

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:

It feels like this wine was a long time coming! Well, it actually was since it spent an extra year in barrel. Let me properly introduce this new cuvée. 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 cuvée that is built around Grenache. Not just any old Grenache. We are selecting our blackest, most wicked Grenaches, the ones that we know will benefit from 33 months aging in various large puncheons or concrete amphora. The heart of this cuvée is the oldest block at James Berry Vineyard, a South facing hilltop Grenache block that was planted in 1980. Vines my parents planted when I was a kid. 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. I am super happy with how it came out. A textural wine, caressing and smooth, but with those incredible aromatics you only get from Grenache. Lifted red and black fruits and some beautiful spice notes from the barrels. Black magic.

You are probably a little familiar with the 2016s. It was a phenomenal year, producing classic Saxum wines. Age worthy, but so full of vitality and fruit that they are enjoyable even in their youth. There's not a lot to say about this vintage except it was ideal.

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, JebDunnuck.com

Tasting Date: 10/31/2019

Rating: 100

Drink: 2021-2036

A perfect wine, the 2016 Hexe comes mostly from the estate James Berry Vineyard yet has a little bit of G2 fruit as well. Made from lots showing the most structure and power, it tastes like an old vine Grenache from the La Crau lieu-dit in Châteauneuf du Pape with its huge bouquet of black raspberries, cassis, garrigue, ground pepper, and melted licorice. Full-bodied, ripe, and sexy on the palate, with awesome concentration, it has enough structure to warrant 2-3 years of bottle age, but good luck keeping your hands off this beauty.

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.

Tim Fish, Wine Spectator

Producer Spotlight, Dec. 18, 2019

Rating: 92

Drink: 2019 through 2029

Burly, with sinewy muscularity framed by smoky blackberry, crushed rock and fruitcake spice accents, taking on tension and structure toward broad-shouldered tannins. Grenache, Petite Sirah, Syrah, Mataro, Zinfandel and Tempranillo.

Since the brand's first vintage in 2000, Saxum has set the standard for Rhône-style reds in California, with numerous appearances on Wine Spectator's Top 100 list, including the No. 1 spot in 2010 with the Saxum James Berry Vineyard Paso Robles 2007. Owner-winemaker Justin Smith (pictured at right) grew up in Paso Robles, located halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, and his father planted the 55-acre James Berry Vineyard in the early 1980s. The core of Saxum's production, James Berry Vineyard is about 10 miles from the Pacific, planted atop an ancient seabed scattered with fossilized shells and shark teeth. The latest James Berry Vineyard Willow Creek District 2017, a potent yet detailed blend, was previously featured in the Insider with a 95-point rating.

As you can see from this collection, Smith makes wine from a range of nearby vineyards, including Booker, Paderewski and Terry Hoage. Smith uses a variety of winemaking approaches, depending on the bottling and vintage, with fermentation vessels that range from concrete to large French oak puncheons, emphasizing the unique qualities of each grape and vineyard.

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.

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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.