

Jeb Dunnuck's reviews

Oct 2019

California's massive Central Coast region continues to be a treasure trove of incredible Rhône variety blends (aka the Rhône Rangers), Pinot Noirs, Chardonnays, and increasingly, Bordeaux blends. While the region could be thought of as a work in progress just under a decade ago, today you have an incredible number of talented winemakers – using Grand Cru level terroirs as well as older vines – to produce an enormous number of world-class wines.

While I normally break up the Central Coast coverage into multiple reports, I've opted to cover both Santa Barbara County and Paso Robles as well as a handful of producers from the Santa Lucia Highlands and Santa Cruz Mountains in a single report.

The focus of this report is largely the 2016, 2017, and 2018 vintages, all of which have produced a bevy of terrific wines.

The **2016** vintage was a beauty, featuring a long, even growing season, with all the varieties and regions excelling. This is clearly one of the standout vintages for the region, and these wines have put on weight and richness since bottling (and this is despite solid yields). The **2017** vintage is certainly more erratic and was more challenging, seeing cool, rainy weather during the winter and spring months, early season mildew pressure (which hurt yields), and a massive heatwave over Labor Day weekend. The heat was a larger issue for Pinot Noir in Santa Barbara County – particularly in the warmer sites – but the Rhône varieties shrugged off the heatwave with few negative effects. It's important for readers to understand that, by and large, the Labor Day heatwave was less an issue for the Central Coast than for Napa, Sonoma, and the North Coast. The **2018** vintage was another long, cool growing season that resulted in beautiful wines across the board. The majority of the top 2018s remain unbottled, but the wines are already a joy to taste and this is a special vintage. Yields are up, and while some wines can lack some mid-palate concentration, they're largely in the style of the 2016s with their balanced, pure, classic characters.

My notes for these wines were created in July of this year during a two-week trip through the region as well as during numerous follow-up tastings at my office in Colorado.

2017 Pinot Noir Fe Ciega Special Bottling-98

Sta Rita Hills

Brought up in new French oak barrels, the 2017 Pinot Noir Fe Ciega Vineyard Special Bottling takes the straight Fe Ciega Vineyard release and gives it more oomph, depth, and richness. Stunning notes of red and black currants, scorched earth, wood smoke, and some complex, reductive notes all flow to a full-bodied Pinot Noir that's flawlessly balanced, has ripe, present tannins, and a monster finish. It's unquestionably the finest Pinot Noir I've ever tasted from this team.

2016 Syrah Solomon Hills Special Bottling-95

Santa Maria Valley

There's only a half-acre of Syrah in the Solomon Hills Vineyard so you don't see many Syrah from this site, which based on the quality of the 2016 Syrah Solomon Hills Vineyard Special bottling is a shame. Sporting a medium ruby/purple color as well as awesome notes of blueberries, crushed violets, beef blood, and subtle marine notes, it hits the palate with medium to full-bodied richness, a beautifully balanced, seamless texture, ultra-fine tannins, and a great finish. This is straight-up classy and one of the standout Syrahs in the lineup. It offers plenty of pleasure today, yet I suspect will evolve gracefully for at least a decade.

2016 Syrah Bien Nacido-95

Santa Maria Valley

There's only a half-acre of Syrah in the Solomon Hills Vineyard so you don't see many Syrah from this site, which based on the quality of the 2016 Syrah Solomon Hills Vineyard Special bottling is a shame. Sporting a medium ruby/purple color as well as awesome notes of blueberries, crushed violets, beef blood, and subtle marine notes, it hits the palate with medium to full-bodied richness, a beautifully balanced, seamless texture, ultra-fine tannins, and a great finish. This is straight-up classy and one of the standout Syrahs in the lineup. It offers plenty of pleasure today, yet I suspect will evolve gracefully for at least a decade.

2017 Pinot Noir Fe Ciega-95

Sta Rita Hills

The 2017 Pinot Noir Fe Ciega Vineyard is as classic a Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir as I could image and offers beautiful red currants, forest floors, dried flowers, and underbrush aromas and flavors. With a great texture, present yet ripe tannins, integrated acidity, and a great finish, you can drink bottles today or cellar for over a decade.

2017 Chardonnay Solomon Hills-95

Santa Maria Valley

From one of my favorite vineyards in Santa Maria, the 2017 Chardonnay Solomon Hills Vineyard is another rich, powerful wine from this team. While slightly closed aromatically, it has plenty of fruit, medium to full body, lots of salty minerality, and a great finish. Beautifully balanced, concentrated, and just straight-up impressive, give bottles a year or two in the cellar.

2017 Chardonnay Puerta Del Mar Special Bottling-95

Santa Barbara County

The 2017 Chardonnay Puerta Del Mar Vineyard Special Bottling was brought up in 50% new French oak whereas the regular release sees just 5% new oak. It also spent 16 months in barrel versus 11 months for the base cuvee. I don't always find the Special Bottling superior to the regular bottling, but in this case, the change in elevage has resulted in a deep, richer, more textured wine. Offering plenty of tropical and orchard fruit interwoven with hints of crème caramel, white flowers, and brioche, it hits the palate with medium to full-bodied richness, a rounded, layered texture, and a great finish. Its oak is beautifully integrated, yet it will still benefit from a year or so of bottle age and keep for over a decade.

2016 Syrah John Sebastiano-94

Sta Rita Hills

A head-turner that would stand up easily in a blind flight of top Côte Rôties, the 2016 Syrah John Sebastiano Vineyard boasts a ruby/purple hue as well as perfumed notes of black raspberries, violets, flowery incense, and cedar. Medium-bodied, utterly seamless, and beautifully balanced, it's a knockout bottle of Syrah from a great vineyard and great winemaking team! It will keep for at least a decade.

2017 Pinot Noir Kessler Haak - 94

Sta Rita Hills

The 2017 Pinot Noir Kessler Haak Vineyard saw more stems than the other cuvees (50%) and offers an exotic, perfumed style that carries lots of blue fruits, blood orange, and floral aromas and flavors. Playing in the medium-bodied, elegant end of the spectrum, it has silky tannins, integrated acidity, and a great finish. It's another beautiful wine from this estate that will evolve for at least a decade.

2017 Pinot Noir Puerta Del Mar-94

Santa Barbara County

A standout in the lineup, the 2017 Pinot Noir Puerta Del Mar Vineyard comes from a cold, coastal site and offers stunning strawberry and cherry fruits intermixed with hints of spice, stems, and peppery herbs. Medium-bodied, silky, and just beautifully textured and seamless, it's ideal for drinking anytime over the coming decade.

2017 Chardonnay Noir Puerta Del Mar-94

Santa Barbara County

The 2017 Chardonnay Puerta Del Mar Vineyard is a more pretty, elegant white and has plenty of salty minerality as well as notes of lemon, crushed citrus, and white flowers. It shines for its purity of fruit, is medium-bodied, beautifully balanced, and has a crisp finish.

2017 Chardonnay Bien Nacido-94

Santa Maria Valley

Leading off the Chardonnays, the 2017 Chardonnay Bien Nacido Vineyard comes from one of the top vineyards in Santa Barbara County and it offers classic, masculine, mineral-driven notes as well as pretty apple blossom, white flowers, and salty sea breeze characteristics. Beautifully balanced, medium-bodied, and seamless, drink it over the coming decade.

2016 Syrah Roll Ranch-93

Ventura County

Coming from a warmer site near Ojai, in Ventura County, the 2016 Syrah Roll Ranch Vineyard shows a pretty, elegant style (especially if compared to older vintages) as well as perfumed notes of blueberries, wild strawberries, bay leaf, and violets. With medium-bodied richness and depth, terrific balance, notable purity of fruit, and a great finish, drink it anytime over the coming 10-15 years.

2016 Syrah Duvarita-92+**Santa Barbara County**

The 2016 Syrah Duvarita Vineyard reveals a more ruby color as well as perfumed notes of red fruits, cedar, dried flowers, and forest floor. Showing a more cool-climate, elegant, fresh and focused style, give bottles 2-3 years and enjoy over the following 7-8.

2017 Pinot Noir - 92**Santa Barbara County**

The appellation 2017 Pinot Noir Santa Barbara County is terrific, with a more Santa Maria mineral and masculine style. Medium-bodied, nicely balanced, and complex, with lots of smoke, dark fruits, and leafy herbs, it's not a blockbuster but has beautiful character.

2017 Riesling Kick On - 92**Santa Barbara County**

Exotic lime, quince, and lychee nut notes emerge from the 2017 Riesling Kick On Vineyard and it's more dry and crisp than normal while still playing in the off-dry category. Medium-bodied, beautifully balanced, and just a joy to drink, it should keep nicely for upwards of a decade, although I see no need to delay gratification.

2016 Pinot Noit-92**Santa Barbara County**

Leading off the Pinot Noirs, the 2016 Pinot Noir Santa Barbara County is another winner that readers should snatch up. Ripe cherries, raspberries, forest floor, and salty minerality all flow to a medium-bodied, elegant, impeccably balanced effort that shows both the quality of the vintage as well as the style of the estate. Drink it over the coming 4-5 years.

2016 Sangiovese White Hawk-91**Santa Barbara County**

A terrific expression of Sangiovese, the 2016 Sangiovese White Hawk Vineyard, from Santa Barbara County, offers some pine, foresty notes as well as bright blackberry and cherry fruits, a kiss of background oak, medium body, and juicy acidity. Drink this forward, charming, beautifully balanced red over the coming 3-4 years. This will be the last vintage of this cuvee produced.

2017 Pinot Noir Bien Nacido -91+**Santa Maria Valley**

The lightly hued 2017 Pinot Noir Bien Nacido Vineyard is also medium-bodied and tight, with pretty notes of bright cherries, forest floor, smoke, and violets. It has good acidity and is need of 3-4 years of bottle age.

2017 Viognier Roll Ranch – 91**Ventura County**

Plenty of apple blossom, apricots, and orange blossom nuances emerge from the 2017 Viognier Roll Ranch Vineyard and it's a medium-bodied effort that has solid texture and depth of fruit, integrated acidity, and a clean, crisp finish. It has a kiss of saltiness on the finish that's going to make it shine on the dinner table.

2017 Syrah -90**Santa Barbara County**

Leading off the Syrahs, the 2017 Syrah Santa Barbara County offers a Saint Joseph-like style as well as plenty of blue fruits, violets, bay leaf, and peppery aromas and flavors. It's medium-bodied, has fine tannins, and a terrific sense of elegance.

2017 Syrah Grenache Sans Soufre Ajoute -90**Sta Rita Hills**

A blend of Grenache and Syrah, the 2017 Ajoute John Sebastiano Vineyard Sans Soufre is a forward, straight up delicious effort loaded with notions of blue fruits, violets, ground pepper, and background meatiness. Nicely balanced, with ripe tannins and medium-bodied richness and depth, drink it over the coming 2-4 years.

2018 Rose-90**California**

I loved the 2018 Rose from this team, and it has a medium-bodied, elegant and refreshing style as well as pretty notes of tangerines, citrus, and a kiss of salty minerality. It's a Provençal effort to drink over the coming 6-12 months or so.

2017 Sauvignon Blanc McGinley-90**Happy Canyon**

Starting with the whites from the team of Adam Tolmach and Fabien Castel, the 2017 Sauvignon Blanc McGinley Vineyard is outstanding, showing bright grapefruit, lime, and floral notes as well as medium body, notable purity, and salivating levels of acidity. Drink it over the coming 3-4 years.

2016 Barbera Rich-89**Ventura County**

The 2016 Barbera Rich Vineyard is another juicy, medium-bodied, charming red that offers more black and blue fruits, as well as peppery herbs. It's fresh, has good acidity, and loads of character.

2012 Apricots-89**Santa Barbara County**

The 2012 Apricots is a blend of Sangiovese and Grenache that offers a balanced, medium-bodied style as well as notes of ripe cherries, spice, cedarwood, and dried bay leaves. It has plenty of charm, light tannins, and a clean finish. Drink it over the coming 4-5 years.

2017 Grenache John Sebastiano-89

Sta Rita Hills

The 100% Grenache 2017 Grenache John Sebastiano Vineyard is a medium-bodied, elegant Grenache that has a touch of Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir character in its salty, loamy earth, floral, and peppery spice aromas and flavors. Nicely balanced and with a good finish, drink it over the coming 4-5 years.