



2007 SYRAH, UPPER CRUST

Santa Maria Valley, Rancho Sisquoc Vineyard

Winemaker's Notes:

Over the years I have made a number of wines from fruit grown at Rancho Sisquoc. It's always been a dependable vineyard, be it for Riesling or Merlot or just about anything. You name it, they grown it. Or perhaps it's better said, he grows it, and the *he* is ranch and vineyard manager Ed Holt. Of all the guys I have bought grapes from, I have worked with Ed the longest. In fact, at one point a few years ago, I was starting to feel a little bored.

This would have been around 2001. My business was going through some changes. I was becoming more interested in the Pinot Noir that was being developed in the Sta. Rita Hills. The Cabernet Sauvignon and other Bordeaux varieties that were starting to take hold in Happy Canyon had caught my eye. It had gotten to the point where I was about to phase out Rancho Sisquoc as a grape source.

But Ed had other ideas. He was in the process of developing a sizeable new vineyard out on a series of mesas that are located on the breezy, western end of the ranch. So he was looking for wineries interested in more grapes, not less. This was also a time when the wine industry's interest in Syrah had become more institutionalized. Syrah was no longer a new experimental grape. Thinking that it was fast becoming the next *it* grape, the industry began planting a lot of it. And it was sort of ironic because of all the stuff that Sisquoc grew, Syrah was not yet in the mix. Not, that is, until Ed had decided that it would play a major role out on these new mesas.

Before Ed had made this decision, he had grafted a tiny bit of the original Sisquoc Vineyard to Syrah, just so he could see what it would be like. So, as all this started to play out, the first Rancho Sisquoc Syrah was actually in barrel and could be tasted.

Now, Ed's a pretty humble guy. It's not like he was saying, "Oh, Bry, this stuff is killer. You gotta get over here and taste it." Instead, on a day when I was over there to look at these new vineyard sites, toward the end of the meeting, almost as if it were a side note, he said, "Yea, we actually did crush some Syrah last fall. You want to stop at the winery and taste it on your way out?" "Well, OK," I thought, "We can do that real quick."

Looking back at it, I have to wonder. Did he really not know what my response was going to be? Mind you, I was making Syrah at the time from great vineyards. I had Radical and Frying Pan Syrahs resting in their barrels back at my winery.

I was grappling with questions like, which is better, Steve Beckmen's fruit or Nook and Cranny? It was going to take a lot to impress me, and I was already sort of thinking in my mind how I was going to politely tell Ed that I just had too much on my plate.

So we went in to the winery and tasted the wine.

I had this experience like one of the characters in *Atlas Shrugged* after John Gault's speech. "Was it real?" asks the character. I did not really want it to be real. I just wanted to go home and work on simplifying my complicated portfolio. The only problem was, what I had just experienced was one of the most interesting wines I had ever taken a whiff of. And that was only Rancho Sisquoc's *first* Syrah! It was off of newly grafted vines. In theory, it should only get better. I started to think that I better find some room somewhere on my proverbial plate for another project.

So, of course, driving home, I'm thinking to myself, *why?*

Why was that wine so good? The thing that was interesting to me was that the wine had such a beautiful core, as if it were very natural; as if that Syrah were being grown in a place that was perfect for Syrah. Also interesting was the knowledge that Syrah does well in a wide range of climates. You can make good wine from with fruit grown in warmer places, and you can also do it with cooler climate fruit. But the places that I always seemed to like the most were in the middle. In fact, in my mind, the place in the Santa Ynez Valley that best expressed this sweet spot was Ballard Canyon.

Ballard Canyon is just to the east of the 101 freeway and a little north of Buellton. It's warm there in the summer, but it's not the oven that Happy Canyon is. And while it's not as cool as the more westerly Sta. Rita Hills, it still picks up the remnants of

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our Ocean breeze. Ballard Canyon is where Steve Beckmen, Tom Stolpman and Michael Lerner grow great Syrah. From a climactic standpoint, it's no fluke; its proximity to the ocean, its centrality in the Santa Ynez Valley, its climate, is good for Syrah.

So what about Rancho Sisquoc? 99% of the time, if I drove over there, I would always take Foxen Canyon Road. I'd get off the 101 at Los Alamos, take Alisos Canyon Road over to Foxen Canyon, and then make that right turn at the church, and on into Sisquoc. There are other ways to get there, but none of them for me are really any faster, and none of them are nearly as scenic. And I don't know if it's because that was always my route, if because the drive was so beautiful that I was preoccupied, or just what. But by the time I would get to Sisquoc, I would feel like I was way back in there. The feeling was one of driving deep into the valley, away from the ocean and into a realm that feels more like a sparsely populated Happy Canyon. It's wild back in there at Rancho Sisquoc. You definitely don't feel like you are anywhere near the ocean. You are back in the forest surrounded by high country. There are hawks in the sky. Most vineyards have problems with deer. Ed Holt has problems with bears!

My mind was telling me that it's a Ballard Canyon-esque set up that's best for Syrah. But I had just tasted one of the most interesting Syrahs ever. So, I got out of my car and walked into my office and grabbed one of those new Santa Barbara County viticultural maps. In fact, I had to grab the Santa Ynez Valley map and then put the Santa Maria Valley map up above it for the perspective I was looking for.

If you draw a line north of Buellton and Ballard Canyon, guess what's about 15 miles due north, with the same proximity to the ocean?

Rancho Sisquoc.

And it's not just any old Rancho Sisquoc, but a Rancho Sisquoc with Ed Holt, a grower and friend with many years of experience, telling me, "We will plant your section any way you want; you pick the row direction, the clone of Syrah, the rootstock, etc. What ever you want Bryan, I just want to keep working with you." The feeling was mutual, and I was starting to like my new take on things more and more. "Just what Frying Pan and Nook & Cranny needed," I thought to myself, "a little competition."

I call this wine UPPER CRUST for a few reasons. First, these new western mesas that Ed has planted are sort stacked upon one another, like a series of adjacent plateaus, with the one to the north being the highest up. That's where our section is, and so that's the "Upper" part of the title. Secondly, when I asked Ed what the soil type was, he said, "It's a Pleasanton Clay Loam." But then he was very adamant about the fact that it's not some run of the mill PCL. "It's a super *concreteous* Pleasanton Clay Loam." In other words, when it gets dry, it resembles cement. "You try to run a ripper blade through there, and you are going to break something, and it's not going to be the soil. That stuff gets real hard when it dries out." So, that's the "Crust" part of it. Lastly, it's a play on words. The upper crust is the upper class. Usually the concept pertains to a social structure. In this case we are applying it to a wine. And when you taste it, you will know what I am talking about.

Cheers, Bryan

Technical Notes:

VARIETAL COMPOSITION: 100% varietal

VINEYARDS: Rancho Sisquoc, "Upper Crust"

FINISHED WINE: Residual Sugar: Dry, pH: 3.40, TA: 8.7 g/L, Alcohol: 16.0%

TIME IN BARRELS: 22 months, 33% new French oak

BOTTLING DATE: Aug, 2009

TOTAL PRODUCTION: 145 cases 12/750 ML

RELEASE DATE: November, 2009