



2007 PINOT NOIR “DÉJÀ VU”

Rabbit Ridge Vineyard, Paso Robles

Note: These notes are essentially the same as last. Since this story is a good one, and since it explains the name of this vineyard site, I think I'll tell it again this year. Enjoy the read.

There I sat, dumbfounded.

It was January of 2005 when one of my employees dropped an email on my desk. Under the caption “PINOT NOIR AVAILABLE” was a photograph. From an impressive elevation, it panned across the top of a vineyard as it looked out over a valley. The soil was dotted with chunky white rocks. I was having a déjà vu with a strong dollop of anxiety. “I’ve been there before,” I thought to myself. “But, *Pinot Noir*, it just doesn’t make any sense?”

I closed my eyes and my mind began to drift back. The last time I had seen soil like that was when I was in Paso Robles about five years ago trying to get a feeling for Cabernet Sauvignon. It was a time when I could still feel the chill of a bad stigma, the result of the terrible Cabernets of Santa Barbara’s past. But it was also a time in which I began obsessing over this notion that some day soon I would be achieving with Cabernet what I was starting to achieve with Pinot Noir. There was this looming potential in the Santa Ynez Valley that was destined to arrive, and when that first brave grower decided to replant the right clone on the right hillside, I wanted to be ready. I needed to find out what made Cabernet tick. So, for months, I drove the back roads of Paso Robles looking at the stuff.

Aside from how hot it got everyday, one thing that struck me was the amount of limestone that you see in the soils as you travel toward the Ocean from town, through a zone the locals refer to as the *West Side*. While driving through this area one morning, something really caught my eye. Up on a ridge a few miles from Highway 101, an almost pure white, south facing limestone hillside had just been planted. “Wow, now that looks cool,” I remember thinking. It was so clean, no doubt having been installed by someone who really knew what he was doing. It was a smaller vineyard, maybe five acres. “In West Side Paso,” I thought, “it has to be Cabernet or maybe Syrah on a dramatic site like that.” Lying there basking in the Templeton Gap, it might even enjoy a cool afternoon breeze every now and then. Bordered by vineyards below, none of which looked quite as compelling, I remember sitting in my car just staring at it.

“Should I drive up there?” I knew they were going to laugh at me. I had this vision of the owner chuckling, “You mean you think we planted the most awesome vineyard in Paso Robles for YOU?” But what did I have to lose? It would only take a few minutes and a pinch of trespassing. I’ve done it before.

Well, as it turns out, it wasn’t the owner who did the chuckling. It was the vineyard manager. Upon arriving, I found some contractors who were putting the finishing touches on a spectacular house that was being built right above the vineyard on the very top of the hill. They gave me the vineyard manager’s number. I called the guy from my cell as I looked out over the vineyard at the vista. The whole thing was riveting. Upon hearing the inevitable, that the house and all the vineyards were the new project of the Rabbit Ridge Winery, I figured it was the last time I would ever set foot on that hill.

Aside from being a bit eerie, when that email hit my desk last January, there was something about it that had me stunned as well. Not only did I have this strong feeling of being there before, not only did it proclaim that those grapes were “now available”, it said that they were *not* Cabernet; they were *not* Syrah.

-more-

Babcock

WINERY & VINEYARDS

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Instead, what clung to the hillside in that provocative photo was the most terroir expressive variety on Earth. It was PINOT NOIR. Once my brain cells relaxed enough to allow my eyes to reopen, I read on.

“We have decided to drop Pinot Noir from our Rabbit Ridge portfolio in favor of pursuing Syrah and other varieties more popular in Paso Robles. We are looking for a good Pinot Noir producer to take the fruit from this special site.”

Gulp! I went from déjà vu to a panic. “Oh my god, what happens if someone else calls them first!” There was a phone number for the owner. “Erich Russell?” I asked. “That’s me,” he replied. I was thinking about how long it would take to get there if I drove as fast as my tired Montero would go. “Are you going to be there this afternoon?” I asked. “Yes,” he said. “Good. I’ll see you in about 70 minutes.”

It had been five years since I had stood on that limestone drenched hillside. Wow. This time, laced into it was some beautiful, maturing Pinot Noir. I had to pinch myself.

How compelling would it have been five years prior to that moment if I would have known, sitting in my car staring at it, that it was Pinot Noir? The vineyard manager, politely telling me to scram, that would have transcended from embarrassing to painful. It’s freaky enough that this vineyard is actually in my hands to work with now, let alone the fact that it’s Pinot. I mean, what started out as an eerie and perplexing feeling has evolved into a real déjà vu; the age old familiarity of Pinot Noir and limestone. It is one of those things that is old and at the same time, compelling. In a word, classic; like the Grand Cru Pinot Noir vineyards in Burgundy, where the underlying geological plates of limestone break through or get very close to the surface.

With limestone gushing out of its dirt, will Déjà vu ultimately produce wines that resemble great Burgundies? Time will tell. But perhaps even more intriguing to me is this vineyard’s potential to give something totally unique. It’s simply a different place, with a totally different climate than Burgundy. All I can say is that the indication from its first few wines is that Déjà vu’s signature will not only evolve into something individual, but full of rich, sublime fruit as well. This 2007 bottling is STUNNING.

Oh, as it turns out, you *can* get there from here in 70 minutes. I will refrain from commenting on how fast you actually need to drive. Good job Montero.

Technical Notes:

VARIETAL COMPOSITION:

100% Pinot Noir, Rabbit Ridge Vineyard, Paso Robles

VINIFICATION:

17 months barrels age, 50% new French oak

STATISTICS:

pH: 3.50 TA: 6.8 g/L RESIDUAL SUGAR: Dry ALCOHOL: 14.3%

BOTTLING DATE: February 2009

RELEASE DATE: February 2009

TOTAL PRODUCTION: 102 cases 750ml

SUGGESTED RETAIL PRICE: \$55.00