

SAXUM HEXE

2016 THE HEXE

56% Grenache, 13% Petite Sirah, 10% Syrah, 9% Mataro, 7% Zinfandel, 5% Tempranillo

ALC: 15.7%

Cases 750 ml: 671

Cases 1.5L: 80

AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District

Released: July 2019

Release Price: \$148

Drink: now - 2030

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

Hexe can have two meanings, to perform magic or, simply, a witch. I like them both when applied to this wine. It is a multi vineyard cuvee that is built around Grenache. Not just any old Grenache, we are selecting our blackest, most evil Grenaches, the ones that we know will benefit from 33 months aging in various large puncheons or concrete amphora. The heart of this cuvee is the oldest block at James Berry Vineyard, a South facing hilltop Grenache block that was planted in 1980. Around this lot we like to weave in some of the most intense Grenache and Mataro blocks from G2 Vineyard, along with a bit of Petite Sirah from Paderewski Vineyard. It is the dark side of Grenache. Black magic.

REVIEWS:

William Kelley, Wine Advocate, May 2018

Rating: (94-96)

Drink: NA

The 2016 Hexe is a new cuvée from Saxum, built around Smith's darker, burlier Grenache lots (predominantly from older, head-trained vines on the south-facing slope of the James Berry vineyard). The wine will receive extended élevage—so in a sense, it represents the obverse of the more ethereal, fragrant Rocket Block and the Grenache analogue of the Syrah-based Broken Stones. The nose offers up aromas of sweet spices, ripe cherries, blackberries, licorice and asphalt, followed by a full-bodied, richly tannic wine with a chewy, firm finish. This is going to need its prolonged stay in barrel to resolve those tannins, but it's very promising indeed. It's a blend of 56% Grenache, 13% Petite Sirah, 10% Syrah, 9% Mataro, 7% Graciano and 5% Tempranillo.

Success sometimes breeds complacency, but that's emphatically not the case for Justin Smith, whose status as Paso Roble's most celebrated winemaker has done nothing to dim his urge to experiment, evolve and improve. Without sacrificing any of their power and authority, both of which come easily in this warm climate, Smith's Saxum wines continue to gain in structural refinement, energy, integration and incipient complexity with every passing vintage. Since the end of the last decade, Smith has been experimenting with whole cluster, a technique he tends to employ in cooler sites and vintages, since extracting excessive stem tannins is a danger in riper, warmer years. Fermentations are cooler and slower, which helps to manage extraction. While new oak was once an important influence in the Saxum wines, its presence is more and more subtle: Smith now works with puncheons instead of smaller barrels, and they're complemented by amphorae and foudres. Since 2010, he has employed Roussanne for co-fermentations

with Syrah in the place of Viognier, since it brings less additional power and alcohol. He also continues to refine and adapt his blends from year to year. Smith's new cellar now means he has the space necessary to mature wines for longer. Today's Saxum wines are accordingly better than ever. The only problem is finding them: I signed up for the mailing list in 2011, and Smith informs me that the current wait is around eight years. At Saxum, Smith characterizes the 2016 vintage as "easygoing and plentiful" after the challenges of the three preceding years of drought. The season's heat spikes weren't too serious, and fermentations went well. He employed less whole cluster than in 2015 but did very little crushing, emphasizing whole-berry fermentations. Having tasted most of these wines from barrel last summer, I was more than impressed by their positive evolution when I revisited them this April.

Jeb Dunnuck, JebDunnuck.com

Tasting Date: 11/29/2018

Rating: (97-99)

Drink: n/a

The 2016 Hexe is designed to be the burliest, most structured Grenache in the lineup and as such will most likely see another year in barrel. Coming from both James Berry and G2 vineyards, this puppy boasts a saturated purple color as well as black, black fruits, tons of chocolate, smoked earth, and gravelly minerality, full body, building tannins, and a big, powerful, structured vibe on the palate. It's a big mouthful of a Grenache, yet it's beautifully balanced and seamless. It's the real deal and another blockbuster you're going to love.

This report looks mostly at the 2016s from undeniable superstar winemaker, Justin Smith. Smith is one of the pioneers of the Paso Robles wine scene yet remains as humble and accessible as ever. Speaking about the 2016s, these are the strongest set of releases since the 2007s, and I suspect at maturity these wines will be even better. They have a rare sense of depth and richness paired with purity and precision, as well as singular characters, and these truly are special wines. The 2016 James Berry is quite possibly the greatest wine ever produced from the region and is a legendary wine in the making. Do whatever you can to latch onto a few bottles of this magical elixir. The majority of the 2016s will benefit from 2-4 years of bottle age, but good luck keeping your hands off of them. The 2017s are similarly styled, yet they have slightly more elegance and approachability compared to the denser, richer 2016s. I suspect these will continue to put on weight as well with additional time in barrel. As I've said in the past, there are few mailing lists worth staying on in today wine world; this is one of them.