



2006 MERLOT SANTA YNEZ VALLEY

VINTAGE NOTES

Average rainfall followed by warm temperatures in late winter caused a very early bud burst in Santa Barbara County—up to 14 days early in some cases. Mid-spring rains, however, slowed things down and had our vineyard manager on his toes about potential disease pressure. Bloom lasted almost two weeks in parts of the vineyard and fruit set was, consequently, erratic. Summer passed with mild temperatures punctuated by our usual two to three day heat spells. Conditions during veraison were favorably warm and consistent. After a slight crop adjustment towards the end of veraison, the vines at Star Lane produced slightly below average crop load of intense but very balanced fruit.

VINEYARD NOTES

Star Lane Vineyard, located at the far eastern end of the Santa Ynez Valley, is both the warmest and the highest elevation vineyard in the appellation. Backing up to the lower slopes of the San Rafael Mountains which loom high above the ranch, Star Lane features a unique range of weathered sand, gravel and alluvial cobbles over a clay/loam subsoil. With both excellent drainage and good water holding capacity in the subsoil, a small section of sandy clay-based soil to the west of the creek on the canyon floor has proved to be an ideal site for or closely spaced Merlot blocks. Clones 181 and 314 are planted at 8' x 3' spacing (1836 vines per acre) on 101-14 rootstock. Yields in the two sections of Merlot from which this wine is made were a moderate 2.5 tons per acre—slightly less than ideal, but perfectly balanced for the nature of the vintage. A modified deficit irrigation technique specific to the Merlot helped reduce berry size and promoted earlier ripening. Additional fruit came from 3 blocks of Cabernet Franc planted on the western bench of the vineyard and a small section of Cabernet Sauvignon directly adjacent to the Merlot.

WINEMAKING NOTES

Slight refinements were made to the basic Star Lane winemaking protocols in 2006. A post-destemmer berry sorting system was added to our processing equipment, allowing us to remove any raisins and shot berries from the fruit in addition to imperfections that were missed on the hand-sorting table. We have found that this has helped enormously with the green flavors and the “over-ripe/under-ripe” paradox that have typically plagued California Merlot. Additionally, the recent change to co-fermentation of the Merlot with small percentages of Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon has introduced a new sense of depth to the wine. Each fermentor is filled with sorted, destemmed and only lightly crushed fruit. Three to five days of cold soak is followed by a moderately warm fermentation with native yeast only. At the end of active fermentation, the must is heated to 95°Fahrenheit for three days to extract every last bit of color, flavor and phenolic material that the grapes have to offer. Free run wine is moved to barrel “dirty,” meaning that much of the fermentation lees are kept in contact with the wine and an uninoculated malolactic fermentation typically finishes in the late spring following harvest. The wine is racked from its lees in early July when the final blend is made and is returned to barrel for an additional 9 months. After 18 months in 75% new French oak and a light fining with fresh egg whites, the 2006 Star Lane Merlot was bottled unfiltered.

TASTING NOTES

Merlot has slowly become one of the brightest jewels in the Star Lane crown. With 2006, Vineyard Manager Rodolfo Bravo and I began to implement some of the irrigation practices developed through experimentation with our Merlot over the two previous vintages. Likewise, in the winery, the changes made to the sorting and fermentation regimes produced stunning improvements in the wine. The result is a very concentrated Merlot that meanwhile retains that sense of suppleness and freshness inherent in the best examples of this varietal. Aromas and flavors of chocolate covered cherries and freshly roasted coffee beans are complimented by a satiny texture, at once soft and firm. The wine is delicious now, and in no way would it be a tragedy to consume this wine very young. Meanwhile, the level of extraction and the deceptive structure of this Merlot suggest that as many as 7 years of careful storage will see fascinating nuances emerge from the wine.

FINISHED WINE

Composition: 88% Merlot, 9% Cabernet Franc, and 3% Cabernet Sauvignon
Appellation: Santa Ynez Valley
Alcohol: 15.1%
Total Acid: 4.5 g/L
pH: 3.81

STAR LANE
VINEYARD

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