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Dry Farming Techniques
Tablas Creek Vineyard, Paso Robles, CA

Tablas Creek Vineyard, Paso Robles, CA. View from Scruffy Hill.

In 1950, Robert Haas, a future co-owner of Tablas Creek Vineyard, began working for his family as a wine importer and merchant in Manhattan. As he traveled extensively through Europe finding wines to import into the United States, he met the Perrin family of Château de Beaucastel in the Rhône, France. Robert Haas loved their wines; he began importing the wine and, with that, a lasting friendship between the two families was started.

Decades later in 1985, the Perrin and Haas families formally entered a partnership: they wanted to start a new vineyard and winery in California. For 4 years, the families searched for a property to develop their Châteauneuf-du-Pape style vineyard. In 1989, they purchased 120 acres in Paso Robles. It was a piece of land with a rugged terrain, limestone and clay soils, and a hot climate. They named it Tablas Creek Vineyard, after the creek running through the property.

From the beginning, a prime goal of Tablas Creek has been to produce wines that reflect the characteristics of the vineyard site. Robert Haas has always supported natural winemaking, minimal intervention, and organic viticulture. But more than that, Jason Haas, the general manager and Robert's son, indicates that dry farming is a large part of this goal, as it is key for producing wines of place and character. Jason writes in his blog that dry farming may well contribute to the lower alcohol, balance, and intensity of their wines. And of course, in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, irrigation is prohibited. For these reasons, Jason says that it was always intended that Tablas Creek would be dry farmed.

But dry farming did not happen immediately at Tablas Creek. To start the vineyard, the families imported Rhône varietal cuttings directly from Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and, after the required USDA quarantine period, they finally planted their imported vines in 1994 and installed drip lines to establish the grapes. These first vines were planted with similar spacing and trellising to their sister vineyard, Château de Beaucastel, with 8 by 3ft spacing and on a wire trellis. But Paso Robles and Châteauneuf-du-Pape have one very significant climatic difference. Paso Robles receives no summer rains and France does. With the tight spacing and no summer rain, the vines' root systems were too crowded to be dry farmed right away, and Tablas Creek continued to use their irrigation system, although sparingly, on their vines.

Fast-forward to 2012, and Tablas Creek has 105 acres under vine, and has not used their irrigation systems during the summer since 2009. But more than that, about a quarter of their acreage was now wholly dry farmed without any back-up irrigation system at all. To meet the challenges of Paso Robles' arid climate, Tablas Creek changed their vineyard architecture. These new dry farmed blocks are still Rhône varietals, but they are planted in a more traditional style, as head trained and spaced at either 10 by 10 ft or 12 by 12 ft depending on the vineyard location. This larger spacing gives the vines more soil volume to grow roots and find the water required for growth. And with age, the original vines on the tighter spacing and wire trellises have grown deep enough roots to support their growth and production without without summer irrigation in most years, but the drip lines are still there, just in case.

A CAFF dry farming workshop at Tablas Creek Vineyard held in August 2012. Attendees learned about farming techniqes and toured the vineyards.

Tablas Creek produced, on average, 16,000 cases of wine a year between 2009-2011, but they expect to increase production to 25,000 cases by 2015. Tablas Creek has recently purchased an additional 150 acres of land and plans to start planting 10-15 acre blocks as early as 2014, according to their blog. To learn more about Tablas Creek, their history, wines, and dry-farming, visit their blog at http://tablascreek.typepad.com/tablas/ .

Final Thoughts

Jason remarks that dry farming takes a little imagination, but with that imagination and a little trial and error, more growers could dry farm. Many growers are scared away from the practice because of potential yield losses. But Jason indicates that to produce grapes with a true expression of the soils and vineyard site, growers may need to maintain moderate crop levels anyway. Tablas Creek has a goal of 3 to 3.5 tons per acre, but sometimes gets closer to 2.5 tons depending on the year. Altogether, the system of farming at Tablas Creek contributes to a unique expression of Rhône varietals on the west side of Paso Robles.

The Dry Farming Details and Techniques at Tablas Creek

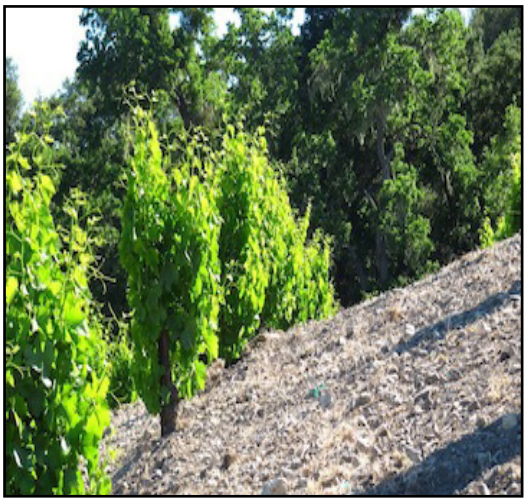
The Vineyard

- Tablas Creek is located on the west side of Paso Robles at 1500 feet in elevation.
- They have 120 acres, with 105 under vine
- Tablas Creek grows Grenache, Mourvèdre, Tannat, Counoise, Grenache Blanc, Roussanne, Marsanne, Viognier, and Picpoul Blanc. They have a goal to grow all 13 traditional varieties allowed in Châteauneuf-du-Pape.
- The vineyard has been certified organic since 2003 and uses many Biodynamic practices across the vineyard
- On average, they receive 28" of annual rain. Unfortunately, they have not received this amount of rain from 2011 to 2014.
- The soils are clay loam and limestone, with good water holding capacity.

Vineyard Development for Dry Farming

Tablas Creek dry farms the entire vineyard most years, but has occasionally had to use the irrigation systems on sections of the original wire-trellised blocks. About a quarter of the vines are dry farmed every year, and these blocks are set up as follows:

- The vine spacing is either 10 by 10 feet or 12 by 12 feet.
- The vines are head trained, which allows for natural shading of the grape clusters.
- They use a variety of rootstocks both for dry farming and calcium tolerance including: 110R, 1103P, and 140RU. They are also experimenting with St. George, the traditional rootstock.
- The dry-farmed blocks yield between 2.5 and 3.5 tons an acre.
- When planting new dry-farmed vines, vines are watered with a five-gallon bucket to help establish the rootstock during the first year. A bucket with a hole in the bottom is placed over the vine allowing for a targeted and slow infiltration of water to the vine.



Scruffy Hill at Tablas Creek Vineyard. Rows are cultivated to create a surface dust mulch to hold in moisture.

Vineyard Cultivation

- In the winter, a cover crop is planted. Tablas Creek has various mixes including sweet peas, oats, vetch, and barley.
- From mid-November to mid-April when the vines are dormant, a mixed herd of sheep and donkeys are allowed to graze in the vineyards. As the herd grazes, they mix the soil with their hooves, fertilize with their waste, and keep the weeds down. This, in turn, reduces the amount of compost they need to apply and the number of tractor passes for mowing. Tablas Creek is currently breeding sheep to increase the size of their herd so they can graze the entire property. Right now, they have enough grazers to cover 30 to 40 acres of their vineyard in the 4 months of dormancy.
- For the sections without the sheep, the cover crop is mowed with a tractor.
- In the spring, the organic matter from the cover crop is disked and spaded into the soil. This is an important source of organic matter to the soils. The soil is tilled and rolled to create a dust mulch on the soil surface to trap in the moisture from the winter so that it lasts through the growing season.
- Crop loads are often thinned to improve the quality of the fruit.
- The vineyards are hand harvested with multiple passes, allowing for each cluster to be picked at the desired ripeness.

Visit our webpages for more information
www.caff.org/programs/dryfarm/
agwaterstewards.org/index.php/practices/dry_farming/

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