



California Central Coast Wine Tour

Class I – Syrah

On the first leg of our journey through California’s Central Coast wine region, we stopped at three small wineries: Cass Wines, Still Waters Vineyards and Clautiere Winery. The topic of discussion was a bold and complex red wine that is quickly gaining popularity in California and throughout the world – Syrah.

Cass Wines

At Cass Wines, we spoke to owner Steve Cass about characteristics of Syrah. Steve mentioned two main styles of wine made with this Rhône varietal: a complex style with flavors of earth, leather and smoke, and a fruitier style with strong cherry notes. “A lot of the wines that are doing really well tend more towards those cherry notes,” Steve explained. We also spoke to Steve about blending Syrah. When Syrah is blended with Mouvèdre and Grenache, it provides a strong tannin structure and an important spicy, smoky character. Meanwhile, Grenache adds strawberry notes and Mouvèdre adds still more spice.

When pairing wine with food, hospitality manager Erin du Fresne suggests that it’s important to “excite the palate.” Syrah, when paired with meat dishes like steak and lamb, does just that. Wine club manager Brandon Lyons agrees, adding that Syrah “is deep enough and complex enough that it goes with many different meals.” We got a great peak at Cass’s commercial kitchen, where they are known to host special dinners prepared by local chefs. Wrapping up the visit, Steve encouraged us to try lots of wines and to not just stick to what we know (often Cabernet and Chardonnay). There are lots of wines out there, and personal taste can change over time, so we should try everything.

Before heading on to the next stop, we learned that Shiraz is the Australian name for Syrah (the name is also found on wine labels from South Africa and New Zealand) and that the term varietal refers to a wine that is named after, and primarily made from, a single type of grape.

Still Waters Vineyards

At Still Waters Vineyards, we got a taste of what working on a vineyard is really like. Owner Paul Hoover describes himself as a grower and a winemaker, and believes

that winemaking is about 70% what he does in the field. Syrah vines at Still Waters, as well as all other varieties, are hand pruned and picked – in fact, everything on the family-run ranch is done by hand.

Paul describes Syrah as being a big wine that is dark in color. Known for its rich flavors, it is typically early to release, meaning that it requires less aging than other red varietals. Paul advised us to not be afraid to use two different wines in one meal. “I’ll start out typically with a white wine in a meal, with salad dishes and appetizers, and then almost always move into a red wine as I finish that meal,” he explained. Some of Paul’s favorite pairings with Syrah are wild game dishes, including duck, venison and elk.

We also spoke with Kasey Justus, the assistant winemaker and tasting room manager, who talked about the advantages of visiting small tasting rooms, especially in Paso Robles. “We try to go out of our way to make people feel comfortable,” she said, adding that the tasting room at Still Waters is a “very homey environment.” Kasey also encouraged us to try new things when we’re wine tasting – not all wines are the same, so if we don’t like a Syrah at one winery, we still might love it at the next.

It wasn’t long before we were outside in the vineyard with Paul, where he explained the process of grafting. When winemakers want to grow a new grape variety, they can use this process to change a vine from one varietal to another. The brains of the grape are in the fruit, so by attaching a piece of bud wood to a thick Cabernet Sauvignon trunk, Paul quickly changed the Cabernet Sauvignon vines into Sauvignon Blanc vines. This process is much faster than growing brand new vines, since it takes years for vines to develop thick, healthy trunks.

Before leaving for our last stop, we got an important tip. If a California wine label says that a wine is a single varietal, such as Syrah, then it only has to be at least 75% that varietal in the bottle. This allows winemakers to blend in other varieties of grapes to their final product. So just because a label says Syrah, Merlot or Chardonnay does not mean that it’s the only grape in the bottle. What makes this a bit confusing is that rules are different depending on what country, or even state, a wine is from. Every wine region in the world has different rules regarding labeling, some more lenient than others.

Clautiere Winery

At Clautiere Winery, we quickly saw why owners Claudine Blackwell and Terry Brady describe their creation as “a winery like no other.” Claudine fills the roll of Director of Fantasy, and has created several pieces of art that can be seen throughout the property. Highlights include a 6.5 foot sphere made of iridescent glass, a cube garden, and a handmade steel rod fence.

Terry is the winemaker at Clautiere, and he told us more about Syrah. He described the grape as being fairly large in size, and pointed out that Syrah has excellent

flavor intensity and color. Terry noted flavors of berries in his Syrah, but also identified a hint of coffee and chocolate, which he said was fairly unique. Flavors in Syrah also come from the barrels. At Clautiere, Terry uses French, Hungarian and American barrels, and he claims that “each one of those brings another aspect to the flavor profile of Syrah.” French barrels add vanilla tones, Hungarian barrels brings more smoke or even bacon fat flavors, and American barrels add the strongest oak flavors to the wine due to their rougher, open grain. Terry also pointed out that by blending several clones of Syrah, he is able to make a more complex, fine wine. He explained that a clone is an identified variation in a grape varietal that is recognized by the way it looks, grows or tastes.

Blends are an important part of the wine list at Clautiere, and Terry described some of the red wines that include Syrah. He suggested pairing Syrah with spicy Mexican or Italian dishes, since it has a peppery quality that is brought out by these foods. Syrah made in cooler climates tends to have more of these peppery and spicy flavors. We took one last look at the colorful tasting room before saying goodbye to an operation that clearly takes both its fun and its wine very seriously.

Syrah is a wonderful wine to experience, and Paso Robles is a great place to sample a wide variety of styles. Many wineries in the area are growing Rhône varietals like Syrah, and the wineries we visited are only three examples of the dozens of places that are open to the public. We had a great time and we’ll certainly be drinking more Syrah soon!

Fun Facts about Syrah:

Syrah is the most widely planted Rhône varietal in California.

Since the 1980’s, the total area of Syrah vineyards in California has increased from 1,000 acres to over 12,000 acres.

Syrah, or Shiraz, is the most widely planted red grape in Australia.

Despite similar names, Petit Sirah and Syrah are completely different varietals.

Picking Syrah grapes when they are slightly less ripe will help produce a wine that does not have overly strong fruit or jammy flavors.