

# 30 TOP BUYS American Syrah

There's a common perception of Syrah produced in the US – too much oak, too much alcohol – that is increasingly outdated as a dedicated band of winemakers put their faith in the Rhône variety and work to bring it out of the shadows

WORDS & SELECTION ANNA LEE C IJIMA

Syrah in the US remains an enigma. Cult brands that emerged during the 1990s – Sine Qua Non on the Central Coast or Cayuse Vineyards in the Walla Walla Valley – are among the country's iconic and most expensive wines.

But by and large, Syrah is still the perennial underdog of American wine.

'There's this assumption that Syrah [in America] is just this goopy, overly alcoholic, overoaked and overextracted wine,' explains Jeff

Lindsay-Thorsen (pictured, right), the winemaker-sommelier who produces WT Vintners' Syrah from vineyards in Washington and Oregon.

The benchmark for Syrah is still encapsulated in the northern Rhône ideal. But to critics who claim that Syrah's otherworldliness, its haunting florality and sanguine, sauvage complexities, can't be found outside France, America's Syrah growers have a firm response.

'Sorry, that's just ignorance,' says Christopher Bates MS (pictured, below), the winemaker and owner of Element Winery in the Finger Lakes region of New York state. The greatness that we tend to associate with the northern Rhône, that perfume, that spice, that earthiness, 'isn't necessarily derived from just one specific place', he explains. 'It's linked to a style and mentality of wine-growing and winemaking, too.'

While pioneering Americans have been championing Syrah since the 1980s, in the broader scheme of history Syrah is barely nascent here, suggests Nikolas Krankl, whose parents Elaine and Manfred established Sine Qua Non in 1994. Today, Nikolas and his wife Julia, founders of Fingers Crossed Wine in Santa Barbara County, are among America's next generation of Syrah champions. 'The gift and the curse is that we don't have that history,' says Julia. 'But that also means we can be as creative as we want.' The most provocative Syrahs grown in America are still a testament to that pioneering spirit – explorations of untried sites, blending from different climates and terroir, experiments in whole-cluster ferments and earlier picking.

## ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

From Washington and Oregon to California and New York, the kaleidoscope of American Syrah is vast and wildly unsung. California is where you'll find the greatest spectrum of diversity. In the chilly, windswept pockets of Sonoma or the Central Coast – San Luis Obispo and Santa



Above from left: Casey and George White, partners in WT Vintners, and winemaker Jeff Lindsay-Thorsen with his wife Cortney Mills

Barbara or sub-regions such as the Sta. Rita Hills and Santa Maria Valley – you'll find Syrah that's often shockingly spry, laser-etched and perfumed. And, unlike in the northern Rhône these days, there's an abundance of exceptional Syrah at a compact 12% alcohol.

Those seeking wines with more muscularity are directed further inland to warmer areas of Santa Barbara, such as the corridors of the Ballard and Happy canyons, or Paso Robles, where Syrah is intense and ripe but moored to that resinous, smoky allure of chaparral.

Further north, Syrah also flourishes in the Columbia Valley – particularly in areas such as the Yakima and Walla Walla valleys – which straddles the border between Washington and Oregon. Syrah here 'is never short on fruit but can go into this feral, spicy place that's an interesting bridge between the Old World and the New World', says Lindsay-Thorsen.

The alluvial plain of the Oregon side of the AVA, littered with cobblestones reminiscent of the *galets roulés* of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, is an epicentre of Syrah in the Walla Walla Valley. Made famous by Cayuse and designated with its own sub-region, the Rocks District of Milton-Freewater AVA is home to a roll call of standout producers and winemakers, including Sean Boyd, founder of Rotie Cellars and Proper Wines.

'There's this fingerprint here,' Boyd asserts, 'this Rocks funk that's deeply savoury – like earth and olive tapenade – that can be so polarising and visceral.' And yet so distinctly American, too. ▶



Christopher Bates MS, Element Winery

Main image, opposite: a draft horse cultivates some of Horsepower Vineyards' Syrah vines in the Walla Walla Valley





**Alban, Reva, Edna Valley, Central Coast, California 2019**

\$166 Chelsea Vintners, Harvey Nichols, Hedonism, The Wine Treasury, Wild Corner  
US\$116-\$130 Los Olivos, Sokolin, Total Wine & More, Wine Express, Wineworks  
Unabashedly powerful yet visceral and alluring, John Alban's Syrah is a benchmark expression of the sun-drenched intensity of the maritime Edna Valley in San Luis Obispo. Smoky, spicy swirls of raspberry preserve, leather and sweet tobacco meld into a palate that's profoundly ripe yet lively and fresh, struck by layers of dusty graphite, ore and iodine. Breathtaking in youth but certain to develop further complexity. **Drink** 2024-2045 **Alc** 14%



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**Arnot-Roberts, Que, Sonoma Coast, California 2021**

£79 (2020) Roberson  
US\$88-\$125 Atlas, Craft & Cru, Grand Cru US, Paul Marcus, Solano Cellars  
Planted in 1994, the Que Syrah vineyard boasts the Sonoma Coast's oldest Syrah vines. This single-vineyard bottling is profoundly aromatic, fiery with incense and peppercorns yet slim and supple. Ripe blackcurrant and cherry flavours are balanced by an edge of acidity and tannins that linger like herbs charred to bitterness on a grill. A complex, fascinating wine. **Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 12%



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**Fingers Crossed, Santa Barbara, Central Coast, California 2021**

£298 Turville Valley Wines  
US\$235-\$300 Falling Bright, Grand Cru, Saratoga Wine Exchange, Station Plaza  
Subtle earthy notes of wild game and truffles open into black figs and milk chocolate. A formidable yet graceful and fragrant Syrah (83%, with 4.7% each of Grenache, Mourvèdre and Petite Sirah). Produced with 35% whole clusters and aged 20 months in French oak (63% new), it's a spicy, deeply satisfying wine with a finish that melds into soft, satin-edged tannins. **Drink** 2024-2045 **Alc** 15.8%



98

**Force Majeure, SJR Vineyard, The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater, Columbia Valley, Oregon 2021**

US\$100 info@fm-wine.com  
Ferrous yet gleaming with juicy black cherry and cassis, this salt-etched, supple wine is made from purchased fruit from the SJR vineyard. Rich and weighty in profile, with a finish marked by a fine rasp of sandpaper tannins and the lingering smoke of bacon fat. Vinified in concrete with 18% whole clusters and matured for 18 months in neutral French oak. **Drink** 2024-2040 **Alc** 15%



98

**Reynvaan, Stonessence, Walla Walla Valley, Columbia Valley, Oregon 2021**

US\$115 reynvaanfamilyvineyards.com  
Sourced from the estate's In the Rocks vineyard, this penetrating Syrah displays a haunting perfume and undulating blackberry and blueberry flavours tinged with blood, iodine and ash. Powerful yet focused and freshly balanced with a finish that lingers on the bitter edges of quinine and olive pit. Made with 15% whole clusters vinified in stainless steel and matured for 18 months in both new puncheons and neutral oak. **Drink** 2024-2040 **Alc** 14.9%



98

**Saxum Vineyards, Bone Rock James Berry Vineyard, Paso Robles Willow Creek District, Central Coast, California 2020**

POA £ Four Corners Wine  
US\$250-\$260 Saratoga Wine Exchange, Station Plaza  
Iodine and violets lend a lifted, airy perfume to this concentrated yet superbly balanced, almost laser-etched wine. Unctuous black cherries and berries coat the palate in waves of satin and dustings of cocoa powder, chalk and ore. A complex, hedonistic wine sourced from vines planted more than 30 years ago and aged for 33 months, mostly in French barriques. **Drink** 2024-2040 **Alc** 15.7%



98

**Andremily, Santa Barbara, Central Coast, California 2020**

£115 (ib) Four Corners Wine  
US\$129-\$155 AOC Selections, Brix26, K&L, Linwood, Sokolin, Spiro Wines  
Veins of char and singed vanilla beans lend sweet, spicy streaks here. While predominantly Syrah, small proportions of Mourvèdre and Viognier lend angularity and lift to roasted, ripe flavours of black plums and cherries. Half destemmed and matured for 22 months in 65% new French oak, it's a bruising, beefy Syrah gripped by a stern, sandpaper rash of tannins. Ready now with a decant, but should meld further in the cellar. **Drink** 2024-2040 **Alc** 15.4%



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**Element Winery, Finger Lakes, New York 2014**

elementwinery.com  
Winter damage in 2014 reduced yields significantly, but the focus and purity of this vintage shines in this rare library release. A profoundly herbal, fragrant expression of New York Syrah (with a 3% dash of Grenache), it bolsters a depth of earth and flora against streaks of unblemished black fruit. Focused and slim, a thrilling, savoury wine that's drinking beautifully but likely to hold longer still. 100% whole-cluster fruit vinified with indigenous yeast and matured in neutral oak. **Drink** 2024-2030 **Alc** 12.3%



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**Force Majeure, Estate, Red Mountain, Columbia Valley, Washington 2021**

US\$85 info@fm-wine.com  
This bright, mouthfilling wine opens with blackberry and plum flavours filigreed with eucalyptus and flint. It's pure-fruited but peppery, with lifted perfume unadulterated by new oak. The finish is polished, marked by hints of anise and burnt sugar. 15% whole clusters are co-fermented in concrete, with 1% Viognier. Matured for 18 months in neutral French oak. **Drink** 2024-2040 **Alc** 14.8%

**Jonata, La Sangre de Jonata, Ballard Canyon, Santa Barbara, Central Coast, California 2020**

£126.67 (ib) Cru  
US\$200 Golden Gate, Michael's, Navarro's  
A profoundly concentrated yet finely contoured wine. Roasted plum flavours are ample and weighty, accented with orange peel, anise and an earthy undertow. It's a bold, beefy wine, yet luscious and hedonistic, too. Fine tannins are supple and ready now, but this is a wine that will evolve beautifully. **Drink** 2024-2040 **Alc** 14.5% ▶



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**Piedrasassi, Bien Nacido Vineyard, Santa Maria Valley, Central Coast, California 2020**

£62 Roberson  
US\$60 [piedrasassi.com](http://piedrasassi.com)

Hints of green leaf and rosemary lend verve to ripe, concentrated black cherry and cassis flavours. A touch richer and darker in fruit profile than the producer's nervier Rim Rock Syrah, but meatier and gamier, too. It's a testament to the breadth of coastal American Syrah and Piedrasassi's profoundly nuanced winemaking expressions. **Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 12.8%



**Piedrasassi, Rim Rock Vineyard, Arroyo Grande Valley, Central Coast, California 2020**

£67 Roberson  
US\$65 [piedrasassi.com](http://piedrasassi.com)

Sourced from the cool, maritime Arroyo Grande Valley, this taut, thrilling wine beams with ripe, piercing blackberry and cherry flavours. Pristine fruit is juxtaposed with the seductive funk of saddle and sage, ash and earth. Composed and revitalising with a haunting violet finish. **Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 12.2%



**Saxum Vineyards, Broken Stones, Paso Robles, Central Coast, California 2021**

POA £ Four Corners Wine  
US\$200-\$250 Brix26, Napa Cabs, Station Plaza, V Wine Cellar, Wine Connection  
A powerhouse of a wine with sun-drenched flavours of roasted plums and black cherry preserve. Despite its hulking footprint, it maintains a purity and finesse that's surprising and enthralling. A rocky, salt-struck vein of minerality rambles from nose to finish. 54% Syrah, 24% Mataro, 20% Graciano and 2% Petite Syrah, 18-20 months mostly in new French barriques. **Drink** 2024-2040 **Alc** 15.5%



**Scar of the Sea, Bassi Vineyard, San Luis Obispo Coast, Central Coast, California 2022**

US\$46 [scaroftheseawines.com](http://scaroftheseawines.com)  
Spellbinding whiffs of ripe black plums and lilacs introduce this cheeky, visceral Syrah sourced from organically farmed vines. Fermented entirely in whole clusters using indigenous yeasts and matured in neutral large-format barrels, it's fresh and pure, and marked with delicate veins of fresh basil and tomato leaf. A perfumed, indeed haunting Syrah that finishes on a cool tang of stone and soft, supple tannins. Delicious. **Drink** 2024-2030 **Alc** 12.2%



**Bedrock Wine Co, Angeles de Arena, Santa Barbara, Central Coast, California 2022**

US\$52 [bedrockwineco.com](http://bedrockwineco.com)  
While potent and brawny, with bruising black plum and blackberry flavours, this has a salty mineral intensity that lends freshness. From the sandy soils of the Guadalupe dune complex, it's a stately wine with intensity and power but also a divine silkiness. Vinified with about 60% whole clusters and indigenous yeasts, matured for 14 months mostly in neutral, large barrels. **Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 14%



**Epoch, York Mountain, Central Coast, California 2019**

POA £ Four Corners Wine  
US\$95 JJ Buckley  
A cooler, rainier microclimate lends a vitality of red cherry and raspberry flavours to this AVA just outside Paso Robles. From sand and sandstone soils, this is a full-bodied but finessed wine with a silkiness of mouthfeel. There's a delicacy to the fruit concentration but it's refreshing, finishing on fine, chappy tannins. Fermented in concrete and stainless steel tanks and new French oak puncheons, 40% stems included, matured for 18 months in mid-sized French oak barrels and puncheons, 30% new. **Drink** 2024-2034 **Alc** 14.7%



**Kobayashi Winery, WeatherEye Vineyard, Columbia Valley, Washington 2022**

[kobayashiwinery.com](http://kobayashiwinery.com)  
There's a thrilling bite to this spry, fresh-fruited bottling known as the Sans Soufre Syrah. 100% whole clusters were pressed in the barrel and the wine matured in neutral French oak for 10 months with no SO<sub>2</sub> added at any point. It's a minimalist expression of a place better known for muscularity, packed with raspberry and red cherry flavours, but lean, too. A delightfully nervy, textured wine framed in soft, easing tannins. **Drink** 2024-2034 **Alc** 12.5%

**Martin Woods, The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater, Columbia Valley, Oregon 2018**

[martinwoodswinery.com](http://martinwoodswinery.com)  
This robust, sensual Syrah opens with heady plumes of violet and rose-petal perfume tipped with fur and earth. Black cherry and blueberry flavours are vibrant and mouthwatering yet intensified by shavings of black pepper and earth. It's a gorgeous, fresh-faced wine with ripe and ready tannins that will likely hold for another decade. **Drink** 2024-2034 **Alc** 14.2%



**Rôtie Cellars, Northern Blend, The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater, Columbia Valley, Oregon 2021**

US\$48 [rotiecellars.com](http://rotiecellars.com)  
The addition of 5% Viognier lends a haunting breath of lilac and violet petals to this powerful, penetrating Syrah. Black cherry and blueberry flavours are intensely ripe yet pristine, a luscious sip framed in ore and salt with a finish that's drenched in satin. Ready now but will improve further. **Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 14.2%

**Sandhi, Anika Bien Nacido Vineyard, Santa Maria Valley, Central Coast, California 2021**

US\$75 [sandhiwines.com](http://sandhiwines.com)  
Syrah's ethereally floral, ferrous perfume is on full display in this fine-footed yet concentrated Syrah. Blackberry and cherry flavours are penetrating and crisp, plumed with rose petals and freshly picked violets, but with hints of fur and leather, too. It's a lavish, delightfully textured wine with fine-grained, furry tannins and a long, piercing finish. **Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 12.7% ▶





**Bedrock Wine Co, Bien Nacido Vineyard, Santa Maria Valley, Central Coast, California 2022**

bedrockwineco.com

This fragrant Syrah is sourced from two sites in the chilly coastal pocket of the Bien Nacido vineyard in the Santa Maria valley: the X block planted in 1973 and the higher elevation Z block planted in 1990. Despite its lean frame, it's a glistening, lipsmacking wine with cutting blackberry and cassis flavours. Nervy and revitalising, with a cool, granitic undertow. **Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 13%



**WT Vintners, Les Collines, Walla Walla Valley, Columbia Valley, Washington 2019**

US\$49 wtvintners.com

A hauntingly perfumed wine, speckled with lilacs and the pungent smoke of struck flint and matches. Blackberry and black plum flavours are luscious yet pristine, stained with blood and framed by a raspy edge of tannins. Made with 100% whole clusters and matured in neutral French oak for 18 months. Immediately welcoming but will continue to evolve nicely through 2040.

**Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 13.9%

**Avennia, Arnaut Boushey Vineyard, Yakima Valley, Columbia Valley, Washington 2021**

US\$60 avennia.com

Whiffs of spiced plum and candied cherry introduce this buoyantly fresh-fruited, dashingly mineral Syrah. It's sun-kissed and opulent yet delicate, its finish edged with whispers of feathery tannins. An elegant, single-vineyard expression of Yakima's Boushey vineyard fermented with indigenous yeasts using 15% whole clusters and aged 18 months in 15% new oak. **Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 14.8%



**Liminal, Block 16 WeatherEye Vineyard, Columbia Valley, Washington 2021**

US\$70 liminalwine.com

Dried mint and wild thyme notes lend savoury appeal to this piercing Syrah sourced from the highest block in the WeatherEye vineyard. While fresh in acidity and held upright by a dusty, mineral undertone, it's a profoundly ripe Syrah packed with black plum and fig flavours. Matured for 18 months in oak, mostly large puncheons but also 20% new French barriques. **Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 14.8%

**Proper Wines, Estate Reserve, The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater, Columbia Valley, Oregon 2020**

US\$85 properwines.com

Intensely ripe aromas of candied blackberry and sun-scorched bramble introduce this truffled, subtly meaty wine. Lavish and muscular yet elegant, too, it finishes on a singe of burnt caramel and soft, feathery tannins. A selection of the estate's best barrels incorporating 20% whole clusters vinified with indigenous yeast and matured for 31 months in oak (a combination of old and new).

**Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 14.2% ▶



**Tensley, Santa Barbara, Central Coast, California 2022**

£23 (ib) Berry Bros & Rudd

US\$34 tensleywines.com

Sourced from five vineyard sites, Tensley's basic Syrah contrasts the sun-drenched richness of black fruit against a savoury backdrop of crushed black pepper, olives and sage. Full-bodied but flecked with salt and earth, it's an accessibly priced introduction to the diversity of Santa Barbara County. **Drink** 2024-2032 **Alc** 14.5%



**The Hilt, Estate, Sta. Rita Hills, Santa Barbara, Central Coast, California 2021**

thehiltestate.com

Veins of green sage and thyme accent cranberry and raspberry flavours in this first bottling of the Hilt's estate-grown Syrah. Sourced from the Bentrock vineyard's cool, wind-swept climes, it's a thirst-quenching, fresh-fruited wine fermented with 66% whole clusters and matured in just 10% new French oak. Struck with sea salt and a searing edge of white pepper, it's fragrant and subtly floral, with an invigorating taut structure. **Drink** 2024-2035 **Alc** 13%



**Waypoint, Bien Nacido Vineyard, Santa Maria Valley, Central Coast, California 2021**

US\$65 Bounty Hunter

Dark fruited and velveteen yet held upright by a taut mineral spray and tangy acidity, this full-bodied yet freshly balanced Syrah shows a riper, richer side of the famed Bien Nacido Vineyard. There's the warmth and spice of a touch of new oak here, but it's calibrated neatly. A solidly structured, elegant wine accented by hints of crushed green olives and wet clay, and soft, furry tannins on the finish. **Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 13.9%



**WeatherEye Vineyards, Estate, Walla Walla Valley, Columbia Valley, Washington 2021**


weathereyevineyard.com

The WeatherEye vineyard is perched on Red Mountain's crest, but its wines aren't included in the Red Mountain AVA as some parts are too high and others extend onto the north side. A potent, ripe wine packed with black cherry and plum flavours anchored by a steely coolness and nervy acidity that pierces the finish. Vinified with 20% whole clusters and matured for 18 months in 60% new, large-format French oak, it's opulent yet delicate in texture, with a finish marked by fine tannins. **Drink** 2024-2040 **Alc** 15%



**White Rose Estate, The Convival Feast, The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater, Columbia Valley, Oregon 2022**

US\$70 whiteroseestate.com

The debut Syrah bottling from this Willamette Valley estate known for Pinot Noir. Sourced from the Rocks District of Milton-Freewater, it balances ripe black cherry and plum flavours against a backdrop of smoky underbrush, flint and dried earth. Plush in texture but edged with angular acidity, it finishes long on supple tannins and hints of candied ginger and camphor. **Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 13.5% 



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