

An Interview with Jason Haas

Tablas Creek Vineyard, Paso Robles, California

Tablas Creek Vineyard has been involved with CAFF since 2012, when they hosted well-received seminar together with CAFF on dry-farming. More recently, in 2014 they poured their wine at a CAFF dry-farming panel discussion in San Francisco. On February 22nd, 2016 Jason Haas will be speaking on the panel for our second annual **How Green is Your Wine?** wine tasting and panel discussion event at the San Francisco Ferry Building. Buy your tickets now to hear more from Jason Haas and other experts about using sustainable growing methods in the vineyard.

Question: Can you please describe a brief history of Tablas Creek Vineyard?

Answer: Tablas Creek Vineyard is the result of a 30-year friendship between Robert Haas, Jean-Pierre Perrin and Francois Perrin. Starting in the 1950s, Haas introduced fine European wines to the United States through his importing company Vineyard Brands. One of the French producers he introduced to the American market was Chateau de Beaucastel, owned by the Perrin family, producers in the Chateauneuf-du-Pape region of the southern Rhone since the 19th century.

Haas and the Perrins began discussing a join Rhone-style project in California as early as the mid-1970s. In 1985, they started an extensive search throughout the state for vineyard land that would closely approximate the climate and soils of the southern Rhone Valley: limestone soils, a favorable climate, and rugged terrain. In 1989, the partnership bought a 120-acre parcel in the Adelaida District of northwest Paso Robles.

Haas and the Perrins knew the Rhone varietals they wanted to focus on: Mourvedre, Syrah, Grenache and Counoise for reds, and Roussanne, Marsanne, Viognier and Grenache Blanc for whites. However, they felt uneasy about the quality of Rhone grapevine stock available domestically and decided to import fresh cuttings of all eight varietals from Chateau de Beaucastel. The cuttings spent three years in a rigorous U.S.D.A. quarantine program before being released to the property in 1993. Over the next decade, Tablas Creek's grapevine nursery would provide millions of cuttings of high-quality Rhone varietals to Tablas Creek, and, eventually, hundreds of other producers around the West Coast. Planting at the winery began in 1994, with 105 acres in production as of 2015.

How many acres do you farm with dry farm & biodynamic methods?

The vineyard has been farmed organically since inception, and certified organic since 2003. We have been incorporating biodynamic techniques since 2010, a

process intensified in 2012 when we brought in our own mixed flock of sheep, alpacas and donkeys. We have been conditioning the vineyard to dry-farming since inception, but it wasn't until 2005 that we were able to farm the entire vineyard without irrigation. We have two different planting styles: about 70 acres that are planted relatively close-spaced (1800 vines per acre) on trellises, with irrigation lines. We use these irrigation lines to get new vineyard established, and can supplement when we see multiple years of drought. We also have about 35 acres that are head-trained and wide-spaced (350-500 vines per acre) that are un-irrigated except for a 5-gallon bucket of water that they receive their first summer.

Why did you start using these kinds of methods on your vineyard?

Beaucastel has been farming organically since the mid-1960s, and are required by appellation law to dry-farm. We have believed that these two techniques are key to producing wines that show off the imprint of our place – our terroir – as clearly as possible.

Does using these methods seem to have an effect on the flavor of your wine?

We think so, though it's hard to quantify, particularly since we have always farmed this way. Dry-farming encourages (requires) deep root growth, which means that a higher percentage of the roots are in the deeper soils that are more specific to our place. It also restricts production, which seems to us likely to produce wines that are both more intense and more characteristic of our own terroir. As for biodynamics, we believe that minimizing what we have to add from the outside maximizes our chances of expressing whatever character of place our vineyard possesses. It also seems to us to produce a healthier vineyard that suffers less in heat and drought (or maybe this is the deeper roots from the dry-farming) and to be more resilient in the face of insects and other pests.

Website: www.tablascreek.com

Blog: tablascreek.typepad.com