

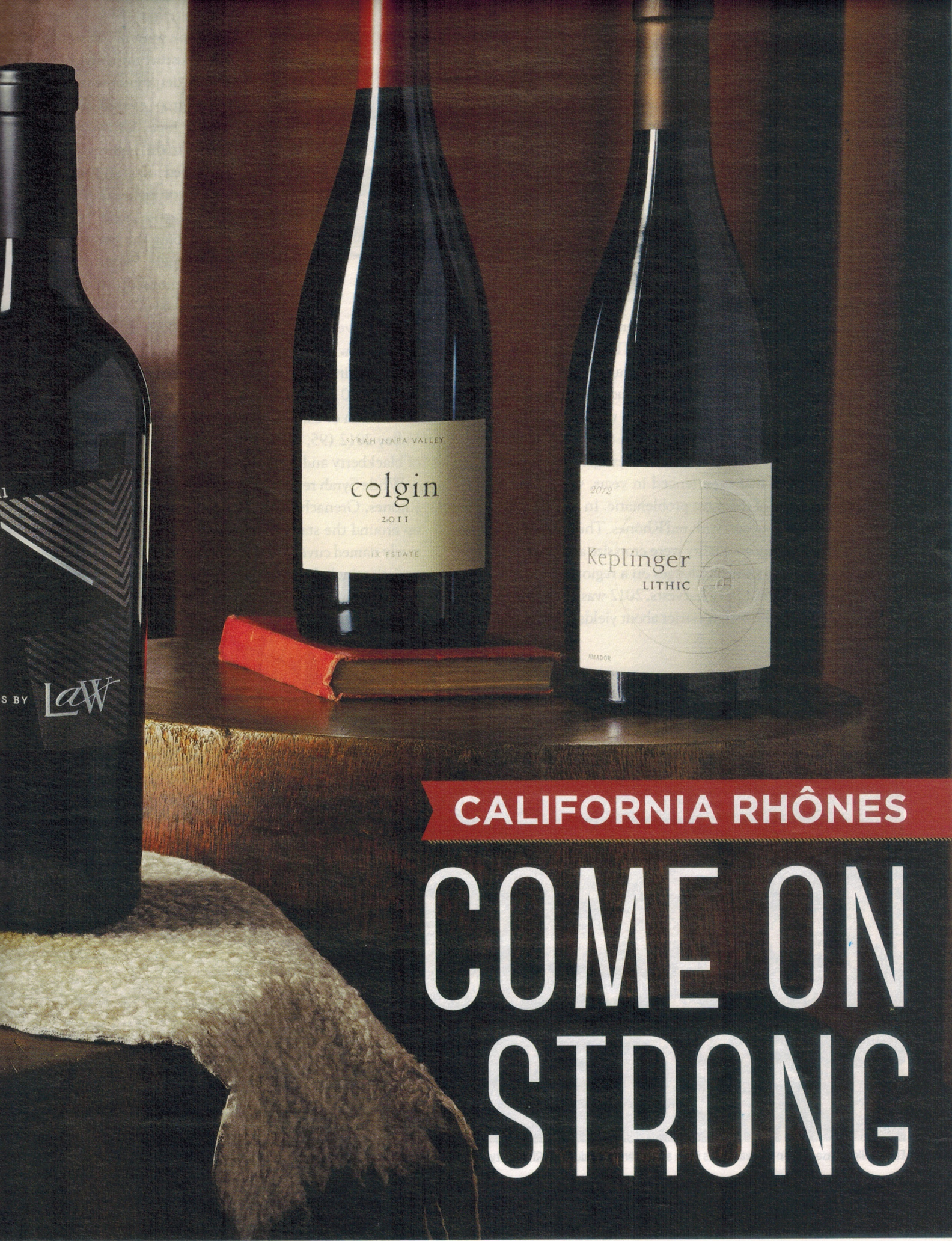
Wine Spectator



**PHOTOGRAPH BY
SUZANNE KANTAK**

PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE
LIBRARY BAR IN THE HUDSON
HOTEL, NEW YORK

California Rhône-style wines have seen
impressive gains in recent years, achieving
high quality in a diversity of styles.



S BY LAW

SYRAH NAPA VALLEY
colgin
2011
BISSEUX ESTATE

2012
Keplinger
LITHIC
AMADOR

CALIFORNIA RHÔNES

COME ON
STRONG

Farming practices can be a bit laid back in the foothills, but Keplinger sets a Napa-like high standard—and it's obvious in her wines. The Keplinger Syrah Fair Play Diamond Bar 2012 is bold and layered, with firm tannins cloaked over juicy blackberry and wild berry fruit, while the Caldera El Dorado and aforementioned Lithic Amador County are each distinctive Rhône-style blends offering a complex mix of flavors. All three rate 93 points (\$60).

A few mountain ridges over, in Auburn, Calif., professional race car driver Scott Pruett is finding equal success in the winemaking world. His 3-acre vineyard of Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon sits at an elevation of 1,000 feet above the American River. The Pruett Syrah Sierra Foothills Taylor's Reserve 2012 (95, \$46) shows enormous richness, with a remarkable display of powerful blackberry, black licorice and espresso flavors.

Though the foothills remains a sleepy wine community, the region seems ready for a higher profile. "There are a lot of young, creative and talented winemakers looking to the foothills to do interesting things," Keplinger says.

SONOMA

Mike Officer of Carlisle Winery says that the 2012 growing season in Sonoma was "about as perfect as one could hope for." From tasting the grapes in the vineyard, Officer expected the 2012s to be up-front reds and full of fruit, but that's not how they turned out.

"I was surprised initially by the amount of tannin in the '12s and how unwieldy and ageworthy they were," he says. "But now the fruit is coming more to the forefront." An excellent example is the Carlisle Syrah Russian River Valley Papa's Block 2012 (91, \$43), a firm, potent red with notes of dark berry, mocha and cigar box.

The 2012s also showcase the stylistic evolution the Carlisle Syrahs have undergone in recent years, shifting away from the big, jammy style of Australian Shiraz. "My approach has changed as I've gotten older and my palate has changed," Officer says. "I now favor a more savory Syrah, and we've transitioned to new vineyards that allow me to do that."

Senior editors James Laube and Tim Fish reviewed the wines for this report.

WHITES

Grenache Blanc challenges Viognier for star allure

BY MARYANN WOROBIEC

Aromatic Rhône-style white wines from California have been gradually increasing their presence in recent years, led by Viognier. But now an emerging star—Grenache Blanc—and a growing trend of blended wines are bolstering this category of whites, which also include Marsanne, Roussanne and Picpoul Blanc.

California Viognier has been touted as the "next Chardonnay" for decades. "I've been making Viognier since 1994," says Bonterra winemaker Bob Blue. "It was always thought, 'This is the next big thing.'" Yet the variety's hold on Rhône-style whites seems to be slipping. Although Viognier still dominates in both acreage and visibility (there is more Viognier planted in California than the other four grapes combined), a quarter of the more than 100 Rhône-style whites reviewed this year are Grenache Blanc, and another third are blends. This growing diversity, along with some new producers and bottlings, has given the category new life.

The big story is the emergence of Grenache Blanc, a grape that can produce wines that are both high in acidity and alcohol. Only available in California since 1999, the first bottlings of Grenache Blanc were odd—either overblown and high in alcohol or searingly

RATING VINTAGES OF CALIFORNIA RHÔNE-STYLE REDS

	Napa	Sonoma*	Paso Robles	Santa Barbara**		
2012	91-94	91-94	91-94	86-89	Record-sized crop with firmly tannic wines and some real beauties; should reward time in the cellar	NYR
2011	87	87	87	87	A damp, cool year led to mixed results. Off the pace of best years, yet there are pockets of success; early drinkers	Drink or hold
2010	93	93	97	87	A cool, late harvest, but amazingly ripe and full-bodied wines	Drink or hold
2009	92	93	95	92	Fabulous wines throughout despite a challenging season; the ripeness is there, even if it came late	Drink or hold
2008	91	91	98	91	A tough start ended with glorious wines statewide, rivaling 2007 for complexity, depth and finesse	Drink or hold
2007	95	92	96	95	Tremendous quality and uncommon complexity statewide; the best on record, along with 2006 and 2009	Drink or hold
2006	93	95	92	94	A golden vintage, fabulous across all regions, offering great diversity of styles	Drink or hold
2005	92	87	86	89	Intense, structured, high quality wines	Drink or hold

*Sonoma includes Alexander Valley, Dry Creek Valley, Russian River Valley, Sonoma Valley and Sonoma Coast AVAs

**Santa Barbara includes Santa Barbara, Sta. Rita Hills, Santa Maria Valley, Santa Ynez Valley and Edna Valley AVAs

A score range indicates preliminary analysis based on barrel samples and/or a limited sampling; many wines of the vintage not yet reviewed.

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended

Drinkability: "NYR" means not yet released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature.

Jeff Cohn has been a leader in the Rhône category for a while, but this year saw a new bottling from him, the Viognier Napa Valley 2 Guys 2 Barrels Stagecoach Vineyard 2012 (90, \$58), which he made in conjunction with Rhône producer Yves Gangloff. The two winemakers collaborated on every aspect of production, and the wine aged for nine months in new French oak barrels that Gangloff had a hand in designing.

Across the board, Rhône-style white wines deliver solid value. The average price of all whites reviewed this year was about \$30, and there are plenty of great values to be had for less than \$20, such as the Groundwork Grenache Blanc Paso Robles 2013 (88, \$16) and McManis Viognier River Junction 2013 (85, \$11). The Bonterra Viognier Mendocino County (2013: 86, \$14) is a perennial favorite, while the Novy Four Mile Creek White North Coast 2013 (87, \$15) is not only a good value, but also represents a blend of Viognier with non-Rhône-white grapes, here



For 20 years, Bonterra winemaker Bob Blue has been focused on producing high quality Viognier from the winery's organically farmed vineyards in Mendocino County.

Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Gris.

Even though Rhône whites are growing in both availability and popularity, the category remains small and harder to find compared with Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, whose ranks include a number of large-production, mass-market bottlings. Haas suggests that this is a benefit, since in a category driven by small producers, winemakers probably have closer contact with their curious, wine-loving customers.

Explaining Rhône whites to consumers has had a cumulative effect—more people know about these wines than five or 10 years ago. Moreover, an increasing number of wine lovers are open to trying new wines and experimenting. For people reaching for a glass of white wine, “Rhône whites are less unfamiliar than they were,” Haas says. “And ‘unfamiliar’ is less of a roadblock.”

Senior editor MaryAnn Worobiec is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California Rhône-style whites.

Recommended Rhône-Style Whites From California

More than 100 Rhône-style whites were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/033115. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

WINE	SCORE	PRICE		
CALIZA Kissin' Cousins Paso Robles 2012 Stylish, showing peach, pear and yellow apple flavors. Viognier blend.	92	\$28	NOVY Viognier Russian River Valley Sunny View Vineyard 2013	90 \$25
JADA XCV Paso Robles 2013 Intense and fragrant and very bold, with pear, peach and melon flavors. Roussanne blend.	91	\$35	Ripe, juicy and appealing, with peach, yellow apple and pear flavors.	
SKIPSTONE Viognier Alexander Valley 2012 Delivers a lush mouthful of apricot, pear and peach flavors.	91	\$48	QUIVIRA Roussanne-Viognier Dry Creek Valley 2012	90 \$32
TABLAS CREEK Patelin de Tablas Blanc Paso Robles 2013 Offers a bright mix of melon, peach, pear and honeysuckle notes. Grenache Blanc blend.	91	\$20	Very juicy, with a terrific mix of mango, papaya and ripe peach flavors.	
JEFF COHN Viognier Napa Valley 2 Guys 2 Barrels Stagecoach Vineyard 2012 Peach, pear and yellow apple flavors are ripe and rich, with soft acidity.	90	\$58	ROAR Viognier Santa Lucia Highlands Sierra Mar Vineyard 2012	90 \$40
FERGUSON CREST Viognier Santa Barbara County 2012 Balanced and pure, showing rich pear, peach and yellow raisin flavors.	90	\$28	Rich and complex, exhibiting flavors that are rich, smooth and round.	
JEMROSE Viognier Bennett Valley Egret Pond Vineyard 2012 Flavors of peach, apricot and yellow apple are ripe and lush.	90	\$32	SANS LIEGE Call to Arms Alta Colina Vineyard Paso Robles 2012	90 \$30
KINERO Roussanne Paso Robles Rustler James Berry Vineyard 2012 Focused and juicy, with apple, pear, peach, melon and pineapple notes.	90	\$30	Rich flavors of pear and melon show spice and citrus zest accents. Grenache Blanc and Roussanne.	
MIRAFLORES Viognier El Dorado 2012 Toast, mineral and spice notes lead to apricot and nectarine flavors.	90	\$20	TABLAS CREEK Roussanne Paso Robles 2012	90 \$35
			Intriguing, aromatic and refreshing, with lemon and peach flavors.	
			GROUNDWORK Grenache Blanc Paso Robles 2013	88 \$16
			Bright and crisp, with plenty of pure grapefruit flavors up front.	
			DI BRUNO Vino Bianco Santa Barbara County 2012	87 \$14
			Melon and peach flavors show a honeyed overtone, with a refreshing acidity. Grenache Blanc blend.	
			NOVY Four Mile Creek White North Coast 2013	87 \$15
			Juicy and bright, with lemongrass, melon, citrus and apple flavors. Viognier blend.	
			BONTERRA Viognier Mendocino County 2013	86 \$14
			Light and crisp, with a spicy edge to fresh peach and apple flavors.	
			MCMANIS Viognier River Junction 2013	85 \$11
			Shows honeyed peach and candied citrus flavors on a smooth body.	