

THE SOMM JOURNAL



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P-29 P53

The Dinex (Boulud) team on the left (left to right): Joe Cracco, Ian Medley (standing), Mike Madrigale; the team from NoHo Hospitality on the right (front to back): Kristen Goceljak, Josh Nadel, Lindsay Gulics.



Que Syrah Syrah

THIS “MALLEABLE” GLOBAL VARIETY **PLAYS STUMP THE SOMMS**

by Lana Bortolot / photos by Doug Young
 team captain: Mike Madrigale, Head Sommelier, Bar Boulud, Boulud Sud



IN THE SPIRIT OF FRIENDLY COMPETITION, MIKE MADRIGALE AND JOSH Nadel, our captains from the Riesling Smackdown, gathered teams for a comparative and comprehensive Syrah tasting. Though the end goal was to declare a winner in this rematch, the tasting brought up another challenge: how to evaluate the diverse world of Syrah outside its spiritual home.

“Without a doubt, Northern Rhône is the benchmark,” Mike said, citing producers such as Gentaz-Dervieux from Côte-Rôtie, Noël Verset in Cornas and Chave in Hermitage as the holy grail. “The finest Syrah in the world is full-flavored and yet elegant at the same time ... it’s not heavy.”

With the bar so set, we tasted 19 Syrahs from across the globe. Sitting on Mike’s team were Joe Cracco and Ian Smedley, Sommeliers at both Bar Boulud and Boulud

Sud. Josh, Beverage Director for the NoHo Hospitality Group, which includes Lafayette, Little Park, Locanda Verde and the Dutch, enlisted two from Little Park: Kristen Goceljak, Beverage Manager, and Lindsay Gulics, Head Sommelier.

Our lineup covered wines from ten countries, including samples from California and Washington State, and prices ranging from \$20 to \$138 (SRP). The tasting was generally arranged from cool-climate to warm, with Rhône wines setting the stage.

Whispered notes overheard at the two ends of the table included oak tannins, strawberry Pez, pink Tums, hamburger, green, "toasty-toasty," talcum, lactic, sour cream, yogurt, bramble, dense, rustic, violet . . . and dog food. Clearly, the tasters were confronted with a new world of sundry descriptors packed into a historic definition of Syrah.

At the gate, Team Madrigale correctly identified the five Rhône wines by region and Team Nadel identified three; both teams had near hits on the appellations.

"Our attack on a subregion is St. Joe and Crozes are so close together; it's half a dozen of one and six of the other," Josh said. But, he added, "there should be a reason to call it Cornas versus Côte-Rôtie or Hermitage."

Often, though, that reason wasn't apparent, as wines from New Zealand, South Africa and Santa Barbara were taken for Hermitage; one from Lisbon and another from Santa Barbara mimicked Côte-Rôtie, and the bottles from Spain and Cortona were thought to be Cornas. Frequently the tasters remarked that the producers—whoever they were—were all familiar with excellent Rhône winemaking. Still, many bottles were chameleons.

"With these New World-style wines, the question is, where is it from? You're playing detective, trying to find something that connects you to a place," Mike said. With some wines, he said "the sweetness and oak are really taking you anywhere and it's like trying to find an anchor."

Josh agreed. "It is interesting to note how many times we ended up discussing

'is this an Old World wine made in a New World style, or vice versa?' [It] speaks to Syrah's malleability."

He added, "It's encouraging to see Syrah can be grown successfully all over the world. That being said, I believe wine should have a sense of time and place: Syrah from Italy does not qualify in that regard, and with the wealth of indigenous varieties in that type of Old World environment, what is Syrah's *raison d'être*?"

Echoing his earlier remark about ideal Syrah, Mike noted many of the global Syrahs were full of flavor and heavy. "For me, that's not what one is looking for when you are looking for Syrah. In good Syrah, there's a savoriness—peppercorn, smoked meat . . . when you make Syrah in other parts of the world you deviate too far away from those characteristics."

Joe added, "An interesting aspect was the herbal mint and cocoa notes that came out of the non-French Syrahs. Whereas the classics usually show olives and savory herbs."

From Josh's team, Lindsay said that

BEST IN SHOW



Nerantzi 2010 Syrah, Macedonia, Greece (\$37) Smoky, spicy bouillon, showing secondary aromas and flavors. Very high-octane in style; interesting and tasty.

FREDERICK WILDMAN & SONS



Fable Mountain Vineyard 2011 Syrah, South Africa (\$35) Very generous wine. NW-OW style, but well-made. Dark, deep, fruity, jammy and powerful.

SKURNIK WINES



Three Rivers Winery 2012 Syrah, Walla Walla Valley, Washington (\$39) Concentrated dark ripe but not overcooked fruits. Food-friendly, tannic, "something quite Old World about this wine""would provide a lot of pleasure to a lot of people."

FOLEY FAMILY WINES



M. Chapoutier 2011 Monier de la Sizeranne Hermitage, France (\$135) Candied, riper fruit, a little more concentrated; leafy, briny.

TERLATO WINES



Ogier 2012 Syrah La Rosine IGP Collines Rhodaniennes, France (\$40) Aromatically interesting, with some nice violet. Good acid, red fruit, not very concentrated, but good "entry level."

ROBERT KACHER

though she is a fan of Northern Rhône for its "integration and layers of aromas and flavors," nevertheless "it was fascinating to me to taste Old World Syrah made in a more modern style, or New World Syrah made in an Old World style. It was hard for me to place those, as I kept going back and forth."

And, after all was said and tasted, no Rhône wine ended up in the final round of top picks. With some hesitation, the panel picked Syrahs from Spain, South Africa, Greece and Washington State.

"I feel somehow unusual recommending a Greek and Spanish Syrah... is that what we want to do?" Josh asked.

"I don't know how I feel about not having a Rhône in there," Mike said. He slid the Chapoutier Hermitage Monier de la Sizeranne and the Ogier Syrah La Rosine into the winners' circle. Spain—which both teams thought to be Cornas—came out.

"I thought it was the best non-French in show, because it was the most classic flavor set without the oddball herbs," said Joe, an early champion of the Spanish wine.

With the guesses as much all over the map as the wines, we counted the ballots twice and declared stalemate. Que Syrah Syrah. SJ

The Quaff Report thanks the following for wine submissions: Banfi Vintners, Foley Family Wines, Kobrand, Robert Kacher Selections, Negociants USA, Shafer Vineyards, Skurnik Wines, Tensley Wines, Terlato Wines, Frederick Wildman & Sons, Winebow Group, Deborah Parker Wong. Thanks to Bar Boulud for hosting the tasting.

Syrahs from All Over

Domaine de Fondrèche 2013 Persia Rouge, Ventoux, France (\$34)

"Acceptable amount of reduction; honest, ripe fruit in a value-driven wine."

ROBERT KACHER

Paul Jaboulet Aîné, Saint-Joseph Domaine de la Croix des Vignes, St. Joseph, France (\$45)

"High-tone, ripe fruit; good meaty Marsala bacon to it. Modern in style; another OW/NW mashup."

SKURNIK WINES

Paul Jaboulet Aîné 2012 Domaine de Thalabert, Crozes-Hermitage, France (\$33)

Earthy and acidic. Mouth-filling without being too fruity.

SKURNIK WINES

Vie 2012 Syrah, Los Carneros, Sonoma, California (\$39)

Confectured fruit, juicy and earthy. Tasted over-manipulated and manufactured.

Emiliana 2012 Signos de Origen "La Quebrada" Syrah, Casablanca, Chile (\$35)

Green notes, vegetal quality, stewed fruits, menthol/mint and mocha.

BANFIVINTNERS

Tensley 2014 Syrah, Santa Barbara County, California (\$28)

Concentrated and viscous with some savory, briny flavors.

EMPIRE MERCHANTS

Shafer "Relentless" 2012, Stag's Leap, Napa Valley, California (\$85)

"Nice and minty"; high-octane style, tannic, juicy, very dark.

Craggy Range 2013 Le Sol, Gimblett Gravels, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand (\$60)

Lots of cracked pepper and dark fruit; ambitious.

KOBRAND

Langmeil 2013 The Freedom 1843 Shiraz, Barossa Valley, Australia (\$138)

Impressed by the oldest Shiraz vineyard designation, the panel thought it was "more a wine for everyday people."

NEGOCIANTS USA

Marqués de Griñón 2010 Dominio de Valdepusa, El Rincón DO de Pago, Madrid, Spain (\$25)

The panel's top puzzler with more tannins than aroma; extracted but did not have excessive amount of oak or sweetness or confectionary quality.

WINEBOW GROUP

Quinta do Monte d'Oiro 2009 Reserva, VR Lisboa, Portugal (\$65)

"Not life-changing but had good varietal character and Old World sensibility."

WINEBOW GROUP

Tenimenti Luigi d'Alessandro 2012 Borgo Syrah, Cortona, Italy (\$20)

Lean, saline, not generous with fruit or barrel; on the rustic side.

WINEBOW GROUP

Tenuta Rapitalà 2013 Nadir Syrah, Sicily DOC, Italy (\$18)

Lactic and lacking in acid and minerality.

FREDERICK WILDMAN & SONS

Herman Story 2013 Nuts + Bolts, Santa Barbara (\$48)

Very concentrated with complexity—another NW/OW puzzler.



NOTE: One further entry, the Penfolds St. Henri Shiraz, was corked and was not considered in the evaluations.