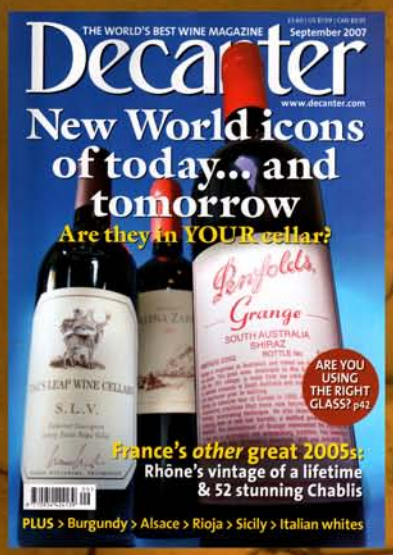
Included with Decanter September 2007 issue



L'Aventure, Optimus 2004 ★★★★★
Predominantly Syrah, plus Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. Bacon fat and graphite aromas, lively black fruit, Cabernet-like tannins, Rhône-like spice. Up to 2014. **£27; F&R, N&P**

CALIFORNIA 2007

A Decanter guide to the past, the present and the future

...In 2005, Parker wrote that 'a decade from now, the top viticultural areas of Santa Barbara, Santa Rita Hills, and the limestone hillsides west of Paso Robles will be as well-known as the glamorous vineyards of Napa Valley'...

RHONE WASN'T BUILT IN A DAY

Once popular only among a small band of maverick growers taking their inspiration from the Rhône Valley, Syrah is now establishing itself as a Californian favourite. Will it last, asks NORM ROBY

...With about 1,050ha planted to Syrah, Paso Robles (see left) accounts for a significant 15% of California's total. As for producers, there are 121 members in the regional association and a recent survey indicated 82 of them produce a Syrah. This is a warm climate, and there is no shortage of ultra-ripe Syrahs made here. But the real story is the growing number of nicely balanced Syrahs made here. One sub-region preferred by many is around Templeton. Syrah vineyards in this location enjoy a slight cooling influence from a breach in the coastal range known as the 'Templeton Gap'.

A few producers have carved out Syrah vineyards on hillsides at elevations of 490m or more. Then there is soil. For Paso Syrah, Justin Smith of Saxum explains, 'Our soils are the magic bullet. The calcium and lime help retain great natural acidities, and the clay helps to hold the rain we get in winter and spring well into the growing season.' These same soils won over the Perrin and Haas partnership of Tablas Creek who wanted to match the climate and high pH soils of Beaucastel in the southern Rhône.

Saxum and L'Aventure winery are pushing a trend that favours the cuvée concept for Paso Syrah. Stephan Asseo, a Frenchman, established L'Aventure on the Westside. His Estate Cuvée – Syrah with a big dollop of Cabernet – is a simply amazing wine for its depth...

... Bordeaux native Stephan Asseo was also attracted to the calcareous western hills. His exceptional L'Aventure wines favour blends of Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot, though his 100% estate Syrah is a triumph too.

The former proprietor of Domaine de Courteillac in Bordeaux's Entre-Deux-Mers bought Paso Robles land in the Templeton Gap in 1998, after becoming 'tired of all the regulations in France'. He adds, 'If you compare this part of the Central Coast to the Rhône, they have a similar Mediterranean climate, there is the Châteauneuf Mistral, the same vegetation and the same trees.'...

... Asseo also makes PharaohMoans, a new Syrah that's set Paso pricing on its ear, at $570 for a six-bottle, pyramid-shaped case. The 2005 is powerful and rich, with 14.8% alcohol, yet like the Flying Wallendas at their best, it keeps its balance and freshness. It also sold out soon after release, price being no object.

Asseo's partners in PharaohMoans are Bryan Ogden of the eponymous restaurant in Las Vegas, and John Schwartz, owner of Amuse Bouche Winery in Napa Valley. 'Syrah is entering the high-end market and a number of California producers are focusing on producing a meatier, smokier style of Syrah, as made in the northern Rhône,' says Schwartz...

*excerpts from original article