



## *Podea, or Unhand the Maiden, Sirrah!*

I am deeply passionate about Syrah and have been toasted head over heels for the grape and the wine for quite some time now. But with the anxiety of any lover comes the fear that I may, *we* may, soon be losing her to a bigger, stronger rival, in this case a gang of stalwart and bold Antipodean stylists<sup>189</sup>—rugbyers to a man, who talk loudly, ameliorate liberally, and carry a big schtick.<sup>190</sup> In fact, *she* (*la* Syrah is unique in being one of the very few named *vinifera* grape varieties that take the feminine article in French, in contrast to *le* virile Petit Verdot or *le* manly Mourvèdre) is really not mine to lose. I do find that she is lately changing in ways that I don't really understand. She has taken on a different style, one that is brash, saucy, and frankly a little over-the-top. She's changed her perfume and is wearing way too much makeup. I can barely recognize the elegant lady; tarted up (better living through acid-base chemistry), the lady is a tramp. And while she may be unchaste, I see when observing the proliferation of floor stacks of brightly colored labels, with their all too piquant nomenclature, that she is certainly not unchased.

Let's put the fancy romantic palaver aside and talk about the lady in red herself, that is to say, *la* Syrah. There has been a lot of discussion lately of Syrah becoming “the next Merlot,” and, frankly, that prospect fills me with significant dread. I believe Syrah has great potential for California, but I am equally persuaded that, as with Merlot, indeed with virtually all the vinous *nouvelles vagues* that have swept our trend-conscious state, given half an opportunity to muck it up we inevitably will.<sup>191</sup> How will the New World stuff up Syrah? How could a grape variety that has a history of two thousand years in a single location, and that was praised by Pliny for its unique fragrance of violets, be in clear and present danger? Cue the Antipodeans.

Syrah, proper Syrah, is a remarkably complex, seductive wine that harmonizes superbly with modern fusion cuisine. But I worry that too few American palates will now ever bother to

<sup>189</sup>. Not too long after I began my efforts with Rhône grapes in the New World, there formed a rather loose association of California producers with similar interests, the so-called Rhône Rangers. The roster of wineries in Cali (as the Aussies call it) now producing wines from Rhône grapes has increased perhaps fiftyfold since then, but the dominant style is now so deeply deformed by Antipodean sensibility (perhaps via Oz-mosis?) and the market segment now so competitive for market share, that the group might more accurately be called the “Testosterhône Rangers.” <sup>190</sup>. Their ameliorations include the whole kitchen sink of technical winemaking tools—acidulation, must concentrators, reverse osmosis, wood chips, you name it. By *schtick*, I am referring to their goofy labels and piquant habits of wine naming, but this is certainly the pot calling the *bouilloire noire*. <sup>191</sup>. There actually is an Australian Shiraz called Duck Muck with a cult following.

learn what real Syrah actually tastes like. The Australian stylistic paradigm of Syrah—“Shiraz” as it is so piquantly called in Antipodea—has quietly become the dominant one. Why? First guess is that American critics tend to reward ultraripe wines that taste like *bombas de fruta*. In fact, I have a pet theory, utterly unproved, that we, as primates, heck, even as mammals, likely are genetically predisposed to prefer the flavors of ultraripe fruit, whether a banana, a mango, or a grape. And in the case of wine, it is not necessarily a matter of the degree of sweetness of the grapes, though the very intense fruity esters are generally associated with grapes that attain *surmaturité*; rather, it may have more to do with the perception of softer tannins that one finds in seeds given more time to ripen. The fact that the wine smells like Mom's kitchen after she has put up some raspberry jam doesn't hurt either. California winemakers have even taken to calling their Syrah Shiraz. Can bright yellow or orange labels be too far behind?<sup>192</sup> On very grumpy days, I conceive of Shiraz as a pernicious weed crowding out the strange, rare, and beautiful Syrah specimens found in such corners as the rock-walled terraces of Côte Rôtie.

They seem so disarmingly benign with their “G'days” and “No worries, mates.” But beneath their apparently artless geniality and bonhomie, the Aussies are very cool and calculating customers indeed. They have been waging a hugely successful war for the hearts, minds, palates, and wallets of the Anglo-Saxon consumer with their Shiraz, so-called, a wine made from a grape that is genetically identical to Syrah but has little to do with the sublime Old World exemplars. They have clearly shown that nurture wins out over nature, at least at the cash register, and have been fiendishly efficient in producing a wine with a taste and texture profile that somehow greatly resonates with the Anglo-Saxon palate. Or maybe it's the cute mammals and the orange labels.

So, in the interest of really understanding what we are up against, and in order to outline a course correction for the broken-guardrail, seriously-off-road, into-the-bushes, errant walk-about into which we are heading, I have prepared a little primer outlining the salient differences between Shiraz from Antipodea and proper Syrah from what I call Podea, which is to say, anti-Antipodea. Doris Day once sang “*Que Syrah, sera,*” but we cannot afford to be so *laissez-faire*.

**PS = Proper (Podean) Syrah      AS = Antipodean Shiraz**

**PS:** Nomenclature of wine is usually determined by the geographical situation of the vineyard.

**AS:** Nomenclature of wine is determined by the following formula: Cute or piquant animal name + geographical feature<sup>193</sup> (for example, Wallaby Ridge, Roo's Leap, Madfish Bay, Wombat Gorge, and so on).

<sup>192</sup>. Bonny Doon Vineyard produces an impeccable Central Coast Syrah, *Le Pousseur*, with a rather bright shiny yellow label. <sup>193</sup>. If this formula is not employed, then a reference to an obscure World War I cavalry regiment or to an equally obscure vine pathology will also suffice. There is an Australian Shiraz with the rather macabre name of Dead Arm.

**PS:** Fundamental expression of the wine is elegant, feminine, and stylistically allied with Burgundy.

**AS:** Stylistically allied with raspberry motor oil.

**PS:** Primary growing area is rich in cultural history dating back to Roman times.

**AS:** Region was settled primarily by an ex-convict population.

**PS:** Grape variety: *la* Syrah, sometimes called Petite Syrah or Serine in Côte Rôtie, though no relation (of course) to Petite Sirah in California.

**AS:** Grape variety: Shiraz, mate. And assigning a gender to a bloody grape? Sounds a bit left-handed, if you ask me. I don't have to worry about you pitching for the other side now, do I, mate?

**PS:** The greatest Syrah vineyards are located in close proximity to Lyons, the locus of French gastronomy.

**AS:** Throw another roadkill emu on the barbie.

**PS:** Alcohol is typically 12.0–12.5 percent.

**AS:** Do not open bottle in presence of open flame.

**PS:** Eminently sippable and drinkable.

**AS:** Typically gulped, but truth be told, one glass'll do you, mate.

**PS:** Capable of expressing *terroir* for a French person.

**AS:** Capable of instilling terror in a French person.

**PS:** Seduces with its elegant perfume.

**AS:** Rapes and pillages the palate.

**PS:** Detectable presence of minerality, and, in the extreme case of Cornas, the sensation of being taken for granite.

**AS:** Marked lack of minerality, substituted by palpable presence of big tits, sorry, that would be big *chips*.<sup>194</sup>

**AS:** *Parfum de chêne*.

**PS:** *Parfum de chien*.

**AS:** Parker friendly.

**PS:** *Par coeur* friendly.

**PS:** *Brettanomyces* science fair experiment coupled with reductive style—bring in da funk.

**AS:** “International” style—*frewt*-driven, accessible.

**PS:** Firm, sometimes slightly green tannins.

**AS:** Generally soft, or “melted,” tannins.

**PS:** Cynical sugar additions.

**AS:** Cynical tannin and acid additions.

<sup>194</sup> It is common practice in the “crafting” of confectionary Shiraz to add oak chips (as well as God knows what else) to the wine.

**PS:** Primary flavors: white pepper, anise, smoked meat, bacon fat, and licorice.

**AS:** Primary flavors: blackberry sundae and American oak.

**PS:** Complex, shifting flavors and breathtaking aromatic development.

**AS:** No dramas, mate.

**PS:** Appellation is difficult to pronounce and impossible to remember. Labeling requirements: dull gray or matte color, obscure or cluttered Gothic typography.

**AS:** Name of wine is related to a cute mammal. Color of label: bright orange or yellow, information readily readable, though appearing often on a diagonal axis.

**PS:** The wine celebrates the unique characteristics of the vintage.

**AS:** The wine is usually palatable every single goddamn year.

**PS:** Commercially iffy. Who can pronounce the names of the appellations, much less remember which years are the “good” ones, which ones the dicey ones?

**AS:** Commercially successful. Who can resist charming marsupials and/or brightly colored labels?

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It is a pity that people in this country are mystified about what proper Syrah should taste like.<sup>195</sup> There is, at least for me, such a radically different quality to these two antipodal, as it were, styles of Syrah that it's almost as if appreciation of them takes place in different parts of the brain.<sup>196</sup> I often wonder what the truly significant barrier to the appreciation of Old World wines is, whether it is really some element of the wine itself—“harder” or “greener” tannins<sup>197</sup>—or whether consumers have already made up their minds

not to enjoy the wines before tasting them, in the way that children may be psychologically ill-disposed to the genus *Greenus* and species *vegetabilis*. I suspect the way the wine is framed for consumers creates certain expectations, and the French effort to exalt *terroir* in their marketing efforts may have the unintended consequence of turning off American consumers who anticipate that the wine will be “unfriendly” and too challenging. *Terroir* may well mean to some: “Here is your broccoli; it's good for you.”

<sup>195</sup> It is my somewhat improvable hypothesis that far too much blowsy, overblown Syrah has entered the American market, turning off Americans to a perfectly wonderful grape variety before they have had the chance to really get to know it. I have recently heard the latest variation of a very old joke: “What's the difference between a case of Syrah and a case of the clap?” “Eventually the clap will go away.” <sup>196</sup> This may not be utterly far-fetched, as many complex cognitive tasks occur simultaneously in multiple areas of the brain. It is not immediately obvious which sets of aromas (fruity esters versus earthier, more mineral-like aromas) fire in precisely which sectors, but I would put my money on any claim that the olfactory product of the Aussie efforts lands squarely in the brain stem, the old reptilian brain. Perhaps the more complex, earthier smells trigger there as well as in other sectors—the amygdala and hippocampus, parts of the limbic system associated with emotion and memory. For me, there is an elusive, unnamable emotion, just below the surface of rationalization, that systematically arises when I taste a *vin de terroir*. <sup>197</sup> Certainly European wines are “earthier,” which is a code word for funkier—replete with aromas generally associated with country matters—and therefore a bit discomfiting to the prissy or squeamish. I imagine that appreciating “earthy” wines is a little bit like delving into the unconscious. Some people are absolutely fascinated with the process of excavation, and others are very happy just not to go there.