

To be fair, this moment is not so much surge as blip. After years of appearing in rare one-off bottlings from loyalists like Qupé or Ridge Vineyards, Mourvedre has settled into a small niche. Perhaps 15 to 20 are now available on shelves.

Mostly, we have been drinking it unwittingly. Most of California's 800 acres of Mourvedre lands in blends; with Syrah and Grenache, it forms the third part of a standard Rhone trio. As such it has been making appearances since the early 1980s in such well-known bottles as Bonny Doon's Le Cigare Volant and [Tablas Creek Vineyard's Esprit de Beaucastel](#).

Legit attention for Mourvedre is a welcome turn. These are typically hearty, well-structured wines, with deep red fruit flavors and a leathery edge. They bring the power and fruit of Zinfandel but add extra depth. And yet the flavors can be hard to nail down - brighter berry notes at times, darker hues at others. Trademark leathery, animal nuances can step forward, providing a signature; other times they lurk quietly. It is a difficult grape to comprehend, much less embrace.

The Rhone hook is a convenient one, but the key to Mourvedre's appeal may lie just a bit farther south in Provence and the appellation of Bandol, where it constitutes the core of robust, long-lived wines, notably those of Domaine Tempier, a linchpin of importer Kermit Lynch's portfolio. Mourvedre's primal nature defines Tempier's sometimes unruly flavors, and I'd wager that Tempier was the catalyst for the (modest) American love of Mourvedre.

Moving even farther south into Spain, the grape has enjoyed more recent popularity under its Monastrell guise, in such upcoming regions as Yecla and Jumilla. The current yen for Spanish wines has brought favor to these expressions.

An affinity for hot places has defined Mourvedre's journey. The grape endures heat well, particularly when grown on infertile but mineral-rich soils, and doesn't suddenly lose its innate acidity or structure during harvests that can extend well into November.

That hearty nature helps explain Mourvedre's long, low-key California history. It dates back at least to the late 19th century, though under another name, Mataro, under which it was a staple for red blends. Many extant vines are more than 80 years old.

Typically the Mourvedre - er, Mataro - available prior to the early 1990s was found in largely forgotten spots that survived Prohibition's scourge, like the sandy soils of Contra Costa County. The Pato Vineyard in Oakley first received its vines in 1896.

Its toughness had another virtue. Thick skins and resistance to spoilage made it a "shipping grape." Along with Zinfandel and Petite Sirah, it was a Prohibition mainstay, able to endure a long boxcar trip East, to be made into basement wine.

A shot at respectability didn't arrive until the 1980s, when Rhone crusaders like Bonny Doon's Randall Grahm and Qupe's Bob Lindquist tried to hunt some down. Mourvedre

was a mystery to most wine folk, but when Grahm called it by its other name, farm advisers guided him to Oakley, where he found "the mother lode" still being sold for home winemaking.

"It's kind of a land that time forgot," Grahm recalls. Other winemakers like Dave Corey at Core and Edmunds St. John's Steve Edmunds got on board. Mourvedre plantings slowly expanded south to Santa Barbara, east into the Sierra foothills, even north to Washington state.

Then Tablas Creek bet big, importing cuttings from the Rhone for its limestone-rich soils. Now Mourvedre occupies fully one-third of its plantings and much of its top Esprit de Beaucastel blend, a nod to the Mourvedre love of its French co-owners, the Perrin family. Surmising that Mourvedre was Chateauneuf du Pape's dominant pre-phylloxera grape, Jacques Perrin had made it a signature of the family's Chateau de Beaucastel.

Yet it turned out many of the gnarled Mataro vines bore little resemblance to any of the newly arrived clones. "We decided it wasn't even close," says Jason Haas, Tablas Creek's general manager.

That might explain the wide flavor swings. But there's still time to figure out what exactly Mourvedre here should be - and perhaps more potential than for Grenache, the perennial Next Big Thing. That's a view shared by a Mourvedre loyalist like Jared Brandt of A Donkey and Goat Winery in Berkeley, who found young head-trained vines in the Sierra foothills. To Brandt, Mourvedre is in a similar spot to Cabernet in the 1960s, "which means that the next 10 years will be really exciting."

Which is not to say those hardy old vines don't serve a purpose. In the remote Lime Kiln Valley outside Hollister (San Benito County) - another locale rich in limestone, which seems to give Mourvedre verve - the spot now known as the Enz Vineyard first received its 8 acres of the grape in 1922.

This is where Kenneth Volk turned to make a varietal Mourvedre in the early 1990s, when he still owned the Wild Horse label. Having farmed the site himself for two years, Volk finds Mourvedre to be the rare grape that thrives without irrigation - a thought worth remembering in a drought year.

I've returned to Volk's Mourvedre several times now as quite possibly the best of the current efforts. Yet even his version remains a side project. "It has certainly been a push up the hill," he says.

Perhaps the handful of new Mourvedres appearing on the shelf will make loving it less of a Sisyphean task.

A taste of Mourvedre

2007 David Girard Vineyards Estate El Dorado Mourvedre (\$28). Dry earth and slightly animal overtones to generous plum fruit and perfume. Stylish and energetic, with slight oak nuances, a dense, mineral-edged texture and berry highlights.

2007 A Donkey and Goat the Prospector El Dorado Mourvedre (\$25). The Brandts are believers in natural, minimal winemaking, and this was made with native yeasts, foot-stomped, then aged in neutral Hungarian casks. An edgy, mineral-tinged nose; licorice-tinged boysenberry, with racy herbal touches and a chewy mineral presence on the palate. Still plenty of ripeness; it finishes with darker, leathery fruit. Simply trying to be different.

2007 McCrea Cellars Yakima Valley Mourvedre (\$35). A lifted, almost herbal tone. Scents of well-dried hide and sharper huckleberry fruit. Larger and somewhat softer in profile, with a bit of heat, plus gutsy tannins and darker mineral notes.

2007 La Clarine Farm Cedarville Vineyard Sierra Foothills Mourvedre (\$15). Scents of iris and leather, with a woody edge and green-tinged red fruit. Juicy and vibrant, though rustic at first taste. A less extracted, fresh-faced approach. After two days, it blossoms, offering crunchy mineral and fresh bayberry.

2006 Kenneth Volk Vineyards Enz Vineyard Lime Kiln Valley Mourvedre (\$36). Densely knit, with white mineral raciness, gorgeously supple blueberry and what Volk quite accurately describes as mulberry. Leathery but fine tannins bulk it out with a subtle, mouth-sticking finish that hints at its size. A serious, memorable wine with lots of potential.

2007 Tablas Creek Vineyard Paso Robles Mourvedre (\$35). Inkier, with roasted huckleberry and plum, and a bright floral tone to lift it. Densely packed tannins stand forward, bringing a ropier, dense quality. A bit leathery to the taste, but lots of angular minerality enlivens it. A hint of the warmer cocoa notes that, in older Tablas vintages, seem to emerge with a bit of age.

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This article appeared on page **K - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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