

Focus Varietal: Syrah

Syrach, also known as Shiraz in Australia, is one of the most noble grapes of the Rhône Valley. It is a key component of our *Esprit de Beaucastel* and, depending on the vintage, forms 20-35% of the final blend.

Early History

Syrach is one of the oldest established grape varieties in the Côtes du Rhône region of southern France, and competing stories abound about its origin. One legend attributes its arrival in France to the Phocaeans of Asia Minor, who brought the grape from Shiraz, Persia when they established Marseilles around 600 BC. Another story claims that Romans brought the variety from Syracuse, in Sicily, to the Rhône in the 3rd century AD. It seems most likely, however, that Syrah is a native French grape, the chance offspring of two grapes (Dureza and Mondeuse) from southeastern France. Whatever its origin, Syrah was well established in the vineyards surrounding the Rhône village of Tain-l'Hermitage by the 13th century.

Syrach Around the World

Syrach is most closely associated with the Northern Rhône appellations of Hermitage and Côte-Rotie, where it produces wines of phenomenal elegance and longevity. It is tremendously flexible, and can make elegant and restrained wines as well as wines bursting with fruit and oak, in locations as diverse as France, California, South Africa, and Australia. In the 1650s, South Africa was the first country outside France to plant Syrah, but it has never been more than a minor variety there. In Australia, however, where it arrived at the end of the 18th Century, it has become one of the most widely planted grapes in that country.

The first records of Syrah in the United States show it arriving in California in

1878, but it remained scarce until quite recently, with only 1,200 tons harvested in 1992. As California winemakers recognize its potential, the acreage has increased nearly one hundredfold in the past ten years, and 101,500 tons of Syrah were harvested in California in 2002. Syrah is now the most widely planted Rhône variety in California. Although it is occasionally confused with the California variety Petite Sirah, they are



separate varieties (many experts believe most of what is called Petite Sirah is a cross of the varieties Peloursin and Durif).

Syrach at Tablas Creek

Syrach is quite vigorous and thrives when given warm days, poor soils, and sun. Because it is so vigorous, it requires extra canopy management (to expose the fruit to the sun for ripening) and aggressive crop thinning. Unlike most other varieties, its canes extend down toward the ground rather than up toward the sun, and therefore it is the one variety permitted to be

trellised instead of head-pruned in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. It ripens earlier than any of the other red southern Rhône varieties, and its small clusters and small berries produce juice with concentrated flavors and significant tannin.

During vinification, we ferment Syrah in large open-top tanks, a process that exposes the juice to more oxygen and thereby softens the tannins and compensates for Syrah's tendency toward reduction. Currently, we have approximately 11 acres of Syrah planted at Tablas Creek, which represents about 30% of our red Rhône production.

Flavors and Aromas

The Syrah grape itself is thick-skinned and dark, almost black. Its wines are intense with a dark purple-black color. The wines taste of blackberry and currant fruit, smoke, tar and black pepper, and have a smooth supple texture. Syrah reflects minerality well, and the chalky character of the tannins provides a wonderful backbone to softer, fruitier varieties such as Grenache and Crounise.

In our blends, Syrah provides structure, a deep blackish-purple color, minerality, and longevity. It can give mid-palate richness to our Mourvèdre based blends (the *Esprit de Beaucastel*), and structure and tannin to Grenache-based wines such as our *Côtes de Tablas*. In 2002 we bottled Syrah as a single variety for our VINSider wine club; we released the wine nationally beginning with the 2003 vintage. 🍷