



NEW RELEASE
WINE NOTES
from
BRYAN BABCOCK

2018 TOP CREAM CHARDONNAY
DONNACHADH VINEYARD
STA. RITA HILLS

Last year I mentioned how it was a happy/sad feeling that I had while writing my notes for the 2017 Top Cream. I was happy because that wine was as good as any Chardonnay I had ever bottled in 35 years, and I was very proud of it. I was sad because my vineyard that historically produced Top Cream was dying from Pierce's disease, and that the 2017 might very well be the last Estate Grown Chardonnay that I would produce in my life time. I also mentioned at that point that my next challenge would be find a vineyard in the Sta. Rita Hills that would be worthy of inheriting the Top Cream moniker for a single-vineyard Chardonnay that could stand next to The Limit. At the time I also mentioned that I thought that vineyard might be Donnachadh, because, like my Estate Top Cream vineyard, the Chardonnay at Donnachadh grows in a very sandy soil, and I thought this might express a characteristic minerality that was similar to what we all loved when we drank all those past Top Creams of yesteryear. Well, what can I say; every now and then nature throws you a bone.

This wine is stunning. It is seamlessly sewn together. It is weighty, and at the same time, nimble.

After 9 months on its lees in the delicately toasted Oak crafted by Burgundy's Gerome Fouailly, the nose is of a creamy honeysuckle and baked vanilla brioche. The fruit is hard to pin down exactly. I keep asking myself, "Is that tropical? Or is that citrus? Or, is that maybe stone fruit?" What I do know is that it's mesmerizing. The texture is fat, but the beautifully balanced acidity whisks it off of your palate as you swallow, leaving you with a feeling on your tongue of an energized resin of terroir that, yes, does remind me of Top Cream's past. As I write these notes, it is the happy without the sad. Indeed it looks like Donnachadh will be a fine heir to the Top Cream designation.

2018 CHARDONNAY SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

In 2018 we returned to a Santa Barbara County appellation for our flagship Chardonnay. At bottling, the wine has a very tightly knit structure. Aromatically, the minerally apple/pear fruit is a bit like a baby Top Cream minus the new French Oak. On the palate, that fruit is launched by a bracing acidity which ushers in a mouthwatering effect all the way through the uber-long finish. While it does have some textural beef, it's also the kind of Chard that can be chilled way down and sipped poolside. Wine Clubbers will be paying in the low \$20's for it. Just another little liquid miracle from the blessed soils of Saint Barbara.

2018 SIMPATICO SAUVIGNON BLANC ESTATE GROWN, STA. RITA HILLS

When it comes to my single vineyard Chardonnays, like Top Cream, I feel like the fruit provides the stage upon which a number of actors can shine. With Top Cream and The Limit, for example, it's all about sensations of cream, yeast, mineral, vanilla, and butter. It's like these things are all baked together into a brioche that is stuffed with some sort of fruit. While the fruit is there, it's not the fruit by itself that's telling your brain that you are in for something special.

It's not so much about the apple as it is the pie. So, consider this stylistic thought for a moment while we discuss my Simpatico Sauvignon Blanc.

Simpatico is made almost the same way as Top Cream. It's barrel fermented in a good percentage of new French Oak, and it does go through the malolactic fermentation which builds in a little of that baked quality. It does rest in barrels after fermentation on its yeast sediments (lees). And, like my single vineyard Chards through 2018, Simpatico was bottled without filtration, so as to preserve every nuance I have tried to build into it.

But Simpatico is not Chardonnay. It's Sauvignon Blanc, a grape that has more varietal punch than Chardonnay, especially when it is grown in a cool climate like ours. Sauvignon Blanc is not the stage upon which all the other stars dance. Sauvignon Blanc is the star, and it's a star that demands a bit of subservience from the other players. In recognition of this, there are a couple of stylistic modifications that I make each year. For starters, the new French Oak barrels from Thierry Doreau are "Chauffe Blond", which means they are raw and untoasted. This provides a more simplified pure expression of vanilla that supports Sauvignon Blanc's more assertive side without competing with it.

Also, Simpatico does not stay in its barrels on its lees quite as long as my single vineyard Chardonnays. With the Chards I want a full complement of creaminess, so there I stay on the lees for a full 9 -10 months; i.e. a full "elevage". Well, Sauvignon Blanc is not so much about the cheese; it's about the fruit. So, I separate the Sauvignon Blanc from any would be antagonists a bit earlier. In effect, SIMPATICO is a way to describe the style of the winemaking, which recognizes the fruit for its nature. The wine is still quite built by Sauvignon Blanc standards. No stainless fermentation here.

It is still quite layered. It's just that the grape plays a more central role in the construction. It took me a few decades to figure all this out.

I guess better late than never.

2018 ONCE IN A LIFETIME
ULTRA LATE HARVEST VIOGNIER
SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

HARVEST SUGAR 40 BRIX | FERMENTATION 160 DAYS | BOTTLED SUGAR 22 BRIX

From the back label of this remarkable wine:

Any late harvest winemaking proposition always maximizes the number of things that can go wrong. The long, precarious wait at the end of the season for ultrahigh sugars is like an invitation to nature to come and feast on a crop that starts looking and tasting more and more like candy on the vines. Once in a blue moon, the shriveling fruit will become inundated, at just the right moment, with the “noble” mold Botrytis, rendering clusters that have a chance to produce liquid gold. If a winemaker is ever lucky enough to behold the astonishing sight of the magic mold on berries that contain almost 40% sugar, he or she must then come to grips with exposing such a miracle to every possible calamity in the cellar, beginning with the fact that such a juice ferments extremely slowly, and is constantly flirting with vinegar bacteria. You go from one seemingly impossible realm to the next, praying that the stars of a golden nectar will align.

In my life, it has happened once.

P.S. Because this wine is so sweet, a proper serving size would be two to three ounces; roughly half, or a little less than half, of a regular glass of wine. While it will pair wonderfully with a wide array of desserts, it is dramatic enough to be served and appreciated on its own. Also, because of the stratospheric residual sugar, it is very resistant to oxidation.

You can open a bottle and pour small servings from it for weeks, if not months, and it will stay fresh. Just keep the golden nugget in the refrigerator and visit it when ever you want to cap off dinner with something special. I have not tried this yet, but something tells me, this stuff poured on vanilla ice cream would be sublime.

2017 BRIGHT FORTUNE
CABERNET FRANC
SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

28 Years ago I thought Cabernet Franc’s future was beyond bright. In fact, I thought Cab Franc was going to become Santa Barbara County’s next “it grape”. Then, inexplicably (until we learned it was due to the variety’s hyper sensitivity viruses) one vineyard after the next started to croak, ushering me into a 20 hiatus from the grape. Throughout most of these two decades, I assumed that I would never make another Cab Franc again. Then, a few brave growers decided to clean up their plant materials, giving Cab Franc a new lease on life over in the Santa Ynez Valley. With this 2017 bottling feeling like a true homecoming vintage for me, the return of a bright fortune for this beautifully rustic variety has materialized.

Cabernet Franc is like the mischievous, atavistic brother of Cabernet Sauvignon. In Europe, it does not produce the aristocratic aroma and flavor of Cabernet Sauvignon that has been the favorite of nobility over the centuries. Cab Franc’s wines are more spicy and potentially more herbal. They have an earthiness that has always made them the favorite of country folk. In certain St. Emilion cellars like those of Chateau Cheval Blanc and Chateau Figeac, their blends built on Cabernet Franc can carry a “world class” moniker.

Personally, I like Cab Franc for its earthy mystery. After all, I am a Pinot Noir producer. Earthy/funky works for me, especially if it’s not \$100 a bottle and it goes well with lots of foods. To me, good Cab Franc is like the perfect wine for most of life’s journeys. It doesn’t necessarily have to be overly complicated to be really good.

2016 FATHOM PETIT VERDOT
HAPPY CANYON VINEYARD
SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

Ladies and gentlemen, FATHOM is firmly back! This is our second bottling of a FATHOM Petit Verdot, and once again, the wine is stunning. Also, if you consider that the next one, the 2018 that is still in barrel, is also stunning, it's starting to look like this is not a fluke. The takeaway, in the Happy Canyon district of Santa Barbara County, Petit Verdot is *the* deal.

Because this grape is 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 few years I have been pursuing a course that simply 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 beast of a grape into submission. Yea, it's a bit freaky. Every time I drive over there, 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 than it does anything else. I say this because its uber-deep fruit is really built around cassis. Yes, it is Petit Verdot, so, of course, there is a mouthful of tannins. But as dense as they are, they are also pretty darn soft, and they are coupled with a long, lingering finish to boot. It's the kind of wine you can lay down for 10+ years if you like the bottle bouquet and majesty that this kind of age can bring. If you can give it at least 3 or 4 years in your cellar, I think the velvety thing on the palate should start to sneak in. Foods: beef, venison, lamb, heavier tomato sauces, etc.; make the meal robust enough to match the wine.

2018 RITA'S EARTH
PINOT NOIR
STA. RITA HILLS

This wine is an homage to the strength and beauty of Saint Rita, the namesake of our appellation, the Sta. Rita Hills. The timeless rose on the label was drawn by my artistic daughter, Chloe. It represents the final, miraculous rose that was taken to Rita after being plucked out of her garden in the middle of winter, shortly before her passing.

The wine offers characteristics that to me hint at a \$50 Pinot, not \$25. The Sta. Rita Hills earth is front-stage-center and is enveloped by spicy cherries. On the palate, it has a substantial fruit weight and fine tannins. Yes, this Rita's Earth Pinot should age well. While it's a pleasure to drink now, but it should continue to spread its wings over the next few years.