



Large Australian Vineyard



When is Shiraz - Syrah? Well ALWAYS!

Many people get confused over the grape varieties of Shiraz and Syrah when in fact they are the same variety but known by different names in different countries, often producing wines of different character. The difference can start because of the climate but most influence is from the winemaker who is in control of the quality and style. It is the old story of either a ‘handmade’ with style, class and taste, or the ‘pile ‘em high and sell ‘em cheap – never mind the quality, feel the length’ – ha ha.

As SYRAH grown in the northern Rhône Valley, it is celebrated and applauded. The wines from the famous Côte Rôtie and Hermitage are, according to top wine writer Jancis Robinson, “worthy of a place at High Table”, a comment I totally agree with. Yet as SHIRAZ and grown on the vast plains of south eastern Australia we can be faced with big, overt-fat, ‘in your face’ reds that could come from anywhere and have no personality at all.

The debate goes on as to what really are its origins. Its arrival in Australia is easy as it is likely that there were some cuttings amongst the 400 foraged by a James Busby who visited Europe in 1832 and after some time in the Sydney Botanic Gardens where it proved that it could stand the climate by 1840 it was to be found out in The Hunter Valley a short distance from the city. Whereas its arrival in The Rhône could be the Romans and / or the Phoenicians.

This variety is often centre stage for a blend, take Châteauneuf-du-Pape for example. Syrah with Grenache and a number of other varieties are used for this famous central Rhône ‘village’ red wine with a world-wide reputation. You will find Shiraz used to make easy drinking reds from all over the world offering red wine drinkers of all pockets the black fruit gum and liquorice flavours that to me epitomize Shiraz. When made well, Shiraz can be rich and opulent with a long length of dark berry fruit and superb supple, full flavoured tannins. Mmmm, yummy!



Hermitage Valley and Area

Wine Press



Shiraz Grapes



So, why the difference in price if the grape is the same?

Have you ever wondered why two wines made from one grape variety can be so different in quality and taste? Below I set out the extremes of production for you to begin to understand. There are of course lots of levels in between but this, I hope, will highlight the main differences – from chalk to cheese in fact.

To produce a high quality wine the vineyard worker will prune the vines hard in winter. In late spring and when the bunches are set he will do a 'green harvest'. This is removing some bunches before they mature to concentrate growth on a few. At harvest the fruit is cut by hand, taken to the cellar, where to get the very best juice the cellar master will select the free run juice. This is where the grapes sitting at the top in a vat will, with by their sheer weight, crush those at the bottom and the juice from this is the very, very best and generally makes the best wine. From here the journey to wine-making begins which will depend on grape variety, regional restrictions and the producers wishes. However everything will be handled carefully and in small quantities, much like a couturier making Haute Couture. After all the care and time taken then, there is the situation of prestige, this too can add significantly to the cost.

On the other hand a producer will still prune but may decide to let the vines grow vigorously, letting the bunches form as they do, cutting back the 'canopy' [foliage] by machine so everything will ripen. When the time is right and in hot countries at night, the grapes will be harvested by machine which will take all fruit, both good and poor quality even any unripe bunches but these will be 'lost' in the multitude of grapes. All this will be tipped into a great big hopper where it passes through a machine that will remove any stalks and leaves tipping in to a large Press. Here the grapes will be pressed three or even four times, gently at first, to extract the useful juice. Afterwards the resulting skins residue can be used to make grape spirit and ultimately fertilizer where it goes back to the vineyard. The juice produced is perfectly good and can make very drinkable wine but of a much less complex and stylish to that of its top quality cousin.

I hope this has helped you understand a little more – 'Happy Drinking Andrew [andrewh@georgehill.co.uk]



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