



A "Eureka!" Moment

TASTING STARS IN PURE CALIFORNIA GRENACHE

story and photo by Randy Caparoso



Garnacha (Grenache) derived from clonal material from Spain's Rioja Baja region grows at Bokisch Vineyards in Lodi.



Jordan Fiorentini, winemaker at Epoch Wines, in the estate Paderewski Vineyard in Paso Robles.



Owner-winemaker Hilarie Clarke of Harrison Clarke Vineyards.

How hot is Grenache? That is, California-grown Grenache as a pure, 100-percent varietal. Not improved—in the fashion common to Southern France, Spain and in most of the U.S. and Australia—by other grapes such as Syrah, Mourvèdre, Carignan, or even (as in Priorat) Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot.

A lot of the recent interest in Grenache among the trade, as well as with geekier elements of the consumer crowd, has been due to the fact that a few California producers have finally allowed the grape to go solo. "Eureka!" they exclaim. This grape has a set of lungs—soaring fragrances suggesting red fruits (cherry, strawberry, raspberry), underscored by subtle spice (black pepper and brown kitchen spices), qualities often lost when blended with the usual suspects.

Pure Grenache, in fact, resembles Pinot Noir in terms of its soft tannin and rather delicate, feminine features. It is not the same, of course, but the grape's huge advantage in California—a state dominated by Mediterranean climates that the French would gleefully describe as "hot"—is that it thrives in sun-drenched spots like the middle and eastern sections of Santa Ynez Valley, Paso Robles, inland Mendocino, Lodi and the Sierra Foothills.

In May, I endeavored to take a measure of California-grown Grenache in a blind tasting of 15 of the best bottlings, inviting three winemaker buddies to taste and discuss. We were impressed by the entire line-up, which delivered not only the perfumes and delicacy expected, but also complexities belying the common notion that finer, more transparent wines come from cooler-climate regions.

In fact, the Grenache we all lauded as being the most intense in peppery spice and pungent earthiness was the **McCoy Cellars 2012 Grenache**, grown in Lodi. A **Bokisch 2012 Garnacha**, produced from Spanish clonal material, also grown in Lodi, was less spicy and earthy, but certainly

among the ziest, sleekest, most feminine wines in the tasting.

Needless to say, factors such as topography (soil, slope, elevation, et al.) and viticultural and winemaking choices have as much impact as climate on artisanal style wines. The **Epoch 2012 "Sensibility"**—grown on alkaline, calcareous, 1,200-foot-elevation slopes in Paso Robles—was among the headiest, thickest and fullest of the pure Grenaches, ringing with peppery spice.

From an even higher elevation site in El Dorado (closer to 3,000 feet), the **Baiocchi 2012 "Sharon's" Grenache** balanced mineral-tinged fruit intensity atop a meaty heft (14.9% alcohol) with the rollicking grace of Dylan's "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat." While grown not far from Baiocchi in El Dorado Fair Play AVA, the **Skinner Estate 2012 Grenache** was a more waifish, effusively strawberryish tartlet of a wine, with leafy-herbal underpinnings.

Some of my favorite California Grenaches have come from Santa Ynez Valley's newly minted Ballard Canyon AVA. Grown on a chalky white hilltop, the **Harrison Clarke 2010 Grenache** showed gloriously aromatic red berry perfumes infused with peppery spice and sprigs of mint; while the **Beckmen 2013 Purisima Mountain-Block Eight Grenache** flashed similar charms in a tighter, linear structure.

We should also laud A Tribute to Grace; a tiny producer devoted completely to all-Grenache, all-the-time. Of the three cuvées we tasted, we were most impressed by the **A Tribute to Grace 2013 Santa Barbara Highlands Vineyard Grenache**, which dangled lush, cedarbox-spiced Grenache fruitiness over the glass-like silk rippling in breezes from the proverbial warm South.

Point being, if you prefer silky fine, gentle styles of red wines, especially for their food versatility, California-grown Grenache is now one of your more serious choices. ■