



# Rhone Rangers

ON THE RISE

## RHÔNE-STYLE WINES SPEAK OF THE POWER OF WINE DIVERSITY

**THERE IS NOTHING LIKE THE DIVERSITY OF WINE,** with all the different grape varieties, regions, wineries, vineyards, vintages and winemakers. This was vividly brought to mind when I tasted Rhône-style wines in preparing for this column. What a delight to taste Grenache, Petite Sirah, Mourvèdre, Viognier and several of their siblings.

Grapes from the Rhône River Valley, one of France's great wine regions, are not as famous or widely grown as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot from Bordeaux or Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from Burgundy. However, one of the more important shifts in California vineyards during the last 25 years has been increases in Rhône grape varieties. One impetus has been a trade organization humorously named the *Rhone Rangers*. Another was that Rhône varieties do very well in the fast-growing wine region of Paso Robles in central California.

The diversity of Rhône-style wines is exceptional. Not only are there 20 or more Rhône grape varieties, but also they are "born to blend" and blending dramatically increases the diversity of the wines. A common and popular Rhône-style blend is Grenache-Syrah-Mourvèdre, which is a staple in the Rhône River Valley and elsewhere is often known by its acronym *GSM*.

Tasting Rhône-style wines is an exciting experience. Not only because of the many grapes and blends, but also because most have flavors less familiar to many American palates. Tasting at home allows for sipping and reflecting, but the ultimate experience is attending a Rhone Rangers' tasting (see [www.rhonerangers.org](http://www.rhonerangers.org)).

### *Here are the top Rhône-style wines I enjoyed recently:*

**Andrew Murray 2012 red blend Espérance, Central Coast (\$25):**

Andrew Murray Vineyards is in California's top echelon for Rhône-style wines.

This GSM features attractive color and aromas, but shines as succulent fruit beautifully complemented by tannic structure develops through a wonderfully strong finish. Its sibling, the white-blend 2013 Enchanté (\$25), is strong, rich and refreshing, but only available online from the winery.

**Tablas Creek 2013 white blend Côtes de Tablas Blanc, Paso Robles (\$27):**

Tablas Creek Vineyard is also among California's best wineries for Rhône-style wines. This fine blend of Viognier and three other grapes is a playfully named variant of the Côtes du Rhône wines that refer to hillsides (Côtes). I loved the creamy texture, strong fruit, seamless integration and perfect balance of this superior wine.

**Halter Ranch 2012 Syrah Paso Robles (\$35):**

The best Syrah I tasted in its price range, this Rhône-style wine from Paso has lusciously smooth fruit supplemented by moderate to strong tannins, great balance and notable complexity on both nose and palate. Pour now with beef or cellar to allow the tannins to soften.

**Lone Madrone 2013 Picpoul Blanc Paso Robles (\$37):**

I've tasted very few single varietal wines of Picpoul ("PEEK-pool") Blanc, but loved the Lone Madrone's strong, zesty, fruit-dominated flavors that produce a wonderful, extended finish. Ideal for pairing with seafood. Also consider the winery's 2012

white blend "Points West White" (\$35). Lone Madrone wines are only available online from the winery.

**Qupé 2010 Roussanne Bien Nacido Hillside Estate, Santa Maria Valley (\$40):**

With grapes sourced from one of California's top vineyards, this beauty has amazing color depth, strong complex aromas, full body and excellent balance. Yet its unforgettable personality is best expressed by its long, powerful finish.

**Dragonette 2012 red blend Seven, Central Coast (\$40):**

This blend of Syrah and a bit of Grenache and Viognier – originally obtained from seven vineyards – has a highly attractive, very complex nose. The flavors are bold and very full-bodied, making for a powerful wine, but one that is refined thanks to modest tannins, smooth texture and fine balance. Only available online from the winery.

**Spring Valley 2011 Syrah Walla Walla Valley, Washington (\$50):**

This "wow" wine—my favorite Syrah—proves excellent Rhône-style wines can come from Washington as well as California. There's great balance between fruit and acidity, well-integrated tannins and memorable complexity that builds to and through a long-lingering finish.

**Tablas Creek 2012 red blend Esprit de Tablas, Paso Robles (\$55):**

The "Spirit of Tablas" red wine is a fine GSM with a bit of Counoise (yet another Rhône grape). A polished, superbly integrated wine with modest tannins and exceptional balance. The exceedingly long finish has power and complexity throughout. Pair with lamb, duck or lighter cuts of beef. 🏔️