

Is Roussanne the Next Breakthrough White Wine in Texas?

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Kim McPherson of
McPherson Cellars made
one of the best
Roussanne wines

I have visited over 50 Texas wineries over the last year and one of the trends that I have noticed is an increasing number of producers making wines that are entirely, or predominantly, from the [Roussanne](#) grape. This grape, which originated in the Rhone wine region of France, would seem to be an obvious candidate for the High Plains and Hill Country viticultural areas of Texas given the similarity of climate and the availability of similar sandy soils to those in the Rhone. Also Roussanne's common "bottlemate" [Viognier](#) is already well-established in the state, and widely considered the grape variety that makes the best white wine from Texas.

To get an idea of how the grape variety is doing, I emailed eight Texas wineries that produce Roussanne from Texas grapes. Seven responded, and all agreed to send a sample bottle of their current vintage. Two of the wineries had two wines to offer so both were included. I also bought wines from elsewhere to use as benchmarks so there was a broader base to judge the Texas wines. To pick these, I went to Jasper Russo. Many of you know him for plugging his food trucks promotions in the comments on SideDish but, in his spare moments, he is actually the consumer wine director for Sigel's. I asked for the names of the three best Roussanne wines from anywhere in the world in his stores and the three he recommended all happened to be from France (he didn't know the reason that I was asking). I purchased two of them and we were up to eleven bottles for the tasting.

I tasted all eleven wines at one sitting, obviously not swallowing. They were not tasted blind, but rather in alphabetical order. Most of the Texas wines had all been sent overnight for morning delivery. None (with one possible exception) showed any sign of heat damage despite the warm weather. The fact they had been immediately stored in an air-conditioned environment on arrival was probably important here. As I tasted from wine to wine I frequently went back to the French benchmarks as a guide to how style and flavors compared.

Detailed tasting notes are below, in alphabetical order, but some general observations quickly emerged.

First, the growers choosing this variety showed that they were above average in the state insofar as wine making skill goes. They made wines that were representative of the grape, well-balanced between fruit and acid, and that, in more than one case, could be described as refined. That said, we still have things to learn from the two benchmarks which were, it should be reiterated, not average examples but two that the wine director for a major wine retailer regarded as two of his three best.

Second, two areas of development seem particularly promising. One path is to make Roussanne wines that are blends with other white Rhone grapes. This is the usual practise in France and was the case with both of the benchmarks. One of the Texas wines (Perissos) offered a straight Roussanne and a Roussanne blend with Viognier and Muscat.

The other path is make use of more oak barrel fermentation and aging. Oak was prevalent in the Mas des Bressades benchmark and at least two of the Texas producers (Becker Vineyards and Brushy Creek Vineyards) used oak to a positive effect. Brushy Creek actually offered us something approximating a lab. experiment with two wines that were made identically from grapes from the same vineyard except that one was made with oak aging and one without. My preference was strongly for the oaked version.

One final sidenote: No fewer than three of the seven Texas wineries used fruit from the [Bingham Family Vineyards](#) in the Texas High Plains, whom we previously talked about [here](#). They have been one of the pathfinders in Texas grape growing and it is on the success of grape growers like them that the quality of future vintages depends.

All of the Texas wines below can be purchased through the winery's web site and those same web sites can detail any retail outlets that stock them.

Results



2010 [Arché](#) Roussanne, Texas.

Nose of wine gums. In the mouth: very balanced flavors of wine gums and flintiness. One drawback: not enough fruit in the mid-palate. Glorious body weight on the tongue. This wine conveys refinement and elegance.

Score: Very Good.

Price: \$26.00



2010 [Becker Vineyards](#) Roussanne Reserve. Bingham Vineyards. Texas High Plains.

Nose early on had distinct hints of sulphur. This is not unusual with wines (sulphur is used in winemaking) and it blew off after about 20 minutes to reveal a nose of ripe peaches. Tastes of peaches and mango in the mouth. Would benefit from more fruit intensity.

Score: Good

Price: \$18.95



2010 [Brushy Creek Vineyards](#) Roussanne. Unoaked. Oswald Vineyard, Texas High Plains.

Nose almost non-existent. Taste crisp acids. Lemon flavors. Initially a rather neutral liquid but after 45 minutes the minerality started to show through. It thus improved in the glass. Would be better with food (e.g. seafood) than as a quaffing wine.

Score: Average.

Price: \$20 approx.



2010 Brushy Creek Vineyards Roussanne. Oswald Vineyard, Texas High Plains. This is the same Brushy Creek wine treated to two months oak aging in lightly used barrels. What a difference in style. The nose now has lemon notes. The mouth feel is of a wine with altogether more body. Flavors of peach and pineapple. Drawbacks are the still straightforward finish. This wine was bottled literally just days before shipment so this situation may change.

Score: Good

Price: \$22 approx.



2010 [McPherson Cellars](#) Roussanne Reserve. Bingham Vineyard, Texas High Plains.

Nose of lychee fruit. Flavors of tea and lemon. Firm acids and good body. Long harmonious finish. This is a stylish wine.

Score: Very good.

Price: \$18



2010 [Perissos Vineyard and Winery](#) Roussanne Blend. Texas Hill Country.

50% Roussanne. 30% Viognier. 20% Muscat. Nose of tangerine and apricots. Complex mouthfeel of vanilla, honey with a silky body. Could do with more complexity. The Muscat character (apricots) clearly comes through and is a little too pronounced for my taste.

Score: Good

Price:\$24



2010 Perissos Vineyard and Winery Roussanne. Bingham Family Vineyard, Texas High Plains.

Nose of apricot and hints of orange. The taste has an intense citrus (grapefruit) character that is impressive. A good quaffing wine.

Score: Very Good

Price: \$34



2010 [Texas Hills Vineyard](#) Roussanne. Texas High Plains.

Nose of ethyl acetate and sourness from too high acid in the mouth. Whoops. Not sure what happened here. Texas Hills has [made some good wines in the past](#) but this one's a doozer.

Score: Below average

Price: \$15.95

The benchmarks:

2010 Cotes du Rhone, Becassone, France.

Classic white Cotes du Rhone. Minerally nose and taste. Good acid. Offering more complexity than expected for this price. Better with food (especially fish or poultry) than as a quaffing wine. This is a blend of Roussanne, Clairette, and Grenache Blanc.

Score: Very Good

Price: \$15.99

2007 Mas des Bressades Roussane-Viognier, Vin de Pays du Gard..

A didn't intend to buy a benchmark this old but it should not affect the results. This 55% Roussanne/45% Viognier blend is fermented and aged in French oak. 80% of the wood is new which contributes the most apparent characteristic to its mouthfeel. Heavy, silky body and butterscotch flavors from the oak aging. The nose is wine gums and tropical fruit. This wine should be an example to all the aspiring Texas winemakers above.

Score: Excellent

Price: \$15.99

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