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Wine Adviser

## Still raising the glass for Rhone-style reds

By Paul Gregutt

Special to The Seattle Times

If we didn't have Doug McCrea making wine in Washington, we'd have to invent him. No one has been more focused or tireless when it comes to exploring wines made from Rhone Valley varieties.

And now that it seems half the winemakers in the state have jumped on the syrah bandwagon, McCrea, who planted some of the very first Washington syrah 15 years ago, remains way out in front of the pack, making such unusual varietal bottlings as roussanne, counoise and mourvedre.

When I sat down with him some years ago to talk syrah, McCrea enthusiastically spoke of its "animal side":

"Some people call it gamay, some call it road kill," he said, explaining that in his estimation, those animal aromas, combined with an earthy element, add olfactory appeal to the natural juicy robustness of the grape.

McCrea has been making five different syrahs for some years now, and each is designed to express a different style: Australian shiraz, French Côte Rotie, straight-ahead Washington, etc. He owns no vineyards but sources his fruit from great sites on Red Mountain, the Yakima Valley and Horse Heaven Hills.

McCrea made a bold, buttery chardonnay for many years, but quit after 2002 to focus exclusively on Rhone whites to complement the reds. His viognier and roussanne are flavorful, appealing wines, though it is McCrea's red wines that deservedly command center stage.

### Closing Up

#### Wine Country Celebrations

**Wine Country Celebrations:** This weekend, the third annual Wine Country Celebrations is being held at a variety of Eastern Washington locations. Winemaker dinners, concerts, a golf tournament and a grand auction are among the events planned. For ticket information, call 206-285-0214 or visit [www.winecountrycelebrations.com](http://www.winecountrycelebrations.com).

**Rhone Rangers Grand Tasting:** The Second Annual Rhone Rangers Grand Tasting is scheduled from noon to 5 p.m. Aug. 6 at McCrea Hill, Seattle Center. As with last year's inaugural event, there will be seminars and tastings for the trade and the general public. It's a great chance to see how our Washington syrahs stack up against the California crowd, and ticket sales benefit Forester. For information, call 707-462-0943 or email [info@rhonerangers.com](mailto:info@rhonerangers.com).

**The Auction of Washington Wines:** The Auction of Washington Wines has moved its dates forward this year, to Aug. 11-13, adding an evening of winemaker dinners to the scheduled events. As always, the Thursday picnic and Saturday auction will be hosted by Château St. Hubert in Woodville, and proceeds benefit a nonpartisan care at Children's Hospital & Regional Medical Center and the Washington Wine Education Foundation. For ticket information, call 206-667-0461, Ex. 236.

### Pick of the week

**McCrea Cellars 2003 Syrah (\$25):** Give this wine a good airing — decanting if possible, or at least a vigorous swirl in the glass. As it slowly opens, it reveals tart red fruit with plenty of power, lots of acid and tannin, and some tarry, rubbery, redolent notes. It's a young wine that delivers a lot of flavor for the price.

#### Other recommended wines

**McCrea Cellars 2004 Roussanne (\$22):** Plump, juicy and packed with flavors of peach, lime, pear and Red Delicious apples.

**McCrea Cellars 2005 "American" Syrah (\$49):** The best I have tasted and Ciel du Cheval on Red Mountain. McCrea's American-looking wine has an Australian shiraz style, with lots of vanilla cookie notes from the American oak barrels.

**Adelaida Cellars 2003 HMH Rhone Pinot Noir (\$28):** From one of the oldest pinot vineyards in California (Hoffman Mountain Ranch), this marvelously fragrant, elegant wine is consumed not only for Paso Robles but for the entire state. Other than California's Josh Jensen, I can think of no one else making California pinot in such a profoundly elegant style.



DOUG MCCREA AT THE SEATTLE TIMES PHOTO FROM DOUG MCCREA OF MCCREA CELLARS makes five different syrahs, each designed to express a different style.

In 1999, he copied Jim Holmes into planting mourvedre and counoise at Ciel du Cheval on Red Mountain. The intent was to use them primarily in McCrea's southern Rhone-styled "Sirocco" blend. But in 2002 and again in 2003, he also bottled them as separate varietals, creating unique wines that offer consumers a rare chance to taste these two grapes straight up (almost — a bit of syrah is blended into each).

Made in limited quantities, the 2003 McCrea Mourvedre and 2003 McCrea Counoise are available at a few select wine shops for \$28. The mourvedre is a forward, fruity, spicy/sweet red wine with plenty of charm. Flavors of berry pie, cracker and vanilla cream swirl through the mouth; it's a bit like drinking pie. The counoise is more jagged but also more interesting, showing tart pie-cherry fruit and a long, tangy finish.

You can taste many of these new releases from 4 to 6:30 p.m. Friday at Seattle Wine Co., 1950 130th Ave. N.E., Bellevue.

### Paso Robles wineries

These striking Rhone Ranger wines from California might look to Paso Robles. It's gorgeous wine country, located just a bit north of the Central Coast region showcased in the film "Sideways." The Paso Robles AVA is home to more than 100 wineries, 27,000 acres of vineyard and a wide range of soils and micro-climates.

It is so diverse, in fact, that more than 55 wine-grape varieties are successfully cultivated there, and wine styles are equally varied. It's a good news/bad news situation. There are so many different wines and styles, there is sure to be something for everyone's taste. But putting a simple identity stamp on Paso is virtually impossible.

One thing it does not have much of is pinot noir. Paso vineyards are generally warmer and drier than their central-coast neighbors to the south. Here it is zinfandel, syrah and especially the Bordeaux red grapes that are widely grown; cabernet sauvignon and merlot account for almost 60 percent of all plantings. But rather than stick with traditional Bordeaux blends, Paso's more adventurous young winemakers are crafting cabryrah hybrids.

Those wines, along with some very pleasant Rhone-style reds and a rare Paso Robles pinot, stole my heart at a recent tasting of wines from 30 or so of the region's wineries.

A few of the larger wineries, such as J. Lohr, Eberle and Peachy Canyon, will be familiar names to Northwest wine drinkers. The cabernets of Justin Vineyards enjoy a cult following, and the Rhone blends from Tablas Creek have raised the quality bar for the entire region. But I was particularly happy to make the acquaintance of two smaller properties whose wines are well worth seeking out: L'Aventure and Adelaida Cellars.

L'Aventure is the project of Stephan Aweil, a transplant from Bordeaux who fell in love with Paso Robles after a months-long search for the perfect terroir. He was looking for "virgin land" and freedom from the regulations that stifle experimentation in France. L'Aventure is the happy result. These are immense, seductive, saturated wines of incredible power. They epitomize the hedonistic Robert Parker style — past vintages of L'Aventure's Optimum (\$45), Estate Cuvée (\$80) and Côte à Côte (\$75) have scored 91-94 points in Parker's influential newsletter.

Massive wines with huge levels of alcohol, layers of new oak and sappy, concentrated fruit, the new vintages of all three of these wines will appeal to anyone who loves the over-the-top style. If there is a criticism to make, it is that they are tiring wines to drink, heavy and heady. Yet they are so incredibly seductive that you can't stop drinking them.

At the other end of the spectrum stylistically, but an equally fine expression of Paso Robles fruit, are the wines of Adelaida Cellars. This is one of the region's older wineries, and its hilltop location and calcareous soils (with vineyards up to 2,300 feet above sea level) give its wines a distinctly different profile. Lighter in color and weight than their peers, they favor elegance over power, without sacrificing length or complexity. The Adelaida Rhone Red is a beautiful effort, and its HMH Estate pinot noir recalls some of the great Calem pinots at a fraction of the cost.

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