

Sip Sip Syrah



A couple of weeks ago, it was so cold that even my dog didn't want to go outside - and he wears a permanent fur coat. So I did what any decent red-blooded wine consumer would do: I broke out the Kind of big red wines: Syrah.

Whether you say Syrah or Shiraz, nothing warms the soul quite like the dark red wine made from one of the top ten grown grape varieties in the world. Although its origin is a bit of a mystery – one legend claims that the grape is named for the famous Persian city of Shiraz while another suggests that Roman Emperor Probus brought the wine from Syracuse (thus the name syrah) a couple of centuries AD – there is no mystery as to its popularity.

Today, the Syrah grape can be found in the warm, sunny climates of California, Washington State, Chile, France, Italy, South Africa, Spain, and, of course, Australia, where it is known as Shiraz (pronounced “shee-rahz”).

On its own, syrah produces single varietal wines of remarkable distinction but it is also a great team player in legendary blends. Of course, the French wine regions of Hermitage, Côte Rôtie and Cornas are famous for their syrah wines – the best fetch over \$500 per bottle – but many enthusiasts believe that Australia – particularly McLaren Vale, Clare Valley and Barossa Valley – and California's Central Coast, have caught up with the Old World in terms of quality and “ageability”.

Regardless of what region the syrah label flies under, you can count on wines that can show power and finesse at the same time. A good friend of mine describes syrah as “an iron fist in a velvet glove.” While the characteristics can vary widely based on soil and climate, the general traits include darker fruit flavors (blackberry and plum) with notes of mocha, roasted coffee, tobacco, chocolate and, of course, black pepper. Winemaking techniques can also impart flavors of toasted oak and vanilla. I think that they are best enjoyed on cold nights with heartier fare such as beef or lamb stew, grilled steaks and game, but personally, I like to drink them all year long.

Here is list of my favorite syrahs from around the world.

From South Australia comes a wine that I am convinced is an homage to my spouse, the **2010 Tait “The Ball Buster” Shiraz**. One of the best values in shiraz with flavors of blueberry, black cherry and chocolate on the well-balanced frame. The medium-finish features rich mocha and pepper notes. \$25

Washington State is making some very interesting syrah based wines with even more interesting names, like the **2012 K Boom Boom Syrah** from Charles Smith Wines. Aromas of spicy cherry and violets fill the bouquet while flavors of blackberry, blueberry and dark cherry on the front end of the palate intergrate with notes of vanilla and spices on the smooth, well-rounded finish. A great value in a big syrah. \$20

Another domestic choice hails from the remarkable Central Coast region of California. The **2010 Stolpman Syrah** from Santa Ynez features a striking nose of black fruit, saddle leather and roasted meat is intriguing and lingering. The palate is filled with flavors of black cherry, dark plum, roasted game and smoke that glide over the tongue and onto the finish. Hints of mocha mingle with soft tannins to provide a medium-bodied finish. \$27

The country of Chile may be best known for their Carmenere, but the **2008 Oveja Negra Lost Barrel Syrah** from the Maule Valley just may have you drinking a different tune. This wine is rich and full, featuring a complex bouquet of cigar-box, lead pencil and black licorice. The well-balanced body includes concentrated flavors of blackberry, cassis, blueberry liqueur, black licorice and dark chocolate. The under-pinnings of minerals supports hints of pepper and spice on the lovely finish. \$25

Of course, no review of syrah wines would be complete without slipping in a classic syrah from France. The **2007 Chave Silene Crozes-Hermitage** from the venerable producer Domaine Jean-Louis Chave, located in the Rhone valley of France, features a bouquet filled with scents of cassis, roasted meat and black olives. The mouth-feel displays rich flavors of blackberry, cassis, black cherry and spice on the intricate palate. The long, luscious finish featured just a touch of black pepper. \$25