



WINE NOTES *from* BRYAN BABCOCK

2016 OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS GRENACHE SPANISH SPRINGS VINEYARD SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

About ten years ago, I started having this sort-of-strange urge to produce a white wine and a red wine from the same grapes. The idea was not to take a delivery of grapes and split it, pressing out half the juice for white and crushing the other half for red. No, I wanted to take the same clusters--indeed the same berries--and coax each of them into producing both a white and red wine. And, of course, I wanted both wines to be really good. It seemed like a novel idea, and I thought if I could pull it off, everyone, including myself, would be blown away. While you can make white wine from red grapes, you cannot make red wine from white grapes unless you artificially add color, which I was not looking to do. I was pursuing purity and greatness, without any artificial gimmicks. So, knowing that it had to start with red grapes, I decided to kick everything off with Syrah. The way it would be done would be to lightly press out some almost free-run juice at very low pressure, so as to avoid forcing out any pigment from the skins. If I could capture roughly half of the overall yield, with little to no pigment, that would be the fraction fermented for a white wine. Then, that same fruit would be dumped out of the press and taken to the destemmer and crushed for the other half of the wine which would be red.

There was never any issue with the red wine. Syrah makes big red wine. So that half of the equation was fine. It was the white wine that I couldn't figure out. Because Syrah has so much pigment, and because it bleeds out of the skins so easily, there was always too much color in the juice, and it didn't matter how gently I squeezed it. The bottom line: if I was going to use Syrah, the best I could do with the first half of it was make orange wine. Shortly after bottling the first one, I had a little epiphany, and decided to call it Identity Crisis! You've heard of the black sheep of the family? Well, Identity Crisis was the orange sheep that, as it turned out, was actually pretty tasty, so everyone was relatively happy. Still, I longed for more of a mind-boggling, perfect, red-white dichotomy. If Syrah bled too easily, then I would just have to look at a red grape that was stingier with its pigment. Enter Grenache.

With Grenache, its color does not usually want to come out and play, at least not on day one. You can easily squeeze on it without waking it up. So, I was finally able to make a genuinely white wine from red grapes. I still called it Identity Crisis, and everyone was still happy. The real crisis for me, however, was that now the red wine half of the equation totally sucked. I mean, as red Grenache it was ok, but I needed it to be great for this whole dichotomy phenomenon to make sense. At that point I started to speculate; perhaps if I sourced some Grenache that was grown closer to the coast in a cooler climate, it might just have a little more pigment that would bolster a serious red wine, but with juice that could still easily press out at low pressure, sans color, for the white. Enter the Spanish Springs Vineyard.

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In 2016, it was a bit of a challenge to find any coastal Grenache. Finally I got a call from a buddy of mine, Michael Haddox, who was farming some up in San Luis Obispo County. He was almost apologetic at first because the Vineyard, Spanish Springs, was not actually in the revered Edna Valley. He went on to tell me that it was too close to the coast to be in Edna, and, in fact, was located only a couple miles inland from Pismo Beach. Thinking that this could be a good thing as far as maximizing color in Grenache, I signed up for 4 tons. The fruit arrived, and what fruit it was! In the bins, it was much darker than any Grenache that I had ever worked with. At that point, I thought, “this is it!” I was going to make the perfect red/white - Yin/Yang - “what, that’s impossible!” thing happen, and it was going to be with the coastal fruit from Spanish Springs. I loaded the press and started gently squeezing.

Instead of a precious stream of crystal white juice, though, what I got was a gurgling, black, Texas Tea, that at first glance made me wish I had stuck with Syrah and joined the Revolutionary Orange Party. The stuff was so black I went into the lab and called Mr. Haddox to make sure it wasn’t some kind of mistake. “Are you sure this is my block? Are you absolutely sure this is Grenache?” I had never seen any red grapes, at any pressure, from any variety, press out this dark. To see something like this with Grenache was like an odd quirk in the universe that defied the laws of Enology. I sat there in the lab totally dumbfounded. The juice was so dark, I wondered if it could even make rosé, or was I on track to make two red wines from the same grapes--huge and huger? After coming to grips with the fact that this fruit would not make a white wine, I decided to go with the flow. I had already pulled about 200 gallons out of the press. Putting that inky juice back into the skins at that point would have been an even bigger sign of defeat, so I told my crew to put it in some barrels. “Oh, guys, I forgot to mention, we are making a really big orange wine this year!” While I never did achieve a perfect red-white, dual universe victory, I did go on that year to make two single vineyard Spanish Springs wines that changed my life.

The juice that we fermented in barrels did, finally, lighten up enough to yield a rosé. In fact it finished with a beautiful, deep hue that was somewhere between hot pink and ruby red. On the palate, the wine was an absolute bomb, with gigantic texture, fruit, succulence and acid. It was completely weird at that point knowing that the biggest wine I had ever made in my life was rosé!?

So, with freaky having become my new normal, I decided to match this existential weirdness with stylistic weirdness, and I bottled the wine WITH its ENTIRE component of yeast sediment (lees). At that point, the biggest wine I had ever made also became the most controversial wine I had ever made. For those of you who know my wines, it was the 2016 Eye Of The Beholder, En Tirage Grenache Rosé. And it is, to this day, exactly what it was on day one: beautiful and perplexing.

Now for the main reason behind this lengthy discussion: in 2016, the same grape clusters that made Eye Of The Beholder also made a red Grenache. As you can imagine, getting color in that wine was not an issue. In fact, that wine went on to become one of the darkest, most structured, most concentrated red wines I have ever made. Indeed, it is so stunning that it has prompted me to do something that I did not think I would be doing, at least not this soon. I am adding a new variety, along with Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, to my collection of single-vineyard wines. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Grenache to the Terroir Extraordinaire portfolio. And be assured, this is the kind of Grenache that you can take to a totally jacked up Grenache tasting, and then listen to the cognoscenti as they proclaim, “This cannot be Grenache!”

From the moment it started to ferment, it was a beast. And when I run into this kind of stunningly enigmatic thing, I find, with at least the first example of it, it’s best to just let it be that way. Doing so provides you with a chance to study and comprehend the baseline of what you are working with. In the future, if there is any room for improvement here, it will be in the way of refinement. With this vintage, however, I simply could not pass up the opportunity to bottle the inexplicable. My dad always used to tell me, when opportunity knocks, open the door.

In this case, opportunity should be knocking in each bottle for a long time. 20 years? Easily. Starting from the color that makes you feel like you are staring out into space at a Black Hole, to the nose, redolent of things like toasted cassis, smoke, Kirsch, forest floor, herbs, orange peel, and cardamom seed, this is quite a wine. If you spend an hour with it, you come up with a whole nother set of descriptors. And yet, I think, for all practical purposes, the nose is still quite closed, and has a lot more to give in the future. On the palate, it is as chewy and tangy as the nose suggests it’s going to be. If you’re having, let’s say, Granny’s stewed Rocky Mountain oysters for dinner this weekend, and you need to pair it with a wine that drinks like a bull in a china shop, then go get your corkscrew. If you have the patience to not poke the beast for 5 years, or better yet, 10, then I do believe the nose will harmonize and start to launch, and the palate will synergize and start to soften. If you can wait 20 years, I think the beast will morph into an electric silk that will deliver a sense of exultation through the mere act of swallowing. Whether you drink this wine now or in 20 years, if you are not absolutely happy with it in a holy s#@t kind of way, then call me, and I’ll send you something less spirited.

2018 LOVE GARDEN SPARKLING CLAIRETTE

MÉTHODE ANCESTRALE, “PÉT-NAT”

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

If you read only one sentence of these notes, this should be it:
Make sure you chill this thing down really well just like you would a bottle of Champagne.

This is our first ever release of a wine with bubbles. It's from one of these new white Rhone varieties that I am looking at--in this case, namely, Clairette. Stylistically, the wine falls under the Ancestral Method, or in French, Méthode Ancestrale. It is believed that Méthode Ancestrale is the way Europe's first sparkling wines were made, most likely by accident. The other stylistic term that I often hear applied to wines like this is “Pét-Nat”, which is short for Pétillant Naturel, or naturally sparkling. At the moment, pét-nat is all the rage in the blossoming “natural wine” movement, and is definitely on most wine hipsters' radar screens. Personally, I prefer the term Méthode Ancestrale because it just sounds cool. I'll use the term pét-nat here, as it is currently the more popular term in the wine trade.

The way you produce a wine like this is to bottle it slightly before its primary fermentation is finished. Thus, the tail end of fermentation, along with any carbon dioxide it produces, takes place in, and stays in, the bottle. Since the carbon dioxide can't escape into the atmosphere, it is forced back into solution in the wine. You can see how the very first sparkling wines were probably produced accidentally when winemakers may have thought some of their fermentations were done when they really were not. After enclosing their vessels, pressure developed inside and the wines became bubbly. Today, Champagne production, or Méthode Champenoise, is simply a highly refined version of the phenomenon that has taken wine with bubbles to an art form. While pét-nat can be taken just as seriously as any other style, to me it feels more like a casual street method. I don't think we will ever see vendors on street corners selling Champagne out of croissant carts. But pét-nat?

There are some pitfalls to all of this, and on bottling day you really need to have your act together. Essentially, if you bottle too early, you may develop more pressure than the bottles can handle. Indeed, I have heard horror stories from winemakers who had all of their recently-bottled pét-nat laying in storage bins when a bottle exploded, setting off a chain reaction which decimated almost the entire lot. Can you imagine? In 2018, I actually made two pét-nats, this Sparkling Clairette, and a Blanc de Noirs from estate grown Pinot. While my Pinot didn't explode, half of it did leak because we did not apply robust enough bottle caps. As a result, this was the first year that I have ever seen fruit flies survive through the winter over in the warehouse. In the bottles that didn't leak, there is a beautiful sparkling wine, but with half the production lost we did not have enough to label and sell commercially. Welcome to the wine business! After using a very robust “Champagne Yeast” on the Pinot, its final fermentation took place in the bottle very rapidly. About three days after bottling, I was curious and wondering if there were any bubbles yet. So I went over to the warehouse, grabbed a bottle and took it back to the lab where I naively opened it, at room temperature! The next thing I knew, 2/3 of the bottle was on the ceiling. I stood there taking a Blanc de Noirs shower as my lab tech, Allyson, walked in with a look on her face like, ‘How long you been doing this again?’

This Sparkling Clairette is very pretty with subtle pear fruit, and bubbles that are consistent with most pét-nats -- a little bit bigger and with less of an all-out gush compared to Champagne. The other thing about pét-nats is that, due to the pressure that builds up, the tail end of fermentation does not always finish, and the wines may have a touch of residual sugar. As I write this here on Valentine's Day 2019, I think I taste maybe 1/2% of residual sugar, just enough to accentuate the fruit and make it utterly delicious. By the time you receive this wine in the upcoming May shipment, it may very well be a little more dry and crisp, but my guess is that it will always have at least a touch of RS. This is an aspect of pét-nat wines that I really like. Each year is not totally predictable. As long as you don't bottle too early or too late, you will end up with something with bubbles in it. Just how dry it is and how much it gushes is something that you have to explore upon opening it. Another thing I love about pét-nat is that there is never any SO₂ added to the wine. Because it's still fermenting when you bottle it, the addition of any kind of preservative at that point is not appropriate and would hinder the fermentation process. And from an oxidation standpoint, the wine shouldn't see any degradation for years. Any oxygen in the equation was kicked out during fermentation, and now that the wine is bottled, no oxygen can get in. The bottom line is that there is always a theme of freshness with pét-nats.

You will notice that, similar to my radical En tirage versions of Eye Of The Beholder Rosé, this pét-nat has some sediment in the bottle, a remnant of the fact that fermentation finished there. While Eye Of The Beholder was a winemaking style that was built on this sediment, and lots of it, most pét-nats have only a slight sediment. In other words, the bottle won't turn into mud if you shake it up. Upon opening, the bubbles will tend to mix the wine, but it maxes out at a slight haze, and there is no need to decant. Just pop and serve. The bottles are crown capped, so opening is with a bottle opener, not a corkscrew.

Make sure you chill this thing down really well just like you would a bottle of Champagne.

You don't want to wear the stuff. You want to drink it.

Finally, the thing I love the most about this project is the beautiful label that Lisa has designed. Bubbles in a Love Garden--perfect! This is now our official label for the production of all future rosé and sparkling wines.

2018 LOVE GARDEN PETIT VERDOT ROSÉ SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

Even a guy like me can maintain an artistic spasm for only so long, and while my Eye Of The Beholder Rosé was a fascinating and intellectually rewarding project, it has recently given way to a return to, shall I say, normalcy. The 2017 Eye Of The Beholder, which we shipped back in February, will be the last of its kind, at least for the foreseeable future. To those of you who, like me, will miss the freak show, I apologize. For most of you, though, I sense a big sigh of relief as I inform you that my Rosé will no longer be all about the mud. Going forward, my Rosé will be all about the Love.

While this is not the first fruity, chill, pop & serve Rosé I have ever made, it is the first Rosé from Petit Verdot that I have ever made. Now that Petit Verdot has become the go-to grape in my FATHOM program, I have a pretty hefty delivery of the stuff coming each fall, so, this is something that could be duplicated. Let's see how this one goes.

While the Petit Verdot did make very pretty Rosé, it wasn't without its challenges. In the making of a Rosé, you want to squeeze hard enough on the red grapes to push out at least some pigment. If you don't get enough pigment, you end up with white wine, or something that is like a muddled orange--been there, done that--so squeeze away, right? The only problem was our production trials showed us that with Petit Verdot, if you squeeze it too hard, you start to force out some seriously rough tannins, (the hallmark of this grape when it is made into a more typical red wine). The moral of the story: there's a sweet spot. Find that spot and you get the pink and the fruit, and it feels good on the palate to boot.

This is the other Love Garden right now along with our new Sparkling Clairette. I am a bit biased, but I do think the labels that Lisa has created are the most beautiful things in the wine business. How do you capture in two words a feeling for the atmosphere that she has created in the tasting room? Well, she's done it.

2017 RADICAL PINOT NOIR RADIAN VINEYARD STA. RITA HILLS

Some of my notes here have been pretty lengthy, so I think I'll try and trim this one down a bit. This Radical Pinot is a good wine to do this with because it's like an instant replay of last year, and the year before that, etc. In other words, it's another classic derived from some of the best blocks of Pinot Noir in the stunning Radian Vineyard. Super complex, hauntingly earthy, unctuous fruit, sublime texture on the palate; it's everything a trophy Pinot should be. High fives to Ruben Solorzano and his crew over there for yet another year of perfect timing and balance in the vineyard.

2017 PINOT NOIR STA. RITA HILLS

In 2017, my deliveries of Pinot Noir were so small that it made it impossible to skim off any gallons of Déjà vu, Radical, Slice Of Heaven, etc. Thus, the bad news is, for one year, I had to put a tour de force blending program on hold. The good news, for fans of this wine, is that it forced me to utilize 100% Estate Grown fruit. In other words, my 2017 Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir is pretty much indistinguishable from Ocean's Ghost. In contemplating these notes, at one point I was about to proclaim "It's a mini-Ocean's Ghost!" Then I went and tasted it, and I couldn't find the mini part. Even though it is a bigger lot (800 cases), every effort was still made in the winemaking to capture all the nuance from our soil. It's a dark, rich, structured Pinot Noir from a very good vintage that can be aged or enjoyed any time. While its mystique is not the result of blending great vineyards, it is, nonetheless, still there.

2017 SLICE OF HEAVEN PINOT NOIR RITA'S CROWN (THE LAST OF) & DONNACHADH VINEYARDS STA. RITA HILLS

Over the last decade or so, my Slice Of Heaven was the product of the extraordinary Pinot Noir that grew in Block 14 at Rita's Crown. I would say it was as early as 2013 that I started to see some viticultural issues in that block. At first, I chalked up the stunting of some of its vines to the fact that Block 14's hillside is quite steep, and it does not hold on to its irrigations very well. It's just stress, I thought. But, hey, that's what makes for great wines, right? Then, by 2015, a good half of the vines started to look pretty haggard. In 2016, after surmising that the problem was not soil mechanics but Pierce's Disease, we picked only the strong vines, leaving us with half of a crop and only 200 cases of production. I probably should have let it go at that point, but I didn't have the heart. I came back in 2017 hoping for a miracle. We got barely a ton of fruit, not enough for a commercial single vineyard bottling. That's when I waved goodbye to Rita's Crown and looked to the other side of the Santa Ynez River for a future home for Slice Of Heaven.

Fortunately, as I gazed south, I felt like I was being counseled by God, as the newly-planted Donnachadh (pronounced DON-a-ka) Vineyard had come into view. While losing Block 14 at Rita's Crown was sad, the place where I could see myself going was sublime. In the Sta. Rita Hills, if there is a vineyard that captures, or perhaps surpasses, the heavenly feeling of Rita's Crown, it's Donnachadh. Donnachadh is not merely a small hillside with Pinot Noir on it. Donnachadh is a shimmering throne where wonderous disciples like me stand at its base and worship.

So, for one year only, this Slice Of Heaven is part swan song, part beacon to the future, as we blended the last 3 ceremonious barrels of Rita's into the first crop of Donnachadh. It is an extremely earthy blend, not unlike the 2017 Microcosm from the Spear Vineyard. It has a touch of that brown sugary, Santa Rosa Road molasses thing going on, which should just get prettier and prettier over the next few years. It's a tight wine on the palate with firm acidity, so I would not hesitate to lay it down for 3 or 4 years. If you want texture and ripeness right now, drink the Radical.

In the words of Peter Gabriel,
my heaven will be a big heaven, and I will walk through the front door

BACKROADS RED BLEND 5TH EDITION

It is along the backroads of Santa Barbara County that I have found the vineyards that have given rise to my most spectacular wines. In the process of making those wines, there are a number of occasions when less than 100% of their volume in barrels can be captured unfiltered with perfect clarity. When the 5% of cloudy wine that is left can be blended and filtered, then for me, it's time to honor those vineyards by collecting that wine and putting it in a bottle.

This 5th Edition blend answers the question, how beautiful can an androgynous kitchen sink be? It's a seductive interplay between the power that comes out of the Syrah, Cabernet, and Petit Verdot in my cellar, along with the earth and spice from the dregs of all my Pinot, Grenache and Carignan . . . a (not so) little wine that continues to be a crazy good value.