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WHITE HOT

In a warming world, grapes of the Southern Rhône Valley are thriving stateside.

Story by AMY BETH WRIGHT



In 2012, when Susan Tipton opened the doors of Acquiesce Winery in Lodi, California, she was prepared to drink her wines if she couldn't sell them. "And I meant it," she recalls.

In the preceding years, well-meaning colleagues had gently attempted to dissuade Tipton from opening a dedicated white wine winery in a warm California region better known for concentrated reds. But a single bottle in 2006 was all it had taken to convince her to replant her vineyard, where Zinfandel had once been cultivated for Gallo, to white southern Rhône.

"I fell in love with a white Châteauneuf-du-Pape," says Tipton. "I immediately brought the bottle back to the store and said, 'I'd like two cases of this amazing white wine.' It turned out I'd bought the last bottle in California. I was like, okay, I'm a white wine drinker, we lived in Europe for a while—how have I never tried a white Châteauneuf-de-Pape, and why is it so rare?"

White wine accounted for 13 percent of wine production in the Rhône Valley in 2025; reds and rosés comprise the difference. The Rhône Glacier, on Dammastock peak in the Swiss Alps, is the source of the Rhône River, which eases through gorges and valleys to drain into Lake Geneva. Its course then angles southwest, drawing an Etch-a-Sketch path through the southern Jura Mountains, and between the Alps and a mountainous French upland. Between Lyon and the Mediterranean Sea, more than 30 distinct winemaking traditions and appellations are nested; the terraced vineyards of the northern Rhône were built during the Roman Empire and are prized for Syrah. But in the southern Rhône, the river branches in two and eventually seeps through brackish wetlands to join the Mediterranean Sea. Maritime breezes impart a bright, sea-sprayed character in white wines with vibrancy and savoriness. Aligned with the fresh and lively styles currently being sought out by drinkers, the historically underappreciated white wines of the southern Rhône are reaching new borders in favorable climates, inspiring winemakers an ocean away.

Having evolved over millennia to thrive in warm environments, Rhône white grape varieties also offer unique fortitude in the current climate era, tolerating warm conditions while upholding the backbone of acidity that makes wine enlivening. Michael Cook, a viticulture program specialist with Texas A&M's AgriLife Extension Service, says that the heat-adapted grapes provide inspiration for researchers and winemakers. For that reason, southern white Rhône are part of "a quiet revolution," says Philippe Pellaton, president of Inter-Rhône, the wine region's industry alliance. Jérôme Castillon, co-president of AOC Costières

de Nîmes, describes their increasing popularity with wine drinkers as a postscript to the rosé trend, where consumers are "drawn to wines with a lighter profile, but with more aromatics."

With a satisfying white Rhône hard to come by in-state, Tipton decided to plant an acre of grapes in 2008. Half was dedicated to Grenache Blanc, the most planted white grape in the southern Rhône and a cornerstone in blends, an art form and lineage in Rhône winemaking. Lower-acid in comparison to others, Grenache Blanc is weighty and lush on the palate, its fuller body a supple, textural counterpoint to tangier notes of green apple and citrus. Tipton allotted the other half-acre to Grenache, a thin-skinned, fruity Rhône red, as the basis of a potential rosé program. Tipton's instinct to eventually plant nine Rhône varieties—and to emphasize white southern Rhône in single-varietal bottlings—proved auspicious. Acquiesce (the term implies letting the grapes come into their own, with minimal adjustments) has since earned more than 100 awards from the *San Francisco Chronicle* Wine Competition, the American Fine Wine Competition, and many others.

When compared with menu mainstays like Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio, and Chardonnay, white Rhône simply don't command the same spotlight. "White southern Rhône are a discovery category that requires more conversation with consumers than others," says Josh Nadel, a master sommelier and the beverage director for NoHo Hospitality Group in New York City. "But there's a sense of adventure in those grapes that the landscape doesn't provide with more well-known varieties and well-known regions."



"Much of California's warm, and 90 percent of Chardonnay is grown in areas that were warm 20 years ago and are warmer now. Chardonnay adapts so well, but realistically, a grape like Grenache Blanc handles heat better," says David Gates, senior vice president of vineyard operations at Ridge Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains. "Grenache originated on the Iberian Peninsula and has thick leaves with a high wax content that helps protect it from the heat."

During colder midcentury periods in Europe, Rhône white grapes like Bourboulenc, Picpoul Blanc, and Clairette Blanche, among others, would have been seen as a disadvantage, explains Jason Haas, partner and general manager at



Clockwise from this photo: Harvesting Grenache Blanc at Acquiesce Vineyard; Acquiesce winemaker Christina Lopez; Grenache Blanc on the vine at Acquiesce; Ridge Vineyards' Grenache Blanc; Ridge Vineyards' David Gates harvesting at Monte Bello in the Santa Cruz Mountains.





McPherson Cellars
Roussanne.

Tablas Creek Vineyards in Paso Robles. “A grape like Picpoul Blanc was dismissed as a simple, cheerful oyster wine, the south of France’s answer to Muscadet,” says Haas. “It can be so much more now, as it’s gotten warmer. It gets texture, tropicality, super-bright acids and minerality, and is an absolutely lovely grape for this moment.”

In 1994, the Perrin family, owners of a 16th-century estate in Châteauneuf-de-Pape, collaborated with the Haas family, led by American wine importer Robert Haas, to plant Rhône varieties at Tablas Creek Vineyards. The site was selected for its elevation in the coastal Santa Lucia mountains and high pH limestone and marine sedimentary soils. Tablas Creek has since become a benchmark for Rhône-style wines in California and an advocate for their visibility among consumers. Jason Haas has served on the board of the Rhône Rangers, a non-profit promoting Rhône varietal wines grown in the U.S., for two decades. Annual tasting and education events showcase fine Rhône bottlings from the Sierra foothills, Santa Barbara County, Paso Robles, Texas, Oregon, and beyond.

“For millennia, the weather was hot and dry around the Mediterranean basin,” says Olivier Yobregat, an agronomist engineer with the Institut Français de la Vigne et du Vin (IFV). Ancient varieties were thus selected for their ability to uphold bright acidity in warm periods, and for their productivity—the exact characteristics helping the grapes thrive stateside. Now, says Haas, “Everything is ripening earlier, and higher acid white Rhône’s will likely do better than others because they evolved in places that are hotter and drier than Burgundy or the Loire.” To that point, Acquiesce winemaker and vineyard manager Christina Lopez notes, “These varieties can withstand several days of triple-digit temperatures, and still hold onto their acid.”

Acquiesce’s single-varietal Bourboulenc is enlivened by high acidity while expressing minerality, citrus, beeswax, and honeysuckle, pairing compellingly with dishes highlighted by sweetness, like corn and coconut soups or breakfast waffles with maple syrup. “The fact that the grape is rarely made as a single-varietal wine is a tragedy,” says Tipton.

Another compelling case for these wines is the price. “You can make really interesting versions of southern white Rhône’s that engage people for a fraction of what it might cost to make something else in major appellations where land prices are high, like growing Cabernet in Napa,” says Nadel. “People can take chances, and good things will materialize.”

Bryan McCall, the wine director at Charlie’s in St. Helena, in the Napa Valley, has featured a fan-favorite kegged Marsanne made locally by Hayfork Wine Company. “The people who were unfamiliar initially were willing to give it a shot because the price was right,” says McCall. He notes that patrons seeking a glass of white wine will often start with California Chardonnay as a reference point, asking questions like, ‘Is it oaky? Is it buttery?’ For those guests, the richness of white Rhône’s can be surprising.

At Charlie’s, full-bodied white Rhône’s have proven magical with fall flavors in creamy truffle pasta and hearth-roasted kognut squash with pepitas, winter curry, and carrot velouté. Tablas Creek’s single varietal Grenache Blanc has a signature creamy texture and full body, with flavorful notes of orange zest, green apple, and fennel. In Ridge Vineyards’ Grenache Blanc, a small percentage of Picpoul Blanc is “the secret sauce for its lift of acidity,” says Gates, who adds that Rhône bottlings have “really changed the dynamic of wines in California.”

Ryan Sipin, the consulting wine director at La Fête in Birmingham, Alabama, concurs with sommelier Josh Nadel that white Rhône varietals are often sold by way of suggestion. A blend of Clairette Blanche, Grenache Blanc, Bourboulenc, Ugni Blanc, and Muscat Blanc from Château Simone, cultivated just south of the Rhône Valley, expresses “texture, weight and an intense core of fruit” that’s an idyllic match for roasted chicken with lemon and garlic, he says. La Sardinière, a Roussillon Grenache Blanc, proves “sublime due to its fleshy orchard, almost tropical notes, and incredible backbone of acidity,” says Sipin, who suggests pairing it with snapper. “There are so many gems to be found outside of our normal comfort zone.”



In the eastern shadow of the Cascade Mountains, rainfall averages just eight inches a year in southern Washington state’s Horse Heaven Hills AVA. Ray McKee, winemaker at Trothe, a winery known for premium Cabernet Sauvignon, builds a dry white wine under the Sagebreaker label (named for co-owner Jeff Andrews’ family effort to break through dry land and sagebrush in the 1940s for wheat farming). Made using 20-year-old Viognier, Marsanne, and Roussanne vines, the wine is an elegant intertwining of stone fruit, floral notes, and bright acidity. “In the 20 years I’ve been in the industry, the climate has changed dramatically—so we are already seeing that these grapes maintain their character in a time of climate extremes,” says Andrews.

To the southeast, in semi-arid and warm Walla Walla Valley, Rich Funk, owner and winemaker at Saviah Cellars, creates a distinctive house Viognier from estate plantings in Walla Walla and The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater (a small AVA that's strewn with river cobbles, much like the southern Rhône's galet roulés). Acidity, orange blossom, stone fruit, and salinity reposition the varietal, which can be unrestrainedly floral, to express complexity. A slow fermentation in concrete eggs keeps the lees in suspension, supporting texture, body, and mouthfeel, and preserving fresher notes. Saviah's aromatic, acid-forward blend Stone Petal blends Viognier, Clairette Blanche, Picpoul Blanc, and Roussanne to evoke minerality alongside notes of chamomile.

Craig Camp is the general manager of Troon Vineyards in southern Oregon's Applegate Valley, where the 100-acre estate was initially planted by Dick Troon in 1972. In 2018, Camp and his team began replanting varieties for biodynamic farming that would continue to thrive in the region looking ahead. This includes eight white Rhône varieties, which, per Rhône tradition, are mostly vinified as blends, with a couple of single-varietal wines. "We took into account climate change, assuming a hotter, drier climate will be accentuated in the future," says Camp.

Kim McPherson, the son of Clinton "Doc" McPherson, whose viticultural experimentation and leadership beginning in the '60s led to designation of the Texas High Plains AVA in 1993, says that growing grapes that suit a warm, dry climate is essential to the High Plains' success, as opposed to planting commercially familiar grapes that won't perform as well or compare favorably to examples from other wine regions. "I could never sell Chardonnay or Cabernet to our customers on the East Coast," McPherson says. In the Rhône tradition, he artfully balances Viognier, Roussanne, Marsanne, Picpoul Blanc, and Picardan in blends. Like Tipton at Acquiesce, he has explored them all as single varietal wines as well. "The mistral blows through the Rhône, just as it's windy in the High Plains. The grapes just work here."

McPherson's Les Copains, a white blend, includes Clairette Blanche sourced from Farmhouse Vineyards in the High Plains, where owner Katy Jane Seaton describes vineyard challenges like extreme heat, cold, and hail. "Clairette thrives in fine sandy loam soil with an undesirable water profile that's high in salt content. That alone indicates its hardiness," says Seaton. "Texas is *hot*. White Rhône's are hardy and sensible, and their productivity matches their complexity, structure, and liveliness."

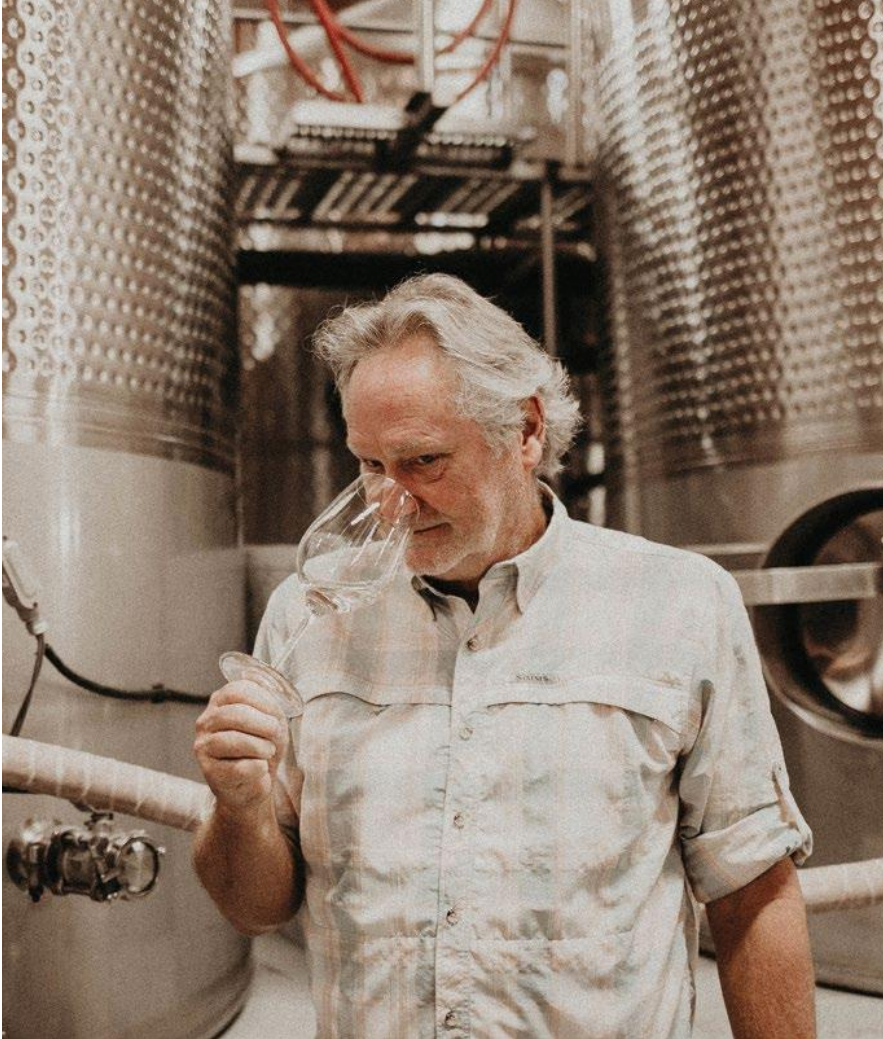
At Ab Astris Winery, winemaker Mike Nelson selected grapes for the Texas Hill Country estate

for their promise to withstand early frosts, late freezes, high winds, and drought. After a freeze in 2021, Nelson secured seven tons of estate Clairette Blanche, which he ferments and ages in a combination of neutral oak barrels and stainless steel, to accent body and mouthfeel. He has similarly experimented with fermenting and aging Picpoul Blanc, Marsanne, Roussanne, and Clairette Blanche in stainless steel, concrete, and oak vessels, discerning which will constrain "brightness and zip," and which will enhance body and texture. Nelson also recently collaborated with Elisa Christopher Wines to craft a traditional method sparkling from Clairette Blanche, an example consonant with Crémant de Die, a high-altitude Rhône Valley appellation; Nelson tastes lime, lemongrass, and minerality in the first vintage.

THESE GRAPES ARE AN EMBODIMENT OF RESILIENCE AND POSSIBILITY IN A PERIOD WHEN THE CLIMATE CAN BE INCREASINGLY UNPREDICTABLE AND EXTREME.

"The Rhône is a great example for us," says A&M's Michael Cook, connecting the white Rhône's that are currently flourishing in Texas with the Spanish and Italian varieties that did the same in the Rhône. "They hybridized naturally through millennia and are getting more hardy in relation to their environment," Cook observes. These grapes are an embodiment of resilience and possibility in a period when the climate can be increasingly unpredictable and extreme. And in the thick of hot Texas summers, Picpoul Blanc in particular is most recently emerging as a single-varietal lodestar. "It fits what Texas is all about—sitting outside in the shade drinking a glass of wine with friends, with something that's not one-dimensional," says Cook. "That's where the magic happens."

When Tipton opened Acquiesce, she had to close the winery for half the year for the first six years; her inventory would sell out completely. Now, not only are southern white Rhône's much easier to find, buyers can choose among vintages from several domestic wine regions that are in a state of evolution—willing to adapt, much like the grapes they champion. ■



Clockwise from this photo: Saviah Cellars' Stone Speak Estate Vineyard in The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater on the south side of the Walla Walla Valley AVA in Oregon; Kim McPherson of McPherson Cellars in the Texas High Plains; McPherson Cellars Clairette Blanche.

