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By: Jon Bonne

This past weekend was the annual [Rhone Rangers](#) tasting in San Francisco, a gathering of many of the top American producers of Rhone-style wines: varietal Syrah, Grenache, Roussanne, Viognier and so very many blends. (As I [previously blogged](#), I was there in part to moderate two panels -- one on cool-climate Syrah, one on nontraditional blends, which in this case seemed to largely mean Cabernet and Syrah.)

The Rhone Rangers tasting is always a good chance to benchmark these types of wines. With about 100 wineries there this year, things were perhaps a bit more subdued but there are plenty of new names on the roster, which I take as a sign that there's momentum to keep growing the category. Still plenty of Syrah out there, but more Grenache, Grenache Blanc and Mourvedre. More Marsanne showing up.

Ten highlights along the way:

**2007 Arnot-Roberts Alder Springs Vineyard Syrah (\$60):** This northern Mendocino vineyard is getting quite the reputation for Syrah, and Forestville-based Arnot-Roberts is making tight-knit, perfumed wine from it. All three Arnot-Roberts were excellent, but this in particular had a racy, fleet-footed quality.

**2004 Clos Saron Heart of Stone (\$35):** Fiery, chewy, long-aged and hugely structured Syrah (with some Viognier) from the Sierra Foothills.

**2006 Kenneth Volk Enz Vineyard Mourvedre (\$36):** Aside from his Pinot, Ken Volk (ex Wild Horse) also makes an outstanding Mourvedre from this site in Lime Kiln Valley in San Benito County. Decomposed granite atop limestone, and the wine's mineral and lifted loamy highlights show off the very best side of Mourvedre.

**2006 Lagier Meredith Mount Veeder Syrah (\$50):** Carole Meredith (now a Vintners Hall of Fame inductee) and Stepher Lagier remain on point with their rough-and-tumble mountain Syrah. Bold stuff.

**2008 Lone Madrone La Mezcla (\$32):** Tablas Creek winemaker Neil Collins' own label is worth watching. This unusual mix of Grenache Blanc and Albarino finds that balance of mineral snap and a surprising weight for two grapes that are usually sharp as tacks.

**2007 Outpost Howell Mountain Grenache (\$40):** I never knew of Outpost as a source for Grenache, but this mountain version is all spice and leather, a darker effort in the Spanish style that moves it past its bright berry fruit.

**2007 Peay Estate Sonoma Coast Viognier (\$40):** The Peay wines are always standouts, but it's so hard to find good Viognier that this rare white of theirs is worth noting. Focused, textural and leaning toward lighter citrus and mineral, it's an example of finding a great (cold) climate for a grape that gets overripened almost by default.

**2006 Ramey Rodgers Creek Vineyard Sonoma Coast Syrah (\$60):** Say "David Ramey" to me and I wouldn't think Syrah, but this bottling from a cooler site near the Petaluma Gap (which also provides fruit for the Skylark and Spicerack Syrahs) has both the tarry, peppery notes that mark great aromatic Syrah and the refined grip and weight that you'd expect from a Ramey wine.

**2007 Rotie Cellars Northern Rhone Blend Syrah (\$35):** Walla Walla-based winemaker Sean Boyd (who also works with Waters and Greg Harrington of Gramercy Cellars) has this label as a tribute to the source of it all. (The Gothic type on the labels, reminiscent of a Cote-Rotie, is a love-it-hate-it kind of thing.) Rich chocolate notes are buoyed by a racy, tight-knit profile in a promising new Washington contender.

**2007 Treana Central Coast White Blend (\$25):** About half-half on Viognier and Marsanne, and a great use for both. Ripe peach and honeysuckle richness meet with clean lines and a taut, restrained profile.

***Y mucho mas:***

Some happy news here at Food & Wine Central: The Chronicle's Food and Wine sections were nominated Monday for best newspaper food section by the James Beard Foundation, a sign of the terrific work by our entire department during the past year.

What's more, my story last year about Abe Schoener and his [Scholium Project](#) was nominated for best wine writing. As happily stunned as I am to hear the news -- and see the competition, which is Alan Richman and Jay McInerney -- it's doubly a pleasure for that particular story, a personal favorite, to get the recognition.

**Also:** Just in case you haven't gotten to the list of wine and spirits nominees: California vintners Merry Edwards and John and Doug Shafer were nominated, along with cocktail master Dale DeGroff, Garrett Oliver of the Brooklyn Brewery and Julian Van Winkle III of Kentucky's Old Rip Van Winkle Distillery.

A full list of nominees is available [here](#).

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