, rich and smooth, with firm, ripe, intense pepper, wild berry and sage notes that are complex and concentrated, finishing with a long, vivid burst of ripe fruit. Best from 2009 through 2013. 1,000 cases made. —J.L.

ALCINA Syrah Los Carneros Las Madres Vineyard 2005 91 \$45

A bit reduced, very dense and concentrated, with grapey, tarry, herb, rhubarb and blueberry fruit that's rich and complex, finishing with a burst of complex flavors and firm but ripe tannins. Drink now through 2012. 240 cases made. —J.L.

ALESIA Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands Fairview Ranch Vineyard 2004 91 \$40

Fresh sage, herb and loamy earth scents join ripe, vivid wild berry and wild raspberry, which gives the fruit a slight earthy taste. Tannins are ripe and this is finely balanced. Drink now through 2010. 275 cases made. —J.L.

BIG BASIN Syrah Santa Cruz Mountains Rattlesnake Rock 2004 91 \$55

Distinctive for its bold blueberry, spice and licorice notes and its rustic and intense flavors of plum, smoky meats and cedar. Takes on complexity on the finish and there's no shortage of tannins but it balances out in the end. Best from 2007 through 2012. 270 cases made. —J.L.

BLUE CELLARS Syrah Napa Valley Truchard Vineyard 2003 91 \$45

Lots of pepper on the nose, and it's ripe, intense and peppery on the palate, too, with vivid blackberry and wild berry flavors. Firms up on the finish, with excellent acidity and ripe, integrated tannins. Drink now through 2012. 190 cases made. —J.L.

LAGIER MEREDITH Syrah Mount Veeder 2004 91 \$50

Firm, intense and richly flavored, with chewy, peppery notes joining ripe plum and spicy herb and sage notes. Clean and refreshing on the finish. Drink now through 2013. 700 cases made. —J.L.

OJAI Syrah Santa Barbara County Thompson Vineyard 2003 91 \$56

Very stylish, with a firm core of earthy berry, herb, sage and creamy oak, picking up a touch of espresso and cedar on the long, complex finish. Drink now through 2011. 324 cases made. —J.L.

EDWARD SELLERS Syrah Paso Robles 2004 91 \$30

Brimming with ripe, juicy, richly flavored dark fruits, with wild berry and blackberry at the core, intense, fleshy and balanced, ending with a nice burst of fruit and ripe, integrated tannins. Drink now through 2011. 440 cases made. —J.L.

TOR Syrah Napa Valley Rock Old Clones 2004 91 \$40

Loamy, earthy berry and mineral flavors are rich and spicy, with pepper, blueberry and wild berry, turning supple and even delicate on the finish. Excellent balance and range of flavor. Drink now through 2011. 500 cases made. —J.L.

VAGABOND Napa Valley 2004 91 \$60

Wonderful intensity and purity of fruit, with spicy, peppery blackberry and wild berry flavors and hazelnut and cedar notes. Deftly balanced, long and persistent on the finish, gaining complexity. Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. Drink now through 2011. 600 cases made. —J.L.

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