

Jeb Dunnuck's reviews

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I always love the tasting with Ojai Vineyard's Adam Tolmach and Fabien Castel. Consistent with just about every winemaker I spoke to, both commented on the tiny yields of 2015, which Adam attributed to an accumulation of drought and salt buildup as opposed to poor weather in the spring. Over the past decade or so, the style of the wines from this estate has significantly changed with harvest occurring much earlier than in the past. Today, the wines lean heavily towards the racy, lean end of the spectrum, while still offering fruit and texture.

2015 Chardonnay Puerta Del Mar-94+

Santa Barbara County

Coming from a very western, downright cold site that's farmed by the Jonata team, the 2015 Chardonnay Puerta Del Mar is clean, crisp and classically styled. Lemon, white flowers, ripe citrus and plenty of salty minerality give way to a gorgeous, tight, crisp beauty that will blossom with another 2-3 years in bottle.

2015 Riesling Kick On Ranch-93

Santa Barbara County

I also loved the 2015 Riesling Kick On, and it's probably my favorite vintage for this cuvée. Green citrus, wet stone, green apple and spice flow to a fresh, elegant, beautifully textured Riesling that has a terrific, salty finish.

2015 Sauvignon Blanc McGinley-90

Happy Canyon

The 2015 Sauvignon Blanc McGinley Vineyard is another racy, vibrant white from this team. Green Apple, lots of citrus and salty notes emerge from this racy, beautifully fresh, elegant wine that, like all of Adam's wines today, has racy acidity as well as impeccable balance.

2016 Riesling Dessert Wine Kick On Ranch-94

Santa Maria Valley

We finished the tasting with the 2016 Riesling Kick On Dessert, the finest vintage of this cuvée to date. Lychee, honey, white flowers and hints of white peach and apricot give way to a gorgeously rich, impeccably balance sweet, downright irresistible dessert wine.

2016 Rose-91

California

The 2016 Rose is a beautiful, salty, light colored and juicy rosé that does everything right. Racy and crisp on the palate that is built around a core of sweet fruit, this beauty makes you salivate for another glass.

2015 Pinot Noir Bien Nacido-92**Santa Maria Valley**

A solid example of the vineyard, the 2015 Pinot Noir Bien Nacido offers that darker cherry, earth, herbal, and fall aromas and flavors that's classic from the site. Medium-bodied, textured and balanced, with plenty of tension and length, it needs short term cellaring, but is a pretty, classic Pinot.

2015 Pinot Noir Fe Ciega-94**Sta Rita Hills**

One of my favorites in the lineup was the 2015 Pinot Noir Fe Ciega, which comes from a terrific site in the Sta. Rita Hills. Offering terrific, fruit forward notes of framboise, ripe cherries, spice and flowers all flow from this classic, elegant Pinot Noir. It has a sappy, grippy style, plenty of salty minerality and fine tannin. Give it a year.

2015 Pinot Noir Kessler Haak-89+**Sta Rita Hills**

From a vineyard right beside Clos Pepe, the 2015 Pinot Noir Kessler Haak saw 50% whole cluster (this started in 2014), and was aged in mostly neutral French oak. It has a distinct herbal edge as well as plenty of smoked meat, fennel and blackcurrant fruit, medium-bodied richness, good texture and a clean finish. This might be a love it or hate is style for most, but it's certainly interesting, and has some upside

2015 Pinot Noir Puerta Del Mar-91**Santa Barbara County**

Framboise, dried flowers and cherry notes all emerge from the 2015 Pinot Noir Puerta Del Mar. This medium-bodied, fresh, and lively Pinot drinks in a cool, sappy, mineral-driven style.

2015 Pinot Noir Solomon Hills-92+**Santa Maria Valley**

Another beauty is the 2015 Pinot Noir Solomon Hills, and it sees just a touch of whole cluster (15%) and is brought up mostly in neutral barrel. It's lighter ruby color is followed by a darker fruited, earth, damp earthy quality that I love. It's not a big wine, but it has plenty of tension, fine tannin and lots of saltiness that comes out with time in the glass.

2015 Pinot Noir s-89**Santa Barbara County**

A relatively equal blend from the single vineyards, the 2015 Pinot Noir Santa Barbara County is a juicy, Pinot Noir that has plenty of texture, gripe and sappiness, with notes of framboise, forest floor and earth.

2015 Sangiovese White Hawk-89**Santa Barbara County**

Sweet cherries, spice and dried herbs all define the 2015 Sangiovese White Hawk, and it's charming, medium-bodied, supple and elegant, with light tannin. It's an enjoyable red to drink over the coming 4-7 years.

2014 Syrah Bien Nacido-94**Santa Maria Valley**

One of the gems is the 2014 Syrah Bien Nacido, and it has the classic minerality, tapenade, violets and pepper of both the vineyard, and high-quality Syrah. Medium-bodied, fresh, elegant and lively, it shows off vibrant acidity and stunning purity. It will keep for a decade.

2015 Syrah Grenache No So2 -91**Santa Barbara County**

Seeing no SO₂, ever, the 2015 Syrah / Grenache (no SO₂) is a nicely concentrated, blueberry, blackberry, cured meats and spice-driven red that is plump, rounded and sexy on the palate. It has tons to love, but I would drink it over the coming 3-4 years at the most.

2014 Syrah Roll Ranch -96**Ventura County**

Smoking good, the 2014 Syrah Roll Ranch is up with my favorite vintage of this cuvée. Seeing more and more whole cluster, it offers beautiful blueberry, violets, and pepper in an elegant, yet opulent style that's just a joy to drink.

2014 Syrah White Hawk-95**Santa Barbara County**

The 2014 Syrah White Hawk is a stunner. Currants, lavender, decaying flowers, and hints of peppery herbs give way to a rounded, beautifully textured, sexy Syrah that still has building tannin and a great finish.

2014 Syrah Solomon Hills-92ju**Santa Barbara County**

Seeing a lot more whole cluster than normal, the 2014 Syrah Solomon Hills offers serious amounts of black olive, pepper herbs, and darker fruits, with an undeniable herbal edge, medium to full-bodied richness and a good finish. Adam compared this to Jamet, and I agree, but it really pushes on the herbal edge.

2015 Syrah-91**Santa Barbara County**

Coming from a mix of all seven single vineyards, the 2015 Syrah Santa Barbara County is gorgeous, and lovers of elegant, cool-climate Syrah should snatch up this wine. Blackcurrants, blueberries, violets and hints of peppered meats give way to a rounded, supple, juicy palate that's not lean in the least.

This report looks primarily at the 2014s and 2015s from Santa Barbara County. While both are drought years, the vintages are dramatically different.

The Classic 2014s

Starting with the **2014 Vintage**, this year is characterized by an early bud break and almost no precipitation throughout the year. Like in 2012 and 2013, the warm, early spring resulted in a healthy fruit set and big (sometimes huge) yields. While it was consistently hot through the growing season, there were no heat spikes (as in 2010) meaning growers could achieve terrific phenolic ripeness, even with incredibly large yields.

The wines are ripe, voluptuous and sexy, with forward, supple styles imparted by the large yields. They're not the most concentrated wines out there, however, the majority are already accessible and offer loads of pleasure. In short, it's a classic, charming California vintage to drink while you wait on the 2012s and 2013s.

The Variable 2015s

The **2015 Vintage** was the last in a historically dry four-year period that started in 2012. As in 2014, the vintage started off early with warm weather in the spring and an early bud break. However, several factors resulted in a miserable fruit set which dramatically reduced yields. Almost every winemaker I spoke with commented on the yields, yet most were split between the cause; some blamed the cold, windy weather in May while others looked more towards the accumulation of drought years, consecutive large crop loads, and toxic salt buildup in the soils.

Whatever the cause (and I suspect it's a combination of both), this was a dry, stressful vintage for the vines, particularly in the coastal regions of the Sta. Rita Hills and the Santa Maria Valley. Harvest started early in August and was finished by mid to late September for most producers. Growers saw some of their smallest yields ever so there's not much wine to go around. After the huge yields of 2012, 2013 and 2014, this was a relief for many producers, but consumers will need to jump on these top wines before they're gone.

As to the overall style of the wines, these are elegant, lightly textured efforts that have more in common with a cool-climate year (2010s, and to a lesser extent, 2013s) than a hot, drought year.

Unquestionably, the thicker-skinned varieties of Syrah, Mourvèdre and Cabernet Sauvignon fared better than the thinner-skinned varieties of Grenache and Pinot Noir. The top Syrahs are beautifully concentrated and rich, with notable tannin, yet have a freshness and purity that set them apart. Most will benefit from short term cellaring.

The top Pinot Noirs are silky and polished, with medium-bodied, racy profiles, moderate tannin, and lots of salty minerality. However, I found many Pinot Noirs (and to a lesser extent, Grenaches) to have firm, anemic personalities – and quality is far from consistent. Readers will have to be selective with these wines. While the Pinot Noirs will gain more weight with a few years in bottle, I'm less optimistic with regards to Grenache.

In addition, many wines are overtly stem-influenced. Due to the increased stem-to-juice-ratio (less berries per cluster equals more stem influence), producers who like whole-cluster fermentations had to be especially careful as a little whole cluster went a long way in 2015. I tasted many wines made with just 10-15% whole clusters in the fermentation, yet tasted as if they were made with 50-75% whole clusters.

As for the Chardonnays, harvest decisions and stylistic differences between estates continue to make it almost impossible to generalize about this variety. Suffice to say there are some incredible wines in the vintage for those who opted to harvest ripe fruit.

In short, 2015 is an incredibly interesting, intellectual vintage that yielded some thrilling wines. However, quality is far from consistent.

The Wines

All of these wines were tasted at the end of June during two weeks spent in California. This was followed by numerous tastings at my office in Colorado.