

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



2015 PINOT NOIR *The Cauldron*

Harvest date: September 22, 2015

Fruit source: own-rooted Pommard clone planted 1979

Grapes at harvest: Brix 23.5, pH 3.15, TA 6.4 gr/liter

Finished wine: Alcohol 13.8%, pH 3.56, TA 5.7 gr/liter

Barrel aged 17 months in French oak, 50% new barrels

132 cases produced

Bottled unfiltered April 11, 2017

THE 2015 VINTAGE was characterized by early bud-break, early bloom, and a big heat spike in early August. A hot summer like this can force an early harvest, but September brought mercifully cool temperatures and chilly evenings, and the vineyard was allowed to develop the integrated, intense, and focused flavors only afforded by generous hang time at cool temperatures.

VINIFICATION: The grapes were destemmed into several vessels: a 5-ton stainless steel tank, a 3-ton open top oak tank, and a 1.25-ton bin. 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 at dryness, settled for 7 days, and racked into oak barrels for a 17-month élevage.

WINEMAKER NOTES: Because the Cauldron is one of the warmer parts of our property, my concern with warmer years like 2015 is that the wines will reflect the growing season more than where the grapes are planted, so our team was very careful with extraction in 2015. The resulting wine from the Cauldron is imbued with black cherry and raspberry and the earthen complexity we have come to expect from our old vine Pommard blocks.