



This article from *The World of Fine Wine* may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement. Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world's finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews, and comprehensive international auction results. For further information and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit www.worldoffinewine.com or call +44 20 3096 2606

CALIFORNIA RHÔNE A LIFE OF THEIR OWN

Peter Liem introduces a fascinating tasting, shared with Alex Hunt MW and Andrew Jefford, of varietal and blended California wines based on Syrah, Grenache, Roussanne, Marsanne, Viognier, and others that showed just how far expressions of Rhône grape varieties have come in the Golden State in the years since the “Rhône rangers” emerged in the 1980s

Rhône varieties have a storied past in California, and many readers will remember the remarkable rise of the original Rhône rangers in the 1980s and 1990s, when people such as Randall Graham of Bonny Doon Vineyards, Steve Edmunds of Edmunds St John, Bob Lindquist of Qupé, and John Buechsenstein of McDowell Valley Vineyards began drawing serious attention for their distinctive wines. By 1989, John Alban of Alban Vineyards had created, as his label proudly states, the first American winery and vineyard to be established exclusively for Rhône varieties.

A MOVEMENT TOWARD LOWER ALCOHOL LEVELS IS THEORETICALLY WELCOME... YET IN THIS TASTING SOME WINES SUFFERED FROM EARLY PICKING. HIGHER RIPENESS WOULD HAVE CONTRIBUTED MORE DEPTH AND COMPLEXITY

In the modern day, a number of producers have focused on red varieties such as Syrah and Grenache, as well as whites like Roussanne, Marsanne, and Viognier. Our tasting featured a selection of wines from various locations, and the results were notably impressive. While the best examples reflected varietal character, they also ceased at some point to reference European models, demonstrating instead something distinctive and poignant of the place where they were grown, besides simply ripe fruit. Failla's Syrah from the new Fort Ross-Seaview appellation and Lucia's Syrah from the famed Garys' Vineyard are two outstanding wines that demonstrated exceptional personality, and while both of these weigh in at more than 14% ABV, they navigate their richness superbly well. Grenache, too, showed exceptional potential, with wines from Skinner and A Tribute to Grace offering sophisticated expressions.

As with many other contemporary California wines, there has been an overall trend toward growing these varieties in cooler sites and making wines with a lower alcohol content. A movement toward lower alcohol levels is theoretically welcome following the excesses associated with the state in earlier days, yet in this tasting I felt that some wines suffered

WHILE THE BEST EXAMPLES REFLECTED VARIETAL CHARACTER, THEY ALSO CEASED AT SOME POINT TO REFERENCE EUROPEAN MODELS, DEMONSTRATING INSTEAD SOMETHING DISTINCTIVE AND POIGNANT OF THE PLACE WHERE THEY WERE GROWN

from early picking and that higher ripeness would have contributed more depth and complexity of flavor, as well as greater harmony.

Nevertheless, some of the wines were excellent: Radio-Coteau's Las Colinas, blended from several coastal vineyards, seemed to embody the essence of cool-climate California Syrah—and at just 13% ABV, it showed classic varietal notes encased in a sleek, elegant frame. An even more extreme example was Arnot-Robert's Syrah from the unusually cool Clary Ranch site, which felt expressive and complete despite clocking in at only 12% ABV.

Reds and whites can both excel

The tasting was largely reds, yet the white wines were intriguing as well, demonstrating a serious potential for these varieties when treated with care. Both the Grenache Blanc and the Roussanne from Skinner balanced a ripe depth of fruit with a lively structure that reflected their coastal origins, while Peay's Roussanne and Marsanne blend was even more reflective of a cool climate in its elegantly taut profile. We tasted two Viogniers from Calera, both of which showed the plush, forward ripeness expected of this variety in California, and these were starkly contrasted by Peay's Viognier—grown in an exceptionally cold site that's strongly influenced by the nearby Pacific Ocean, this is a deliberately atypical example of the variety, which can be polarizing for some yet rewarding for those open to its charms. White blends, too, worked very well, with examples from Skinner, Tablas Creek, and Donkey & Goat among the standouts.

Overall, it was a fascinating tasting, showcasing wines of personality and sophistication, and proving yet again that both red and white varieties have found real homes in the state. As the climate continues to warm, these should be suitably adaptable, and it's easy to see why many of these wines deserve to be recognized as Californian superstars.

AVERAGE AND RANGE OF SCORES		
	Average	Range
Tasting	87	78-95
AH	86	78-94
AJ	87	79-95
PL	89	80-92

OVERALL, THIS WAS A FASCINATING TASTING, SHOWCASING WINES OF PERSONALITY AND SOPHISTICATION AND PROVING YET AGAIN THAT BOTH RED AND WHITE VARIETIES HAVE FOUND REAL HOMES IN THE STATE. IT'S EASY TO SEE WHY MANY OF THESE WINES DESERVE TO BE RECOGNIZED AS CALIFORNIAN SUPERSTARS

PETER LIEM'S TOP WINES	
Peay 2014 Estate Viognier Sonoma Coast	92
Radio-Coteau 2014 Las Colinas Sonoma Coast Syrah	91
Skinner 2015 Grenache Blanc El Dorado	91
Peay Estate 2012 Roussanne/Marsanne Sonoma Coast	91
A Tribute to Grace Wine 2014 Grenache Besson Vineyard	91
Tablas Creek Vineyard 2014 Cotes de Tablas Adelaida District Paso Robles	91
Rhys 2013 Syrah Horseshoe Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains	91
Wind Gap Wines 2013 Wind Gap Syrah Nellesen Vineyard Sonoma Coast	91
Failla 2013 Syrah Fort Ross-Seaview	90
Skinner 2014 El Dorado Grenache	90
Pisoni 2014 Lucia Gary's Vineyard Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands	90
Skinner 2014 Seven Generations El Dorado (white blend)	90
Donkey & Goat 2015 Eliza Barsotti Vineyard (white blend) El Dorado	90
Skinner 2014 Roussanne El Dorado	90
Lagier Meredith 2011 Syrah Mount Veeder Napa Valley	90
A Tribute to Grace Wine 2014 Grenache Santa Barbara County	90
Tablas Creek Vineyard 2013 Esprit de Tablas Paso Robles	90
Pisoni 2014 Lucia Soberanes Vineyard Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands	90
Radio-Coteau 2013 Harrison Grade Sonoma Coast Syrah	90
Wind Gap Wines 2013 Wind Gap Syrah Armagh Vineyard Sonoma Coast	90
Calera 2015 Viognier Central Coast Fortieth Anniversary Vintage	90
Arnot-Roberts 2014 Syrah Clary Ranch Sonoma Coast	90

Failla 2013 Syrah Fort Ross-Seaview (14.1% ABV) | 91

AH | There's real exotic presence on the nose here, a mysterious camphor-like scent backed up by blackberry fruit. The palate is beautifully sleek yet well defined, in a very Rhône-like way. The alcohol is completely hidden; the wine feels cool and fresh, with a subtle bit of blueberry ripeness mid-palate that maybe represents the Californian influence. Promising future but delicious now. | 93
AJ | Deep, dark black-red. This wine is aromatically fascinating: peppery black fruits when you first peep inside it, then citrus blossom and tangerine-skin fragrance later. In this, it reminds me of Languedoc rather than Rhône Syrah, and why not? On the palate, it is lush, full and open, despite the firm tannins, and the fruits absolutely carry those splendid spice-and-citrus perfumes that the nose sketched out. It does, for all that, have a fresh and lively style from the quality of fruit as much as from any overt acid balance. (There is one, but it is soft and unobtrusive.) A fine, exciting effort, though I wouldn't keep it for too much longer. | 91
PL | This is silky and fragrant, its rich ripeness accented by floral undertones. It feels broad in build and forward in fruit, though it's held in check by firm tannins on the finish. | 90



Skinner 2014 El Dorado Grenache (14.8% ABV) | 91

AH | Very pale red, with attractive bright spicy/leafy notes, this is very much a new-wave style. The stated alcohol (14.8%) may seem at odds with the move toward restraint, but actually this wine is delicately balanced, a nifty bit of residual CO₂ offsetting the natural richness. There's low extraction and plenty of naturally dense raspberry/mulberry fruit—a winning combination for early drinking. Really nicely done. | 90
AJ | Clear, pale red. Sweet, lifted, refined: real grace and charm here, in admirably unforced style. Blossomy perfumes. Smooth, soft, graceful, and sweet, yet with a fine grain and multiple layers to it; texturally rich, too. Wonderfully drinkable, open-pored Grenache of silky and insinuating style. Fine strawberry, quilted and sumptuous. Utterly delicious and well done for the restraint: I adore this stunningly Burgundian Grenache. (In warmer places, Grenache is often more Burgundian than Pinot.) | 93
PL | The bright, pungent flavors of strawberry and red cherry are delicious, feeling lively and focused on the palate. A hint of raspy tannin on the finish would be ameliorated by food, and for a wine that's close to 15% ABV, this is impressively light on its feet, with a fresh, tense fruitiness and a deft harmony and poise. | 90

Tablas Creek 2014 Cotes de Tablas Blanc Adelaida District Paso Robles (Roussanne/Grenache Blanc/Picpoul de Pinet) (13.5% ABV, SC) | 90

AH | Dense and assertive on the nose, even if it's not overtly aromatic; there's a very Rhône sense of mineral-infused ripeness here. The palate frames that ripeness with just enough natural-feeling acidity and maybe even a touch of tannin, so that the whole feels well supported and composed. Understated yet powerful, with good length, this is sensitively made wine. | 90
AJ | Bright pale gold. Whipped cream and pounded aniseed: lots of quiet charm and tease. Almost as if there were some Vermentino in here. On the palate, this is graceful, creamy, soft, subtle yet accessible, full of almond appeal. Lovely weight in the mouth and a little quiet supporting acidity, too. Excellent work and admirable restraint. Lovely graceful food wine: the advance of civilization. | 91
PL | The fragrant, floral aromas are accented by intriguingly umami undertones, creating a lively tension. It's delicate and long on the palate, enlivened by a tense structure. | 89

Pisoni 2014 Lucia Gary's Vineyard Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands (14.2% ABV) | 90

AH | Appealing roasted-fruit aromas are coated in a slightly sickly layer of vanilla on the nose. The palate starts bright and assertive, with plum/mulberry fruit and a nice lick of tannin. But the vanilla sweetness drags on the finish. | 85
AJ | Saturated opaque black-red. Deep, spicy, meaty, earthy, bustling, and serious: This needs time to acquire harmony, but there is a huge amount on offer in here. It's very dense, rich, close-grained, and tightly constructed on the palate; stupendous tannins but matched by long and penetrating fruits. Rich in style, built to the true California gauge, but totally uncaricatural; it does that masterful swoop with real poise and finesse. And its allusive spectrum is very true to the inspirational seam, with sumptuous black fruits, sweet and savory notes, incense spice and fine citrus perfumes... An awesome effort here. There is ample oak, but the wine inside is so dense and long that it can carry it effortlessly. Compared to the rest of this Syrah cohort, this wine is pretty much out-of-sight better. It can be done! Bravo! | 95
PL | This is youthful and constricted, its dark, berry-like flavors feeling coiled and wound up. It's taut in structure and energetic in tone, and it feels as if it will develop in complexity and depth with a few more years of age. | 90



Lagier Meredith 2013 Mondeuse Mount Veeder Napa Valley (14.1% ABV) | 90

AH | Very deep purple, yet engagingly floral and spicy on the nose—not unlike some of the better varietal Petit Verdots. With some encouragement, a layer of ripe blueberry fruit emerges. There's plenty of tannin, and the palate structure is on the leaner side, but it's really very well put together, clean but characterful, and a lovely opportunity to experience an alternative interpretation of this rare grape variety. | 90
AJ | Very deep black-red. Hugely characterful in scent, with a great carpetbagful of spicy, peppery, dusty damsons. This'll twiddle your knobs! It's almost oppressive, but not quite; a great wine-bar by-the-glass variety-bringer. On the palate, it's a huge tannic slogger, like heroic Petite Sirah, but with fresher wild-plum flavors. It won't be to everyone's taste, and it does come across as just a little bit monotone in terms of its aromatic spectrum, but I'm enjoying the flavors a lot; the tannins are very fine and full of inner resource, and I'd love to try a glass or two of it with dinner. It seems to belong happily in its place, and it's been rendered with great sensitivity to the raw materials (nothing corrected; no fear). Super stuff. If affronting. | 91
PL | While this feels ripe in its berry-like flavors, it remains taut and fresh on the palate, its light-bodied fruit buttressed by zesty acidity and earthy tannins. It's refreshing to drink and really needs food to show its best. | 88

Skinner 2014 Seven Generations El Dorado (white blend) (13.6% ABV) | 89

AH | This slightly cloudy (presumably unfiltered) wine has appealing aromas of peach and rose petals, though it's so soft aromatically there is a resemblance to face cream. The palate is well tuned, structurally, with just enough acidity and no sign of rapid evolution. Flavor-wise, it's just a bit pappy, all layered in shades of white. | 86
AJ | Luscious glowing mid-gold. Sweet, warm, soft, full—the summer afternoon, summarized. Seeds, honey, peaches. Full and cross-hatched with those summer fruits; some textural depth; and the complexity and discretion promised by the blend. An excellent effort; you can almost hear the bees buzzing. | 92
PL | This is subtle and nuanced in aroma, needing some time in the glass to emerge. It's supple and graceful in texture, balancing all of its components well, and it persists with long, quiet length. | 90

Donkey & Goat 2015 Eliza Barsotti Vineyard (white blend) El Dorado (12.5% ABV) | 89

AH | Very golden for such a young wine, and densely aromatic with crystallized ginger, roasted peach, and orange peel—I wonder if there's some skin contact here. The palate confirms this, with a nice tannic bite to underpin the powerful apricot fruit. What's particularly interesting is the achievement of power and full varietal identity at only 12.5% ABV (assuming the label is accurate).

ALEX HUNT MW'S VERDICT

I've had the impression in the past that Rhône varieties appeal far more to California producers than California consumers, who much prefer Cabernet, and that in an attempt to appeal to said consumers, there was a tendency to style Rhône reds in the manner of Cabernet, thus supposedly increasing their appeal. These wines naturally tended to do a worse job of tasting like Cabernet than Cabernet does and so became dogged but unloved experiments that nobody wanted to buy. What a different impression this tasting gave! There were all kinds of styles and quality levels, but none of the wines could be accused of lacking character or retreating to the safe haven (and commercial quicksand) of the Bordelais vernacular. The Syrahs were peppery and brambly, the Grenaches generous and raspberry-jam-scented, the whites broad yet toothsome, the Cunoise and Mondeuse... well, just amazing to see at all, and particularly made with such care and character.

If a renewed desire to express these varieties is the root cause of such an interesting lineup, the more immediate cause is surely the moderation of ripeness. Only a couple of wines showed excess alcohol on the palate—indeed, there were more that would have benefited from slightly later picking. Most, though, found the sweet spot that favors aromatic light and shade while offering some depth of texture and ripeness of tannin. The same applies to extraction; some were heavy-handed, just as many too gentle with the skins, and some fun skin-contact white wines added interest to the overall picture. Syrah was the dominant variety in the tasting, and rightly so on this evidence, with some genuinely world-class wines of magnificent personality and precision. Throughout the tasting there were the inevitable ups and downs, but overall this struck me as a revitalized landscape crying out to be explored.

TOP WINES

- Radio-Coteau 2014 Las Colinas Sonoma Coast Syrah **94**
- Wind Gap Wines 2013 Wind Gap Syrah Armagh Vineyard Sonoma Coast **94**
- Failla 2013 Syrah Fort Ross-Seaview **93**
- Peay Estate 2012 Roussanne/Marsanne Sonoma Coast **92**
- Lagier Meredith 2011 Syrah Mount Veeder Napa Valley **92**
- Qupé 2011 Syrah Bien Nacido Hillside Estate Santa Maria Valley **92**
- Radio-Coteau 2013 Dusty Lane Sonoma Coast Syrah **91**

- Skinner 2014 El Dorado Grenache **90**
- Tablas Creek 2014 Cotes de Tablas Blanc Adelaida District Paso Robles **90**
- Lagier Meredith 2013 Mondeuse Mount Veeder Napa Valley **90**
- Donkey & Goat 2015 Eliza Barsotti Vineyard (white blend) El Dorado **90**
- Skinner 2015 Grenache Blanc El Dorado **90**
- Pisoni 2014 Lucia Susan's Hill Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands **89**
- Broc Cassia 2015 Grenache Rosé Mendocino **88**
- Arnot-Roberts 2014 Syrah Clary Ranch Sonoma Coast **88**

This "semi-orange" wine, as it turns out to be, is not subtle—in fact, it's a bit of a bruiser—but the elements are so well knit that it may well mellow with time. And if it doesn't, it's still an exciting, distinctive take on the white Rhône blend. | 90
AJ | Full gold, with a hint of haze. Richer, more honeyed, with an oxidative note, perhaps deliberate. There's lovely peachy fruit as well, though, and a little gingery spice. Perhaps a natural wine approach here, but it doesn't overly obtrude: refreshing and chewy, with some tannin on the palate, and apple acidity despite the honey and peach flavours. Well crafted and worthwhile. | 88
PL | This is slightly obscured by its oak, needing time in the glass to bring its fruit into the foreground. Its notes of apricot, Asian pear and litchi are ripe but restrained, elongated by zesty acidity and finishing with excellent length. | 90

Skinner 2014 Roussanne El Dorado (13.6% ABV) | 89

AH | This golden-colored wine certainly captures the fragility of Roussanne, with apricot-kernel

aromas already taking on notes of straw and biscuits. The balance between acid, alcohol, and fruit is good, but there's a lack of energy to the flavor that translates to a fatiguing experience for the drinker. | 84
AJ | Mid-gold; bright and glinting. Fresh, light; scents of hay and citrus pith: attractive and true enough to variety, given the different location. Full, soft, lots of sweet seed flavors; ample glycerol; subtle, mouth-filling and intriguing. Perfumed right the way through the mouth, too—hay and meadow flowers. An excellent translation of a Rhône original. Beautifully soft, sumptuous, and seamless. | 93
PL | This is waxy and fragrant, showing a full-bodied ripeness while balancing its richness well. Its flavors of pear, guava, and melon are lively and clean, complemented by a suave texture. | 90

Radio-Coteau 2014 Las Colinas Sonoma Coast Syrah (13% ABV) | 89

AH | This is a marvelous nose, immediately and quintessentially Syrah. Smoke, black pepper,

bacon, grilled bell peppers, bramble, it's pretty much all there. The palate wears its density lightly; it's poised and fresh, with nicely judged acidity, yet the fine tannic power and fruit concentration is there in reserve. A wine that should certainly develop well in bottle, and a lovely example of classically proportioned Syrah. | 94
AJ | Dark black-red, but in general a lighter wine than most of its peers. Sweet yet dry and a little aromatically monotone. Simple and a bit kerosene in style; well off the pace of the best of its peers. | 82
PL | This is fragrant and perfumed, feeling elegant in demeanor yet dark and meaty in tone. It's harmonious and lithe, persisting with excellent length. | 91

Skinner 2015 Grenache Blanc El Dorado (13.2% ABV) | 89

AH | Lovely, broad, evocative nose of ripe stone-fruit, flowers, and hay. Although aromatically more restrained than a Viognier of comparable ripeness, it's very much in the same sort of key. The palate is bright and taut, with perky acidity framing the fruit, and moderate alcohol ensuring it's not too flabby. | 90
AJ | Bright mid-gold. Sweet, soft, crushed seeds: graceful and insinuating aromas, exactly what you expect from Grenache Blanc. Soft, mellow, with both vegetal and fruit flavors: marrow and apple. Perhaps the acidity has been corrected up a bit, or maybe it was an earlier pick. There's a slight heaviness about the palate, but I think it would be a good and amenable food wine, and it's a sincere attempt to make headway with this intriguing and surely site-adapted variety. | 85
PL | This is clean and fresh, its floral flavors of stone fruit and exotic citrus feeling lively and poised. It shows ripeness and depth without excess weight, maintaining a harmonious balance throughout the finish. | 91

Peay Estate 2012 Roussanne/Marsanne Sonoma Coast (12.6% ABV) | 89

AH | Green-gold in color, slightly cloudy, and with a complex green apricot/walnut sort of nose, this is fairly groovy, left-field stuff. The palate seems to add some oak influence to the mix, and this adds structure and support for the savory development of the flavor. There's a spicy-smoky note that suggests a more reductive (qua cult Meursault) *élevage* and a really well-knit, sinuous sort of texture. | 92
AJ | Bright gold; very slightly opaque. This seems a little reductive on the nose, though if you shake it about a bit, then the summer fruits emerge, blinking. I'd advise decanting. It never completely escapes from that slightly rubbery-reductive frame, however; not a completely successful aromatic profile. Rather hard on the palate compared to the best of its peers, lacking a little allusive charm. | 83
PL | This is initially reductive and taut, needing lots of air to express itself. It's fuller in fragrance on both the nose and the palate than one might expect from just 12.6% ABV, and its texture

feels supple and sophisticated, contributing to the overall feeling of finesse and poise. It feels remarkably youthful, and while the aromas are a little restricted on the finish, I expect that this will show more length and depth with time. | **91**

Broc 2014 Eagle Point Ranch Cunoise Mendocino (13% ABV) | **89**

AH | Nice pale cherry red and bright cranberry fruit here, but there's also a dustier, more raisined note underneath. Some of these grapes seem to have got too hot. The palate favors the fresher side, I'm glad to say, with a nice blend of dried cranberry fruit and a soft-vegetal, mulchier component. It's more appealing than it sounds, and I'm delighted to see a varietal Cunoise being made—why not?! | **87**

AJ | Clear deep scarlet. Cunoise is one of the peppery seasonings in most Châteauneuf-du-Pape blends, and this has that peppery, spicy profile in abundance. Light, quite grippy, spicy, bright, and characterful, with redcurrant and cranberry fruits combined with a saucisson-like meaty spiciness, this is a fine effort at translating an unusual Southern French grape to the golden hills. Well worth a look. A little bit biting at the end, but then it would be in Avignon, too. | **90**

PL | This is lively and fresh in feel, with brambly notes of cherry and redcurrant. It remains taut and high-toned throughout the palate, thriving on its energetic structure and purity of fruit flavor. | **89**

Pisoni 2014 Lucia Susan's Hill Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands (14.3% ABV) | **89**

AH | Dark, brooding nose; closed but quite promising. The palate is neat and nicely fleshy up-front, before tightening up to tannin and rock flavors on the finish. Barely approachable now, this should be refined and interesting in a few years' time. | **89**

AJ | Saturated black-purple; opaque. A touch reductive when first assayed; broodingly good. Needs decanting if drunk young; better still, time. Rich, deep, spicy, lush, and exuberant on the palate, with plenty of smoky-lively Rhône character in a slightly raw and rasping style. Very good wine but not quite sumptuous enough all the way through to be great. | **88**

PL | The flavors of boysenberry and marionberry are exuberant and ripe, with a juicy depth and vibrant presence. They're supported by a firm structure, providing length and liveliness on the finish. | **89**

Lagier Meredith 2011 Syrah Mount Veeder Napa Valley (13.7% ABV) | **89**

AH | Lots of blackcurrant linctus character on the nose here, and a certain medicinal bitterness that actually sits well on the palate. There's a background note of pepper that is very Syrah, as is the finesse to the tannin and the layering of fruit. Good stuff, aging nicely. | **92**

AJ | Dark black-red. Sweetly and frankly jammy on the nose. Sturdy and well constituted on the palate, but there is no freshness or vividness of fruit, and

LIVELY AND VIVID, PROBABLY THE FRESHEST OF OUR GRENACHE COHORT: AMPLE SOFT CHERRY WITH A MILK-CHOCOLATE FINISH. HOW COULD ANYONE NOT ENJOY SIPPING THIS? IT HAS SOME NUANCE AND STONY FINESSE TO CARRY YOU THROUGH THE BOTTLE. THESE GREAT GRENACHES ARE SO SOFT AND SMOOTH

it is held together by its base sturdiness and some grippy tannins. Even the jamminess disappears on the palate, strangely enough. A decent chunky red but the inspiration is missing. | **84**

PL | This is fragrant and perfumed, with notes of litchi and pear accenting the fruit flavors of berry and cherry. It's tannic and firm on the finish. | **90**

Broc Cassia 2015 Grenache Rosé Mendocino (12% ABV) | **88**

AH | Very pretty pale Provençal pink—bang on trend. And the nose is equally seductive, very delicate yet with more depth than expected. The palate shows a little bit of development: Come publication, the 2016 will surely be the wine to buy. But the quality of the fruit is not in doubt, with its persistent raspberry/strawberry flavor, and natural weight at lower alcohol. | **88**

AJ | This has the true Provençal pale and melancholy pink, so it looks good. Stealthy, peachy scents, and a light, graceful, peachy palate. Not overly concentrated, but it doesn't need to be since drinkability is all; soft, subtle, supportive but not assertive acidity, and some closing, structuring vinosity. Blush Zin is forgotten! Another ringing success. | **89**

PL | Pale in color, this is quiet on the nose yet fragrant and forward on the palate, showing juicy notes of red fruit. It's light and taut, with a delicate body and kinetic structure. | **88**

A Tribute to Grace Wine 2014 Grenache Santa Barbara County (14% ABV) | **88**

AH | Translucent color, opaque nose. There's a lovely texture to the palate, which is round and supple even if lifted by a tiny touch of residual CO₂, but the flavor is mainly lacking. There's a bit of rather unappealing mousiness but not much fruit to enjoy. | **82**

AJ | Clear red. Sweet, fresh, and lively, with

some lifted cherry fruits realized with lots of airy grace. Lively and vivid, probably the freshest of our Grenache cohort: ample soft cherry with a milk-chocolate finish. How could anyone not enjoy sipping this? At the same time, it has some nuance and stony finesse to carry you through the bottle. These great Grenaches are so soft and smooth and seamless that they are easy to underestimate. This is another truly fine Grenache effort. | **93**

PL | This combines a juicy ripeness with a savory earthiness and firm tannin, finishing with fresh, delicate aromas and quiet length. It feels concentrated in its red-fruit ripeness without needing weight, showing an impressive harmony. | **90**

A Tribute to Grace Wine 2014 Grenache Santa Barbara Highlands Vineyard (14.5% ABV) | **88**

AH | I'm all for paler red wines, but this dilute, wide-rimmed tawny is (given its youth) in danger of pushing its luck! Aromatically it's indifferent, with a pleasant mineral-ripe impression, but all very vague. The balance is absolutely fine, but in a way the wine is so evanescent that's hardly surprising. There is a degree of mid-palate density, to be fair, but I think the under-extraction has probably gone a bit too far here. | **84**

AJ | Very pale strawberry red. Strawberry aromas, with just a little balsamic note behind. Vivid, fresh, lively, and juicy; ample, soft tannins; and sweet, beguiling fruits. Another disarmingly lovely Grenache with true subtlety and grace to it. There is real seriousness behind it, too, in the quality of the tannins and the layered fruit notes. Again, as with [the Skinner Grenache El Dorado 2014], the overall effect is Burgundian, though the scents and flavors are very different. | **92**

PL | Fragrant and red in tone, this is ripe in flavor while remaining relatively light in body and tense in structure. While it shows a little heat on both the nose and palate, it's well balanced overall, finishing with fresh acidity and persistent length. | **89**

Tablas Creek Vineyard 2013 Esprit de Tablas Paso Robles (Mourvèdre/Syrah/Grenache/Cunoise) (13.5% ABV) | **88**

AH | There's very little to get a handle on here, aromatically. The proportion of the palate is nice, quite slender and precise, with a natural freshness. But there's not a whole lot of flavor or complexity. | **84**

AJ | Deep, clear black-red. A spicier, earthier mix than many of its red blended peers: carefully crafted, refined, and appetizing. This is a graceful and charming wine on the palate: complex, refined flavors; moderate levels of concentration; firm supporting tannins. So urbane and carefully crafted that one risks underestimating it, but it would drink superbly well and has all of the generous flavor appeal which the Rhône ideal promises. | **91**

PL | The ripe flavors of blackberry, cassis, and black cherry are jammy and brambly, feeling fresh and lively on the palate. They're complemented

by a supple texture and kinetic structure, finishing with fine length. | **90**

Pisoni 2014 Lucia Soberanes Vineyard Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands (14.1% ABV) | **88**

AH | This wine is playing away from the fruit, aromatically, with rocky and vegetable notes to the fore. The structure is poised, mid-weight, with appropriately fine-grained tannin. The wine might be going through a slightly reductive phase, but it appears on the austere side at this point. | **86**

AJ | Saturated deep purple-red; opaque. Gruff, with some peppery green tones in here. Very deep on the palate, with lots to kick into and enjoy; firm backing tannins; a mouth-filling style. To me it is just a little bit cool and green, which is a puzzle—perhaps some deliberate mixed ripeness? Excellent Syrah fruit, anyway, full of the moist coal and coal-dust character of its septentrional incarnation; plenty of oak; and then a cool green freshness and copsiness to the style that some may like, but it doesn't quite do it for me. Much better ripeness than the green meanies among the Syrah cohort, though. | **89**

PL | This is concentrated in tone, showing dark, vibrant flavors of blackberry and black cherry. It's fragrant on the finish, with a firm depth of fruit and slightly grainy tannins, and it feels harmonious and expressive. | **90**



Skinner 2013 Syrah El Dorado (14.2% ABV) | **88**

AH | Wow—nothing to do with Syrah and everything to do with Christmas on the nose: cinnamon, allspice, nutmeg, and orange peel. It's a lovely aroma, which continues onto the palate, but the fact that the palate is dry (as it should be) sits uneasily with all those sweet-associated flavors. The overall effect is oddly austere, through power of expectation, and a lack of actual fruit flavor. | **86**

AJ | Dark black-red. At last, as with [the Failla Syrah Fort Ross-Seaview 2013], we find in this wine some of the exotic citrus-grove scents that Syrah acquires in Languedoc and that are such an attractive contrast to the classic Rhône aromatic incarnations. This is much sweeter, more straightforward but also more beguiling than [the Failla Syrah], a scent of immediate charm. On the palate, it is a relatively simple, sweet-fruited, but perfumed wine with low acidity and some soft tannic support. A delicious bottle for short term drinking. | **89**

PL | Juicy and full in body, this is ripe and straightforward, with a bold presence on the palate. | **89**

La Clarine Farm 2014 Somerset Syrah Sumu Kaw (14.3% ABV; SC) | **88**

AH | Immediately aromatic and engaging, this nose is super-ripe and tending toward confectionary and liqueur notes that are a bit too heady. The palate shows some herbal, whole-bunch characters that should rein things in, but it's not enough—the overall effect is oddly medicinal, and the structure remains on the loose side. A flamboyant effort but not one that hangs together for me. | **82**

AJ | Deep, dark black-red. A super Syrah nose, with vivid black-fruit depths but also a classic smoky tone, too: somewhere between Crozes and Cornas, with the throttle fully open. Exuberant and characterful on the palate, and it does exactly what the nose promises: unleashes a great rip of cascadingly curranty, smoky, super Syrah fruit. Just the thing itself, delivered with compelling generosity and unabashed style. Attababy! | **92**

PL | While this is ripe and full in body, it tethers its berry-like flavors and exuberant juiciness with hints of tobacco and exotic spice. It's lively and fragrant on the finish, persisting with fruity aromas. | **89**

Radio-Coteau 2013 Dusty Lane Sonoma Coast Syrah (14.2% ABV) | **88**

AH | Gently milky/chocolaty nose on first sniff, but some more vigorous brambly notes beneath. And happily it's the brambles that define the palate! This is sleek, approachable Syrah that still has definition, poise, and a certain sternness on the palate. Refreshing and promising. | **91**

AJ | Deep black-red. Sweet and warm, with some coffee notes but also some rawness and a touch of rubber. Pungent and lively, but those coffee-rubber notes remind me a little of some South African Syrah wines. It's satisfying, sweet, and long on the palate, but better aromatic finesse is a desideratum for future vintages. | **84**

PL | This is dark and juicy, though it feels slightly one-dimensional on the palate. | **88**

Radio-Coteau 2013 Harrison Grade Sonoma Coast Syrah (14.2% ABV) | **88**

AH | Rather soupy, oxidative nose, albeit flecked with green. And the palate feels very cool and fresh. This is an odd one. There's good blueberry length and high-class fruit density. But the finish is slightly flat and tired already. One to review in future. | **86**

AJ | Dark black-red; still opaque. Sweet and rather stewy; forthcoming but not enticing. Deep, sweet, dense, and full on the palate: an impressive wine here with ample ripeness and a multilayered style; firm supporting tannins, too. Substantial and rich Southern Rhône style that is only held back a little by its rather muddled aromatic profile. | **87**

PL | Ripe and plush, this accents its dark fruit flavors with a *garrigue*-like herbaceousness, feeling harmonious and inviting. It's backed by soft tannins, and it persists with deep aromas. | **90**

Wind Gap Wines 2013 Wind Gap Syrah Armagh Vineyard Sonoma Coast (12.9% ABV) | **88**

AH | On the nose, this has the arresting, devil-may-care vegetal exuberance of old-school Cornas. In the mouth, it's focused and slender but not too lean, and there's a degree of underextraction that, in light of the slightly austere flavors, is a clever touch that absolutely works. There is plenty of depth and grip, and no more color or tannin than is necessary. Bold winemaking with a neat result—and quintessentially Syrah. | **94**

AJ | Clear black-red. Another very cool and herbaceous effort on both nose and palate, alas. | **79**

PL | This is dark in tone and expansive in fragrance, its ripe fruit feeling floral and quietly assertive. | **90**

Calera 2015 Viognier Central Coast Fortieth Anniversary (13.9% ABV) | **87**

AH | Not gushingly aromatic as some can be, and despite its youth, this Viognier favors a sort of lushly savory style over out-and-out fruit. The alcohol does poke through, though the palate is lithe and fresh enough otherwise. But without either exuberant apricots or real musky mystery, it's rather one-note. | **85**

AJ | Bright gold. Sweet and candied scents. Attractive, though less of the apricot and more mango/papaya than home on the Rhône. A clear cut above most IGP Viognier, however. Soft, full, frankly sweet-edged, but with some of the exoticism this variety name promises. The finish is a little driving and rugged; I think the ideal is a luscious meltaway. But good Viognier, certainly, and a California white that seems in harmony with its growing conditions. | **87**

PL | Creamy and ripe, this shows bold, waxy flavors of pear and quince, and while it feels full and extroverted, it balances its weight and alcohol well, maintaining a lively harmony throughout the fragrant finish. | **90**

Skinner 2014 Mourvèdre El Dorado (14.1% ABV) | **87**

AH | This nose is rather reduced and stinky, without revealing much other character. While there's a nice balance of flesh, tannin, and acidity in the mouth, the flavor just isn't there. This feels like a blending component more than a complete wine. | **83**

AJ | Deep, clear black-red. Ripe blackberries and dusty plums; earthy; some game fur: very creditable and on-target. Attractive, enticing scents. Warm, rich, earthy, subtle, and expansive, once again with lots of lush bramble and plum. Texturally ample; and beautifully unstrained in its articulation; glidingly open and resonant. Fine Mourvèdre and a delicious red wine from California. | **91**

PL | Rich and round, this pairs its full flavors of berry and cherry with a creamy, vanilla-like oak, feeling lavish and forward on the palate. It's balanced by taut acidity, and its aromas persist on the finish with sappy length. | **88**

Peay 2014 Les Titans Estate Syrah Sonoma Coast (13% ABV) | 87

AH | Closed on the nose, with a bit of red fruit and mineral. The palate is much livelier, really quite spicy but not in a typical black-pepper way—more Victorian sweets, or slightly camphory. Still, it's a bit small-scale and simple. At 13%, this is a lower-alcohol style, but I'm not sure it has yet worked out how to retain intensity and depth at this more moderate level of ripeness. | 85

AJ | Saturated deep red-black. Sweet and warm, but rather soft-focus and undifferentiated. Mellow, soft, chewy; lots of texture and depth, but the core of fruit hasn't, for whatever reason, quite made it to the party; so you have all that shell to bite your way through, and then there isn't the central-palate glow to reward you when you get there. But this is still very good wine that I'd be happy to drink, and it doesn't have the green tones that spoil the appeal of its less ripe peers. | 88

PL | This is restrained and reticent, showing a bold ripeness and a dark, juicy fruitiness while remaining wrapped up in its structure. It's quiet and tense, needing plenty of air to bring out the flavors on the palate. | 89

Peay 2014 La Bruma Estate Syrah Sonoma Coast (13% ABV) | 87

AH | Closed, light, simple; a slightly peppery, crisp rendition of Syrah that is correct in every way save capturing the depth and nobility of which the variety is capable. There's some mid-palate density, and the overall balance is appealing, but this feels very much like first base. | 86

AJ | Dark black-red. Fresh and lively; some snipped privet tones but matched by cool, vivid black fruits and sheeny oak. Lively, vivid, livid: another deep Syrah that seems to me to have been picked a little on the early side, so that you get all the carapace but the warm, ripe fruit isn't quite there to carry it. Are we all trying too hard to be Northern Rhône in style? Or is this a reflection of a genuinely cool site where this is the result when harvested in mid- to late September? Anyway, the result is a fresh, lively, cool-dude wine, albeit very slightly green and hollow. | 88

PL | This is ripe and sappy in depth, and while its flavors are appealing, they finish somewhat short and restrained. It keeps me interested while leaving me wanting more. | 88

Qupé 2013 Marsanne (75% Marsanne, 25% Roussanne) Santa Barbara County (12.5% ABV) | 87

AH | A very peculiar nose here: lime chutney and lavender. Strikingly aromatic but also a bit flat and woolly, like a Riesling costume that has frayed and sagged over time. The palate follows suit, speaking broken Alsacienne rather than any dialect of the Rhône. The structure is lean, the flavor citrusy, but there's a lack of precision and real aromatic freshness. | 82

AJ | Bright steel gold. Lively, forthcoming aromas of chilled cream and pounded hazels and almonds; sweet, fresh, and enticing. Best meadow flowers of all the flight, too; this would smell good in a

flight of white Hermitage. Vivid and lively blend with some textural depths and exactly the aroma and flavor spectrum the scent of the wine held in promise; super-drinkable in style. Delicious and again very true to the Rhône ideal. An outstanding effort. | 92

PL | This is quiet and reductive, and its orchard-fruit flavors feel a little constrained, accented by hints of green, sweet-herb notes. While this is pleasant, it makes me wonder if it would have benefited from later picking: I appreciate low-alcohol wines, but was this sufficiently developed at 12.5%? | 87

**A Tribute to Grace Wine 2014 Grenache Besson Vineyard** (14% ABV) | 87

AH | The color is clear, but the nose is a little inky/tarry for now. The palate, by contrast, is surprisingly vegetal—not that that is a problem in itself, but there's an underlying souniness that suggests this is evolving quickly. Not much lift to the flavor for such a young wine; the future doesn't seem all that bright. | 81

AJ | Deep, clear red. Lots of pure red fruits on the nose, with a very slight rubbery cast. Better on the palate: clean plum/strawberry backed by supple tannins in a soft, engaging, kick-back-and-enjoy style. | 88

PL | This is supple and tense, its red-fruit flavors feeling ripe and expressive yet suspended within a taut and lively structure. It feels light in body despite its 14% ABV, and it finishes with delicately fragrant length. | 91

Tablas Creek Vineyard 2014 Cotes de Tablas Adelaida District Paso Robles (Grenache/Syrah/Counoise/Mourvèdre) (15% ABV) | 87

AH | The first impression is of pure ripe summer-berry fruit—then the alcohol and a sweet/sour bourbon touch follow on the nose. The palate is fairly tannic yet remains loose, thanks to the high alcohol, low-density fruit, and heady aromas coming through. It's a nice enough drink but lacks the definition and poise to be fine or refreshing. | 83

AJ | Deep but clear black-red. Sweet, soft cushion of cherry and plum, with some incense and animal fur behind. Open and spice-fruited, with ample tannins. A wine of merit, but the slightly strange aromatic profile just holds it back from a high score. | 86

PL | Dark and juicy, this is intense in flavor without

being overly rich, its dark flavors of boysenberry and plum accented by hints of dried porcini mushrooms, game, and exotic spice. It finishes with an elegant fragrance and subtle length, navigating its ripeness well. | 91

Qupé 2011 Syrah Bien Nacido Hillside Estate Santa Maria Valley (13.5% ABV) | 87

AH | This is a very high-class nose, with gorgeous berry fruit, expensive new oak, and real layered depth. On the downside, it's not particularly Syrah—if anything, the red-fruit character combined with the oak spice give it a rather Côte de Nuits demeanor. But the sheer quality (harmony, length, complexity, and so on) is certainly premier cru level, so I must conclude it's a really excellent, if atypical, wine. | 92

AJ | Clear deep black-red. Sharpish VA-edged red-fruit notes, a little bit raw and livid in style; unenticing. Coffeish oak. Dry and hard on the palate, with hollow fruits. Not a success for me. | 79

PL | This is fragrant and coffee-like in tone, balancing its ripe flavors with a delicate body and structure. It's lively and long on the finish. | 89

Peay 2014 Estate Viognier Sonoma Coast (13.4% ABV) | 86

AH | It's there, but you have to go searching for the stone-fruit aroma in this Viognier, buried under something greener and more abrasive (sulfur?). So limey on the palate you could think it was a Clare Riesling that had let itself go. This is an odd and not entirely successful wine. | 84

AJ | Steel gold. Aromatically, this is the least successful of the three varietal Viogniers: a little bit earthy and charmless. On the palate, it is also the most acidic and least full-throated, which (unless it is grown in a very cool place) suggests some ambivalence about the luscious, unapologetically ripe Viognier ideal. It's a drinkable wine nonetheless—but will it satisfy those on a Viognier quest? | 83

PL | While this starts off reticent and a little reductive, it unfolds in the glass with a subtle, quiet detail, feeling confident and unhurried. It's not typically varietal, showing cool fruit notes and lively acidity, yet it's highly individual in personality, and it carries itself with an elegant refinement and grace. It would certainly feel at home alongside equally refined cuisine. | 92

Rhys 2013 Syrah Horseshoe Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains (13.5% ABV) | 86

AH | A varietally vague, flat, and milk-chocolate/malty nose. There's some attractive fruit on the palate but too little of it, given the combined pressure of the malty sweetness and the rather chalky tannin. | 82

AJ | Dark, just opaque black-red. Rather a sweet, popcorn-style aroma that is neither varietal nor particularly alluring. Deep and vivid on the palate but lacking the warmth and drive of ripe fruit. On the palate, though, it is a more subtle wine than

the aromas suggested, and it isn't thin and grassy, despite the 13%. Was it riper, and has it been put through the cone? I don't know—but to conclude, it is a good wine that I would enjoy drinking, but I can't give a high score since it lacks satisfying ripeness and aromatic finesse. | 86

PL | Smoky and assertive, this combines a rich depth of fruit with a focused structure, feeling both luscious and vibrant. It's bold and heady in its ripeness, but balanced well. | 91

Bonny Doon 2015 Popelouchum Vineyard Estate Grenache San Benito County (13.9% ABV; SC) | 86

AH | Clear-colored, fruit-forward, youthful, but also rather heady, this Grenache feels like it could have done with longer *élevage* to settle down. Perhaps this composure will emerge in bottle, but for now it's too light and juicy-jammy to hide the alcohol, lacking some structure and definition. | 84

AJ | Clear, pale red. Very slightly toffeeed; with some plum fruits behind. A simple charm here. Soft, sweet, open; also a touch toffeeed. Attractive wine in a gentle, unintimidating style. | 85

PL | Taut in structure and light in body, this shows bright notes of red fruit complicated by savory, Marmite-like flavors. While it doesn't feel entirely complete on the palate, it's intriguing for its individuality, and it keeps you coming back for more. | 89

**Lagier Meredith 2013 Syrah Mount Veeder Napa Valley** (14.5% ABV) | 86

AH | This nose is burly and thick-set, with heady jam and medicinal notes. The palate has some freshness still but not a lot of definition. It's a bit vague and non-varietal—more loose, generic Rhône style than specifically Syrah. | 85

AJ | Deep, dark black-red. Rather earthy and farmy, and sweet with it, lacking a little purity and finesse. A little bit heavy and stewy on the palate, though I'm grateful for the ripeness and would enjoy drinking this wine in the short term. | 84

PL | Bold and luscious in its ripeness, this is delicious without being very long or complex. | 89

Calera 2014 Viognier Mt Harlan (14.2% ABV) | 86

AH | Very dumb, vaguely peachy nose. The palate seems rather stretched, with surprising acidity for the breadth, but an oxidative, dusty sag to the flavor. A muted, hollow varietal expression. | 81

ANDREW JEFFORD'S VERDICT

What a fascinating tasting! So many heights attained, so many depths plumbed! Let's take each category in turn.

The whites were, in general, much better than I expected, with four truly outstanding wines. Let's be clear: This is a category where conditions are absolutely right for California to excel, so what is required is sincere study of the masters, then trust in the vineyards to provide the raw materials to open up the possibilities for excellence. Those four fine wines show (for me) that it can be done. The wines are sumptuous, subtle, and food-friendly—perfect for restaurants. Three were blends, and one was a Roussanne; there seems to be some nervousness surrounding Viognier, and nothing we looked at in this tasting hit the heights. But I still feel it should be possible somewhere or other. These varieties work very well when blended, as our top wines suggested.

Our "lesser red varieties" section was entertaining, and there were some hits. What a shame we only had a chance to look at one ripe Mourvèdre. Grenache in general was superb—though I am guessing it is unfashionable. As so often, this is the true Pinot of the warm places, and I was hugely impressed by the unhysterical, raw-material-respecting approach of the three wines I marked most highly. The variety is obviously very content here; perhaps the wines we tasted were based

on old-vine material. We probably didn't see enough red blends to draw sound conclusions, but for me there was at least one outstanding example, and with time there should be more. (See the comments about whites above; the same holds true for reds.)

Then we came to Syrah—and all the problems began. There was (for me) one very great wine (Pisoni 2014 Lucia Gary's Vineyard Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands), which shows that great Syrah can be made here, and another artless and exuberant wine (La Clarine Farm 2014 Somerset Syrah Sumu Kaw), which also shows that there are places where the variety is very happy and feels at home. But after that, there was so much muddle and confusion and so much that was troubled and lamentable. I am completely at a loss to understand why so many people want to make 13% ABV or 12% ABV Syrah in California—unless they are choosing super-cool environments where it isn't going to flourish anyway. So many of the wines we looked at were marred by herbaceous, green tones and a muddled, troubled sense of ripeness. Others were ripe but marred by vulgar oak. One or two had the exotic citrus notes of Languedoc Syrah, and those boded well, too. But for me, Pisoni 2014 Lucia Gary's Vineyard Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands was a long way ahead of a generally disappointing field.

TOP WINES

Pisoni 2014 Lucia Gary's Vineyard Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands **95**

Skinner 2014 El Dorado Grenache **93**

Skinner 2014 Roussanne El Dorado **93**

A Tribute to Grace Wine 2014 Grenache Santa Barbara County **93**

Skinner 2014 Seven Generations El Dorado (white blend) **92**

A Tribute to Grace Wine 2014 Grenache Santa Barbara Highlands Vineyard **92**

La Clarine Farm 2014 Somerset Syrah Sumu Kaw **92**

Qupé 2013 Marsanne (75% Marsanne, 25% Roussanne) Santa Barbara County **92**

Failla 2013 Syrah Fort Ross-Seaview **91**

Tablas Creek 2014 Cotes de Tablas Blanc Adelaida District Paso Robles **91**

Lagier Meredith 2013 Mondeuse Mount Veeder Napa Valley **91**

Tablas Creek Vineyard 2013 Esprit de Tablas Paso Robles **91**

Skinner 2014 Mourvèdre El Dorado **91**

Broc 2014 Eagle Point Ranch Counoise Mendocino **90**

Broc Cassia 2015 Grenache Rosé Mendocino **89**

Pisoni 2014 Lucia Soberanes Vineyard Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands **89**

Skinner 2013 Syrah El Dorado **89**

Donkey & Goat 2015 Eliza Barsotti Vineyard (white blend) El Dorado **88**

Pisoni 2014 Lucia Susan's Hill Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands **88**

Peay 2014 Les Titans Estate Syrah Sonoma Coast **88**

Peay 2014 La Bruma Estate Syrah Sonoma Coast **88**

A Tribute to Grace Wine 2014 Grenache Besson Vineyard **88**

Calera 2014 Viognier Mt Harlan **88**

AJ | Bright steel gold. This has great charm: a fountain of Chantilly cream and blossom flowers, with some quieter orchard fruit beneath. Rich and full on the palate, with plenty more cream for that luxurious textural experience. Flavor-wise, we're in the right zone for the orange and yellow summer fruits, though, as with [Calera Viognier Central Coast Fortieth Anniversary Vintage 2015], these come across as a little sinewy and perhaps a little warm. Enjoyable and true to its origins, though. | **88**

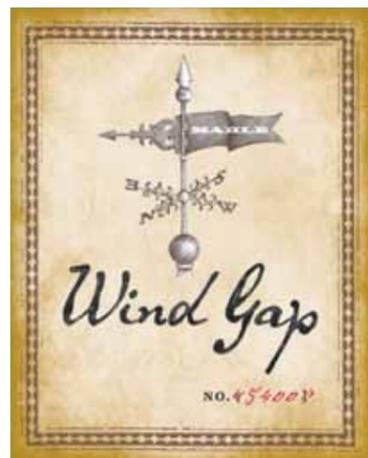
PL | This is biscuity and broad, its notes of Asian pear and citrus enveloped in creamy notes of oak. It's well integrated, needing a little time in bottle to develop more complexity and depth, and it finishes with focused, fragrant length. | **88**

Wind Gap Wines 2012 Wind Gap Old Wine Grenache Sonoma County (13.5% ABV) | **86**

AH | This slightly older Grenache is showing a lot of dusty evolution, and the underlying fruit seems jammy on the nose. The palate is much more appealing, with a warm-strawberry fruit character, quite a lot of tannin but an overall softness due to the age. It's rather old-school and delicate. A bit of an oddity. | **85**

AJ | Clear, translucent scarlet. Sweet, warm, honeyed strawberry fruits. On the palate, though, this is a little bit acidic and cross-grained, a touch raw and ungrateful, without the serene mellow qualities of the finest of its peers. | **83**

PL | Taut and fresh, this feels vibrant in its red-fruit flavors, enlivened by bright acidity. It persists on the finish with lively, fragrant length, if not a lot of complexity. | **89**



Arnot-Roberts 2014 Syrah Clary Ranch Sonoma Coast (12% ABV) | **86**

AH | This nose may be a little closed at first but has plenty of Syrah notes hidden in there: smoke, bacon, black pepper. At 12%, it's light but not scrawny or green. With a certain St-Joseph-like density and honesty, this is a pretty convincing rendition of a lighter, fresher style. | **88**

AJ | Deep but not opaque black-red. Frankly herbaceous nose: unappealing. Grassy, acidic palate: I couldn't drink this with any pleasure, alas. | **79**

PL | This is soft and fragrant, its ripe berry fruit complicated by meaty undertones. It feels tense and lively on the finish, with pungent aroma. | **90**



Wind Gap Wines 2013 Wind Gap Syrah Nellessen Vineyard Sonoma Coast (11.9% ABV) | **86**

AH | There's a nice smoky character on the nose here that is very evocative of Syrah. The palate is a bit lean and pinched. There's a possibility of low-level TCA, but we have no second bottle to compare so must take it at face value. | **82**

AJ | Deep, dark black-red. Inky-sweet and spicy scents; not unattractive but a bit raw, high-toned, and, we think, TCA-scalped. Dense, vivid, and full on the palate, but there are some green tones in here. On the basis that it isn't a good bottle, the score should really be NS, but I am giving what I might have given it without the scalping. | **84**

PL | This is dark and concentrated in flavor, complementing its fruit with gamy, meaty undertones. | **91**

Tablas Creek Vineyard 2013 Esprit Blanc de Tablas Paso Robles (Viognier/Grenache Blanc/Marsanne/Roussanne) (13% ABV) | **85**

AH | Very tropical-fruity on the nose, with all sorts of mango, guava, and mandarin going on. Soft in the mouth but with decent freshness. It's simpler than the nose implied, but well made and very Rhône. | **87**

AJ | Full bright gold. A slight cardboard note—let's try a second bottle. Bottle 2 also seems very reserved to me, with a little white blossom and white-fleshed fruit. I will give it five minutes. Brighter, fresher fruit at the end of all of that, but rather shy alongside some of its peers. Soft, lively, gentle, honeyed, and pleasing on the palate, but just a little bit irresolute. This is carping—still a lovely glass of relaxed, open-pored white. | **80**

PL | While this is a bit closed on the nose, it's more fragrant on the palate, showing waxy, textured notes of pear, guava, and quince. It remains quite constricted in structure, feeling harmonious yet reticent on the finish. | **88**

Bonny Doon 2013 Le Cigare Blanc Réserve (Roussanne/Grenache Blanc/Picpoul B) (14.1% ABV; SC) | **85**

AH | Rather flat and honeyed, with low acid

and a hot finish, this wine has tipped gently into overripeness. | **81**

AJ | Pale to mid-gold. Grapey, vinous, firm, and fresh, with sweet and sappy though softly defined fruits. A little hazel, too. Impressionist but pleasing aromas. There is also, to be fair, a touch of reduction. Soft palate, but almost to excess, with a slightly gluey style. True to the Rhône ideal but could be a little clearer and more limpid. | **84**

PL | This feels reductive and restrained: could its screwcap be contributing to this? It's floral and citrusy on the palate, and it feels like it has a hidden depth that's waiting to emerge with time. It's supple in texture and elegant in tone, and it finishes with long, subtle length. | **89**



Bonny Doon 2009 Le Cigare Volant Réserve (Syrah/Grenache/Mourvèdre/Cinsault) (13.4% ABV; SC) | **85**

AH | This older wine has lots going on aromatically: a sort of BBQ sauce sweet-spiciness, lifted by menthol and raspberry-jam notes. The palate, though, while nicely balanced, has a very strong taste of the stable yard. It seems like some rogue microbes have thrown this off balance. | **82**

AJ | Deep though non-opaque black-red. Very sweet and a touch confit, with a dusty tone; yet there is also something a little green in here, too. Plus oak. Ambitious but a bit raw. The palate corresponds. For me, there is not a great deal of harmony here, though it is a wine with good things inside; the green tones and overt oak hold it back from a top score, though it remains eminently drinkable. | **84**

PL | This is gamey and earthy underneath its ripe, sappy fruit, showing notes of leather and rosemary under its energetic flavors of black cherry and blackberry. It finishes with bright aromas and taut, lively length. | **88**



THIS IS CERTAINLY IN THE "NATURAL" CAMP, WITH A CLOUDY APPEARANCE AND A RELATIVELY DEEP, COPPERY COLOR. IT DOESN'T FEEL OXIDATIVE, THOUGH, AND ITS CITRUSY FLAVORS FEEL LIVELY AND FRESH ON THE PALATE, PERSISTING WITH FRAGRANT AROMA AND TAUT, ENERGETIC LENGTH. IT TASTES MORE OF ITS NATURALNESS THAN ANYTHING ELSE

Donkey & Goat 2013 Fenaughty Vineyard Syrah El Dorado (12.8% ABV) | **84**

AH | This is an appealing nose, rocky, brambly, tarry (in the right—fresh—sort of sense). But there's a volatile, vinegary element that carries onto the lean palate. If this is aiming for that lighter, limpid St-Joseph sort of style, it's too coarse to pull it off. | **81**

AJ | Dark black-red. Sweet but slightly unfruity scents; a little bit stewy and reduced. Not exactly enticing. Very dense and tight-grained on the palate, with lots of concentration and depth, but the ripeness has just not come to the party and the result is a sinewy, strident, intellectual-masochists' mouthful of which I would struggle to drink more than half a glass. Alas—since I sense there are great efforts going on here. | **82**

PL | This is ripe and plush, with a slightly herbal note underneath the berry-like fruit flavors. It's taut in structure, feeling fragrant and high-toned. | **89**

Donkey & Goat 2014 Stone Crusher Skin Fermented Roussanne El Dorado (11.5% ABV) | **84**

AH | Startlingly orange and also cloudy, this wine has its colors firmly pinned to the skin-contact mast. While there is a bit of a vinegary tang on first sniff, the style is actually more fruity than Sherry-toned. Sadly, though, the palate is dominated by that vinegar tone, and the otherwise admirably slender, graceful structure doesn't have the presence to overcome it. | **78**

AJ | Cloudy pale orange in color. Engaging and enjoyably affronting aromas, though it smells more of the skin-contact techniques and time on

yeast than the actual variety to me. A little bite of VA, but otherwise cleanly done and *qvevri*-like. Tannic, acidic, chewy, and full on the palate, with apple and whitecurrant fruits. The acidity is a little high and wild and biting for my taste, but otherwise this is an appealing orange wine for fans of the style. | **85**

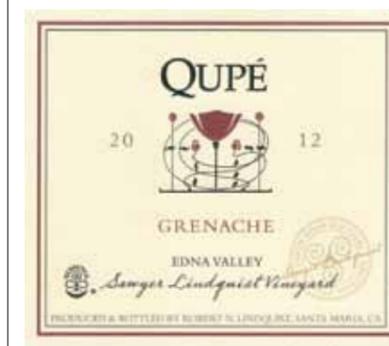
PL | This is certainly in the "natural" camp, with a cloudy appearance and a relatively deep, coppery color. It doesn't feel oxidative, though, and its citrusy flavors feel lively and fresh on the palate, persisting with fragrant aroma and taut, energetic length. As with many wines like this, it tastes more of its naturalness than anything else, but if you're tolerant of that, it's quite delicious to drink. | **88**

Qupé 2012 Grenache Edna Valley (13.5% ABV) | **83**

AH | With two bottles rather rubbery and sweaty, there seems to be a reduction problem here—unusual for Grenache! The chalky texture on the palate and the suppressed fruit add up to a rather charmless whole. | **81**

AJ | A deeper-hued red than most of its Grenache peers. Rather a grubby nose—we'll try a second bottle. 2nd bottle: Better, cleaner, but a little less effortlessly varietal than the best of its peers. On the palate, the fruit is slightly "fresher," but concentration is moderate, and for me the varietal charm and focus have been lost, though some may appreciate that "freshness." | **84**

PL | While this is ripe in flavor, it misses a little focus and definition, its red-fruit flavors feeling opulently fleshy and loose-knit. It turns floral on the palate, finishing with hints of aniseed and chamomile. | **85**



Arnot-Roberts 2014 Syrah Que Syrah Vineyard Sonoma Coast (13% ABV) | **82**

AH | This wine is playing at the vegetal end of the aromatic spectrum, which, combined with the hint of reduction, makes the nose a bit pinched and off-putting. This is astringent, inky, underripe. It tastes of blackberries picked too early from an English hedgerow. Another couple of Brix would have seen it in a happier place. | **81**

AJ | Deep purple-black but not quite opaque. Herbaceous notes on the nose: either picked too early or some canopy issues here. St-Joseph in a cool year. Lovely depths and tannins on the palate, but that cool, raw, green-hangar fruit is just not

going to drink well beyond a glass or two, in my opinion. Deep, but finally a little raw. | **86**

PL | This feels slightly oxidative and tomato-like, with firm tannins and a smoky, tobacco-like undertone. It's loose-knit and unfocused on the palate. | **80**



La Clarine Farm 2015 Somerset Mourvèdre Cedarville (11.5% ABV; SC) | **82**

AH | A pale cherry-red color and bright blackcurrant pastille/menthol aromas immediately make this an unusual Mourvèdre. The surprising declaration of 11.5% ABV is confirmed by the super-lean, marathon-runner palate profile, but unfortunately the metaphor extends to an unwelcome sweaty tang that suppresses the fruit. This wine is certainly a statement—but not a very digestible one. | **80**

AJ | Relatively pale red in color. Pungent plums and cranberries, holly and boiled strawberries: another hugely characterful nose, but I can't say it smells of ripe Mourvèdre to me, and I'm a little nervous about the sip, but let's keep an open mind... On the palate, in fact, it does seem a bit raw and short. The acidity is not excessive, so there is no biting sharpness, and nor is it herbaceous, but there isn't a lot beyond what are relatively simple fruit flavors, which come across as a little "tinned" and junior in style. I'm just wondering about the strategy here: surely a little more ripeness would have paid dividends? What's wrong with 13.5% or 14% ABV? | **81**

PL | This accents its tart, red-fruit flavors with a leafy herbaceousness, and while it's zesty and lively in structure, it feels a little insubstantial on the finish. | **84**

Arnot-Roberts 2014 Griffins Lair Sonoma Coast (13% ABV) | **82**

AH | This nose has an off-putting oxidative, volatile feel. The structure of the wine seems classy and the acidity fresh, but there's a gaping hole where the fruit should be. In the absence of a second bottle, it's not clear if this is representative, but it has to be marked as such. | **78**

AJ | Deep, dark black-red, with some opacity. This wine is more reductive than herbaceous, but there's a bit of both here. Slightly alarming yogurt style, too. Texturally rich, yet the purity and ripeness of fruit are just not there, though this wine is not grassy or herbaceous for me. | **80**

PL | This is constricted and taut, its fruit feeling ripe yet clamped down by its tannic structure. | **87**