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## Daniel: Rhône wine festival timely, anticipating grill season

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`` So many Rhônes, so little time."

That was the theme of the 14th annual Hospice du Rhône, held earlier this month in Paso Robles. But it also pretty well summed up my time at the event. I tasted diligently, but with about 170 wineries and importers, some of whom poured half a dozen or more wines, I was able to get to only a tiny fraction of what was available.

Talk about excess! But I would expect no less at an event billed as `` this planet's largest international celebration of Rhône grape varieties." Wines from five countries were represented.

The timing of Hospice du Rhône is perfect for anyone looking for wines that match up with the grilled foods of summer. With that in mind, I concentrated on reds (though there were some fabulous whites -- more about those at the end).

Many Rhône-style reds, such as syrah and grenache, have a smoky quality that pairs well with grilled foods. They also have ample fruit and a nice spiciness, so they'll hold their own against flavorful marinades and sauces, like the Latin-flavored steaks in Aleta Watson's story. One caution: Some Rhônes, especially those from California and Australia, pack a punch of alcohol, and it isn't always obvious because the wines have so much seductive fruit. When Mae West said, `` Too much of a good thing can be wonderful," she probably wasn't thinking about the next morning.

But I digress. Here are some of my finds from this year's Hospice du Rhône.

**SYRAH:** One of the seminars this year featured shirazes (syrahs) from **Elderton Winery** in Australia's Barossa Valley. Barossa shirazes have the reputation of being big, jammy fruit bombs, but the Elderton wines have more structure and elegance. While the flagship **Command Shiraz (the current vintage, 2002, is \$70)** is a powerful, concentrated wine, the high point for me was the **2001 Estate Shiraz (\$30)**, a rich, smoky, bright, well-balanced wine with plenty of blackberry fruit and hints of pencil lead and spice. (The outstanding 2002 is the current vintage, but you may still see some 2001 on store shelves.)

Other knockout Aussie shirazes included the **2002 Flinders Bay (\$17)**, a wine with bright raspberry flavors and a slight leafy note; **2003 Aramis (\$20)**, with its ripe berry flavors and accents of chocolate and mint; **2003 Joseph `` Angel Gully" (\$45)**, with its juicy blueberry and spice and firm structure; and the **2004 Torbreck `` Struie" (\$45)**, which is pretty yet powerful.

Good syrahs were to be found from all over California. From Mount Veeder, above the Napa Valley, there was the **2003 Lagier Meredith (\$50)**, a ripe, juicy wine with plenty of black fruit. A good one from the Sierra foothills was the **2003 Cedarville Estate Syrah (\$25)**, which displays roasted berry flavors and notes of mocha and white pepper. The south-central coast was particularly well-represented, with outstanding syrahs from Paso Robles and Santa Barbara County.

From Santa Barbara, Bob Lindquist of **Qupé Wine Cellars** poured an extensive lineup. From a winemaker of great restraint, Lindquist's 2004 wines are riper than usual because of a heat spike during the harvest. They're

still delicious, though, especially the smoky, supple **2004 Purisima Mountain Syrah (\$35)** and the peppery **2004 Stolpman Vineyard Syrah (\$35)**. The **2004 Beckmen Estate Syrah (\$25)** offers bright, spicy blackberry fruit, while **Beckmen's 2003 Purisima Mountain Syrah (\$40)** is dark and mouth-filling. The **2003 Paul Lato ``Quo Vadis'' Bien Nacido Vineyard Syrah (\$45)**, from a tiny and fairly new producer in Santa Maria, is peppery and loaded with fruit.

From Paso Robles, I was extremely impressed by the **2003 Halter Ranch Syrah (\$28)**, with its juicy berry, mocha and spice, firm but approachable tannins and nice balance. **Adelaida** had a pair of good syrahs: the regular **2003 syrah (\$26)**, with its smoky black raspberry flavors, and the **2003 Viking Estate Reserve (\$55)**, a bigger wine that's still fairly tight but has lovely fruit and nice spice. The **2003 Clautiere Syrah (\$28)** is supple and plush, with cherry, black raspberry and accents of vanilla and spice, while the **2004 Falcone Family Syrah (\$28)** is peppery and bright, with blackberry, cola and spice.

A great bargain is the **2004 Cycles Gladiator Syrah (\$10)**, with its bright black raspberry fruit and spicy oak.

Finally, there's France. Many of the Rhône reds currently available are from the very hot and dry 2003 vintage. I've found many of those wines to be clumsy and overly tannic. A couple of exceptions are the **2003 Georges Vernay Côte-Rôtie ``Maison Rouge'' (\$40)**, a smoky, ripe wine with notes of white pepper and a smooth finish, and the **2003 Domaine Combier Crozes-Hermitage (\$28)**, which offers ripe blueberry fruit accented by bacon fat and green peppercorn. An outstanding 2004 was the **Les Vins de Vienne Cornas ``Les Barcillants'' (\$37)**, a bold, dark, spicy wine with nice freshness.

**OTHER REDS:** Grenache is another important red from the Rhône, and it shows up a lot in blends. As for straight grenache, a couple of good ones are the **2004 Beckmen Purisima Mountain (\$36)**, a wine with lots of ripe, spicy strawberry flavors, and the **2004 Robert Hall (\$24)**, with its smoky strawberry and black raspberry fruit.

Among the blends, a good value is the **2004 Rutherglen Estates ``The Reunion'' (\$16)**, a medium-weight wine with smoky blueberry and some lovely savory notes. I also liked the **2004 Four Vines ``Peasant'' (\$30)**, with its pretty strawberry and blackberry flavors and nice spice; the **2003 Zaca Mesa Z Three (\$40)**, a dark, dense blend of plush fruit and savory notes; and the brawny, dark and spicy **2004 Villa Creek Mas de Maha (\$28)**. The latter was something of a renegade, since it contains the non-Rhône tempranillo along with grenache and mourvèdre.

**WHITES:** One of the most stunning wines of the weekend was the **2004 Georges Vernay Condrieu ``Chaillées de l'Enfer'' (\$72)**, a weighty yet delicate wine made from viognier that is crisp and perfumey, with flavors of white peach and mineral. It was the talk of one of the seminars. For less money, look for the **2005 Rutherglen Estates ``The Alliance'' (\$15)**, an Aussie marsanne-viognier blend that's very crisp, with flavors of white peach, lime zest and mineral; the rich, fleshy, slightly honeyed **2004 Zaca Mesa Roussanne (\$25)**; or the racy, peachy **2005 Eberle Mill Road Vineyard Viognier (\$20)**. **The 2005 Qupé Marsanne (\$18)** is crisp and zippy and probably will age well; during the weekend I tasted a 1988 Qupé Marsanne that was extraordinary.

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