



NEW RELEASE
WINE NOTES
from
BRYAN BABCOCK

2019 PICPOUL
SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

Ladies and gentlemen, let me tell you about my newest viticultural love affair, Picpoul. Like Clairette Blanche, Picpoul (also known as Picpoul Blanc) is one of those white Rhone varieties that just never seemed to arrive in California winemaking till now. While I was able to work with Clairette in 2017 and 2018, 2019 was the first year for me to crush some Picpoul, and I think with this inaugural bottling you will see and taste why I am so high on this variety, and why I think its potential run in new world winegrowing may very well be upon us.

Picpoul's varietal character can be similar to that of Chardonnay, and this wine serves as a case in point. It has a beautiful expression of minerality laced into a seemingly familiar fragrant nose of apple and pear. Be they exaggerated or subtle, describing the differences in Picpoul and Chardonnay in Santa Barbara County is something that I will be formulating in the years to come. From the French versions of Picpoul that I have tasted over the years, there is usually a tantalizing presence of citrus, especially a sprightly suggestion of lime, or, at times, even guava. For now, if you were to ask me, "Bryan, how is your Picpoul?", I might say, "Well, it's one of the most interesting Chardonnays I have ever made."

Along with its fruit, it's the acid and texture that are really interesting. Like my bigger Chardonnays, Top Cream, Dream Field, etc., this wine was barrel fermented, put through malolactic fermentation, and then held on its lees for an extended ripening period. The result is a beautiful fusion of the fruit-butter-acid complex. In other words, like a great Chardonnay, this Picpoul has beautiful structure and texture. It's rich, but with its firm acidity it still has a vibrant nerve. In a nutshell, it's looking more and more like Picpoul is not a wimpy grape, rather it's quite robust as white varieties go.

Finally, as an enological teaser, I also will share with you a unique aspect of this wine's recipe and its call for some super hip barrels that my Burgundian buddy and cooper, Gerome Fouailly, recommends for white Rhone varieties. For these very intriguing barrels Gerome utilizes both French Oak and Acacia, alternating every other stave so as to give them a striped effect. He calls them his "Harlequin" barrels. When I asked Gerome if there was any reason to this madness beyond simply wanting to make a barrel with stripes, he said, "Of course there is; it's because the Acacia brings up the honeysuckle qualities that I find in many white varieties, especially the ones in the Rhone." Ookaay I thought, and so in 2018 I tried some Harleys (my nickname) on my Clairette, and, sure enough, they seemed to bring up a sexy honeysuckle quality in this delicate variety. This 2019 Picpoul was fermented in about 1/3 new barrels, half of which were Harleys and half were traditional oak with Gerome's delicate level of toast. So far I am loving the results.

For now, I hope you enjoy this beautiful premier bottling of Picpoul, and stay tuned for what I am sure will be delicious future developments.

2019 SOULSTRUCK CLAIRETTE BLANCHE

This is my second go around with this new variety after a microscopic production of it back in 2017 from some fruit out of the Martian Vineyard over in Alisos Canyon. That wine was not shipped to any wine clubs because there was not enough of it. Clairette is one of those white Rhone varieties that just never seemed to arrive, while at least four of the others did. For years we became accustomed to drinking things like Viognier, Grenache Blanc, Marsanne and Roussanne.

Now, finally, the last two or three partners are starting to show up. Along with Clairette, I am also fascinated with Picpoul, and if I can find someone brave (crazy) enough to plant some Bourboulenc, I'd love to play with it as well.

At this point, these varieties are like a delicious study here at the winery.

When I say Clairette, keep in mind this is after being scolded by the US Tax & Trade Bureau for trying not to use the word Blanche along with Clairette. Every time I talk to anyone who knows anything about this grape, they just call it Clairette.

Anyway, one of the new signs up in my office says, "It's the Blanche Stupid".

What I love about this wine is that, after years and years of making uber rich wines from Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, I now finally have a stylistic bookend. This wine is delicate. It's leaner. Compared to most everything else I have done, it's crisp, and it definitely sports that elusive thing that the wine media seems to love to discuss these days, minerality. It's got a slight bit of pear and maybe a teaser of guava. Here is the question; if Babcock made a wine that he loved to chill way down and drink poolside during an Autumn heat wave (as if he has time for such things during harvest) what would it be like? Taste this one, you'll have the answer.

2018 OCEAN'S GHOST PINOT NOIR

For the last 15 years or so, I have been struggling in my vineyard with Pierce's Disease. It's caused by a bacteria that, in a nutshell, clogs up the vines' vascular system. Once infected, the vines die within a few years. Making it particularly challenging is this winged insect called the Sharpshooter. In Napa, for example, they have the Glassy-winged Sharp Shooter, while here in Santa Barbara County we have the Blue-Green Sharpshooter. The problem is, these bugs carry the bacteria on their mouth parts, and when they land on the leaf of a grapevine to feed, they infect the vines with the disease. At my peak 20 years ago I was farming 80 acres. Now, with Pierce's disease I am farming only 12. But that's OK; in fact my wife Lisa calls it, God's Council.

"What's he trying to tell you?" she asks. The answer is, I am being encouraged to take a break from farming, which is exactly what I have needed in order to have the time to do some of the other things in life that I really want to do. While I will always be farming at least a little bit of something somewhere, there are things that I need to get on with; things like planting 1,000 oak trees to create a forest around the perimeter of our property; things like mastering butterfly habitats through the integration of certain flower and milkweed species. Plus, letting someone else grow my fruit is also allowing me to try new all kinds of new vineyards and new grape varieties, which is something I always love to do. I am getting to the point in my old age that if something is no longer fun, I'm letting it go, and taking a break from farming is commensurate with that.

So, here we are with my 2018 (blocks 14 & 15) Ocean's Ghost Pinot Noir. Is there some Pierce's Disease in blocks 14 & 15? Yes. So the way I look at it is to appreciate the fact that I got this far with these almost 40 year old vines. They are still out there giving me everything they've got. And in 2018, they gave me oh-so much. The wine is dark, rich and magnificent. Think earth, think cherries, think liquid legacy.

Will there be another Ocean's Ghost after this one? Well, as I write these notes, I am farming the next, and probably the last, Ocean's Ghost Pinot Noir. The vines that are still productive out there look great, and I gave them a big drink of water to get them through the mid-August heat wave that we are having. In the end, I am sure I will be glad I asked the vines if they had one more unforgettable wine in them.

2018 DÉJÀ VU
PINOT NOIR
BENTROCK VINEYARD, STA. RITA HILLS

To experience a true Déjà vu is to experience something that is familiar yet inexplicable. This is how I have always felt about Block 3 at the Bentrack Vineyard. Of course, you could say that its wines have always been rich, earthy, and robust.

But in Block 3 these things come together in such a unique, almost haunting way. In a word, I can only pin it down as terroir. Of all my wines, this is the one that really drives home this phenomenon of being able to sense a soil in a wine. In Pinot Noir, this is an elusive thing that microcosmically is in perhaps almost every bottle that is produced worldwide. It's like a spirit that local growers here have built the Sta. Rita Hills upon, similar to the way the French built Burgundy long ago upon the world's greatest conduit to the soil.

2018 UPPER CRUST
SYRAH
RANCHO SISQUOC VINEYARD, SANTA MARIA VALLEY

Each year I go up to the Santa Maria area to purchase the Dijon 470 clone of Syrah that grows in the upper terrace on Rancho Sisquoc's "McMurray Bench". The upper terrace is a crusty old piece of dirt that was once described to me by, now-retired grower, Ed Holt as "concretious", and thus the plight of the vines. They basically have to eke out an existence growing in a soil that is like cement when it dries out. It's a plight that has forced many a great wine to come out of Block 2, where 3 acres of the clone 470 are located. For at least 10 years I have been shouting it from the rooftops—this (in my opinion) is the best Syrah on the Central Coast! This 2018 bottling continues to lend itself to this principle. As I study it here in my glass, the opaque, purple liquid offers up heady aromas of black fruits that are like an entanglement of cassis, flowers, and a spice that strikes me a bit like cumin. It's almost like a fruity version of Cabernet Franc, which I find extremely interesting. Not for the faint of heart, its structure is for the long haul, with beautiful, palate-coating tannins that are perfectly woven into the fabric of the fruit and overall mouthfeel. Its central theme has always been an ethereal level of concentration, which is a good thing, because I have too many projects and too many wines being made as it is. If I am going to create a place in my portfolio for a variety, Syrah, that everyone and his or her brother makes, then it has to be spectacular. It's location, location, location, along with Sisquoc's well-executed farming that coaxes out the true nobility of Syrah, and keeps my head and heart in the game year after year.

2018 LOVE AMONG THE RUINS
GRENACHE
STA. RITA HILLS

This wine is a lot about discovery, and at least a little bit about reconciliation. First the discovery part. This is the second Sta. Rita Hills Grenache that I have made. Historically, except for one or two obscure vineyards that have played with Grenache, there simply has not been much of it to speak of in the Sta. Rita Hills. Between Pinot being anointed as king, and a belief that Grenache requires more heat, this important Rhone variety was largely looked over. Recently, a few more brave souls have decided to give it a go. Thus far, these adventurous vineyards are Spear, Peake and John Sebastiano, with fruit from Spear and John Sebastiano represented in this 2018 bottling. With there being some truth to the idea that Grenache likes it warmer, these vineyards are all appropriately located in the warmer, more eastern interior of the AVA.

Initially, my interest in Sta. Rita Hills Grenache rode in on the coattails of a Grenache I crushed in 2016 from a very coastal vineyard west of the Edna Valley in San Luis Obispo County. That Grenache, from the Spanish Springs Vineyard, turned out to be mind-blowing. Grenache usually makes lighter wines. What I got was a dark, dense, sublime freak of a wine with more fruit weight than I had ever seen. It was perplexing and exhilarating at the same time, and after wrapping my brain around it I then began to think, what if Grenache is like this when it is grown under the coastal influence of the Sta. Rita Hills? Along with last year's bottling, this Love Among The Ruins effort is really helping me to visualize and taste the answer to this question.

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It is not the dark beast that the first Spanish Springs (2016 Opportunity Knocks) bottling was. In contrast, this wine is very delicate with beautiful notes of cranberry, raspberry and spice. In the mouth it's really succulent and it packs a bit more of a wallop than you might think it's going to, based on how the wine appears in the glass. As to whether or not the vineyards represented in Love Among the Ruins will produce darker, more structured wines in the future remains to be seen. But if this is what Grenache wants to be in the SRH, then I'm fine with that. This is an absolutely classic rendition of Grenache and its fruit is super fresh and tantalizing.

The reconciliation part of the equation is as follows. Recently, the boundary lines of the Sta. Rita Hills were, if you will, gerrymandered to suit the purposes of a vineyard and winery owner named Pence. At the time, most anyone with a stake of any kind in the Sta. Rita Hills considered this to an affront to sacred boundaries that had been very thoughtfully established almost 20 years prior. Indeed, I was one of those people. After convincing the federal government in 2016 that it would be a good idea to redraw our AVA lines so as to include his vineyard, Mr. Pence became in most minds and hearts, persona non grata. I then proceeded to nickname all the newly annexed acreage of the Sta. Rita Hills. I thought about a number of names; The Booty, The Loot, The Plunder, etc. While I really liked The Booty, what I landed on was The Ruins.

Looking back at the process, I realize that there was an antagonistic thing going on in my head that had nothing to do with plunder. It had to do with potential. While to this day I don't like what Pence did, nonetheless, in his location there was nothing stopping him from growing some very nice fruit, including Pinot Noir. After all, before the annexation, his vineyard was right on the edge of the Sta. Rita Hills. His climate was not hot by any means, and there was nothing fundamentally wrong with his soils. For all practical purposes, so as not to tarnish the reputation of our appellation, it was best for everyone if Pence grew good grapes and made good wines. I sort of had this image of the Parthenon in my head; a beautiful architectural achievement that stands as a beacon to the potential of man, even though it sits there, in Greece, in ruins. What was it that led to its neglect? Perhaps with the right effort, maintenance and investment, it might still look like new.

Then in 2017 I got the Grenache itch and one of the three vineyards that could offer me some fruit was John Sebastiano. Sebastiano was actually one of those vineyards that was tucked just inside of the original eastern boundary lines of the AVA, and everything that I always saw from highway 246 was clearly on the right side of the tracks. Curious as to where the Grenache was located in this 200 acre vineyard, I had the vineyard manager send me a map of all the blocks. The Grenache was in block 42 F. It was way in the back, which is why I had never seen it from the road, and it was far enough to the east to have actually been outside of the Sta. Rita Hills before Pence got out his magic maker. Sure enough, my Grenache from Sebastiano was growing in The Ruins! So, I had to make a choice, either be obstinate and not work this fruit out of principle at best, spite at worst, or I could revisit this vision of somebody getting some fresh paint on the Parthenon. I chose the latter.

If the worst thing that ever happens to the boundaries of the Sta. Rita Hills is what Pence did, then we will all be just fine. I can only hope that the next Pence does not show up some day trying to expand the SRH in other directions. I was basically the field general who organized all the local growers back around 1995 to do the homework, to cover the ground, and to come up with the viticultural lines that would truly represent the climactic and geographical capsule that was the original Sta. Rita Hills. We spent days looking, smelling, feeling for what we thought would have integrity. The boundaries we came up with are as solid now as they were then. In 2016 there was a slight breach in all of that. What's been done has been done. I think it's time to get back to exploring every inch of the Sta. Rita Hills for its potential, even The Ruins. Let's get back to a love for mastering the established things, like Pinot Noir, and for exploring the new things, like Grenache.