

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

November 2026

CLASS E5: Dry Red Rhône Style

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AFTER READING THESE NOTES YOU SHOULD KNOW:

- the BCGWJ definition of Class E5 – Dry Red Rhône Style and recognize which grape varieties may form the required 85% of the wine.
- the principal sensory characteristics of syrah, grenache and mourvèdre and understand the different roles they play in a GSM blend.
- the broad old world and new world expressions of syrah, while recognizing that these are tendencies rather than absolute categories.
- the typical characteristics of cooler-climate and warmer-climate examples of syrah.
- the characteristics of syrah from areas outside of France, including Canada.

BCAWA DEFINITION OF CLASS E5: Rhone Style Dry Red

A dry red table wine made from at least 85% of one or more of the following grape varieties: Syrah (Shiraz), Grenache (Garnacha), Mourvèdre (Monastrell), Carignan, Cinsault, Alicante Bouschet, or Petite Sirah (Durif). Blends may also contain any other varietal permitted in Châteauneuf-du-Pape; the remaining 15% may be any ingredient.

Note: BCAWA / BCGWJ includes Petite Sirah (Durif) in Class E5, although it is not one of the permitted varieties of Côtes-du-Rhône AOC.

INTRODUCTION

The Rhône Valley has a rich wine history dating back to Roman times but today it is recognised for producing world-renowned single-varietal wines in the north and complex blended wines in the south. In the north, syrah is the only permitted red grape, while in the south grenache is the dominant grape, supported by syrah and mourvèdre (GSM). Other grapes are included in the wines produced in the south. For example, in the case of Châteauneuf-du-Pape AOC winemakers can choose from 13 different varieties. However, these notes will focus on the three varietals making up the GSM blend that can be found in wines of this class, with a specific focus on syrah.

THE GRAPES

Syrah (aka shiraz)

Syrah has relatively late budburst, a short ripening-to-maturity period and a late harvest. It is vigorous but relatively low in fertility, with small-to-medium berries and large clusters. It is a sun-loving variety, but excessive heat can push it toward over-ripeness.

Syrah is deeply coloured with a medium plus to full body. Common fruit aromas and flavours include black current, blackberry, black cherry, blueberry, plum and berry compote. Cooler examples may show more red fruit. Herbal and floral notes are also found in syrah, such as black pepper, green peppercorn,

violet/lavender, sage, eucalyptus, licorice and anise. Cooler climates may also produce savoury and earthy notes like black olive, smoked meat, bacon, cured meat, leather and graphite. Finally, the impact of oak and maturation may result in additional aromas and flavours such as smoke, cigar box, vanilla, coffee, chocolate and sweet tobacco. Moderate-to-high acidity and medium-high to high tannin are common; alcohol and fruit weight rise with ripeness.

Grenache (aka garnacha)

Grenache is a heat-loving variety whose expression can range from relatively light and low in tannin to full-bodied, high-alcohol and richly fruity with notes such as sweet black cherry or kirsch, red and dark berries, plum and dried fruit; fig can emerge with ripeness or age. Savoury/spice notes such as white pepper, licorice, black olive, tobacco and mocha are also common and garrigue—thyme, rosemary, sage and other resinous Mediterranean herbs—may be a distinctive regional note.

Grenache is generally softer and less tannic than syrah or mourvèdre, with moderate acidity and potentially high alcohol because the grape accumulates sugar readily. Warmth, generosity, fruit and alcohol are often more obvious than colour or firm tannin.

Mourvèdre (aka monastrell / mataro)

Mourvèdre is a Spanish-origin variety that ripens late and needs heat and sunlight; when fully ripe it contributes colour, tannin, alcohol, savoury complexity and longevity to blends.

It is often less overtly fruity than grenache with dark and red fruit, plum and berry notes.

Savoury/earthy notes such as game, leather, earth, meat, spice can be present.

Mourvèdre is a high tannin, moderate acidity and potentially high alcohol wine; it can supply backbone and length to a GSM blend.

A useful judging shorthand is: Grenache supplies generosity—fruit, warmth and alcohol; Syrah supplies colour, pepper, savoury character, acidity and tannin; Mourvèdre supplies structure, dark/savoury fruit, tannin and complexity.

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY OF THE RHÔNE VALLEY

The history and geography of the Rhône Valley have been clearly documented in a number of previous presentation notes that can be found here: <https://bcgwj.ca/rhone/> The previous notes also review the history of the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) system, the different appellations found in the Rhône Valley, including different crus in both the north and the south regions.

Rather than repeat this information, these notes will focus on areas outside France where syrah is grown, looking in particular at the regions found in the flight of wines to be tasted. This will include the other two top producers of syrah, namely Spain and Australia, as well as two other countries that show much promise in growing syrah, Chile and Canada.

OTHER COUNTRIES WHERE SYRAH IS GROWN

Spain

France is by far the largest producer with ~60,000 planted hectares in 2024. However, while the Rhône Valley is clearly the birthplace of syrah, it actually holds fewer total hectares of the grape than Spain. With approximately two-thirds of French syrah planted outside the Rhône, in the massive, high-volume Languedoc-Roussillon region, the Rhône Valley footprint of ~8,000 hectares is less than the Spanish total of ~16,000 hectares. This illustrates just how massive Spain's broad agricultural layout is compared to France's tightly demarcated river valley.

The French Rhône archetype is known universally as the global definition of "Old World" syrah. It is defined by its austere, savory, and structural nature. Expect intense notes of cracked black pepper, smoked meat, black olive tapenade, and leather rather than jammy fruit. It features high natural acidity and firm, tight-grained tannins.

Spanish syrah generally shows riper, softer, and more accessible profiles due to the intense Iberian sunshine. The fruit profile shifts from the tart blackberry of the Northern Rhône to plush plum and blueberry. However, Spain's modern "freshness movement" means top producers are capturing similar peppery notes by harvesting earlier and avoiding heavy oak.

Spain's acreage is distributed broadly across vast regions like Castilla-La Mancha and Aragon, largely because it is used heavily across the country for blending. In Spain, syrah frequently plays the role of an affordable, high-utility "improver" grape. It is blended into indigenous varieties like tempranillo or monastrell to add depth, colour, and structure. Monovarietal Spanish syrahs exist but represent a smaller fraction of the commercial market.

Australia

James Busby imported the syrah grape from France into Australia in 1832, with commercial winemaking from these cuttings beginning shortly after, making it one of Australia's oldest and most iconic foundational grape varieties. Australian syrah, traditionally known as shiraz, sits between France and Spain in total planted area, at approximately 13,000 hectares. Unlike France, where syrah is strongly associated with the Rhône Valley, or Spain, where it is widely distributed and often used for blending, Australia has developed shiraz into one of its defining red-wine varieties. The grape is planted across several regions, but the most important styles come from areas such as the Barossa Valley, McLaren Vale, and the Hunter Valley.

Australian shiraz is generally characterized by a riper, fuller-bodied profile than northern Rhône syrah, reflecting Australia's warmer growing conditions. Expect concentrated blackberry, black plum, blueberry, and dark-chocolate fruit, often accompanied by spice, licorice, and sweet, rounded tannins. In warmer regions such as the Barossa Valley, wines can be particularly rich, powerful, and high in alcohol, while cooler sites can produce a more restrained style with greater acidity and peppery, savory characteristics. Oak is also commonly used, adding vanilla, toast, and baking-spice notes to the finished wine.

The Australian approach therefore occupies an interesting position between the old-world restraint of French syrah and the broad, fruit-driven style found in much of Spain. While inexpensive Australian shiraz is often made for immediate accessibility, Australia's best producers demonstrate that the variety can also produce highly structured, age-worthy wines. Shiraz is consequently not merely an important blending component in Australia but a flagship variety that has become central to the country's international wine identity.

Chile

Modern commercial plantings of syrah did not appear in Chile until the mid-1980s (with vines planted in the Aconcagua Valley around 1984), and its first prominent commercial syrah debuted in 1995. Large-scale planting and recognition for Chilean syrah only took off during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

According to official data tracked by the Chilean Agricultural and Livestock Service, syrah vineyard surface area grew steadily for several decades but over the last while has experienced a retraction as part of a broader reordering of Chile's national wine map. While the raw number of hectares decreased, winemakers migrated toward ultra-premium, lower-yield micro-plots in high-altitude zones like the Elqui Valley and rocky terraced areas of Colchagua. According to 2023 data, there are currently more than 6,000 hectares planted with syrah in Chile, from a peak of ~8500 hectares in 2014.

Chilean syrah is a vibrant and diverse red wine. It ranges from rich, jammy, and sun-warmed styles in central valleys to lean, savory, and cool-climate styles near the coast or high in the mountains. In the coastal and northern valleys (Elqui, Limarí, Leyda), cool winds and bright sun produce fresh, elegant wines. They feature notes of black olive, white pepper, violets, and crisp acidity. In the warm central valleys (Colchagua, Aconcagua), inland heat creates bold, full-bodied wines. They offer ripe dark fruit, sweet spice, and velvety tannins.

Canada

France, Spain and Australia (and even Chile) each totally dwarfs the production of syrah in Canada, which sits at about 220 to 225 hectares. However, this varietal has been identified as showing particular promise in the wine growing conditions of some parts of the country. Thirty years after syrah was first planted in Ontario it is indeed remarkably well established, commanding not only respect, but enthusiasm and even adulation by consumers, pundits and wine awards judges. Syrah is perennially a favourite category among the judges at the WineAlign National Wine Awards of Canada, both in terms of expectation, and what is found in the glass. In the 2026 competition, fifty entries were received from British Columbia and Ontario, with many scoring over 90 points. There were two Platinum medals, 10 Gold, 21 Silver, and seven Bronze. Internationally, Severine Pinte, the winemaker at Le Vieux Pin on the Black Sage Bench which specializes in syrah, was awarded the "Knight of the Order of Agricultural Merit" from France for her work in Canada.

Well-made BC syrah commonly sits between classic northern Rhône and ripe new world expressions. Typical strengths include concentrated dark fruit, savoury/meaty character, pepper and spice, fresh acidity and firm but ripe tannins. The best examples can be full-bodied without becoming heavy, retaining freshness through the cool nights of the Okanagan and the Similkameen.

Site expression matters. In the Okanagan, sandy/gravelly, fast-draining sites can produce more floral and delicate syrah, while rockier east-side sites may emphasize meaty and savoury characteristics. Naramata is close to the northern edge of dependable syrah ripening, making site selection and vintage conditions particularly important.

VARIATIONS IN STYLE

Old world syrah vs new world syrah

These labels describe broad stylistic tendencies, not fixed rules. Modern producers in both hemispheres deliberately borrow techniques and styles from one another.

Old world syrah and new world syrah are best understood as broad stylistic tendencies rather than fixed categories. Old world examples, particularly those from France and Italy, often place greater emphasis on acidity, savoury and earthy-herbaceous character, and regional expression. Fruit may be fresh and relatively restrained, with black olive, pepper, herbs, meat, earth or mineral notes contributing to the wine's identity. Alcohol and body are often moderate to moderately high, with oak used as a supporting rather than dominant element. New world syrah, particularly from Australia, the United States and South America, more often emphasizes ripe, dark fruit, spice, concentration and fruit weight. Alcohol and body can be higher, and oak can be more apparent, although this varies considerably by producer and region. Cool-climate new world syrah can closely resemble old world examples, so origin should never be inferred from one characteristic alone.

Cool-climate syrah vs warm-climate syrah

Climate has a particularly strong effect on syrah because ripeness changes both its aromatic profile and its structure. Cooler-climate or earlier-picked syrah tends to show fresher red and black berry fruit, higher perceived acidity, firmer tannin and more pronounced black pepper, olive, smoked-meat, bacon, herbal and violet notes. Alcohol and body are generally more moderate. If the grapes are picked too early, however, the wine can become green, lean or hard.

Warmer-climate syrah generally develops riper blackberry, blueberry and black-plum fruit, sometimes moving toward jam or compote. The tannins are often broader and riper, the body fuller, and alcohol higher. Licorice, dark chocolate and sweeter spice may become more prominent. The principal risk is over ripeness: jammy fruit, heat, reduced freshness and loss of the characteristic peppery and savoury definition. For judging, the key question is whether the level of ripeness is appropriate to the intended style and whether fruit, alcohol, acidity and tannin remain in balance.

FOOD PAIRING:

Cool-climate syrah's acid and pepper notes want dishes with their own savory/herbal complexity to mirror against, while warm-climate syrah's fruit-forward richness and higher alcohol want richer, fattier, or smokier food to match its weight — a delicate dish would get steamrolled by a 15% ABV Barossa shiraz the way a rare cut of lamb with fresh herbs would show off a northern Rhône syrah.

Cool climate syrah (Northern Rhône, Elqui, Yarra Valley, cooler Okanagan sites) would therefore pair well with peppered meats such as steak au poivre, mushroom-forward dishes, lamb with herbs (rosemary, thyme) rather than heavy spice rubs and charcuterie, cured meats, and olive-based dishes.

Warm climate syrah (Barossa, McLaren Vale, warmer Okanagan sites like Osoyoos/Oliver) runs riper and jammier with a style that wants grilled or barbecued meats, dishes with sweeter elements such as balsamic reductions, fig, dark fruit chutneys, bold spice such as cumin and smoked paprika, and aged hard cheeses or blue cheese with something sweet alongside.

GSM blends shift the picture again, since grenache and mourvèdre each bring their own personality to the mix. The result is usually rounder and more fruit-forward than straight syrah, but with more savory complexity than straight grenache. That combination opens up a slightly different pairing lane. Some

good GSM pairings include roast lamb or lamb shoulder, herb-and-garlic roasted chicken or duck, Provençal-style dishes such as ratatouille, dishes with olives, tomato, herbes de Provence, Moroccan-spiced dishes (tagine, ras el hanout) and mushroom risotto or dishes with umami depth.

THE FLIGHT:

This flight will include GSM blends as well as single varietal examples of syrah and grenache. It will include examples from the five cool and warm climate regions discussed above – France, Spain, Australia, Chile and Canada – with both old and new world styles.

LIST OF REFERENCES:

- British Columbia Wine Grape Council <https://bcwgc.org/about-us/>
- Chilean Agricultural and Livestock Service <https://www.sag.cl/>
- Decanter Chilean Syrah <https://www.decanter.com/features/chilean-syrah-246351/>
- FranceAgriMer - Établissement national des produits de l'agriculture et de la mer https://www.franceagrimer.fr/sites/default/files/2025-12/20251121_CC%20VITI%20VINICOLE%20%202025.pdf
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- Syrah du monde https://www.syrah-du-monde.com/pages/80_syrah/ref_intern.en.html
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