

Jason on Vintage 2016

by Jason Lett



Overall, 2016 was similar to other recent warm-ish vintages, like 2012 and 2008. The big difference for 2016 was when the growing season started and ended. It's almost like the entire growing season was transposed back a month. April was very much like a typical May, whereas October felt much more like the rainy November that normally marks the end of our growing season – in fact, it was very nearly a record setting high for precipitation.

Although it's a little early to make any kind of deep assessment of the vintage, one thing that is

certainly obvious at this early stage is dark color in the Pinot noir, and even in the Pinot Meunier, which is typically a lighter red. The reds are also marked by darker fruits, light to chewy tannins, and high total acidities. Jamminess is fortunately not a widespread issue in the vintage, at least for us. Even in neutral barrels, there is a toasty component across many of the parcels that sets off the fresh fruit in an attractive way.

Chardonnay is still completing its wild ferment in barrel but under the diminishing sweetness it is beginning to show off a core of austerity.

Credit for the unusual dark color and high acidities, I feel, is due to our relatively cool and rainy July. While this had the downside of encouraging powdery mildew, it also extended the ripening. And, more importantly, it protected the pigments and tannins from the damage of intense midsummer sun.

The greatest vineyard challenge for the vintage was the high mildew pressure in midsummer. In the Willamette Valley, some less conscientiously -managed vineyards were a complete loss. We were able to bring in a very clean vintage, thanks to some rigorous canopy work and thinning early on.

In the winery, the challenge was to declare the picks at the right time to be able to obtain a natural balance in the wine. The search for good natural acidity lead us to begin the pick on our earliest date ever: August 23. However, we also had fruit that wasn't ready until mid October. So 2016 has been one of our longest harvests in history as well.

I am especially excited about the wines sourced from older vines, because they have a natural poise that isn't easily disturbed by unusual circumstances like those we experienced in this vintage. Our older Pinot noir and Chardonnay vines really put on a show this year. We also did some experiments with whole cluster fermentation that came out exceptionally well, so it was a good year for that too.

One thing that will be true of 2016 is that growers got to choose when they picked, rather than the weather choosing when they would pick. What you will see from Oregon in this vintage are the wines that the *winemaker* wants to make. It's probably a good idea to expect a wide range of expression from the vintage, from winemaker to winemaker.

I think any of our varities can suffer in a warm vintage if picked too late. However, that is the fault of the winemaker, not the vintage. Overall, a beautiful glass of wine is the result of many correct decisions. This year, I feel like we had many good options, and as a result the wines will bring pleasure for decades to come.

Field Notes

by Jason Lett

Spring is a time of renewal. Just as fresh young shoots are emerging from the old vines, we're engaging in new projects to keep Eyrie flourishing.

Most excitingly we've bottled the first wines of 2015, the Chasselas Doré and Rosé of Pinot noir. They offer the first insight into the wines to come from vintage 2015, and their freshness is an encouraging sign.

The Chasselas Doré is light and focused. My go-to summer wine, this is a great example of what I love about Chasselas : simple, low in alcohol (only 9.5%!) with a tingle of effervescence captured from fermentation. We only made 900 bottles of Chasselas, so it's a real rarity. Because of such small production, it's only available through the wine club and tasting room.

The Rosé is a particularly complex example this year. The grapes came from the old organic vines of the Cattrall Brothers vineyard. As the pick actually came in over different days throughout harvest, the tart-sweet pink juice fermented in a wide variety of fermenters, from neutral barrels to our big open wooden tank. The range of fermentations provided a few extra facets. I like drinking this wine—it's joyful.

In the tasting room, we have a new face—Abigail Neilan, who comes to us with impressive credentials from Baja Oregon. But, more importantly, Abi has an incredibly friendly and welcoming outlook. Say hi when you stop in!

In the vineyard, we're continuing to prepare ground for planting this coming fall.

The Roland Green field we are planting is pasture ground that has been fallow for almost 30 years. Last spring we cleared the young trees that were starting to colonize the field in preparation for a light plowing to break up the sod and blackberry briars. Because it has lain untouched for so many years, the soil is beautifully evolved. It has a crumb structure like velvet cake, and an enticing aroma under the plow.

Next came the process of grafting the plants. Most new vineyards buy plants “off-the-rack,” specifying rootstock and (*Field Notes, continued*) scion combinations from a nursery catalog. In this way they can receive vines in as little as a few weeks. At Eyrie, we've been patiently going through a multi-year process of identifying the best scions from our oldest vines, and working with nurseries that can take our scion-wood and graft it to rootstocks we've chosen. These custom plants will fit the site like a tailored suit, and continue our unique legacy of flavor, but they take time.

Over summer we'll complete the work of preparing and laying out the new field, which will be 4 acres all together. In autumn, the baby vines will arrive. With luck we'll be done picking grapes in time to get them in the ground before the final onset of the winter rains.

We also have an interesting planting project this spring, but it's not planting grapes. We are starting the process of planting native hedgerows around our vineyards. These will mark property lines, block noise and dust from passing traffic, and most importantly, provide habitat to birds and small animals. Native cherries, hawthorns, roses, elder-berries, white oaks, and crabapples in mixed stands will provide vases in the tasting room with fragrant flowers in the spring, and help feed and house the many small creatures that enrich the vineyard ecosystem throughout the year.

