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Winemaker Bryan Kane, right, of VIE Winery, pours at Hospice du Rhone 2008.

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Winemaker Bryan Kane, right, of VIE Winery, pours at Hospice du Rhone 2008. Bounty of wine at Hospice du Rhone

The 16th annual Hospice du Rhone wine event, held in May at the Mid-State Fairgrounds in Paso Robles, spotlights great Rhone and Rhone-style wines from around the world. That means there was no shortage of wines being poured over two days at the sold-out seminars and open tastings. Here are some of my observations; more next time:

- With summer coming on, I sought some refreshing white wines, like viognier, marsanne and roussanne. One of the most inexpensive (\$18) but ultimately satisfying viogniers was from North Coast-based Rosenblum Cellars; their 2007 Kathy's Cuvee viognier is actually made from Santa Barbara County grapes. Enticing floral aromatics lead the way, with flavors in the apricot and peach range, aided by hints of vanilla, cinnamon and tropical fruit.

- If anyone comes close to Qupe's Bob Lindquist in concocting delicious white Rhone blends it's big Bill Easton from Terre Rouge in the Sierra Foothills. The 2006 Terre Rouge Enigma is a combination of marsanne, viognier and roussanne, and a very pretty wine it is, with a myriad of synergistic and concentrated flavors topped off by a bright and lovely finish. And the 1998 version of Enigma is still going strong, having now become a lengthy and honeyed nectar, with great floral, honeysuckle and lanolin flavors that just won't quit.

- Winemaker Terry Culton at Paso Robles' Adelaida Cellars also knows how to put a refreshing blend together. His Adelaida 2006 estate white blend is three-quarters grenache blanc and one-quarter roussanne. The aromatics are of a clean mountain spring, with a hint of mineral; in the mouth, the honeydew melon flavors are creamy with good ripeness and a crisp, naturally balanced acidity.

- From Napa, Miner Family Winery poured a 2006 viognier, made from Simpson Vineyard grapes, that is at once sweet with ripe fruit but also savory with a floral and herbal bent. Fleshy on the palate, the wine shows plenty of honeysuckle, white gardenia and even some tropical fruit. Truly the epitome of viognier in California and a great example for other winemakers.

- Rosè is also a fine thirst quencher for summer. I found the 2006 Terre Rouge vin gris d'Amador, again from Sierra Foothills' winemaker Bill Easton, to be similar to, say, an Alma Rosa vin gris, except Terre Rouge utilizes Rhone reds rather than pinot noir. But like Alma Rosa, the wine is a serious quaff and a fine, dry, crisp rosè that will whet your whistle.

- The VIE 2007 Belle-Amie rosè, sourced from several Santa Barbara County vineyards, is a horse of a different color, so to speak. The 2007 version is extremely dark, looking like it wants to be a red wine. Winemaker Bryan Kane says they kind of accidentally let their rosè pick up more color than normal. But tasting the results, I'd say it was a happy accident. If there's such a thing as a strong and forceful rosè, this is it. A spicy nose starts it off; there's no petite strawberries and cream here. It comes on with raspberry, pomegranate and a hints of boysenberry, Provençal herb and melted road tar. Dark and brooding, it is nevertheless refreshing, very much in the mold of a Bandol rosè that can stand up to a host of flavorful foods coming hot off the summer grill.

- When was the last time you had a Tavel rosè? That is, a brilliantly red-colored wine from the southern French region of the same name, close to Avignon and just across the river from Chateauneuf-du-Pape. I thought so. I hadn't tasted Tavel in a while either. A luncheon at Hospice du Rhone offered rosè from two dozen top Tavel producers. I only got to half of them, but the 2006 and 2007 Tavel's knocked me out with their freshness, bright intensity of flavors and great acidity. Some names to look for are Chateau d'Aqueria, Domaine de la Mordoree' and Domaine La Rocaliere. The Tavel folks claim their area is "the king of rosè wine," and it's hard to argue with that: Rosè is the only wine they make there!

- Hospice du Rhone is also an opportunity to make new wine discoveries. Peay Vineyards is a producer I've been following for a while. They make cool-climate syrah on the Sonoma Coast, on a steep vineyard ridge only four miles from the Pacific Ocean. The Peays, brothers Nick and Andy, are the winegrowers, and Vanessa Wong (formerly of Peter Michael Winery) is the winemaker. The 2005 Peay La Bruma estate syrah shows high-toned red fruit aromatics along with a spiciness from 30 percent new French oak. The flavors are very pretty with black cherry, lavender, Smith Brothers cough drops and brown baking spices. Very modulated and balanced, it has flavor intensity but also a certain lightness of being. The 2005 Peay Les Titans estate syrah is one for the cellar. Cool-climate red fruit flavors emerge with airing, along with some additional blueberry and vanilla. But this syrah runs deep with a meatiness, as well as tobacco and dark earthy flavors underneath. A bigger and more tannic wine that will only blossom and get better with time in the bottle.

- Arnot-Roberts Wines is a name that is new to me, but that's probably because their production is minuscule, totaling fewer than 1,000 cases. Their syrahs are sourced from very cool-climate vineyards, along the Sonoma Coast and Carneros. The 2006 syrah, from Griffin's Lair Vineyard, has plenty of blackberry and raspberry on the nose and palate. Juicy and spicy with up front flavor oomph, it also seems pretty weighty with some bacon fat and meatiness in the background. The 2006 syrah from Clary Ranch is incredibly aromatic with both red and dark berries, as well as minerals and Asian spices. Raspberry, dark currant and sour cherry flavors on the palate are buffered by the spicy and floral nuances. The 2006 syrah, from Hudson Vineyard in Napa's Carneros district, is one of the best pure examples of syrah I've tasted recently; the deep purple blackberry and cherry fruit just saturate the taste buds with brightness and spice but also continue to echo all the way to the racy finish.

Wine expert Dennis Schaefer's column appears every other week in the Food section. E-mail him at life@newspress.com.