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Santa Barbara: Better Than Ever

featuring Potek Winery

by Antonio Galloni

Santa Barbara is one of the most exciting and dynamic regions anywhere in the world. Each year, new vineyards, estates and projects pop up seemingly without end in the expansive pristine stretch of land that encompasses Santa Barbara County. The daring, innovative spirit embodied by the region's young producers and a vast range of first-class sites creates conditions that are ideal for the production of distinctive, pedigreed wines of the highest level. Best of all, with few exceptions, these wines remain under the radar and very fairly priced relative to global peers. On a strictly personal level, these qualities, along with the region's stunning natural beauty, make Santa Barbara one of my favorite places in the world to spend time in. For more, readers might enjoy revisiting my article *Santa Barbara: On the Road*, which delves into the region's history and geography.

A Little Background

Over the last seven years I have consistently increased the amount of time I spend in Santa Barbara. I have never regretted it. Quite the contrary. The wines have never been better. Moreover, the number of new projects and labels continues to grow at a fast pace. Relative to other regions, the price of land and grapes is much more affordable than it is in California's higher rent districts, which means young winemakers and aspiring estate owners have a much easier time getting started here than, for example in Napa Valley, where prices are prohibitively expensive.

2015 – Challenging And Not Much Of It

As was the case throughout California, 2015 brought an unusual series of weather events. In the fourth year of a brutal drought cycle, budbreak was very early. Poor weather during bloom took with it a significant portion of the potential crop, on average 30-50% depending on the exact location. One of the attributes of an early harvest – even if the growing season is more or less normal in length – is that fruit ripens under the long, hot days of August, rather than the shorter, gentler days of September and early fall. The combined effect of vines that were carrying abnormally low yields and heat spikes just before harvest caused rapid sugar accumulation in many places which led to a large number of vineyards ripening within a very narrow window. That, in turn, put considerable pressure on producers to pick quickly and/or to make difficult choices

about which sites to prioritize over others. The key to 2015 was nailing the pick dates, especially for Chardonnay, which is less forgiving in a vintage such as this one than Pinot or Syrah. That, of course, assumes producers could physically get their fruit harvested when they wanted to.

Last year, I was excited about the 2015s, the Pinots in particular, but today some of my enthusiasm has waned. Yes, the best 2015 Pinots are stunning, but I also saw quite a few examples where the fruit was picked too late, leading to wines that are overripe and unnaturally forward. I found more to like in the 2015 Syrahs, which benefitted from less challenging conditions at critical times throughout the year. Many 2015 Syrahs have not yet been released, but the wines I have tasted are terrific. In whites, the 2015 Chardonnays tend to be a bit blowsy, but there are quite a few wines that merit serious attention.

Based on what I have tasted so far, 2016, is shaping up to be higher in quality and overall consistency than 2015. The 2016s show brisk acids profiles, more delineation than the 2015s and greater structure that in reds manifests itself in wines with quite a bit of tannin.

Potek Winery

This is another strong set of wines from Dave Potter. The three wines I tasted from Mormann Vineyard fruit - the Blanc des Blancs, Chardonnay and Syrah - are all terrific. Fermentation with indigenous yeasts, a preference for mostly neutral oak and generally minimal handling in the cellar are the signatures of these superb wines that speak to the distinct personalities of the sites from which they emerge. Readers should also check out the more affordable wines Potter makes under his Municipal Winemakers label.

2014 Syrah Mormann Vineyard

One of the many highlights in this range, 2014 Syrah Mormann Vineyard is a big, explosive wine endowed with real depth. Inky purplish fruit, black pepper and lavender develop nicely in the glass, with attractive aromatic overtones from the 50% whole clusters. Firm tannins need time to soften in this super-expressive, delicious Syrah from Potek. **(93 points)**

2014 Syrah Kimsey Vineyard

Smoke, game, tobacco, licorice and wild cherry infuse the 2014 Syrah Kimsey Vineyard. The natural power and virile fleshiness of this Ballard Canyon site are tempered by Dave Potter's restrained hand. A wine of personality and real distinction, the Kimsey Syrah is compelling. Here, too, the whole clusters (33%) are nicely integrated into the wine's fabric. **(92 points)**

2014 Syrah Tierra Alta Vineyard

The 2014 Syrah Tierra Alta Vineyard is terrific. Dark cherry, plum, smoke, tobacco, licorice and more feral notes all add character. The Syrah from Tierra Alta seems better suited than Grenache for Dave Potter's approach. There is no shortage of flavor intensity, but the wine is done in the midweight, restrained style that is Potek's signature. The 25% whole clusters are very nicely balanced. **(90 points)**

2015 Chardonnay Bien Nacido

The 2015 Chardonnay Bien Nacido shows the more exuberant side of the year. Chamomile, lightly honeyed notes and tropical overtones build into the supple, creamy finish. This is another super-polished wine from Dave Potter. The Bien Nacido saw more new oak than the Mormann Chardonnay and about 50% malolactic fermentation as well. **(91 points)**

2015 Chardonnay Mormann Vineyard

The 2015 Chardonnay Mormann Vineyard is gorgeous. Supple, exquisitely layered and expressive, the 2015 impresses with its superb balance. Orchard fruit, slate, mint and white pepper and a hint of oak give the wine its bright, lifted personality. This is pure class. The 2015 was fermented in neutral oak, with indigenous yeasts. Although malolactic fermentation was blocked, lees stirring helped build texture. **(93 points)**

2015 Kick on Riesling

Potek's 2015 Kick On Riesling is beautifully textured and creamy, with lovely depth and persistence throughout. A bit of skin contact, along with aging in neutral oak, adds midpalate richness. This is very nicely done. **(90 points)**

2013 Blanc des Blancs

Potek's 2015 Kick On Riesling is beautifully textured and creamy, with lovely depth and persistence throughout. A bit of skin contact, along with aging in neutral oak, adds midpalate richness. This is very nicely done. **(90 points)**

