

SAY "SYRAH," GET SULTRY

A long finish & rich mouth-feel make this Rhone varietal perfect for the holiday

By Jessica Yadegaran

Contra Costa Times

YOU COULDN'T get into Gary Danko. And bubbles give her the hiccups, as you learned from last year's sparkling rose pairing. All the more reason to skip Champagne tonight and pick up a bottle of velvety, voluptuous syrah.

Is there a sexier wine? Syrah is like garnets and amethysts swirling in chocolate. The alcohol's sky-high, where it should be on Valentine's Day. And the mouth-feel puts you in the mood.

"The beauty of syrah is that it's got a lot of complexity," says Mauro Cirilli, sommelier at Perbacco restaurant in San Francisco. "It is denser and richer than other reds, and the finish is very, very long."

It's meal-in-a-glass wine, so even a small, solo sip yields spice after spice on the palate. Depending on the style, expect clove, dark berries, loads of pepper and smoked meat.

In France, syrah is the backbone of the northern Rhone Valley's boldest wines. They're high in tannins, savory and earthy, with a medium-to-full body. In Australia, where the grape goes by shiraz, the style is fruity, juicy and spicy, with an inky color and full body. California syrahs are similar to Oz, where the warm climate yields higher alcohol content, typically around 13.5 percent. Now, back to that finish.

"It stays so long in your mouth, it's so concentrated and bold and rich, it excites your body," Cirilli says. "Who wouldn't want those descriptions in their tasting notes?"

Mike Phillips makes valentine-worthy syrah. The winemaker for Michael-David Winery in Lodi fell in love with syrah when he first planted the grapes in 1982. When he starting making the wine two years later, he became an early proponent of the varietal. The Rhone Rangers followed.

"It's my personal favorite," says Phillips, who makes multiple gold-medal-winners -- Earthquake Syrah and 6th Sense Syrah.

Phillips, who doesn't make thin wines -- "it's not something I believe in" -- explains how syrah's complexity and seductive nature starts in the vineyard.

"We let the grapes sit on the vines longer until they shrivel and concentrate themselves," Phillips says, adding that aging in French oak barrels provides elegance and structure. "We're not making raisins per se, but it reduces water in the berry by 10 or 20 percent, so you get more flavor."

This is the preferred way to extract juice. Some winemakers so seek to create that soft, full texture in syrahs that they manipulate the wine, removing water by mechanical means. The practice is illegal in Europe and rarely done in California.

Another reason Phillips loves syrah: "Good value," he says. "It can be more affordable than a bottle of Champagne, and very little is plenty."

In the end, it all goes back to that luscious mouth-feel, and what it does to us. David Stevens explains the effect of a full-bodied syrah by comparing it to dark chocolate.

"They're not simple one-notes, they're symphonies," says Stevens, who teaches wine chemistry through the UC Davis Extension Program. He also makes California Bubble Works, a sparkling cabernet sauvignon for Avventura Vintners in Napa.

"You take an organic compound, chocolate or wine, and they both have phenols, suites of flavors that are similar and invoke similar reactions," he says.

Let a piece of dark chocolate melt on your mouth. Taste that dark fruit and earth? It's like a good syrah. Wine has alcohol, which gives viscosity. Chocolate has fat. Chocolate contains acids. We know wine has lots of acids. And they both make us feel pretty loopy.

"They're even designed for the same purpose," Stevens says. "Syrah is that sort of nice accessible high-quality chocolate."

WHEN, WHERE TO SYRAH

You can drink these round, supple wines early (yes, tonight). Stick with 2003 or 2004 vintages.

From Australia, select wines from the Barossa or Hunter valleys.

In California, Napa and Lodi churn out wonderful Rhone-style expressions.

The cooler, coastal climates of Mendocino and Santa Barbara provide beautiful fruit-forward styles. Washington state's Columbia Valley is ideal, too, because of the pattern of heat -- mild frosts in the fall and spring and long summers.

SYRAH AND BLACK PEPPER MARINATED TRI-TIP

Serves 4-6

1 tri-tip (approximately 1-1 1/2pounds)

4 cups syrah, divided use

6 sprigs fresh thyme

4 sprigs fresh savory

1 clove garlic

1 shallot

6 green cardamom pods

1 stick cinnamon

2 cloves

1 bay leaf

Sea salt to taste

1 tablespoon coarse ground fresh black pepper

1/4 cup honey

Fleur de sel to taste

1. Pour 2 cups of syrah into a nonreactive saucepan and bring to a boil. Remove from the stove, and add thyme, savory, garlic, shallot, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves and bay leaf. Set aside to cool, allowing the flavors to infuse into the syrah.
2. Rub tri-tip with the coarse ground black pepper. Put the tri-tip in a plastic zipper-topped bag, and when the marinade has cooled, add it to the tri-tip and seal the bag. Marinate for 2-4 hours in the refrigerator.
3. Place the remaining 2 cups of syrah into a nonreactive saucepan and place on the stove over high heat. Reduce it until just 1/4 of a cup remains; add the honey and season to taste with sea salt. Set aside.
4. Light a barbecue with mesquite wood and allow the coals to heat up. Remove the tri-tip from the marinade and season well with sea salt. Place on the hot grill and cook to desired doneness. The time will vary depending on the size of the tri-tip, the heat of the grill and how you like your meat cooked.
5. The last 3-5 minutes before the tri-tip is done, brush with the syrah and honey reduction. This will give the meat a nice glaze. Be sure to monitor the heat of the grill, as too high a heat will cause the honey in the glaze to caramelize very quickly.
6. Allow the tri-tip to rest for at least 10 minutes prior to slicing. Thinly slice across the grain of the meat and sprinkle with a little fleur de sel. Serve immediately.

-- Chef Mark Dommen, One Market Restaurant.

Per serving: 610 calories, 33 g protein, 21 g carbohydrates, 27 g total fat, 11 g saturated fat, 110 mg cholesterol, 110 mg sodium, 0 fiber. Calories from fat: 40 percent.

-- Times analysis

SIX SYRAHS

Lewis Cellars 2004 Syrah Napa Valley: Spicy and inky with aromas of oak and blackberry, and subtle flavors of coffee and lavender. \$70.

Ojai Vineyard 2003 Syrah Santa Barbara County: Juicy and bold, with peppery northern Rhone characteristics. \$30.

Columbia Winery Syrah 2004 Columbia Valley: Bright plums, dark berries and earth on the nose, with smoke and black pepper on the palate. \$18.

Ravenswood 2004 Sonoma County Syrah: Jammy scents of boysenberry and black cherry cut by smoke and white pepper on the palate of this Rhone-style expression. \$20.

Cape Mentelle 2003 Shiraz: Earthy and meaty with hints of violet and pepper. Perfect example of Australian expression. \$25.

Chateau De Campuget 2004 Syrah: From the Costieres de Nimes region comes this accurate expression with dark grape flavors. \$15.