

## Once scorned, Grenache is enjoying an international revival

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It's partly thanks to Château Rayas, a red wine made from the Grenache grape

**Jancis Robinson** YESTERDAY

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The world of wine harbours few mysteries, but here's one. There's a new style of wine followed by winemakers all over the world, many of them inspired by one particular wine that's virtually impossible to buy. Even more unexpectedly, it comes from a famous region where all the other wines are made by locals who seem determined to ignore it and instead produce wines that are the polar opposite.

Stranger still, this wine, which I too love and admire, is made in the least salubrious cellar I have ever visited. It is Château Rayas, a red Châteauneuf-du-Pape made from Grenache grapes which manages to be both rich and ethereal, transparent and floral, utterly hedonistic and necessarily alcoholic (because Grenache needs full ripeness) but without heft.

I was recently reminded of Rayas's totemic status when tasting a particularly delicious southern California Grenache courtesy of London wine merchants Lea & Sandeman. The wine, A Tribute to Grace 2017, was made by Angela Osborne from Santa Barbara Highlands Vineyard, whose *raison d'être* as a winemaker, the accompanying notes tell us, "is replicating a bottle of Château Rayas she had many years ago, and finding the truest expression of Grenache possible". It was the most delicious combination of white pepper, massive sweetness and convincing purity.

Until recently Grenache was a scorned grape, but it is now enjoying an international revival. It started in Spain where Garnacha, as Grenache is known there, was the country's most-planted grape until a reverence for

Tempranillo dislodged it from the top spot. Because Garnacha is particularly tolerant of drought, and its hard wood means it has not suffered from the vine trunk diseases that have decimated plantings of many other vine varieties, the average age of Garnacha vines is relatively high. As a result, its produce tends to be distinctly superior.

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Dani Landi became a pioneer of ambitious, handcrafted, delicate Garnacha when he co-founded Comando G, a winery in the Gredos mountains west of Madrid, with Fernando Garcia, in 2008. It is grown on the granite with which Garnacha seems to have an affinity. Landi admits that when he started out, Rayas was a reference point.

The reputation of filigree Gredos Garnachas grew to such an extent that similar wines began to be made all over Spain. Master of Wine Fernando Mora fashions an array of delicate Garnachas in Aragón under his Frontonio label. I emailed him to ask whether Château Rayas had ever been an inspiration. “Yes, always,” he replied, in seconds. “Plenty of herbs, flowers and fruit from a Pinot-like style, with finesse and the ability to age is what makes me love that wine.”

In the unfashionable La Mancha wine region in central Spain, Elías López Montero ages the fruit of a plot of old Garnacha vines for 11 months in the region’s traditional clay jars, known as tinajas. The result is the exceptional pale red Verum, Ulterior Parcela No 6, with its grainy texture and a refreshing mineral note. He loves these old tinajas so much that when a new one arrives in his cellar, having been sourced from a neighbour, he welcomes it with a heartfelt embrace. He too sees a similarity between these new Garnachas and the Pinot Noir of Burgundy, and was inspired to try his hand

Emmanuel and the evolution of Burgundy, and was inspired to try his hand at making one having previously made Pinot Noir in Patagonia.

Michael Hill Smith, an Australian winemaker, was in London recently to show off his latest venture, MMAD, named after the initials of the four partners involved. It's based on a relatively high-altitude vineyard with especially old vines, including some 80-year-old Grenache, a grape almost ignored Down Under until recently. He says the variety is now so fashionable that the price of Grenache grapes has doubled in the last two or three years to overtake that of Shiraz.

"It's very trendy inside the tent," he told me. "McLaren Grenache suddenly had perfume thanks to the wines of Steve Pannell and Yangarra, like Pinot." Is Rayas ever mentioned in that tent? "All the time," he responded rather wearily.

So here's this wine that's regarded by winemakers all over the world as a sort of holy grail. Yet how many of them have tasted it at all often? Although other Châteauneuf-du-Pape producers are touting their 2021s, the most recent vintage available of Ch Rayas is 2011, and prices have risen so vertiginously that a single bottle of 2011 Ch Rayas red (there is also a quirky, full bodied white) now costs more than £1,500.

Wine writer John Livingstone-Learmonth of [drinkrhone.com](http://drinkrhone.com) has decades of experience of Rhône wines and their makers. I asked him why Emmanuel Reynaud, who inherited Ch Rayas on the death of his hermit-like uncle, Jacques, in 1997, was releasing the wine so slowly. "He does always release late these days," he wrote, "given that Jacques went through a splurge of selling off nearly everything, the cellar denuded of bottles, the lesson learnt. There was no 2018 to speak of, so Emmanuel is inclined to allow stocks to rise to cover such years."

I wonder how many of the Rayas acolytes have visited the winery? Thanks to Chris Davey, the former UK importer of Rayas, I've managed five appointments at this distinctly unprepossessing building at the end of a winding, barely signposted lane, and managed to gain admittance to taste the young wines at only four of them. The last time, in 2014, I arrived at the agreed time to find all the doors and windows closed and shuttered. I wandered around the back and found a lone labourer who informed me that his boss was busy at his other winery, Ch des Tours in Vacqueyras. This is the only time I've been stood up by a wine producer.

To me, the most extraordinary of the many extraordinary aspects of Ch Rayas is how pure the wines are compared to the conditions in which they are made and aged. I've never seen such grey, ancient, cobwebby casks, arranged apparently at random in the dusty, earth-floored winery. It is not the only wine that (eventually) emerges from these unprepossessing cellars. There is also Pignan, from another plot on the property, and two Côtes du Rhône, Ch de Fonsalette and Pialade, the last two of which include grapes other than Grenache. Pialade is released earlier than the other wines; you can actually buy the 2015 if you're prepared to pay a three-digit sum for a mere Côtes du Rhône.

Why do so few other producers of Châteauneuf make a wine even remotely like Rayas? They seem stuck in the groove of the powerful, concentrated wines championed by US critics such as Robert Parker in the 1990s. Perhaps the locals rarely get a chance to taste Rayas and be inspired by it? When the wines are eventually released, they tend to whoosh out of the region straight into the global fine wine market.

For many years, I went to the village to taste hundreds of examples from the latest vintage and it was one of the most bludgeoning assaults on my palate, so concentrated were the wines. As in many regions, the wines have been lightening up in recent years but still, the style of the world's favourite Châteauneuf remains, mysteriously, largely ignored by its neighbours.

## Rayas-inspired reds

Fine examples from Spain, Australia and California, in ascending price order

- **Care Garnacha Nativa 2020 Cariñena 14.5%**  
£10.75 Bush Vines
- **Viña Zorzal, Sea of Dreams 2019 Navarra 13.5%**  
£15.50 Songbird Wines, £15.99 Thorne Wines and NY Wines
- **Ramon Bilbao, Limite Sur Garnacha 2017 Rioja 14%**  
Around £19 from Winestore.co.uk and Great Wines Direct
- **Verum, Ulterior Parcela 6 2018 Castilla La Mancha 13.5%**  
£22 The Great Wine Co
- **S C Pannell, Basso Garnacha 2019 McLaren Vale 14%**  
\$25.99 Vinous Reverie
- **Daniel Gómez Jiménez-Landi, Las Uvas de la Ira Sierra de Gredos 2020 Méntrida 15%**  
£25 Berry Bros & Rudd, also available in bond from Bordeaux Direct
- **Frontonio, Telescópico Garnacha 2019 IGP Valdejalón 13.5%**  
£25.99 Bancroft
- **MMAD, Blewitt Springs Grenache 2021 McLaren Vale 14%**  
£441 for 12 bottles, Oz Wines
- **A Tribute to Grace 2017 Santa Barbara 14.2%**  
£43.95 Lea & Sandeman
- **Yangarra, Ovitelli Grenache 2019 McLaren Vale 14.0%**  
\$64.99 K&L, San Francisco

*Tasting notes on Purple Pages of [JancisRobinson.com](https://www.jancisrobinson.com). More stockists from [Wine-searcher.com](https://www.wine-searcher.com)*

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