



USA, California, Santa Barbara: Recent and Forthcoming Releases

featuring Potek Winery
reviewed by William Kelley

April 2018

This report focuses on recent and forthcoming releases from Santa Barbara County, supplemented by several outliers from further afield within California's Central Coast. This region comprehends a considerable variety of mesoclimates, grape varieties and winemaking styles, which means it truly offers something for everyone. The region's best wines, it goes without saying, are produced when site matches style—a lesson that winemakers are increasingly learning. Moreover, many of these wines represent excellent value when compared with their qualitative equivalents from California's North Coast, so bargain hunters will find rich pickings galore.

The wines reviewed here are largely derived from the 2015 and 2016 vintages. As Lisa Perrotti-Brown reported in our Interim End of September 2017 Issue, the 2015 vintage suffered from poor flowering and uneven fruit-set, issuing in significantly diminished yields. This warm vintage was, moreover, the fourth consecutive year of drought, and the vines often suffered in the dry, balmy conditions. Phenolic ripeness did not always track sugar accumulation, so determining the optimal time for harvest was evidently challenging. The resulting wines are decidedly heterogeneous. Some are layered, concentrated and complete, retaining freshness and energy. Others are aggressively tannic and out of balance. The devil is in the detail, so 2015 is not a vintage to buy blind.

The 2016 vintage, blessed by winter and spring rainfall, marks a brief return to something resembling normality for Santa Barbara County. Crop set was good: somewhat below the region's historic average, but appreciably larger than the modest yields of 2015. The growing

season itself was cool until a defining heat spike in September that precipitated a comparatively early harvest. The ensuing wines are more consistently excellent than the 2015s, generally displaying beautiful balance, bright fruit and excellent concentration. Across the whole range of Santa Barbara's broad stylistic spectrum, there are many outstanding wines to recommend.

I'll be passing through Santa Barbara again later this year to visit several producers who didn't have blended or bottled wines to show in March—including Manfred Krankl of Sine Qua Non (whose bottled 2015s were reviewed in the Interim End of September 2017 Issue)—and to take an early look at the nascent 2017 vintage, a year characterized by a warm spring and a significant heat spike in late August and early September, culminating in another early harvest. Initial indications are that quality is promising, with yields ranging from average to considerably below average. But more on that later in the year.

Since this is my first report on the wines of Santa Barbara County for The Wine Advocate, it seems appropriate to give readers and producers some idea of the criteria by which I've assessed the wines reviewed here. Above all, I place a significant premium on structural harmony in both red and white wines, and any wines that do not possess those qualities will struggle to receive a glowing appraisal and a high score. In other words, wines with coarse or astringent tannins (whether derived from grapes, stems or oak barrels), tart acidity, conspicuous alcoholic burn or excessive fat will not score well. Wines that possess not only structural harmony but also noteworthy concentration and intensity will score very well indeed. For me, these preferences transcend any considerations of style.

2016 Potek • Bien Nacido Vineyard Chardonnay

The 2016 Bien Nacido Vineyard Chardonnay, which spent eight months on the lees in neutral oak, offers up aromas of buttered apples, pear and honeycomb, followed by a medium-bodied, taut palate that represents a lean, acid-driven and minimalistic interpretation of this pioneering Santa Maria Valley vineyard. **(90 points)**

2015 Potek • Grenache Kimsey

The 2015 Grenache Kimsey offers up notes of blackberry, strawberry preserve and dried flowers. On the palate, it's medium to full-bodied with a rich core of sweet fruit, juicy acids, fine structuring tannins and a sappy, flavorful finish. This is another impressive Grenache from Potek. **(90 points)**

2015 Potek • Syrah Kimsey

The 2015 Syrah Kimsey reveals aromas of ripe blackberry, tar, sweet spices and peony. On the palate, it's full-bodied, succulent and velvety with good depth and concentration, concluding

with a rich, somewhat rustic finish. This is a characterful Syrah that should drink well for the better part of a decade. **(91 points)**

2015 Potek • Syrah Mormann

The 2015 Syrah Mormann is the most tightly coiled of these Syrah bottlings, but I suspect it also holds the most potential. The wine wafts from the glass with notions of smoky cassis, petroleum jelly and bay leaf. On the palate, it's medium-bodied, taut and crunchy with fine but youthfully grippy tannins and a bright line of acidity, concluding with a sappy finish. Give this a year or two in the cellar before pulling corks in earnest. **(91+ points)**

2015 Potek • Syrah Tierra Alta

The 2015 Syrah Tierra Alta is excellent, offering up a deep bouquet of blackberry, elderberry, purple flowers and subtle grilled meat. On the palate, the wine is full-bodied with an ample core of fruit, velvety tannins, good juicy energy and a lovely sense of balance and harmony. **(92 points)**

