

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



2019 PINOT NOIR *The Cauldron*

Harvest date: September 29, 2019

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

Grapes at harvest: Brix 22.1, pH 3.08, TA 8.1 g/L

Finished wine: Alcohol 13.0 %, pH 3.42, TA 5.9 g/L
Barrel aged 11 months in French oak, 30% new barrels
65 cases bottled unfined on February 10th, 2020

VINIFICATION: The grapes were destemmed into our 5-ton open top stainless steel and 3-ton oak fermenters. After a 5-day cold soak, fermentation initiated and the wines were punched down twice a day throughout the fermentation. The new wines were pressed at dryness, settled for 3 days, and racked into oak barrels for an 11-month *élevage*. Despite its small case quantity, this wine has elements from both the stainless steel and oak fermentation.

WINEMAKER NOTES: The 2019 Cauldron was a test of patience in many ways. The cool growing conditions of 2019 pushed harvest back to the end of September with increasing chances of heavy rains. The wine is a reflection of the year with aromas of bergamot, pine resin, and black currants and a palate that bristles with energy and tension. Perhaps more than any of the other wines in this series, The Cauldron maintains its identity despite wildly different vintages, a testament to both the place and the vines entering their 4th decade. The 2019 vintage will take some time to settle in, as with most cooler vintages. I think the early drinking window for The Cauldron will be best 2026 – 28, and for those who appreciate some aged character, 2035 and beyond.