

WINE AND DINE

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Que Syrah, Sera?

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Doris Day's popular song Que Sera, Sera is the theme of this column on a couple of levels. The translation of "Whatever Will Be, Will Be" conjures up the carefree spirit of the warm summer months, when we enjoy casual backyard entertaining.

This weekend, many Father's Day celebrations will feature backyard grilling, when Dad holds center stage, cooking family specialties for a group of appreciative dinner guests. Also, this play on words asks "Which Syrah Will It Be?". Syrah wines can have the fruit driven character, peppery notes, be big and bold yet offer soft tannins (when blended with Grenache) that pair well with Dad's barbeque.

There is a parallel between French and American Syrah wines which this column will explore. In both countries, the wines from their northern regions are similar in style, and the same can be said for the wines of both southern regions. In one case, it is cultural and in the other country it is climatic. Let's explore these similarities.

French Syrah

Syrah wine has its roots in the Rhône Valley of France, divided between the Northern and Southern regions. Rhône Valley Syrah wines tend to offer blackberry, dark plum and spicy pepper notes. In general, Syrah from the Northern Rhône Valley and wines from the Châteauneuf-du-Pape appellation of the Southern Rhône Valley are highly prized collectables and are often very pricey. These wines are muscular, complex and offer long term aging potential. The Northern Rhône's cooler climate helps create wines that have earthy, peppery and spice flavors.

France is very strict about grape vineyard plantings in their wine regions. Syrah is the only red grape varietal that may be legally planted in Northern Rhône (a cultural issue), so their Syrah wine is pure Syrah and not a blended product. In the Southern Rhône Valley, wine varietals may be blended. Southern Rhône wines are typically a blend of Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre. These wines are more plentiful, approachable and reasonably priced. The Cotes du Rhône appellations of Southern Rhône offer terrific values at \$10 – \$20 a bottle.

As an aside, young French winemakers immigrate to America to escape the strict winemaking laws of France. They enjoy the freedom to grow grapes in any wine region and experiment by blending different grape varietals together, to create new expressions. While France fights to protect its wine heritage, the United States continually experiments to see what is possible.

American Syrah

California's Rhône-style Syrah and Syrah blends have been steadily gaining in quality and popularity, although still underappreciated in the United States. Californian Syrah offers a broad range of styles that are reminiscent of both the Northern and Southern Rhône Valley wines. As a generality, Napa Valley mirrors Northern Rhône by bottling pure Syrah, and this wine is also muscular, complex and peppery, as their Northern Rhône counterparts.

The Paso Robles region in Southern California patterns its Rhône-style reds after the Southern Rhône Valley region, as their winemakers are blending Grenache with Syrah and turning out a more ripe, fruit driven and softer style wine. Grenache is considered a challenging grape to grow and seems to fair better in Southern California than the northern Napa Valley (a climatic issue). Southern California winemakers blend Grenache to help soften Syrah's more primal nature. In keeping with our pioneering spirit, the vintners in Paso Robles also blend Syrah with Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon, creating some unique taste experiences. While some highly rated American Syrah can cost \$40 - \$75 per bottle, there are good value Syrah wines available from \$15 - \$20 a bottle.

Food pairings with Syrah Wine

As noted, Syrah tends to be a bold wine with earthy notes and peppery flavors. This makes this wine an ideal grilling companion. Along with traditional beef, grilled game, lamb and duck are also favorites of many backyard grill masters. Root vegetables and mushrooms are also good matches for these wines. Have fun picking out "Which Syrah It Will Be" for Dad this Father's Day.

Bill's Wine Picks (with suggested retail prices)

French Syrah

2009 Côtes-Du-Rhône Andezon – Rated 91 points by Robert Parker	\$12
2007 Côtes-Du-Rhône E. Guigal – Rated 90 points by Robert Parker	\$13

California Syrah

2007 Four Vines Paso Robles Syrah – Rated 89 points by Cellar Tracker	\$12
2008 Michael David Winery's 6 Sense Syrah – Rated 86 pts. Cellar Tracker	\$15
2009 Tablas Creek Vineyard Cotes de Tablas Syrah – 89 pts. Cellar Tracker	\$27

Wine of the Month:

2007 E. Guigal Côtes Due Rhône

Suggested Retail Price: \$13

E. Guigal was late releasing this wine, but it was worth the wait. This wine is a blend of 50% Syrah, 40% Grenache and 10% Mourvèdre. Robert Parker rates this effort 90 points and describes this wine as "A deep ruby/purple wine with lots of cassis, kirsch, pepper, and even an intriguing floral note, the wine is medium to full-bodied, silky smooth, and a truly delicious, hedonistic and intellectually satisfying wine that is a remarkable bargain." Sounds good to me.



Bill Garlough is the founder and owner of My Chef Catering in Naperville, the winner of the 2007 U.S. Chamber's National Small Business of the Year. Bill is a level 1 master sommelier and pairs food and wine for My Chef's customers. He can be contacted at www.mychef.com.