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Grenache Ground Breakers

*Winemakers Joel Gott
& Dave Phinney
Explore New Frontiers*

COVER STORY

Grenache Ground Breakers

WINEMAKERS DAVE PHINNEY AND JOEL GOTT EXPLORE NEW FRONTIERS

by David Gadd



PHOTO: MIKE PUCCI

Winemakers Dave Phinney (left) and Joel Gott are breaking new ground for Grenache.

The Roussillon, in southern France.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHATTERWINES.




PHOTO: JIMMY P.

For winemakers Dave Phinney and Joel Gott, the grass is often greener—and the grapes are frequently riper—on the other side of the world. When not making wines for their respective California labels (Orin Swift Cellars and Joel Gott Wines), the adventuresome duo can usually be tracked down via GPS trekking the globe in search of hidden pockets of undiscovered viticulture that can be turned into value-driven wines for an ever more appreciative American audience.

While Phinney and Gott's individual pursuits include Malbec in arid Argentina, Pinot Noir in high-elevation Chile and Cabernet "from all over," their first project together is a stunning Grenache from the Roussillon, in southern France.

Shatter, 100% Grenache from the small town of Maury in France's Roussillon region, is named for a phenomenon in which grape clusters fail to develop all their berries after flowering. While this condition—called *coulure* in French—is usually considered a viticultural hazard, Gott and Phinney boldly embraced it as the name for their new project. As Phinney explains, "This area of the Roussillon is very prone to shatter. It actually decreases yield and intensifies the wines." Shatter is the newest edition to the Trinchero Family Estates growing portfolio of wines.

The striking Shatter label is as elegant as the wine inside.



Grenache is one of
the wines that people
truly get."

—winemaker Joel Gott

The Art of Discovery

At the insistence of his Southern California distributor, Phinney made his first trek to the Roussillon in 2008 and was amazed by what he found there: largely undiscovered vineyards full of old-vine Grenache.

"I bought 30 acres on my first trip," says the winemaker. He was almost afraid to let anyone else in on the secret: "I told everyone to keep it quiet," he confesses. The vintner was so enthusiastic about Maury that he built a winery from scratch, with the blessing of the "forward-thinking" local government administration.

One person Phinney did trust was Joel Gott, a kindred spirit with a knack for seeking out grapes no one else had found. "I love the experimentation, I love finding stuff," says Gott, "and I love being able to deliver great, inexpensive Grenache." Gott was already making a Garnacha from Spain's Calatayud region under his label The Show, as well as a California Grenache, Alakai, sourced from Monterey County and Knights Valley in Sonoma (see sidebar).

Gott was as impressed as Phinney with the terroir and viticultural potential of the Roussillon. "You

see mountain vineyards here in California, but the difference in the Roussillon is that these are dry, rocky canyons that look like they're made for billygoats—the vines are growing out of the rock."

The duo of winemakers immediately planned a wine from the region. They partnered with Trincherro Family Estates for marketing and sales. Gott had been working with TFE on his own labels and, as Phinney notes, "Trincherro didn't have anything like this in their book. It was a symbiotic fit." The winemakers agreed on a name, and Shatter was born.

Gott Grenache?

In addition to Shatter, his project with Dave Phinney, Joel Gott has his hands in two other Grenache-based wines. The Show Garnacha is sourced from Spain's Calatayud region, while Alakai is a California Grenache from Monterey County and Knights Valley in Sonoma.

Executive Editor Meridith May gives her perception on the taste profiles of the 2010 releases of these French, Spanish and California versions of Grenache. All are sold and marketed by Napa-based, family-owned and -operated Trincherro Family Estates.

PERFUME & PERKY ACIDITY: Shatter 2010, Maury, France (\$30)

Red currants and wild cherries create a mesmerizing perfume, deepened by the time the lusciously textured fruit hits the palate. It even picks up some black fruit and, even deeper, anise along the way. The expected perky Grenache acidity is present but softened by the French oak (aged 12 months, 75% new). Long last the finish! Long live Shatter!



PHOTO: MIKE PUCCI

The famous schist of the Maury appellation.

The Roussillon Difference

The famous black, fractured schist of Maury and other appellations in the Roussillon contributes to the intensity of the region's wines, Gott notes (see the Roussillon story in our November 2011 issue). "This is wildly different Grenache: dark black and sometimes reaching 28 to 30 Brix."

Phinney adds that this "fickle" variety, while lighter in California, resembles Petite Sirah in the Roussillon, and with yields of only half a ton per acre in Maury, "it's a whole different ball-game." Furthermore, he reminds us, "You can't water in France."

GENEROUS FRUIT & FLORAL: Alakai 2010 California Red (\$18)

There's a sweetness we'll attribute to California-grown fruit, a nature's sugared plum quality, that, with a hint of hibiscus flower, makes a startling entrance for this blend of 77%

Sonoma Grenache, 17% Napa Valley Syrah, 4% Mourvèdre and 2% Petite Sirah. The sun shines brightly on blackberries while white pepper, mocha and cinnamon play the back tones. But that middle: jasmine, violets and hibiscus. A luxury sip. (Alakai is a high-plateau rainforest in Kauai and the name of Gott's black Labrador, who passed away in 2005.)



DRAMA QUEEN: The Show 2010 Garnacha, Calatayud, Spain (\$13)

This is where Garnacha first gained its ground: the rugged terrain and high altitude vineyards of Northeast Spain. The Show is as big and bold as the bucking steed depicted on the label. The seamless carmine curtain opens to authentic earthy pleasures: black cherries and chocolate melted into sundrenched soil. Spiced raspberry and roasted coffee plays a character role to the never-ending story.



The condition known as shatter (*coulure* in French) concentrates the grapes.

The age of the vines is also extraordinary, even when measured against California's old-vine Zinfandel. "They've only been keeping records since 1954," Gott says, "so the only true assessment is to talk with the vineyard owners. Many of these vines were planted post-World War I and pre-World War II."

Back Story

Phinney got into wine when he spent a year in Tuscany while pursuing his undergraduate degree in political

science at the University of Arizona. When he returned to the States, he found a professor in the U. of A. agriculture department with whom he collaborated on an experimental one-acre vineyard in the heart of Tucson, while also learning the sales side of the business ("the hard part," as he says) with gigs in the city's best wine shops. After working one harvest at Robert Mondavi, Phinney started Orin Swift Cellars (the name combines his father's middle name with his mother's maiden name) in 1998 with two tons of

purchased Zinfandel.

Zinfandel was also instrumental in initiating Gott's wine career. Coming from a family that had been involved in the California wine business for five generations, Gott and his brother opened a market in Calistoga in 1993, turning it into a gourmet wine and food emporium. The experience of selling wine at retail convinced Gott that wine that could be sold at a reasonable price point was the future. His winemaker wife, Sarah, produced the first Joel Gott Zinfandel in 1996, and the entre-

preneur now has a hand in a wide array of négociant projects, both in California and beyond.

Phinney first met Gott at the Palisades Market in Calistoga. "I went in to sell him my wines," Phinney recalls. The two hit it off. "Now our kids go to the same school, and our wives are best friends." The Shatter project ideally combines the dynamic duo's interest in exploring the wide world of wine and their commitment to offering consumers real value for their wine dollars.

Shattering Expectations

"Response to Shatter has been insane," Gott says. "Lots of markets sold their entire allocation in one day." Fortunately, Phinney notes, because it is sourced from across the Maury appellation, Shatter is a scalable project that can accommodate growing consumer demand. With a "treasure map" of the area's best vineyards provided by the local growers' cooperative, Phinney and Gott have access to untapped riches in the form of excellent Grenache. Case production of Shatter will increase from 6,000 cases in the current 2010 vintage (its initial release) to around 15,000 for the next release, reports Phinney.

"Grenache has the potential to become the next hot topic," opines Gott. "Grenache is one of the wines that people truly get. To a lot of people, it's a new discovery, and it comes in lots of profiles."

Phinney now owns 300 acres in the Maury appellation and flies to Roussillon a dozen times a year to keep an eye on his estate, which is managed by Brit expat and longtime Maury resident Richard Case, his "man on the ground." Outside observers have called the region a "baby Priorat," and chances are that with the likes of Phinney and Gott, as well as other local and outside winemakers, bringing it wider attention, it may soon explode the way Priorat did a decade ago.

The new wine may shatter sales records while simultaneously consumer ideas about Roussillon, which has, until now, mainly been known for sweet *vin doux naturel* wines. But don't count on Shatter being the last joint project from these two ground breakers. As Gott puts it: "There's a lot of inexpensive Grenache out there."

Grenache in Perspective

To get a market-savvy take on Dave Phinney and Joel Gott's up-and-coming Grenache projects, we spoke with **Bob Torkelson**, President and COO of Trinchero Family Estates.

THE TASTING PANEL: What's the value in a large company like TFE creating partnerships with freewheeling "little guys" like Dave Phinney and Joel Gott?

Bob Torkelson: I suppose you could consider Joel Gott and Dave Phinney "little" when it comes to overall case output. But in my mind, they are giants when it comes to passion, creativity and understanding the premium wine consumer. In our experience with Joel, he has become an unselfish advocate for our premium wine portfolio. We have learned an enormous amount from Joel and his team. Dave brings experience in an important wine producing country like France and helps us frame it in terms that American consumers can understand. Working with these guys has been a dream for our organization.

TTP: What's the future of Grenache with the wine-drinking public?

BT: The flavor profile is hot, as is the category. At the retail level, it's growing at nine times the rate of total table wine.* All three of our Grenaches mentioned have distinct profiles and appeal to consumers for specific reasons. **Shatter**, from France, not only offers wine drinkers an outstanding Grenache, but the opportunity to enjoy the unexpected region of Roussillon and the low yields of the Maury vineyards. For **The Show Garnacha**, we source the grapes from the place where Garnacha was first born: Calatayud, in northeastern Spain, which produces some of the highest-quality wine in the country. Garnacha accounts for more than half of the region's production. The Grenache grapes in Joel Gott's **Alakai** come predominantly from Pelkan Ranch in Sonoma's Knights Valley, from Sarah Gott's father's vineyards, giving the Alakai a soft, fruit-forward taste.

TTP: What's the strategy for marketing wines like Shatter, Alakai and The Show? Are these on-premise brands or off-premise performers?

BT: The three wines have very different strategies. A luxury wine, Shatter appeals to sommeliers and wine connoisseurs, although it is still a fantastic value at \$29.99 SRP for the Shatter 2010 Grenache. Small-production, unusual wines from cult-like winemakers are typically a "hand sell," and we expect Shatter to do really well on-premise and in fine-wine retailers. The label, with its broken/shattered glass photography showcases Dave's artistic style and imaginative approach for which Orin Swift wines such as Prisoner are well known.

Joel is a master blender, so Alakai is Grenache at the core but also has small amounts of Syrah, Mouvèdre and Petite Sirah blended in. It appeals in fine wine shops and on-premise, but is also at a price which make it accessible by the glass in restaurants.

The Show Garnache is an exceptional value and is experiencing initial success in the retail level, some of which may be a result of the loyal fan base of The Show Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec. The March launch was well timed as the demand for Spanish wines has increased, especially Garnacha. Spanish imports dominate the Grenache category with 91% of the retail dollar volume*.

TTP: How would you sum up the TFE-Gott-Phinney partnership?

BT: We are excited and honored to be working together with Joel and Dave. Shatter is a great fit for our expanding luxury portfolio. It is a truly innovative wine from an unheralded region of France, created by two of the wine industry's leading personalities. I am confident that this collaboration is going to produce some amazing wines, and we are going to have fun doing it.

*Nielsen, U.S. Food Stores, 52 weeks ending 5/26/12 ■■