“What’s the difference between a case of Syrah and a case of the clap? You can get rid of a case of the clap.” So goes a joke that journalists have been stuck on for the past six or seven years. Like most good jokes, it’s funny because it’s true. Or at least it was for a while.

I had dinner with Qupé’s Bob Lindquist last month, and I asked him if it’s still true that Syrah is hard to sell. He cocked his head slightly and narrowed his eyes before answering: “No, that’s not really what I’m seeing.”

In my little corner of northern California, I see Qupé Syrah on display a lot, often with a glowing review from a store’s staff and a price tag of under $20. Qupé’s entry-level Syrah is a benchmark California take on the variety, and it’s hard to believe that it was ever a tough sell.

It was refreshing to hear that there actually is a market for Syrah, a grape that I adore and regard as one of the true greats. The constant drumbeat over the past 10 years has been that nobody wants to drink it, and that’s a frustrating thing when you really love the stuff.

Bob Lindquist of Qupé sees Syrah sales rising as the U.S. economy improves.

BEYOND THE NUMBERS

While Syrah sales have been lackluster at the grocery store level, some higher-level American producers have a different perspective.

Lindquist sells Qupé wines in all 50 states. About 30 of those are “active” markets that order and re-order more than once a year. Qupe produces about 40,000 cases of wine each year, and two-thirds of that is Syrah. Lindquist was one of the very first producers to tackle Syrah in California, and from the beginning Qupé has been devoted to a relatively cool-climate style.

To hear Lindquist tell it, Syrah did go through some growing pains, but that’s mainly because of general economic downturn. The difficult stretch for Syrah during the past decade can be attributed to overproduction and a general economic downturn.

Varied styles of Syrah from France, Australia and the U.S. created some consumer confusion, but American Syrah appears to be coalescing around a cool-to-moderate climate style.

U.S. consumers are developing an understanding and appreciation of Syrah. As the Syrah varietal brand strengthens, so does market pull-through.

AT A GLANCE

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economic conditions and a spell of oversupply when many growers and large wine producers got into the game.

“So many winemakers jumped on the Syrah bandwagon in the 1990s because they love it and it’s relatively easy to grow,” he said. “Wineries best known for other varietals started coming into the market with another Syrah; so yes, the market flooded and with a lot of Syrah that was expensive as well.”

Lindquist cited Ramey as an example. “Here is one of the greatest producers of Chardonnay and Cabernet in California that decided to start a Syrah program because Dave Ramey loves Syrah,” he said. “The grapes came from outstanding vineyards, but they came into the market at the wrong time and (the winery) wanted $50-$60 a bottle. They had trouble selling it and so backed way off in the amount produced, basically making it just for their tasting room and wine club. Of course, as soon as they did that, demand increased in other markets,” said Lindquist.

Another issue that created challenges for Syrah, Lindquist noted, is that there was a period when consumers heard a lot about it, but didn’t know what to expect when they bought a bottle. That range of styles, national and international, still creates some customer confusion – especially since Syrah is grown in more places now than ever before. “Syrah is one of the greatest red grapes,” he said, “but should it taste like Côte Rotie or Yellow Tail? Barossa or Priorat? Paso Robles or Santa Barbara?”

ON THE UPSWING

Despite the market challenges, Qupé Syrah sales didn’t really suffer. “We’ve always sold well because we’ve been in the market so long,” Lindquist said. “We couldn’t keep Syrah in stock in the late 1980s through the 1990s, but there was a lot less competition then. We also made less wine back then.”

Now, Lindquist said, thanks to improved economic conditions in the United States, Syrah is making a comeback.

Another Rhône-driven Santa Barbara County winemaker, Steve Beckmen of Beckmen Vineyards, also believes Syrah sales are on the rise. “The Syrah market has steadily improved over the last few years in many places throughout the country, with California leading the way, which has helped to improve sales,” he said. “We have seen some improvement in other markets, like New York and Texas, with some still lagging behind in their acceptance of Syrah.”

Qupé’s entry-level Central Coast Syrah is often sold for just under
The style of Syrah from California is clearer and more focused than it has ever been, allowing the consumer to understand the grape and wines better,” Beckmen said. Beckmen describes his style of Syrah, and the style of others that are selling well, as falling somewhere between cool and warm climates, where Syrah can achieve a broad range of flavors. He cites the Ballard Canyon AVA in Santa Barbara County as a place that’s near ideal for that style. “Also, Syrah wines offer the consumer greater quality-to-value ratios than most other red grape varieties, which the consumer has been figuring out lately.”

“The market now is as strong as it’s ever been; there is just a lot more competition,” Lindquist said.

Lynn Penner-Ash, of Penner-Ash Wine Cellars, is one of Oregon’s most devoted Syrah lovers and producers, even though she makes only about 500 to 600 cases a year. She also said she’s seeing signs of a Syrah uptick.

“I do think there has been a slight turnaround, but a turnaround nonetheless,” she said. “We’ve seen our national distribution pick up over the last two years, meaning more and more states are also willing to pick up an allocation of Syrah. Over the years we’ve not really had a hard time selling the little amount of Syrah we make, but it has been quicker sell-through the last two years.”

Steve Beckmen of Beckmen Vineyards has seen the Syrah market improve in the last few years.

$20 retail, but both Qupé and Beckment produce Syrahs in the $30-$55 range, along with limited-production $100 bottlings.

Even the varietal character issue seems to be working itself out – at least in California.
Even so, Penner-Ash notes that some of her grower friends have not found it easy to sell grapes from back-to-back bumper crops on the West Coast. Thus market forces still continue to complicate the issue.

She believes that she’s making a niche wine that has a healthy niche audience. “We don’t produce a big, fat, higher-alcohol style. Ours is more restrained and some say more Pinot-like, though we do throw some Viognier into the fermenters. I think ours is an easier style to pair with foods and enjoy by itself, so maybe that makes it more appealing to a larger audience.”

Farther north in Washington, Jean-François Pellet, a partner in and winemaker for the Rhône-driven Amavi brand, has seen a similar trend. He thinks that Amavi’s continued success in selling Syrah derives from a few factors, including expressing a particular regionality, delivering exceptional value

SERIOUS ABOUT SYRAH

From my perspective of attending Rhône Rangers tastings in northern California over the past couple of years, it is clear that the number of producers participating has contracted. The trade tasters seem less curious and more serious; the wines seem to be higher quality, more visionary; and Lynn Penner-Ash is selling through her small-production Syrah faster than in previous years, and it’s gaining wider distribution. Photo: Andrea Johnson and cultivating relationships with active sellers.

“Yes, we are seeing the same effect,” said Pellet of the suggestion that Syrah might be easier to sell these days. “I would admit that the Amavi Syrah has been really well embraced by the sommelier community, and we have seen slow but steady growth for the past five years. I believe the reason is (because) Amavi is delivering a very good value from Washington, and Walla Walla in particular,” he said.
people manning the tasting tables are miles more articulate than they used to be. Syrah is discussed in terms of style in a much more sophisticated way, and the wines themselves are more sophisticated.

Wines from the Rhône have steadily increased in price over the past 15 years, including both Syrah and Grenache-based wines, which shows that global awareness of Syrah is on the rise. While Australian mass-market wines continue to tumble, higher-quality Aussie regional wines are selling better in America – and that includes Shiraz.

Meanwhile, American Syrah seems to have slowly emerged from that awkward adolescent period and is finally growing up. Knowledgeable American consumers are asking for it and drinking it. Fifteen years ago, it was projected to be “a thing,” and it is now a thing. It was a bumpy trip, but Syrah has arrived.

It’s true that some who tried to take advantage of the trend floundered, but the wineries that have been steadfastly devoted to making great Syrah seem pretty comfortable in their boots right now.

It might even be possible that the American public, which has grown into a very sophisticated wine market, has finally wrapped its collective head around this whole Syrah thing and understands that this wine is complicated – which they already seem to understand with regard to Pinot Noir.

Lindquist believes that Syrah ultimately will be a major player on the American wine scene, and that it is inevitable. “You can count the red grape varieties that consistently make great wine in different growing areas on one hand – seven fingers, actually: Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Nebbiolo, Merlot, Grenache and Sangiovese.”

Personally, I think Nebbiolo probably could be stricken from that short list because it doesn’t perform that well in varied environments; but Syrah undeniably belongs in the pantheon of noble varieties. And, as Lindquist suggests, consumer appreciation of the variety can only improve.

If there is anything that I learned from surveying some of America’s best Syrah producers, it is that rumors of Syrah’s death have been greatly exaggerated.

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Comments? Please e-mail us at feedback@vwmmedia.com.