

PROMISING NEW Producers

BY MARYANN WOROBIEC

Dozens of new California Rhône producers emerge each year, drawn by the adaptability of Rhône grapes to the state's diverse winegrowing regions. This report profiles 10 noteworthy newcomers, an eclectic mix that includes a former pro football player, restaurateurs, and business professionals pursuing second careers. They hail from as far north as Sonoma, as far south as Santa Barbara, and out to Calaveras County in the Sierra Nevada Foothills. Many on this list have the potential to make it big with Rhône varieties, but may be hard to find; most are made in small quantities and are best obtained directly from the winery.

Big Basin

Bradley Brown worked as a business developer and marketer in Silicon Valley's high-tech industry for 14 years before shifting to wine. In 1998, Brown purchased 150 acres in the Santa Cruz Mountains that rise above Silicon Valley, developing 10 of them into vineyards with John Alban as mentor. Brown also sources grapes from sites in the Santa Lucia Highlands of Monterey County.

91	Syrah Santa Lucia Highlands Fairview Ranch 2005	\$45	220 cases
89	Syrah Santa Cruz Mountains Rattlesnake Rock 2005	\$54	340 cases

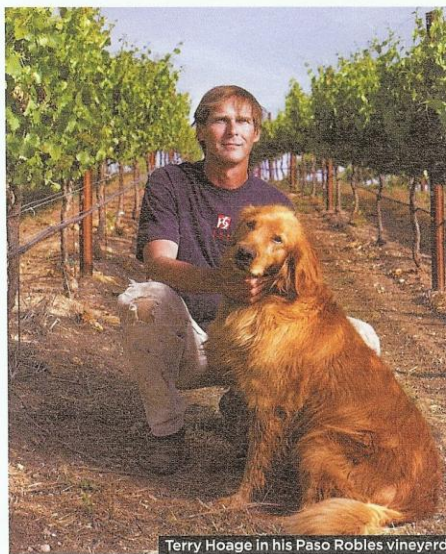
Terry Hoage

Terry Hoage is a former NFL defensive back who played for 13 seasons and six teams. In 2002, Hoage and his wife, Jennifer, bought a 26-acre ranch in Paso Robles, with 18 acres planted to Grenache and Syrah. At first, they set aside grapes to make a hobby wine, just three barrels' worth in 2002. But by the 2005 vintage, they were keeping all the grapes to themselves and had built their own winery; and in 2007, they crushed 2,200 cases worth of wine. Their bottling names play on terms from both wine and football: The Hedge refers to a pruning technique as well as a feature of the stadium at the University of Georgia, Hoage's alma mater, and The 46 is a tribute to the 4-6 defense of Hoage's former coach Buddy Ryan.

92	Syrah Paso Robles The Hedge 2005	\$45	750 cases
91	Grenache-Syrah Paso Robles The 46 2005	\$40	440 cases

Jonata

The team behind Screaming Eagle's \$500 bottles of cult Napa Cabernet produces Jonata (pronounced ho-NA-ta). Before he purchased Screaming Eagle in 2006, Charles Banks (a money manager for NBA players and other athletes) bought a 600-acre property in Santa Barbara County's Santa Ynez Valley. These first wines are from young



Terry Hoage in his Paso Robles vineyard

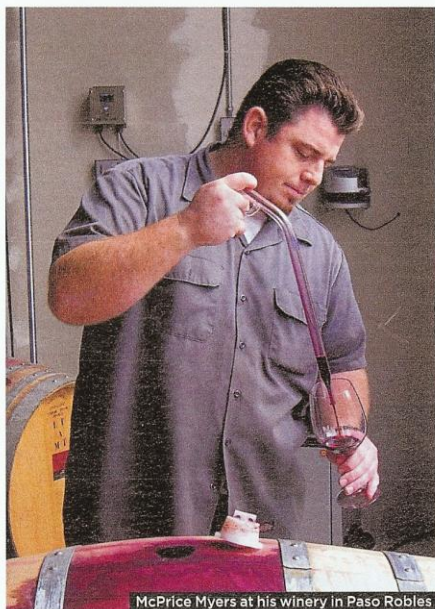
vines planted in 2000, and the future looks promising with winemaker Matt Dees and renowned consulting enologist Michel Rolland in charge of the winemaking.

89	Syrah Santa Ynez Valley La Sangre de Jonata 2005	\$125	700 cases
88	El Corazón de Jonata Santa Ynez Valley 2005	\$85	870 cases

Kaena

Kaena founder Mikael Sigouin, a native Hawaiian, makes Rhône varieties for his own label and as assistant winemaker at Fess Parker Winery. The Grenache from Kaena, which means "potential for greatness" in Hawaiian, is the star of his proprietary lineup, but the Hapa (another Hawaiian term, meaning "of mixed descent") is a delicious blend of Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre. Sigouin purchases grapes solely from Santa Barbara County vineyards.

92	Grenache Santa Ynez Valley 2005	\$25	50 cases
91	Hapa Santa Ynez Valley 2005	\$34	150 cases



McPrice Myers at his winery in Paso Robles

Krupp Brothers

This label's Black Bart Syrah shares a name with one of its founders and is also a nod to the gentleman bandit who robbed stagecoaches in the 1800s. Brothers Jan and Bart Krupp own the 500-acre Stagecoach Vineyard in Napa Valley, and though its grapes are sold to dozens of iconic Napa brands, the Krupps make a number of wines from it as well. The wine is cofermented with a touch of Viognier, giving it an aromatic profile. Krupp Brothers also produces a good Marsanne-based white called Black Bart's Bride.

91 Syrah Napa Valley Black Bart Stagecoach Vineyard 2005 \$52 1,219 cases

McPrice Myers

McPrice Myers, who had a previous career managing specialty grocery stores, founded his own label in 2002, when only 27 years old. He had no experience beyond enjoying other people's wines and volunteering at harvest. Additionally, Myers and Russell From (whose Herman Story Wines should also be on your look-for list) have created a brand called Barrel 27, which features Rhône varietals as well.

93 Grenache Santa Barbara County L'Ange Rouge 2005 \$32 435 cases

Prospect 772

Calaveras County, in the Sierra Nevada Foothills, is known more for its Gold Rush heritage than for grapegrowing, but that didn't stop Ron Pieretti and Wendy Sanda from developing a vineyard on a 25-acre parcel near the town of Angels Camp. Master of California Rhône wines Jeff Cohn, of JC Cellars, is consulting winemaker, and the debut wines—The Brat (a blend of Grenache and Syrah) and The Brawler (a Syrah and Viognier combo)—are stunning.

93 The Brawler Calaveras County 2005 \$36 150 cases

91 The Brat Calaveras County 2005 \$36 150 cases



John Lancaster (left) and Robert Perkins of Skylark

Relic

Husband-and-wife team Mike Hirby and Schatzi Throckmorton debuted Relic's first Rhône wines in 2003, but a large part of their inventory—including two bottlings from 2004—was lost in a wine warehouse fire in Vallejo, Calif., in 2005. "Things have only gone better for us since then," says Hirby. He and Throckmorton met at a wine tasting, and the two have already made their mark on the wine world—Hirby was assistant winemaker at Behrens & Hitchcock and now consults for a slew of others. Throckmorton acts as general manager for both Behrens & Hitchcock and Erna Schein. "Syrah can wear the winemaker's touch even a little bit more," Hirby says. "It can be like a Shiraz, massively rich, or like a Pinot Noir, much more delicate, and everything in between." Relic will debut additional Rhône wines with the 2007 vintage, including a blend of Grenache and Mourvèdre from Napa and a Viognier from Mendocino.

94 Syrah Mendocino County Alder Springs Vineyard 2005 \$54 115 cases

92 Syrah Napa Valley Richard Perry Vineyard 2006 \$49 115 cases

Rudius

When Jeff Ames, who grew up in Tennessee and Alabama, caught the wine bug, he left the South to work a harvest in Oregon, then settled in Napa in 1999. He was assistant to consulting winemaker Thomas Brown on numerous projects before becoming head winemaker at Tor Kenward Family Wines in 2003, where he made some terrific Syrahs under the Rock label. Rudius is Ames' own project, and this Syrah comes from a 2.5-acre vineyard in the cool Russian River region of Sonoma.

88 Syrah Russian River Valley 2005 \$35 192 cases

Skylark

Skylark's John Lancaster and Robert Perkins are prime examples of the recent trend of restaurateurs turning to winemaking. The two met at San Francisco's famed Boulevard restaurant, where they both still work, as wine director and sommelier. Their portfolio comprises mostly Rhône varietals, made in what Lancaster calls a ripe, juicy, polished style and priced reasonably. The partners don't own any vineyards, instead taking advantage of the contacts they've made with growers and winemakers over the years.

90 Syrah Dry Creek Valley 2005 \$27 250 cases