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Tasting Highlights: California Syrah

The success of Syrah offers wine lovers diversity and quality

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The ascent of California Syrah is in many ways similar to the rise of Pinot Noir in the Golden State.

It's a rather recent phenomenon that is rapidly gaining momentum. The wine is successful in many appellations throughout the state and it is yielding wines with unique appellation and vineyard characteristics. But one area where it's clearly different is that Syrah is still feeling its way in the market. It has not become the hot ticket that Pinot has.

There are a lot of terrific Syrahs available, and I suspect that one reason they haven't yet caught fire is that they can be more challenging wines to drink young. That is, Syrah is typically intense and can be tannic, and the flavor profile—often beefy spice and berry flavors—is not as familiar to many wine drinkers as those of other wines. That said, I strongly recommend you take a look at what's happening with Syrah these days.

One tip: These young wines need lots of time; sometimes they continue to develop over days, which is unusual. So I suggest you open a few bottles and make note of what you like and find in each and then revisit them over a period of two or three days. You'll be fascinated by how much they change.

JAFFURS Syrah Santa Barbara County **Ampelos Vineyard** 2004 92 \$42

Big, rich and expressive, with ripe, vivid, intense wild berry and blackberry that, for all its size and density, is remarkably supple and smooth, finishing with mocha and espresso notes. My favorite of the new Jaffurs Syrahs. Drink now through 2011. 74 cases made. —J.L.