



Wine Notes
from
Bryan Babcock

2017 TOP CREAM
CHARDONNAY
ESTATE GROWN

This year's Top Cream brings emotions that are happy and sad. I am happy because the wine is, once again, so darn good. I am sad because, for all practical purposes, it's the end of an era. My vineyard has Pierce's Disease. In the Chardonnay, lots of it. Now that over half of the vines are being affected, it's time to take the vineyard out. While I hope to grow Chardonnay again someday in my vineyard, it could be a while before I am in a position to replant. At this point, I am so involved with Agristhetics and the reforestation of the property, it could take a number of years. The good news on this front is that there are so many stunning new vineyards in the Sta. Rita Hills, I simply don't need to grow most of my own fruit. For now, I will proceed forward as a righteous buyer of Chardonnay, as I focus on oak trees and butterfly sanctuaries.

This wine is so nicely knit together, I am very proud of it. After a 30+ year run of making some pretty darn good Chardonnays, this is a good one to serve as a book end for all that work. It's a little tighter than the past few vintages which was appropriate for the vintage. Those poor, weakened vines gave it everything they had to adequately ripen their fruit. After an excruciating cluster-select-hand-picking, it came in a point of sugar lower than normal with acids that were quite firm. The result is a wine not just with a Burgundian style, but with an actual Burgundian persona. I almost feel like the vineyard is calling out Touchet! Over my decision to pick a little less ripe. After a full elevage in the most extraordinary barrels that Gerome Fouailly can make, it's minerality, minerality, minerality, vanilla bean, clean apple-pear fruit, and yeast, all perfectly captured by winemaker Colin Kress who manages to not filter our best white wines, like it's a walk in the park. The great French Chardonnay appellation of Meursault surprisingly does not have a Grand Cru vineyard. My mind tells me that if it did, it would produce something like this.

I will probably take the Top Cream name next year and transfer it to a Chardonnay vineyard in the Sta. Rita Hills that is fast becoming one of my other favorites; Donnachadh (pronounced Donnaka). Along with our Limit Chardonnay, which hails from the Radian Vineyard, I think that will be the best way for the name "Top Cream" to live on.

2107 SOULSTRUCK SAUVIGNON BLANC

For the second year in a row, this bottling of Soulstruck Sauvignon Blanc is from estate grown fruit that I chose not to dedicate to my pinnacle bottling, "Simpatico". So, while this wine is very reasonably priced, the thing to know is that the fruit still came from one of the most interesting Sauvignon Blanc vineyards in California; indeed the only Sauvignon Blanc vineyard to my knowledge in the Sta. Rita Hills. As a result, the wine is saturated with beautiful flavors and texture. With all of my estate grown Sauvignon Blanc, the formula is always focused on taming the herbaceous beast that cool climate Sauvignon can often be. Simpatico is all about capturing and taming raw energy. For little brother Soulstruck, I like the nickname "li'l beast." He's fully tamed as well.

2017 PSI CLONE PINOT NOIR

It is in the hearts of the stewards of Pinot Noir that the desire for well bred vines feels something akin to the pursuit of a holy grail. For me, Psi Clone has always been the wine that tempers this plight. If you want the full story, go to our web site, click on Winemaker's Stories, then click on Psi Clone Saga. Once again, this bottling delivers the tantalizing qualities of my most favorite Pinot clones; Dijon 459, Dijon 777, and, of course, my own in-house Psi Clone. Beginning with its beautiful ruby red hue, and ending with a long, rich, soft finish, the overall theme is robustness, not from terroir or oak as much as from pedigree of vines.

2017 JE NE SAIS QUOI PINOT NOIR PEAKE VINEYARD

This year's Je Ne Sais Quoi is from the spectacular Peake Vineyard, located in the eastern end of the Sta. Rita Hills on Santa Rosa Road. As in years past, Je Ne continues to be one of the more complex and earthy Pinots in our Terroir Extraordinaire lineup. For me, describing this stuff is a bit like trying to describe the Simpatico Sauvignon Blanc, when, on a number of occasions, I have found my self at the computer, and after an hour I don't have a single word on the page. Some things just have their own smell, and it's hard to reference them vis a vis some other smells. It's like if you want to know what a lychee nut smells like, smell one. You can't say it's like a papaya or a mango. It just isn't. And some wines have their own sense of earth and minerality that just has to be smelled to be appreciated and understood. I will say it's a very complete Pinot; great color and overall extraction out of a vineyard that I think has a very bright future. The clones are kind of interesting as well. The wine is a blend of the recently arrived Calera Clone, as well as the old, dyed-in-the-wool, Hyde Clone. The two seem to have a firm affinity for one another (do opposites attract?) and have combined for a beautiful display of richness and complexity.

2016 BLOCK 15 CABERNET SAUVIGNON ESTELLE VINEYARD, SANTA YNEZ VALLEY

At this point I truly believe that Block 15 at the Estelle Vineyard is the nicest little section of Cabernet Sauvignon in Santa Barbara County. I usually get an email or two every year from wine club members who sneak bottles of Block 15 into blind tastings with a bunch of Napa Cabs. The subject line usually reads something like "Guess which wine was our favorite?!!!"

2016 FATHOM PETIT VERDOT HAPPY CANYON VINEYARD, HAPPY CANYON AVA

After a 10 year hiatus, ladies and gentlemen, FATHOM is back! Interestingly, after all that time, the project resumes with me still trying to wrap my brain around Bordeaux Varieties in the interior of the Santa Ynez Valley. And, as freaky would have it, the project has been resurrected by none other than the very enigmatic Petit Verdot. I truly believe this is one of the best Petit Verdots out there, at least in the United States. Perhaps that is not saying much because, well, nobody makes one. There is no doubt an Aussie or two somewhere Down Under that are knocking out some great bottlings. Other than that, there are very few varietal Petit Verdots made. Because it's typically so powerful, it's usually used as varietal lip service in Bordeaux blends at a miserly rate around 2%. In most parts of the world, if you blend in much more than 4%, your world class Cabernet Sauvignon just starts walking and talking like a wounded Petit Verdot. Over the last couple years I have been pursuing a course that lets Petit Verdot be Petit Verdot, and it's all being made possible by the shallow, rocky soils, and the very warm, let's face it, hot, climate of Happy Canyon, together beating this red beast of a grape into submission. Yea, it's a bit freaky. Every time I drive over to Happy Canyon, I just crank up the Beatles "Let It Be" in my truck.

To me, this very structured, very robust wine drinks more like a cult Cabernet from Napa than it does a Bordeaux Varietal from the Santa Ynez Valley; uber-deep cassis fruit, a mouthful of tannin, and a long, lingering finish. Of all of my wines, if you want to lay one down for 20+ years, this is it. If you can give it at least 3 or 4 years in your cellar, I think the velvety thing should start to sneak in.

To really understand my FATHOM program, here are the historical notes that I started to update a couple years ago, as the most recent Petit Verdot phenomena began to unfold.

Enjoy the read:

FATHOM *The Saga*

Winemaker's Preface:

Perhaps the best way to explain the return of FATHOM is to look at a historical (even if abbreviated) overview of the development of Bordeaux varieties in Santa Barbara County. To preface this, I would note that of the six red Bordeaux varieties, Cabernet Sauvignon is no doubt the most successful and important grape worldwide. In the Bordeaux family, it is followed by Merlot. Then it's probably a tossup between Cabernet Franc and Malbec. Petit Verdot and Carmenere are hardly on the radar screen. Based on this, I think it is fair to say that if you are in a region that does not do really well with Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot, unless you can splinter off one of the other varieties into some sort of beautiful, niched-out freak show, then it's going to be very challenging to get the cognoscente to take your Bordeaux varietals as a group seriously. For me, it is in this context that FATHOM has always been an attempt to explore and comprehend the potential for such an alternative reality.

The Dark Ages
1975 to 1990

The quality of local Cabernet Sauvignon is deplorable. From 1982 to 1984, Bryan Babcock is teased by his colleagues in the wine shop where he is employed after they find out that he is from Santa Barbara County and has intentions of making wine there after he gets out of school. Constantly he hears their never-ending taunt, "You better stick to Gewurztraminer!"

The Renaissance
1991 to 1995

It is discovered in a number of Santa Barbara County vineyards that Cabernet Franc, the primordial, atavistic ancestor of Cabernet Sauvignon, can make really nice wine. A few encouraging Merlots also pop up during this era. Babcock develops a program called FATHOM, studying the viability of making Bordeaux styled blends with Cabernet Franc leading the charge. Some extremely good wines are produced. Babcock is on the verge of telling his former colleagues to eat crow. Due to the new enthusiasm, Cabernet Franc and Merlot plantings begin to pop up all over the interior of the Santa Ynez Valley.

The Age of Vertigo
1996 to 1999

The planting of these varieties continues well into the beginning of the Age of Vertigo, until it is discovered that anxiety-ridden Cabernet Franc does not handle stress very well. Under the pressures of shallow, rocky soils that don't hold much water, extreme summer heat, and grapevine viruses for which Cabernet Franc has no tolerance, one vineyard after the next starts to croak. Despondent, Babcock makes Merlot the lead grape in his FATHOM program. Little does he know, the movie Sideways will disregard Merlot big time in a few years.

The Enlightenment
2000 to 2002

In one Santa Ynez Valley vineyard a confused neophyte, Marybeth Vogelzang, plants Cabernet Sauvignon in the face of the stigma that is still lurking from the Dark Ages. Two wineries, dumb enough to do so, begin making the wines from her fruit.* In a total state of shock, one of these wineries, Babcock, releases its first arguably great Cabernet Sauvignon; the 2001 Vogelzang. Babcock theorizes that the Cabernet Sauvignon from the Dark Ages was planted for the most part in Santa Ynez climates that were too cool, and in soils that were too rich. Because the vines were way too vigorous, and because the growers did not know what to do about it, the resulting wines were vegetal and poor. Babcock continues to theorize that in the warmer Happy Canyon area of the Santa Ynez Valley, if the right clones of Cabernet Sauvignon are planted on the district's rocky hillsides, the sky could be the limit. The Cabernet Cat sneaks out of the bag. Vogelzang's status ascends to that of viticultural rock star.

The Age of Reason
2003 to 2004

An era also known as The Age of Pining Away For A Place That's Not So Damn Hot. Babcock continues to hold his theories near and dear, but he longs for a Cabernet site slightly to the west of Happy Canyon; someplace closer to the ocean; someplace that's still plenty warm, but not over 100 degrees every time one goes there to take a grape-cluster sample. He also starts to realize that if the best Bordeaux varietal in his quiver is going to be Cabernet Sauvignon, there is no reason to brand it as anything other than Babcock. In other words, Babcock starts to realize that any further pursuits with FATHOM will be utterly bogus.

The New Epoch

2005 to 2012

Babcock discovers that slightly cooler place. It's called the Estelle Vineyard. The rocks on the ground there are beautiful, like a kaleidoscope of colors. It has multiple clones of Cabernet Sauvignon. To boot, there is a pinch of that too burly for its own good, yet still fascinating, Petit Verdot. Even the new bastard (Merlot) looks good! Babcock surmises that with vineyards like Estelle, he is on the forefront of the production of great Cabernet Sauvignon in Santa Barbara County. Babcock goes to the dictionary and looks up the word Epic. The dictionary describes a book by some guy named Homer. Wrong word.

Babcock looks up the word Epoch

*A period of time, an era, an age in which striking things happen;
the starting point of such a period.*

Babcock tastes his 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon from the Estelle Vineyard and estimates that the potential in Santa Barbara County for the world's most important grape is suddenly enormous.

The Age of Bordeaux Varietals In The 9th Inning

2013 to 2015

After a decade of thinking that well-heeled Cabernet Sauvignon drinkers from Los Angeles were going to abandon the lunacy of an eight-hour drive (or a plane ticket) to the Napa Valley, in favor of a hop, skip, and a jump to Santa Barbara County, Babcock begins to realize that it's not going to happen in his life time.

After making a slew of good Cabernets from the Estelle Vineyard, he decides to hang on to one small section, Block 15, which always made the best wine in the New Epoch. Babcock heads home to the Sta. Rita Hills, where well-heeled Pinot Noir drinkers from all over the world actually are starting to show up. Realizing that Cabernet Sauvignon in Santa Barbara is going to remain a very quiet, little phenomenon, Babcock faces the music; his spirited study of Bordeaux varieties is probably coming to an end, if it weren't for the tiny batches of Petit Verdot he made when he was down to his last strike in

The 9th Inning

The Age (tentatively known as) Extra Innings

2016 to Present

This era, which is still unfolding, may very well go through a number of official name changes before it's over. On the table at this point is:

The Age of, Wow, It's About To Get Really Weird

With the potential for Bordeaux Varieties hanging by a thread, Babcock decides to go all in on a last gasp effort to make something heavenly out of a perplexing, miscreant grape. Understanding that the vast majority of Petit Verdot world-wide is used ever so sparingly in blends because of its rigid, brutish nature, Babcock surmises that it's going to be a Hail Mary. Because of Petit Verdot's extreme levels of tannin and acid, it is often found in Bordeaux as 2-4% of the blends. Wishfully, Babcock wonders if the same conditions (extreme heat and stressful soils) that brought Cabernet Franc to its grave in The Age of Vertigo, might just be perfect for taming the wild red beast that is Petit Verdot. In the Spring of 2018 Babcock tastes his 2016 vintage Petit Verdot out of barrel and contemplates, *FATHOM might just have a new mojo.*

Excited, he is struck by a new realization; the last time he felt like he had the bases loaded, it was in The Renaissance.

*In the Enlightenment, that other winery was Foxen.