

NEW ZEALAND SETS SIGHTS ON SYRAH



Jason Yapp of U.K. wine merchant Yapp Bros. conducting a Rhône Syrah seminar (top) and tasting (bottom).

Syrah has become an increasingly hard sell for vintners and restaurateurs since the heady days of the Rhône Renaissance in the 1980s. That didn't stop leading members of the world's wine trade from gathering to discuss the finer points of the variety and New Zealand's position on the world scene at the triennial New Zealand Syrah Symposium, hosted by Hawke's Bay Winemakers in January.

It may come as a surprise to some American wine professionals that New Zealand has an appealing and identifiable Syrah style. British journalist Tim Atkin, MW, a speaker at both the 2007 and 2010 symposiums, reminded producers that three years ago, he had told them Syrah could "save the day in Hawke's Bay." Indeed, it combines the unmistakable peppery character of the Northern Rhône with riper, California-style blackberry fruit. The finest examples from Waiheke Island and Hawke's Bay have an elegance and a streak of acidity rarely seen in the New World. But no one seems to have taken Atkin's advice. In the past three years, New Zealand plantings of Syrah have increased by a meager 40 acres, to a total of only 726, while Sauvignon Blanc still covers more than 34,500 acres.

Syrah has the same problem as Riesling: the trade loves it, but consumers don't get it. To make things even more confusing, it has another name—Shiraz. In the United States, Syrah represents only 4% of wine sales, down nearly 8% by volume in 2009. As Evan Goldstein, MS, president of Full Circle Wine Solutions, explained at the symposium, "Consumers, even knowledgeable ones, don't really know how versatile Syrah is. There's a huge range of Syrahs and Shirazes, and people are confused." But Goldstein wasn't ready to give up on the variety: "It is one of the few grapes that can chameleon. It can be a pure wine or have a bit of Viognier, Grenache, or Mourvèdre. And it's great with comfort food because it's a bold, sincere, flavorful wine." Unlike Pinot Noir, Syrah is easily approachable. Considering its wide geographic spread, Goldstein advised producers to promote varietal wine flights, by-the-glass offers, and events such as Wine Australia's recent Shiraz masterclass.

The popularity of Australian Shiraz has waned since its boom years in the 1990s and early 2000s. At the symposium, a debate about overzealous acidification was reignited when some of the country's top Syrahs showed sour finishes. Before the conference, Andrew Jefford, a senior research fellow at the University of Adelaide, had complained to Australian producers, "Misjudged acid addition is, for me, the defining fault of the Australian wine industry, and I regret the fact that it is rarely, if ever, viewed as a fault here. I've tasted hundreds of wines that I truly feel are defaced by acidity." The criticism has apparently touched a nerve, as indicated by the discussion in Hawke's Bay.

Markus Hendrich of the Australian Wine Research Institute revealed why some cooler-climate Australian Shirazes have the same peppery characteristic as those from New Zealand and the Rhône. One drop of a compound called rotundone is powerful enough to make an Olympic-size swimming pool smell peppery. The Australian study showed that rotundone exists mainly in cooler growing regions and is also present in high levels in Graiano grapes.

Whether you call it Syrah or Shiraz, the variety has a great deal to offer sommeliers, as this symposium demonstrated. Sauvignon Blanc may fill most New Zealand wine sections today, but in the view of conference attendees, it may be time for the country's wine industry to start championing its terroir-driven, rotundone-charged Syrahs.

—Rebecca Gibb