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I SAY SYRAH YOU SAY SHIRAZ

Anthony Rose visited six regions of Australia, asking leading local winemakers for their opinions on Syrah wines from around the world. The answers afford unique insights not only into the myriad styles of Syrah, but into the Shiraz from its greatest New World stronghold

Photography by Claes Lofgren

C

redit for the idea of taking a presentation of Syrah from a global perspective to Australian winemakers in six different regions must go to the French cooper Seguin Moreau. It was part of an annual series to which Anthony Hanson MW, David Gleave MW and Jeremy Watson had previously contributed on Burgundy, Italy and Spain respectively. Given Australian pride in its own Shiraz, however, taking Syrah there gave me an inkling of how Daniel must have felt on being cast into the lions' den. Only he had no option. As it turned out, I wasn't torn limb from limb. The sessions provided an opportunity to look at Syrah's immensely diverse terroirs, and it was the very fact that Australian winemakers are justifiably proud of their own Shiraz that made their reactions both instructive and unexpected.

The initial selection had been made by James Kelly from Seguin Moreau's Adelaide office. The two main criteria were that the wine had to have been matured in Seguin Moreau oak, in whole or in part, and that it should be a worthy example of fine Syrah from its country but not necessarily an icon. With two cases of each wine required, budget played a part. So, in Guigal's case, for instance, it was Côte Rôtie Brune et Blonde, not La Mouline.

After an initial tasting in London in the summer, we agreed on six wines: 2000 Albert Belle Hermitage; 2001 Château de la Negly, La Porte du Ciel from La Clape in the Languedoc; 2001 Montes Folly from Chile; 2001 Planeta from Sicily; and Alan Limmer's



It was soon clear that there would be wide variations in attitudes to quality and style, as well as strong personal preferences. In the Yarra, a strong regional preference saw the cooler-climate wines take the top five places

2002 Stonecroft Hawkes Bay Syrah. The 1999 Bon Père Germanier, Cayas, from Switzerland, was added later, and James Kelly was to come up with another five wines.

Kelly left, though, shortly before I arrived in Oz, leaving his successor, Aldo Bratovic, the unenviable task of putting the tastings together in double-quick time and selecting the remaining wines. We managed to get hold of Marc Kent's 2001 Boekenhoutskloof Syrah and the 2002 Incognito from Hans and Carrie Jorgensen as examples of, respectively, South African and Portuguese Syrah. The Montes Folly Syrah from Chile was not forthcoming and had to be substituted by the 2002 Casa Lapostolle. Meanwhile, through Chuck Hayward, his American importer contact, Aldo organised the 2001 K Vintners Millbrandt Syrah from Washington's Columbia Valley and the 2000 Truchard Syrah Carneros. The Incognito only arrived in time for the third tasting, at which point we ended up with 11 Syrahs, but in Australia 11 makes a team, so we stuck with it.

Since scores are now part of the idiom of the day, it seemed a good idea to rate the wines as we went along, to try to make additional sense, albeit in an imprecise sort of way, of how winemakers in the different regions reacted to the wines. It was inevitable that there would be some influence from the presentation and the discussion that followed. In that sense, the results were not as 'scientific' as if the wines had been tasted blind each time and scored with no discussion. But scores are hardly scientific anyway, and given that the discussion was the most important part of the presentation, this seemed the most practical way of putting the results into some kind of perspective. A 'chart position' of 1 was to be awarded to the best wine, 2 for the second best and so on, with the whites not rated. Not everyone scored the wines, and those whose scores were incomplete or incomprehensible were excluded. The regions, in order of travel, were: Coonawarra, Clare, McLaren Vale, Barossa Valley, Yarra Valley and Hunter Valley.

The tour

First up was Coonawarra, on 1 November, at the inappropriately named Chardonnay Lodge. From the word go, it was soon clear that there would be wide variations in attitudes to quality and style, as well as strong personal preferences. At this first tasting, the cooler-climate European styles of Guigal and Bon Père Germanier were the least popular. Sue Hodder from Wynns stood up for the Swiss Syrah, liking its 'floral-aroma profile, tomato, pepper and spice', but the majority found it and the Guigal on the lean, skinny and green side. The Belle Hermitage was highly regarded, while the California and Washington Syrah and the Boekenhoutskloof from the Cape were the most popular of the New World styles. One or two winemakers noted mercaptan characters in the Planeta and 'dead fruit' in the Château de la Negly, while the Casa Lapostolle was felt to display rather obvious, charry-oak character. The 2002 Te Mata Shiraz/Viognier had been included as a substitute for the Incognito, but it was so outclassed that it was dropped.

Position	Wine (in order of tasting)
8	2000 Guigal Côte Rôtie, France
2	2001 Belle Hermitage, France
9	2001 Château de la Negly, Porte du Ciel, France
10	1999 Bon Père Germanier, Switzerland
5=	2001 Planeta, Sicilia, Italy
7	2002 Stonecroft, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand
4	2001 Boekenhoutskloof, South Africa
5=	2002 Casa Lapostolle, Chile
1	2001 K Vintners Syrah, Washington, USA
3	2000 Truchard Syrah, California, USA
11	2002 Te Mata Shiraz/Viognier

The second tasting took place on a cold and frosty morning in the Clare Agricultural Halls on 3 November. Alone in Clare, neither of the two *bonne bouche* whites with which we started each tasting showed well: the 2003 Terredora Campo Re Fiano d'Avellino and 2002 Guigal Condrieu La Doriane. The Belle Hermitage shone again, but Stephanie Toole and several others picked the Planeta as their best wine. It took seven out of the 11 first places. The Boekenhoutskloof and the K Vintners from Washington were both popular (although the former was too 'blokey' for Ms Toole) and the Guigal and Bon Père Germanier almost equally unpopular, but the Casa Lapostolle fared even worse, many actively taking against its obvious charry, burnt characters. On this occasion, the Truchard Syrah, third in Coonawarra, was derided by more than one for Brett and sulphidic characters. The Château de la Negly was better appreciated on this occasion, while the Stonecroft maintained a steady pace in the middle of the order.

7	2000 Guigal Côte Rôtie, France
2	2001 Belle Hermitage, France
5	2001 Château de la Negly, Porte du Ciel, France
10	1999 Bon Père Germanier, Switzerland
1	2001 Planeta, Sicilia, Italy
6	2002 Stonecroft, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand
3	2001 Boekenhoutskloof, South Africa
8	2002 Casa Lapostolle, Chile
4	2001 K Vintners Syrah, Washington, USA
9	2000 Truchard Syrah, California, USA

The third tasting, in McLaren Vale, took place at the Salopian Inn on 5 November, with the most vocal audience to date – even Chester Osborn, with a cold, was chipping in. The wines were generally showing better than in Clare. Château de la Negly, looking so much fresher and better balanced, triumphed. The Belle Hermitage came in second for the third consecutive time, while the Guigal and Bon Père Germanier were widely felt to be too lean and overtly peppery. The Truchard was canned for obvious Brett characters, but what had previously been seen to be



Harvesting Syrah on the steep vineyards of Côte Rôtie

obvious cherry characters in the Casa Lapostolle showed much better, with attractively fleshy fruit. The Incognito, on its first outing, came in a respectable fourth place, thanks to three first places and some generally good scores, while the Planeta slipped and the Boekenhoutskloof was all over the place, with both vocal supporters and detractors.

9	2000 Guigal Côte Rôtie, France
2	2001 Belle Hermitage, France
1	2001 Château de la Negly, Porte du Ciel, France
10	1999 Bon Père Germanier, Switzerland
7	2001 Planeta, Sicilia, Italy
4	2002 Incognito, Portugal
5	2002 Stonecroft, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand
8	2001 Boekenhoutskloof, South Africa
3	2002 Casa Lapostolle, Chile
6	2001 K Vintners Syrah, Washington, USA
11	2000 Truchard Syrah, California, USA

At the **fourth tasting**, at Bob McLean's Barr-Vinum Restaurant in Angaston in the Barossa on 8 November, there were, not surprisingly perhaps, more big-company winemakers, although Penfolds had had to pull out because of a major benchmark tasting. The Belle Hermitage took second place, although this time it was the Casa Lapostolle whose powerful, generous fruit and substantial oak were the most widely appreciated by the Barossa crowd. Indeed, it seemed to put its best foot forward for them. The Château de la Negly and Planeta were both liked as richly endowed, modern, warm-climate European styles, and K Vintners fared well. On this occasion (and in the Barossa, of all places), the Incognito and the Boekenhoutskloof came in

for criticism for being too hot. Surprisingly, the Stonecroft put in a strong performance, with cool-climate Syrah coming second and third. The last-placed two wines were rejected for having perceived faults of, respectively, green tannins and Brett.

7=	2000 Guigal Côte Rôtie, France
2	2001 Belle Hermitage, France
4	2001 Château de la Negly Porte du Ciel, France
10	1999 Bon Père Germanier, Switzerland
5	2001 Planeta, Sicilia, Italy
7=	2002 Incognito, Portugal
3	2002 Stonecroft, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand
9	2001 Boekenhoutskloof, South Africa
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6	2001 K Vintners Syrah, Washington, USA
11	2000 Truchard Syrah, California, USA

The **fifth tasting**, in the Yarra Valley, took place at de Bortoli's restaurant on 10 November, with a smaller group that included the big presence, figuratively speaking, of Yarra Yering's Bailey Carrodus. Yarra provided the most starkly different results to date. In fact, a strong regional preference saw the cooler-climate styles take the top five places. For the first time, the Bon Père Germanier featured strongly, as did the Stonecroft, while the Belle Hermitage romped home in first place. The elegant style of the K Vintners was also much appreciated with a fourth place, and the Guigal put in its best performance. The Château de la Negly could only manage sixth place, and the Planeta, Incognito, Boekenhoutskloof and Casa Lapostolle were all, relatively speaking, out of favour in the Yarra.

5	2000 Guigal Côte Rôtie, France
1	2001 Belle Hermitage, France
6	2001 Château de la Negly, Porte du Ciel, France
2=	1999 Bon Père Germanier, Switzerland
9	2001 Planeta, Sicilia, Italy
8	2002 Incognito, Portugal
2=	2002 Stonecroft, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand
10	2001 Boekenhoutskloof, South Africa
7	2002 Casa Lapostolle, Chile
4	2001 K Vintners Syrah, Washington, USA
11	2000 Truchard Syrah, California, USA

Finally, to the Hunter, for the **sixth tasting**, on 12 November, where the Belle showed its class in another first place. The Château de la Negly was back in favour, too, although reactions varied from ‘an overmature dry Port’, to Len ‘Mr Chairman’ Evans’s enjoyment of the ‘sweet style with supportive but not dominant oak’. Most were surprised by the quality of the Swiss wine’s freshness, and the cool-climate Stonecroft also showed well. The Planeta and Incognito were also back in favour, while the Boekenhoutskloof produced mixed reactions – from ‘funky’ and ‘monolithic’, to ‘plenty of fruit, albeit without great length’. The ‘concentrated sweetness and spice’ of the Casa Lapostolle appealed to some, while Evans found ‘everything in it big – a caricature’. The main casualty was the K Vintners, with a bottle that was less expressive than the others had been. The Guigal was generally felt to be clean, albeit thin, and the Truchard unquestionably farmyardy.

10	2000 Guigal Côte Rôtie, France
1	2001 Belle Hermitage, France
2	2001 Château de la Negly Porte du Ciel, France
6	1999 Bon Père Germanier, Switzerland
5	2001 Planeta, Sicilia, Italy
3	2002 Incognito, Portugal
4	2002 Stonecroft, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand
7	2001 Boekenhoutskloof, South Africa
8	2002 Casa Lapostolle, Chile
9	2001 K Vintners Syrah, Washington, USA
11	2000 Truchard Syrah, California, USA

The Results

The overall positions at the end of the six tastings can be seen in the table below, along with final marks and average scores (lowest being best).

The final position of the Belle Hermitage was proof positive of the wine’s exceptional pedigree and universal appeal. It had come first twice and second four times, and it was never lower than second on any one occasion. An overall second place for Château de la Negly’s La Porte du Ciel was a vindication of this wine’s intense concentration in the modern Languedoc style, and while it offered a very contrasting style to the northern Rhône’s Hermitage, its performance was more varied according to region. The Guigal, on the other hand, did not fare so well (vintage almost certainly played a part here) – its main support coming from cooler-climate Yarra Valley.

The relatively unknown Swiss Syrah did better than might have been expected, and although it ended up in ninth place, it was far from derided, even scoring a second-equal place in the Yarra and a sixth place in the Hunter. However, at 48° north, it’s a tough call for such cool-climate character to convince Australian palates. Having said that, the K Vintners from Washington is not far off at 46° north, but Columbia Valley’s warmer climate endowed the wine with convincing substance and flesh. The Planeta Syrah fared well, coming in fifth overall, and while it lost out in the Yarra, it scored a significant first in Clare Valley. The Incognito wasn’t placed because it had missed out on the first two tastings, but had its average score been the same across all of the tastings, it would have come in sixth.

New Zealand’s Stonecroft Syrah ended up in a creditable fourth place after stealthily climbing up the middle order, although its peppery cool-climate character was more generally appreciated in the Yarra Valley, the Hunter and, perhaps surprisingly, the Barossa than it was elsewhere. After a good start, the Boekenhoutskloof’s performance dipped as it was increasingly criticised for overhot fruit characters. Perhaps most controversial overall was the Casa Lapostolle, which proved popular in the Barossa and McLaren Vale, but was found to be overoaked and lacking depth in Coonawarra, Yarra and Clare.

The Washington Syrah was one of biggest surprises, and not just because hardly anyone had come across it before. This extreme, northerly Syrah turned out to have a seamless, utterly

FINAL RESULTS TABLE

Place	Wine	Score	Average
1	2001 Belle Hermitage, France	308	51
2	2001 Château de la Negly Porte du Ciel, France	438	73
3	2001 K Vintners Syrah, Washington, USA	457	76
4	2002 Stonecroft, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand	474	79
5	2001 Planeta, Sicilia, Italy	500	83
6	2002 Casa Lapostolle, Chile	527	88
7	2001 Boekenhoutskloof, South Africa	574	96
8	2000 Guigal Côte Rôtie, France	596	99
9	1999 Bon Père Germanier, Switzerland	645	108
10	2000 Truchard Syrah, California, USA	740	123
not placed	2002 Incognito, Portugal	347	87

drinkable fruit quality that few disliked, even if it was pipped to the class post by Belle. Meanwhile, its American counterpart, the poor old Truchard from Carneros, faded from view after its first positive performance in Coonawarra, largely because of a perceived farmyardy, Brett character that seemed to get worse as the sessions proceeded.

All in all, the tastings provided a fascinating perspective on the workings of Syrah around the world but were all the more invaluable for the insights provoked from many of those who

regard this classic variety virtually as their own. Bearing in mind that generalisations are dangerous, the differences of opinion that arose from the tastings actually reinforced a number of the similarities between Syrah / Shiraz in Australian and other global terroirs. Those who preferred one style to another were often expressing preferences based on the kind of style they themselves were making, and in doing so showed the extent to which they respect their own terroirs. This augurs well for the diversity of Australian Shiraz and must surely be cause for optimism. ■

TASTING NOTES AND PRICE GUIDE

France

2000 Albert Belle Hermitage, Rhône Valley (£25-27)

Cool-climate Syrah from a good vintage, showing intense black pepper, tar and saddle-leather characters on the nose and a seamless, mineral quality of fruit in which the tannins and acids are perfectly in balance. 18.5

2001 Château de la Negly, La Porte du Ciel, Coteaux du Languedoc, La Clape (£55)

A dense, rich Languedoc red with aromatic vanilla oak and pepper spice, dark chocolate, blackberry mid-palate richness in a powerful frame of substantial tannins. 17.5

2000 Guigal Côte Rôtie Brune et Blonde, Rhône Valley (£20-25)

Cool climate from an average vintage, showing strong aromatic peppery characters and a rather lean, scrawny palate tinged with green edges, making for an average, rather than benchmark, Côte Rôtie. 15

Italy

2001 Planeta Syrah, Menfi, Sicily, Italy (£20-25)

Richly concentrated and appealing dark-cherry and damson young-vine fruit characters. While on the big and muscular side, it is not hot, overly tannic or oaky, although it may be lacking an extra dimension of structure. 16.5

Portugal

2002 Incognito Syrah, Alentejo, Portugal (£15)

Deeply coloured, rich and pruney, blackberry fruit, with powerful alcohol and substantial tannins making for an overtly warm-climate style, albeit lacking a touch of elegance and depth. 15.5

Switzerland

1999 Bon Père Germanier, Cayas Syrah, Switzerland (£20)

A traditional Swiss Syrah with a pungent white-pepper

nose, a degree of fruit sweetness from well-integrated oak and a savoury, lean finish, all adding up to a well-crafted, self-evidently cool-climate Syrah. 14.5

New Zealand

2002 Stonecroft Syrah, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand (£15)

Cool climate in the New World, with Côte Rôtie-style cracked pepper, but more Hermitage-like sweet-savoury tarry characters on the palate, plenty of fresh and seamless blackberry fruit and an astringent, refreshing twist on the finish. 17

South Africa

2001 Boekenhoutskloof Syrah, South Africa (£25)

Intense warm-climate aromas, a big, rich, luscious palate of dark-red and black fruits with spicy oak, substantial tannins, and warm-climate fruit characters, teetering on the edge of an alcoholic cliff at 15.3%. 16

Chile

2002 Casa Lapostolle Cuvée Alexandre Syrah, Cachapoal, Rapel Valley, Chile (£15)

Plenty of oak char and vanilla, with liquorice spice and tar and expressive blackberry fruit on the palate, encased in a firm and obvious, impressive framework of spicy vanillin oak. 16

United States

2001 K Vintners Millbrandt Syrah, Wahluke Slope, Columbia Valley, Washington (£15)

An almost Hermitage-like Cascade Mountains red, with approachable, seamless red-berry fruit and well-integrated oak, making for a balanced and charming fruit-bomb of a red. 17

2002 Truchard Syrah, Carneros, Napa Valley, California (£20)

Deeper colour and full, dark-berry fruit, with a funky, leathery nose and a slightly bitter finish – symptoms of a wine that, despite its positive fruit qualities, displayed its farmyardy characters a little too prominently. 12