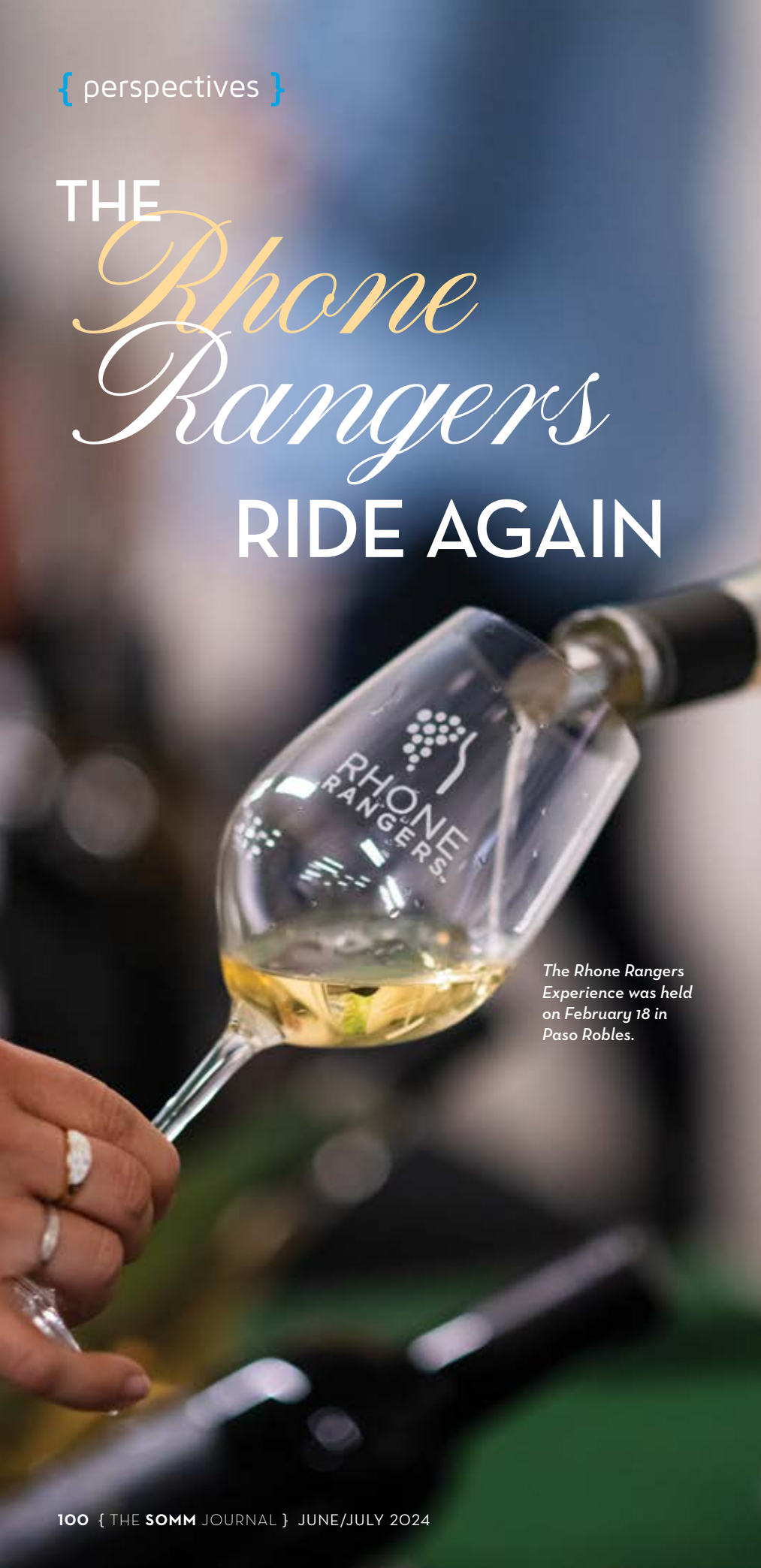


THE *Rhone Rangers* RIDE AGAIN



The Rhone Rangers Experience was held on February 18 in Paso Robles.

EIGHT PRODUCERS DISCUSS HOW THEIR FAVORITE GRAPES FROM THE FRENCH REGION THRIVE IN CALIFORNIA

by Allison Levine

IN FEBRUARY, THE 16th annual Rhone Rangers Experience was held in Paso Robles. Wineries from not only Paso but also Lodi, Santa Barbara County, San Luis Obispo, the Sierra Foothills, El Dorado, Temecula, Carmel, Ojai, Sonoma, Napa, Oregon, and Texas gathered to share their wines. With 82 producers and 600-plus attendees on hand, it was clear there is a growing passion for Rhône grape varieties, which were first brought to California more than 100 years ago.

Granted, from the end of Prohibition until the 1980s, most of the Syrah, Grenache, Petite Sirah, Marsanne, Roussanne, Carignan, Mourvèdre, Counoise, and Cinsault planted in the state went into bulk wines. After all, the Rhône Valley was not well known by the American consumer until, as Patrick Comiskey writes in *American Rhône: How Maverick Winemakers Changed the Way Americans Drink*, “intrepid importers brought new potential markets to the U.S. . . . and that inspired producers to start making [Rhône-style wines] in the States.” The first modern American Syrah was made in 1976 by Joseph Phelps in Napa. Gary Eberle planted 50 acres of Syrah in Paso Robles in 1975, and many more Rhône grape plantings followed in the 1980s. The first meeting of the Rhone Rangers was in 1987.

We spoke with eight attendees who shared some insight into their favorite Rhône varieties:

PHOTOS: BRITTANY APP/APPH PHOTOGRAPHY



BOB LINDQUIST,
Lindquist Family Wines,
Santa Maria Valley

Central Coast pioneer Bob Lindquist was one of the leaders of the movement to produce wine from Rhône varieties in California as well as one of the original Rhone Rangers. In 1982, he became the first person to make Syrah in Santa Barbara County, where he was also the first to make a red Rhône blend in 1988 and the first to produce Viognier in 1989; additionally, he was the first to produce Marsanne in the entire state of California in 1987. According to Lindquist, "Great grapes always rise to the top. Syrah, Grenache, and Roussanne all make great wines, especially on the Central Coast where you can find cool to warm temperatures."

BILL EASTON,
Terre Rouge, Sierra Foothills

Another of the original members of the Rhone Rangers, Bill Easton is based in the Sierra Foothills, where, he says, the "terroir leads to ageable wines like the best wines from the Rhône Valley": The region's mineral-laden granitic and volcanic soils are like those of the Northern Rhône, the climate is cool, and the elevation is high. "Domestic Rhône varieties continue to progress in the market as people understand what places are necessary for the best expression of certain grape varieties," he adds.



JEFF MORGAN,
Covenant Winery,
Berkeley

Jeff Morgan makes Syrah from vineyards in California's Central Coast and Sonoma County as well as in Israel's Upper Galilee and Golan Heights regions. Like the Rhône and parts of California, Galilee has lots of red soil and limestone. But, he says, "I think the soil might be less important than temperature or climate, because my warmest sites in both Israel and California have produced wines very similar in style."

CHRISTINA LOPEZ,
Acquiesce Winery &
Vineyards, Lodi

Christina Lopez, winemaker at Acquiesce Winery, is also a fan of Picpoul, an acidic variety whose name translates from the French as "lip stinger." It keeps a firm grip on this acid even in warmer climates, making for a great varietal wine as well as a blending component. Until recently, Acquiesce owner Sue Tipton was the only producer in Lodi with Picpoul in her portfolio; now there are others. "I think vintners are starting to notice its beauty, and . . . it's starting to become a fan favorite in the tasting room," says Lopez. "We expect to see this same trajectory for Bourboulenc and Clairette Blanche."



SONJA MAGDEVSKI,
Clementine Carter,
Santa Ynez Valley

Clementine Carter, one of the labels produced by winemaker Sonja Magdevski, is dedicated to Rhône varieties. Grenache is a specialty, which she sources from numerous vineyards in Santa Barbara County; she calls the grape "a chameleon—it defies expectations."

BRYAN WIDSTRAND,
Steinbeck Vineyards &
Winery, Paso Robles

Bryan Widstrand began making sparkling wine in Australia: He was working his fourth harvest at a winery when the winemaker quit and he took over; despite his inexperience and lack of formal training. He learned that the key to production is "the expression of the fruit, not a recipe." Today, he makes both sparkling and still wine in Paso Robles, where he sees a bright future for bubbly: "With Rhône varieties, the juice expresses itself, and you don't have to fight hard [to ripen the fruit] in warm climates."



BRYAN BABCOCK,
Babcock,
Santa Ynez Valley

For 25 years, Bryan Babcock has been known as a producer of Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir, but today he's just as bullish on Rhône grapes. He started with Grenache and then added Carignan, Viognier, and Picpoul to the mix; the latter may not be obscure for much longer, he says, as it is a stylistically flexible variety that can be made in stainless steel or oak and with or without malo treatment while "retain[ing] its zip."

CRAIG CAMP,
Troon Wines, Applegate
Valley, Oregon

According to Craig Camp, Rhône varieties are "ideal for the West Coast in the face of climate change. They evolved to require less irrigation and be more resilient in warmer, drier climates while producing balanced, complex wines. Oregon's Applegate Valley is the perfect location to produce wines from Rhône varieties that reflect the elegance of the wines produced in the Northern Rhône." He added, "Consumers today are seeking interesting wines beyond the basics, and the members of the Rhone Rangers are ideally suited to provide the compelling wines that these consumers are looking for." SJ