

18 California Rhône for the Holidays

New reviews of California Syrah, Grenache and more for the most festive time of the year



Photo by: Javier Bustamante

Kale made an impressive Sonoma County Syrah and Grenache blend.

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Tasting Highlights bring the best wines from our editors' most recent tastings to WineSpectator.com members.

We've covered a lot of ground to find exciting California Rhône-style reds to share this holiday season.

We start in Ballard Canyon, a subappellation of Santa Ynez where Syrah and other Rhône varieties hold court. It's home to Rusack's 17-acre estate vineyard, which turned out a racy version in 2013. Traveling west to Sta. Rita Hills, Ojai's John Sebastiano Vineyard bottling shows plenty of richness from an area known for Pinot Noir.

Grenache likes warm, dry conditions, but true to his contrarian nature, Bonny Doon winemaker Randall Grahm planted his Rancho Solo vineyard in a relatively cool site in Soledad in Salinas Valley. Sleek and zesty, the Cuvée R was aged in puncheons to highlight the snappy fruit. Groundwork, on the other hand, shows the supple side of the grape. It's the second label of San Liege, with Curt Schalchlin at the helm.

Alicante Bouschet isn't a Rhône grape but its parentage is tied to Grenache. Popular during Prohibition, this French émigré now plays a minor role, mainly adding tannins and color to blends. Carlisle's Mike Officer adds a dollop to some of his Zinfandels. But he was so impressed with the old-vine Alicante from Pagani Ranch in 2013 that he let it take the driver's seat.

ANDREW MURRAY Roasted Slope Santa Barbara County 2013 *Score: 91 | \$40*

Rich and well-constructed, with blueberry, pepper and dark chocolate aromas leading to plush, complex flavors of blackberry, anise and smoky beef. The tannins are big but ripe. Syrah and Viognier. Drink now through 2026. 500 cases made.—*T.F.*

BIG BASIN Syrah Santa Cruz Mountains 2013 *Score: 90 | \$36*

A big and zesty red, with a solid structure and plenty of flavor. Notes of raspberry and dried cherry blend with smoked herb and cracked pepper beef. Tannins ease in on the finish. Drink now through 2023. 335 cases made.—*T.F.*

BONNY DOON Grenache Monterey County Cuvée R Rancho Solo 2014 *Score: 90 | \$48*

Zesty and sleekly styled, with aromas of raspberry and cinnamon and snappy flavors of smoky red plum, pepper and licorice. Drink now through 2021. 270 cases made.—*T.F.*

BOOKER Grenache Paso Robles Ripper 2013 *Score: 90 | \$85*

Tightly focused, with a dense core of loamy minerality. The aromas of raspberry and smoky herb combine with sharply sleek flavors of dark plum, roasted sage and white pepper. Needs time. Best from 2017 through 2026. 525 cases made.—*T.F.*

CARLISLE Alicante Bouschet Sonoma Valley Pagani Ranch 2013 *Score: 90 | \$36*

This Alicante has a lot going for it. Full-bodied and ripe, with a fine core of focused tannins and acidity, plus accents of licorice, pepper and tobacco. Drink now through 2024. 100 cases made.—*T.F.*

DENNER Carignan Paso Robles Willow Creek District The Sacred Burro 2012 *Score: 90 | \$60*

A distinctive and racy blend, with pomegranate and smoked pepper aromas, offering layered, vibrant flavors of cherry, tobacco and herb. The tannins are lively, lending the wine focus. Drink now through 2026. 270 cases made.—*T.F.*

FOXEN Syrah Santa Ynez Valley Toasted Rope 2013 *Score: 90 | \$44*

Balanced and well-focused, with raspberry and smoky beef aromas and lively, complex flavors of black cherry, grilled herb and pepper. Drink now through 2026. 420 cases made.—*T.F.*

GROUNDWORK Grenache Central Coast 2013 *Score: 90 | \$20*

Soft and supple, with floral raspberry and spiced cinnamon aromas and rich, vibrant flavors of cherry, licorice and smoky herb. Drink now through 2023. 1,000 cases made.—*T.F.*

KALE Home Run Cuvée Sonoma County 2013 *Score: 90 | \$50*

Fresh and focused, showing subtle power. Floral cherry and grilled anise aromas open to elegantly complex flavors of smoky plum, white pepper and sage. Syrah and Grenache. Drink now through 2026. 450 cases made.—*T.F.*

LE P'TIT PAYSAN Le P'tit Pape San Benito County 2013 *Score: 90 | \$22*

There's a touch of Rhône valley gaminess in the aromas, plus notes of raspberry and smoky pepper. The flavors are trim and focused, featuring accents of cherry, cedar and grilled herb. Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre and Counoise. Drink now through 2025. 880 cases made.—*T.F.*

MCPRICE MYERS Grenache Santa Barbara County High On The Hog 2013 *Score: 90 | \$35*
Jammed with fresh fruit and spice, this is a ripe and jammy quaff, with accents of grilled herb, anise and smoky beef. Drink now through 2024. 543 cases made.—*T.F.*

OJAI Syrah Santa Barbara County John Sebastiano Vineyard 2013 *Score: 90 | \$45*
A core of firm tannins and acidity is framed by rich and complex fruit, showing notes of blackberry, smoky cedar, white pepper and herb. Drink now through 2024. 427 cases made.—*T.F.*

OJAI Syrah Ventura County Roll Ranch Vineyard 2012 *Score: 90 | \$49*
Dense but rich with character, offering a core of vivid acidity and tannins, paired with intriguing notes of blackberry, iron, grilled herb and licorice. Drink now through 2025. 282 cases made.—*T.F.*

ORIN SWIFT Grenache California Trigger Finger 2013 *Score: 90 | \$38*
Lively and appealingly ripe, but nicely structured. Baked cherry and spicy cinnamon aromas combine with bold but supple flavors of raspberry, cracked pepper beef and herb. Drink now through 2023. 287 cases made.—*T.F.*

PRUETT Lucky Lauren Red Sierra Foothills 2013 *Score: 90 | \$29*
A muscular red, with a complex, focused core, offering aromas of blueberry, tar and bitter chocolate and dense, powerful flavors of blackberry, grilled herb and cracked pepper. Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. Best from 2017 through 2027. 160 cases made.—*T.F.*

RUSACK Syrah Santa Barbara County Ballard Canyon Estate 2013 *Score: 90 | \$29*
Racy and focused, with floral black raspberry and graphite aromas and compact but complex flavors of boysenberry, smoky herb and pepper beef. Drink now through 2023. 1,330 cases made.—*T.F.*

TENSLEY Los Padres Central Coast 2014 *Score: 90 | \$22*
Burly and jammy, with black raspberry and spice aromas and broad-shouldered flavors of dark plum, licorice and espresso. The tannins are big but ripe. Drink now through 2024. 10,000 cases made.—*T.F.*

WRATH Syrah Monterey Ex Anima 2013 *Score: 90 | \$25*
Floral black raspberry and licorice aromas lead to a burst of jammy huckleberry flavors and accents of white pepper. The texture is plush and soft, with enough complexity for this to keep gliding. Drink now through 2022. 196 cases made.—*T.F.*