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Married to the Fog

Syrah settles on the California coast

"I think syrah is misconstrued as a warm-region grape when it's really a cool-region grape," says Larry Hyde, a grower in Napa Valley's Carneros. "Look where it grows in France: very close to Burgundy." Recently, Hyde broke ground on a new vineyard, a rocky crest on Bayview Road where he planted chardonnay and syrah. "You can see the bay from the hill," he explains, though we've driven up here at night, and all we can see in the headlights are the rows of thin young vines.

With a vineyard just a mile from San Pablo Bay, neither Hyde nor his client David Ramey could care less that UC Davis lists syrah as a warm, Region III variety in their heat summation index. In fact, Hyde says, "Ramey has encouraged me to tear out the chardonnay and plant the rest with syrah," even before the vines bear fruit.

The comment resonated with me, as it ran counter to statements from other growers who had little interest in planting more syrah. For the moment, the market is flooded with a lot of warm-climate, young-vine fruit. In 1990 there were only 586 tons of syrah crushed in California. Last year it reached 147,000 tons, nearly a 50 percent increase over the prior year. But new plantings have slowed dramatically since 2002.

Anthony Truchard's family grows syrah farther north, where Carneros clay meets volcanic soils at the base of Mount Veeder. His father planted four acres of syrah in 1990 at the very northern end of the property, then another eight acres in 2000 across Old Sonoma Road. They have no plans to plant any more syrah. The Truchards keep the old block for their own syrah bottling, and they sell off some of the grapes from the younger vines. Currently Truchard produces 2,600 cases of syrah. "And

if we made it all, we could make 4,000," he says, recalling their production in the 2002 vintage. "We had trouble keeping our syrah around until 2000. It used to fly out the door. But there's been a dilution factor; there are so many of them now."

Truchard's is still among the best. Winemaker Sal DeLanni finds that the flavors develop more quickly in the hillside vines due to stress, and he generally harvests his syrah around 25° Brix. "I could try to force a riper style, but it's not what the vineyard does. This vineyard does a Rhône-style syrah," he says. "Syrah is a lot like zin: You can make it in a lot of different ways. We go for the pepper and the game; you don't get that in the middle of the [Napa] Valley. In the warmer areas up-valley, the aromatics burn off."

The wine DeLanni made in '02 still has all its aromatics intact. He recalls the vintage as a long, even growing season, a balanced year, which makes sense when you taste the depth of flavor and lasting spice in the wine. The '03 is bigger, more velvety, the tannins more potent; the '04 is back to the elegance of the '02, with peppery spice that drives it.

"They're not the sweet, fruity syrahs that become softer and heavier [with age]," DeLanni says. The freshness that parallels the higher acidity in the wines is what makes them more elegant. "Like the Sonoma Coast."

There are, in fact, similarities between Truchard's syrah and some of the better wines from the far coast of Sonoma County. What the two areas share is plenty of syrah-friendly fog. Nick and Andy Peay, who grow syrah on an old pear and apple orchard in Annapolis, just released two new bottlings from 2004 (both recommended in this issue). One is named for the fog—La Bruma—that rolls in off the ocean



four miles to the west. The other is named for the redwoods—Les Titans—which once surrounded this hilltop. The conifer forests laid a foundation of high-acid loam over these coastal ridges, marine terraces that had been pushed up by the Pacific plate and are slowly eroding back into the sea.

The Peays planted eight acres of syrah starting in 1998, their vines nestled behind a higher ridge that bears the brunt of the ocean winds. Andy Peay says the wind comes up every day at 12:30 and blows strong through the afternoon. "The wind keeps our temperatures in the low seventies. The fog is just sitting out there," he says, as he points past the next ridge. "As the wind blows, it's like a refrigerator." That wind abates around 4:30, before the fog rolls in at 6:00. Fog blankets the vineyard for the night, then burns off in the morning, usually around eight, but sometimes, not until noon.

The cool conditions give their syrahs remarkable flavor intensity at a relatively low level of alcohol. The 2005s, for instance, fall into the mid-13 percent range. Tasted out of barrel, the core of La Bruma emphasizes bright tones of cracked black pepper and earthy spice. Les Titans is gamier, darker in fruit tone, more intense. As great as these wines may be, the Peays have no intention of planting more syrah. "High-end syrah is hard to sell," Andy Peay says. "There's much more of an appetite for high-end pinot noir."

Part of the challenge may be a market filled with warm-climate syrah, modeled after old-vine Australian styles—and made, less fortunately, from vigorous young vines. There are, however, pockets in the cool zones of California's north coast where young-vine syrah produces wines with aromatic complexity and structural tension. As long as they remain a hard sell, they'll be great buys. ■

