

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. This is 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 so 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



2018 PINOT NOIR *The Cauldron*

Harvest date: October 3rd, 2018

Fruit source: Estate South Block,

own-rooted Pommard clone planted 1979

Grapes at harvest: Brix: 23.5, pH: 3.26, TA: 6.7 g/L

Finished wine: Alcohol 13.8 %, pH: 3.57, TA: 5.5 g/L

Barrel aged 15 months in French oak, 40% new barrels

99 cases bottle unfined on February 10th, 2020

VINIFICATION: The grapes were destemmed into our 3 open top oak fermenters. After a 3-day cold soak, fermentation began, 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 then racked into oak barrels for a 15-month élevage.

WINEMAKER NOTES: The 2018 Cauldron is, in my mind at least, the finest version of this wine we have produced in the fifth vintage of production, and the best Pinot Noir we produced in 2018. For a vintage that has been praised for the overall quality of the wines, it isn’t a vintage that I think of as ‘balanced’ in its youth. Taming the structure of the 2018 Pinot Noirs at Bethel Heights was the challenge of a harvest that presented very few. While I’m proud of the results, I think it will take a few years for them to calm down and return to the form they showed at the blending table. The Cauldron has been the exception, singing now, while also showing tremendous promise for the years to come. It has elegance and grace, while still showing the nerve and density of the vintage; a tense core that radiates out into the fruit and texture rather than pulling in.