TASTING HIGHLIGHTS

California Rhône Reds: Central Coast Splendor

New reviews of Golden State Syrah and Grenache blends up to 93 points

Chad Melville is a second-generation farmer of his family's 120-acre vineyard in Santa Barbara County. Rita Hills. (Courtesy of Melville Winery)

By Aaron Romano

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Tasting Highlights' wine reviews are from out of the tasting room, offering a sneak peek of our editors' most recent ratings—including scores and full tasting notes—in WineSpectator.com members.

It's no secret that California sunshine is a key ingredient to the success of wines produced in the state. But California's many microclimates offer more than just abundant sunshine. The Central Coast, while vast—it includes six counties and stretches approximately 300 miles from north to south—is the region most influenced by its proximity to the Pacific Ocean, which tempers the sunny day weather influence and myriad microclimates, resulting in a range of wine styles, particularly for Syrah and Grenache.

Paso Robles' west side has long been a leader in Rhône-style wines, thanks to its warm days, cool nights and calcareous soils. Tablas Creek is among the region's most recognized pioneers for Rhône varieties. The winery was founded in 1989 by the Perrin family, proprietors of Château de Beaucastel, and the Haas family of Vineyard Brands. Its Patelin de Tablas is a classic Rhône-style blend of Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre, and its Côtes de Tablas is a savory mix of Syrah and Grenache—and hard to beat for the price.

Over the years, Paso Robles has also garnered a reputation for making Rhône-adjacent blends—meaning using grapes from Syrah or Grenache as the lead variety while blending in non-Rhône grapes. Denner's unconventional Nightshade blend adds Malbec, Petit Verdot, Petite Sirah, Zinfandel and Grenache; Sculpt and Cinaudi for a perky, juicy and fresh wine. Meanwhile, Daou blends Petite Sirah with Syrah, Zinfandel, and Lagrein for a bright wine with hibiscus and subtle cedar notes that frame the raspberry and plum core.

Winemakers in Santa Barbara's Sta. Rita Hills like to call their sunshine "refrigerator" as the seven-to-nine miles distance from the Pacific and transverse mountains that run east-west allow for cooler nights and lower daytime temperatures, resulting in one of California's longest growing seasons. Both Melville and Brewer-Clifton are perhaps better known for their Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from this region, but here they deliver cool-climate Syrahs that are fresh and distinctive, with plenty of savory aromas and flavors.

Top Central Coast Syrah and Grenache Blends

TABLAS CREEK

Patelin de Tablas Paso Robles 2024

Score: 93 | $28

MS review: Decidedly savory, yet fresh and inviting, with thyme and licorice root notes that meld with a silky textured core of juicy plum and wild strawberry that are buoyed by fresh acidity. This circles back to its opening notes on the finish with lingering savory and herbal accents. Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre, Cinsaut, Counoise. Drink now through 2040. 4,801 cases made.—Aaron Romano

TENSLEY

Syrah Santa Barbara County 2024

Score: 92 | $34

MS review: Lush and juicy, with ample structure. Rich, this offers delicate accents of red apple skin, lavender and white pepper that meld with the plum and blueberry core. Remains fresh, showing caressing tannins before ending on a late echo of espresso. Drink now through 2048. 2,800 cases made.—A.R.

FUNDAMENTAL

Red Central Coast 2023

Score: 91 | $22

MS review: Perfumed with iris, violet and baking spice notes, as well as ripe plum, this red offers a pleasant thread of salinity that cuts through the blackberry core, adding bacon fat and espresso details that linger around tannins. Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre and Petite Sirah. Drink now through 2038. 1,500 cases made.—A.R.

MELVILLE

Syrah Sta. Rita Hills 2023

Score: 91 | $28

MS review: A fresh, distinctive and crowd-pleasing style, with guava, tangerine zest and pink peppercorn accents framing the finely chiseled, leather- and mineral-accented core of fresh raspberry and mulberry. Ends with nimble tannins and plenty of peppery and sencha notes. Drinkable and food-friendly. Drink now. 1,347 cases made.—A.R.

BREWER-CLIFTON

Syrah Sta. Rita Hills Perfume 2024

Score: 90 | $50

MS review: A remarkably fresh and distinctive version, with river mint and lavender aromas and white pepper accents to the fresh strawberry core. Fennel's licorice-like sweetness emerges on the midpalate, and the wine finishes with bright acidity keeps things fresh and moving along. Finishes with refined tannins. Drink now. 590 cases made.—A.R.

DENNER

Nightshade Paso Robles 2024

Score: 90 | $90

MS review: A perky, juicy kitchen sink version that's fresh and enjoyable now, offering lavenly berry flavors at the center, with shades of tangerine, spices and pâte de fruit that linger around gentle tannins. Grenache, Malbec, Syrah, Petit Verdot, Petite Sirah, Zinfandel, Graciano and Cinsault. Drink now. 1,500 cases made.—A.R.

FOLDED HILLS

August Red Santa Barbara County 2024

Score: 90 | $48

MS review: Tight at first but slowly reveals a subtle mix of pentagon and leaf, with a core of plum and berries that gains richness on the back end. Finishes with slightly chalky tannins. Syrah and Grenache. Best after 2026. 488 cases made.—A.R.

DAOU

Pessimist Paso Robles 2024

Score: 88 | $20

MS review: This is rather bright, with hibiscus and subtle cedar notes framing the raspberry and plum core. Fresh herbs hold in on the broad finish. Petite Sirah, Syrah, Zinfandel and Lagrein. Drink now. 175,000 cases made.—A.R.

FESS PARKER

The Big Easy Santa Barbara County 2022

Score: 88 | $40

MS review: The roasted herb and espresso bean notes may have you thinking muscle, but this is svelte in texture, with a medium-bodied frame centered on raspberry and sugar plum fruit that ends with subtle richness around smooth tannins. Syrah, Petite Sirah and Grenache. Drink now. 2,520 cases made.—A.R.

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