

Beyond the Blocks

Bethel Heights, like most vineyards, is laid out in a series of rectangular shapes, or “blocks.” We began designating wines from some of our single blocks in 1991, both for exceptional quality and for the distinct differences they showed from one another. The distinct personalities of the Flat Block, the Southeast Block and the West Block are deeply woven into the fabric of Bethel Heights’ history; it would be impossible to tell that history without them.

Then, with the passage of time, certain other patterns began to emerge.

The Cauldron

The South Block is the third piece of the triptych of Pommard Pinot noir planted by my family in 1979 on the east side of Bethel Heights, but it was never given the same block-designated status as its siblings, the Flat Block and the Southeast Block, perhaps because it is such a sprawling six-acre parcel. It begins at the top with shallow volcanic soil on a gentle South facing slope before abruptly falling off to the West and settling into a natural bowl-shaped depression at the bottom, about two acres in area, that we came to call the Cauldron. Natural erosion over time has led to a deeper collection of soil here than on the shallows above, and its steep sides prove a bastion against the marine winds from the West. This protection allows an expression both graceful and complex, a lens into Bethel Heights without the bluster and turbulence of the wind. It is singular and unique.

At its most fundamental, terroir encompasses all the limiting conditions of the place you’ve decided to plant some grapes: geology, geography, topography, climate, ampelography, and on and on. Terroir does not fit neatly into the tidy rectangles of vineyard blocks. We had to start looking beyond the blocks, following where the wines lead us. While we respect our history and what we learned in the process, we don’t allow it to hold us back from where we may go next.

~ Ben Casteel



2016 PINOT NOIR *The Cauldron*

Harvest date: September 21, 2016

Fruit source: Estate South Block,
own-rooted Pommard clone planted 1979

Grapes at harvest: Brix 23.2, pH 3.29, TA 7.0 gr/liter

Finished wine: Alcohol 13.9%, pH 3.59, TA 5.9 gr/liter

Barrel aged 15 months in French oak, 33% new barrels

97 cases bottled unfined January 16, 2018

THE 2016 VINTAGE was the earliest vintage we have ever seen in the Willamette Valley. The growing season was warm and wetter than usual, leading to veraison beginning in early August at Bethel Heights. Harvest started on August 27, and was finished before the end of September.

VINIFICATION: The grapes were destemmed into several vessels: two 5-ton stainless steel open top tanks, and one 4-ton stainless steel open top oak tank. After a 3-day cold soak, fermentation initiated and the wines were pumped over once a day to minimize extraction in a warm vintage. The new wines were pressed after 13 days at dryness, settled for 7 days, and racked into oak barrels for a 15-month élevage.

WINEMAKER NOTES: Because the Cauldron is one of the warmer parts of our vineyard, my concern with warmer years like 2016 is that the wines will reflect the growing season more than where the grapes are planted, so our team was very careful with extraction. The resulting wine from the Cauldron shows layers of forest floor, clove, and camphor intertwined with black cherry near the pits and black currant. The tannins are firm, but with time I think will reveal a broad, expansive wine with the complexity we love in our old Pommard Blocks.