

SAXUM ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

2017 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

78% Grenache, 14% Mataro, 8% Syrah

ALC: 16.5%

Cases 750 ml: 193

Cases 1.5L: 60

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: July 2020

Release Price: \$148

Drink: now - 2032

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

Wow, what can I say about the 2017 Rocket Block, it has a lot to live up to. The Rocket Blocks have been on a roll since coming back with the 2015 vintage. This version might be my favorite of the trio!! We aged this Rocket Block in half concrete amphora because we loved the aromatics so much we wanted to preserve them and we felt the tannins of 2017 did not warrant as much new wood as a more structured vintage would. So here we have the Rocket Block in all its naked glory, just pure raspberry and black pepper spice with a complexity that is hard to believe. If you crack one of these babies (which you really should wait 4-5 years before doing) give it some room to relax in your glass and watch how it unfolds over the evening and following days. It's a real beauty.

I'm sure most of you have had a chance to crack one of our '17s from the last 2 releases and I'm hoping you found them to your liking. They are open, luscious wines with great aromatics and soft, lush tannins..... but enough tannins to frame the abundant fruit nicely. I am super stoked and find them very approachable now. Across the board 2017 is an incredibly tasty, approachable vintage.

REVIEWS:

Josh Reynolds, Vinuous Feb 2020

Rating: (97-98)

Drink: NA

Shimmering violet color. A complex, explosively perfumed bouquet evokes ripe, spice-accented red and blue fruits, incense and floral oils, which are enlivened by a vibrant mineral quality that builds as the wine opens up. Sweet, seamless and energetic on the palate, offering densely packed black raspberry, boysenberry, candied lavender and spicecake flavors that show outstanding clarity and building power. The mineral and floral components drive an extremely long, sappy finish that's given shape by smooth, deftly woven tannins.

Jeb Dunnuck, JebDunnuck.com

Tasting Date: 10/31/2019

Rating: 95-97

Drink: na

Justin commented that the heat in 2017 really helped the Grenache. His 2017 James Berry Vineyard Rocket Block is a prettier, more elegant wine than the 2016, offering beautiful notes of kirsch liqueur, incense, blood orange, and flowers. With nicely integrated stems, medium to full body, silky tannins, and terrific balance, it's going to benefit from just a handful of year of bottle age and drink spectacularly well for 10-15 years or more.

2016 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

59% Grenache, 28% Mataro, 10% Counoise, 3% Syrah

ALC: 16.5%

Cases 750 ml: 133

Cases 1.5L: 100

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: July 2019

Release Price: \$148

Drink: now - 2030

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

If you are getting offered this wine, buy it, that's all I can say. It'll blow you away. Nothing else needs to be said. A perfect vintage and our favorite lots of James Berry Grenache coming out of the legendary Rocket Block section. The regular James Berry 2016 received a perfect score from Jeb Dunnuck, this is a selection out of that!

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

Another perfect wine is the 2016 James Berry Vineyard Rocket Block, which always comes from a single block of the oldest Grenache vines in the James Berry Vineyard as well as around one-third of Mourvèdre. Its deep ruby/purple hue is followed by incredibly complex notes of black fruits, chocolate, cured meats, flowery incense, and assorted spicy, meaty, Mourvèdre-dominated nuances. Full-bodied, voluptuous, and perfectly balanced, with that rare sense of intensity paired with elegance, it has some upfront appeal, but do your best to give bottles 2-4 years of bottle age.

Saxum's Justin Smith has hit a home run with these recent vintages, and his 2015s, 2016s, 2017s, and 2018s all have singular styles, with the quality remaining sky-high. The 2018s show the slightly more pure, fresh, yet concentrated style of the vintage nicely. While not yet bottled, these will offer pleasure in their youth as well as benefit from short term cellaring. The 2017s are more pretty, perfumed wines that don't quite have the density of the 2016s yet certainly don't lack for fruit. Most are already drinking nicely today, yet as with all great wines, they're going to evolve gracefully. Lastly, the 2016s are some of the greatest wines I've tasted from this estate, and they offer massive, layered, yet impeccably balanced profiles that are a joy to drink today; they'll also be a joy to drink in 10-15 years as well. As I've written more than once, there are few mailing lists worth being on, but without a doubt, this is one of them.

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Tim Fish, Wine Spectator
Producer Spotlight, Dec. 18, 2019
Rating: 94

Drink: 2019 through 2032

Dense and rich, this full-throttle blend offers intricately layered blackberry, crushed stone and smoky meat accents that drive toward big but polished tannins. Grenache, Mataro, Counoise and Syrah.

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: (96-98)

Drink: NA

The 2016 Rocket Block James Berry Vineyard shows fabulous potential, but it's still a baby, offering up a deep-pitched bouquet of wild berries, wood smoke, sweet licorice and dried flowers. On the palate, it's full-bodied, rich and layered, with great concentration and rich tannins that are hidden by an exuberantly primary core of fruit. In a subtle departure from 2015's 100% new puncheons, the 2016 is being matured in 73% new puncheons and the balance in used wood, where it will spend another 12 months.

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.

Josh Reynolds, Vinuous Sept 2018

Rating: (96-98)

Drink: NA

Glass-staining ruby. A complex, expansive bouquet evokes ripe red and blue fruits, Moroccan spices, vanilla and candied flowers, enlivened by a smoky mineral quality that gains power as the wine opens up. Sweet, seamless and broad on the palate, offering deeply concentrated raspberry liqueur, boysenberry and spicecake flavors that show outstanding clarity and spicy lift. The mineral and floral components drive an extremely long, sappy finish shaped by smooth tannins. The interplay of power and finesse here is mighty impressive.

2015 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

89% Grenache, 11% Mataro

ALC: 16.4%

Cases 1.5L: 128

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: July 2018

Release Price: \$296 (magnums)

Drink: now - 2028

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

I feel that the 2015 Rocket Block needs a little explaining, or perhaps I should say, you need to be forewarned about it's nature. It is a wine that defies categorizing. On the one hand, it is loaded with ripe rich flavors, mouth coating and decadent. On the other hand, it is ethereal and light, hard to capture, like a ray of sun coming through some high trees. Brilliant might be a good word for it. The color isn't black like the night, rather it's red like a ruby, and the flavors sparkle and change right before your eyes (or tastebuds I should say). Let me back pedal a bit and tell you about the origin of the Rocket block..... It's a particular part of James Berry Vineyard, planted in 1995 with the California selection of Grenache that goes by the handle Grenache 01. A very steep North East facing slope that rises 100 feet in a short amount of time. The soil is rich but rocky and well drained, and the exposure being away from the hot summer sun lets this block hang forever. It is almost always the last block we pick out of all our vineyards, allowing for maximum hang time and perfect fruit maturity. Perfectly ripe.

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REVIEWS:

William Kelley, Wine Advocate, May 2018

Rating: (96-98)

Drink: NA

The 2015 Rocket Block James Berry Vineyard—which had been assembled in preparation for its bottling in two weeks' time—is superb, revealing complex aromas of cherry, raspberries and spice. On the palate, it's full-bodied, textural and bright, with an expansive core of juicy, succulent fruit framed by fine-grained structuring tannins. This rendition of Rocket Block—from a cooler, northeast-exposed parcel—is one of the most elegant, vibrant wines in the Saxum cellar, exemplifying not only Smith's evolution as a winemaker but also what's possible in Paso Robles. The final blend is 89% Grenache and 11% Mataro ... It should enjoy two decades of longevity.

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: 8/10/2017

Rating: (96-99)

Drink: n/a

Last made in 2013 (and before that, 2005), the 2015 James Berry Vineyard Rocket Block is primarily Grenache (89% Grenache and 11% Mourvèdre) and there's a scant four barrels produced. Coming from the northeast face of the Rocket Block, it was fermented in oak uprights and aged in 100% new 300-liter barrels. It's a ripe, incredibly sexy, hedonistic effort offering crazy notes of kirsch, black cherries, spiced meats and dried

herbs. Elegant, packed with character, ripe and sexy, it has fine tannin and is going to be gorgeous once it's bottled.

I've raved so much about the wines from Saxum's Justin Smith, I feel like a broken record every new vintage. Nevertheless, these latest vintages are all stellar, and certainly the move to the new cellar hasn't affect or changed the quality here. The 2014s show the richer, more fleshy style of the vintage, yet still carry the slightly more streamlined/elegant style that Smith has chosen over the past few years. The 2015s play even more in that realm, which is very much the vintage, and are lively and elegant, with pretty, perfumed characters – and plenty of fruit. The 2015s share a lot of similarities to the 2011s (which shined for their aromatics), yet have more fruit and power. It's worth noting that the majority had just been recently bottled, which makes these showings even more impressive. A vintage that really excites me is the 2016s, which appear to be a return to a more bombastic style, with beautiful fruit and texture.

Josh Reynolds, Vinuous Sept 2018

Rating: 96-98

Drink: NA

Lurid ruby-red. A powerful, highly expressive bouquet evokes raspberry preserves, cherry cola, potpourri and exotic spices, and a smoky mineral note builds with aeration. Sweet, palate-staining red fruit liqueur, spicecake and candied lavender flavors show outstanding depth as well as nerviness, thanks to a spine of juicy acidity. Smoothly plays power off elegance and finishes extremely long, sappy and precise, with silky tannins emerging steadily and evenly.

2013 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

100% Grenache, ALC: 16.4%

Cases 750 ml: 280

Cases 1.5 L: 60

Vineyard: G2 Vineyard

Released: July 2016

Release Price: \$98

Drink: now - 2028

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

Rocket Block, what can I say? It's back for one time only! We had such an abundance of awesome Grenache in 2013 that we thought it would be fun to resurrect this legend. Hailing from the original planting at JBV, it's an East facing slope that ripens really late, literally the last block we pick. The ferment was so beautiful we knew we had something extra special, so we kept it apart from the rest and aged it for its first year in concrete. We were a little taken back by how glacially slow the tannins were resolving in concrete so we racked into neutral oak puncheons, but instead of bottling with the usual 20 months of aging we decided this baby needed another year. So here we are after 33 months of aging, it's finally ready for primetime. All Grenache, all the time. It's a testament to what pure Grenache can do here in Paso when conditions are perfect. Ripe, round, concentrated, with a great core of brightness and nerve. The tannins are still quite present, and she'll need a few more years to really strut her stuff, but I think the upside potential will be

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awesome. One for the ages, a worthy successor to the 2005 (the last Rocket Block we made).

Let's talk about this vintage. It was the second year in a row with very little rain, so the vines responded like you would think, they produced very little fruit. What little fruit they had became extremely concentrated because there just wasn't much moisture available for the vines. No water = concentration.

That could have been a problem if it wasn't for our cool nights and calcareous soils which preserve the natural acidity. So we ended up with ripe, rich, concentrated wines that have great spine and a focused juiciness that holds them together. Something that really is a rarity in the world of wine. They are wines that speak of Paso Robles and I'm proud of them, just as I am proud to call Paso Robles my home. It's an awesome community to be part of.

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, Wine Advocate #226 Issue: Aug 2016

Rating: 98

Drink: 2019-2029

Tasted on two separate occasions, just before and then after bottling, the 2013 Rocket Block James Berry Vineyard comes from an east-facing, cooler parcel in the James Berry Vineyard that's harvested very late. It is an extraordinary wine (100% destemmed Grenache) that was fermented and aged in concrete for a year before being moved to used barrels. Only bottled in 2003 and 2005 previously, the 2013 sports a medium ruby, mostly opaque purple color to go with ethereal notes of black raspberries, kirsch, currants, ground herbs, flowers and incense. Like all of Justin's 2013s, it leans towards the elegant and finesse-driven side of the spectrum, yet it has insane levels of purity, fine tannin, no hard edges and a sensational finish. Forget bottles for 3-4 years and drink over the following decade.

One of the superstars in California is undoubtedly the humble, soft spoken, yet incredibly talented Justin Smith, who has had the reins at Saxum since 2000. And while a lot of winemakers would have been content to stick with the tried and true at this point, Smith continues to question, experiment and fine tune everything he does. Today, his wines are much more finesse oriented, pure and graceful than in the past, without sacrificing texture, concentration or richness. In short, these wines kick ass and shouldn't be missed by any serious wine lover out there!

Tim Fish, Wine Spectator, Issue: March 31, 2017

Rating: 95

Drink: 2018 through 2029

Impeccably built, combining a dense, structured core with rich and polished fruit. Aromas of blackberry and floral herb combine with smoky sandalwood and spice notes. Hands off for now.

Josh Reynolds, Vinous, Sept 2016

Rating: 95

Drink: 2019-2028

(from a block of Grenache within the James Berry Vineyard; aged for 33 months in large French oak casks) Opaque ruby. Explosive, spice-accented aromas of red berry preserves, rose oil and star anise develop a smoky mineral element as the wine opens up. Sweet, seamless and expansive on the palate,

offering deeply concentrated raspberry liqueur, cherry and spicecake flavors with a subtle touch of cola on the back half. Velvety tannins add shape to the powerful, incisive finish, which leaves behind notes of crystallized red fruit and floral pastilles.

2005 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

93% Grenache, 7% Grenache

ALC: 16.4%

Cases 750 ml: 200

Cases 1.5 L: 25

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: July 2007

Release Price: \$75

Drink: now - 2020

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

After deciding not to make a Rocket Block in 2004, the 2005 is back in full form. Aged in mainly neutral puncheons, this is the most aromatically explosive wine I have ever made, it just comes after you with raspberries, lilacs and blueberries. In the mouth it is magically both huge and light at the same time, thanks to its incredible purity. Fans of the 2003 Rocket will not be disappointed! Unfortunately there were only 250 cases made, so I apologize to those who aren't offered an allocation.

REVIEWS:

Robert Parker, Wine Advocate #177, Jul 2008

Rating: 96

Drink: 2008 - 2023

The 2005 Rocket Block is another exceptional offering that represents Saxum's version of a Paso Robles Chateaufeuf du Pape. As its name suggests, it explodes from the glass offering intense black raspberry and blacker fruit scents interwoven with notions of smoke, forest floor, and flowers. Full-bodied and unctuously-textured, with considerable tannin, acidity, and that exquisite minerality that comes from these soils, it is a super-rich, sensationally profound red that should drink beautifully for 12-15+ years. The bottled 2005s are all performing well.

James Laube, Wine Spectator, Issue: March 2008

Rating: 94

Drink: now through 2012

Has amazing fruit purity and range of flavor, with tiers of fleshy dark berry fruit built around plum, wild berry, pomegranate and boysenberry. Holds onto a tight focus, ending with waves of supple flavors that are remarkably complex and vibrant. Grenache and Syrah. Drink now through 2012. 250 cases made.

Josh Reynolds, Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar, Nov/Dec 2007

Rating: 92

Dark red. Graceful red berry and cherry aromas, with complicating floral and mineral qualities adding energy. Brisk but pliant redcurrant and strawberry on the palate, with silky tannins adding shape. Very fresh, elegant and precise, with the balance and suave acidity to reward cellaring. This is more understated

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than the other bottlings I tried at Saxum, but lacks nothing in flavor interest.

2003 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

50% Grenache, 40% Mourvèdre, 10% Syrah

ALC: 16.6%

Cases 750 ml: 250

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: August 2006

Release Price: \$45

Drink: now- 2020

REVIEWS:

Robert Parker, Wine Advocate #159, Jun 2005

Rating: 98

Drink: 2005 - 2015

The 2003 Rocket Block James Berry Vineyard (50% Grenache, 40% Mourvèdre, and 10% Syrah) is truly great stuff. All of the Grenache is aged in larger demi-muids, with the Syrah and Mourvèdre kept in smaller barrels. A dense ruby/purple color is followed by a big, sweet, kirsch liqueur, creme de cassis, lavender, licorice, and pepper-scented bouquet. Reminiscent of a Chateauneuf du Pape with a New World twist, it possesses a fabulous texture, beautiful purity, and a seamless, voluptuous personality. It should age beautifully for a decade, assuming purchasers can keep their hands off of it that long. The 2003s were bottled about seven weeks before my visit, but I could hardly complain about the fact they weren't "showing." I highly recommend that wine enthusiasts who love Rhone Ranger wines pay a visit to the James Berry Vineyard, one of the true grand cru sites in the region.

Stephen Tanzer, Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar, Jul/Aug 2005

Rating: 94

Good bright ruby-red. Attractively high-toned aromas of black cherry, black raspberry, tar, smoked meat and leather. Thick, dense and sweet, with enticing, sappy dark berry flavors. At once layered and firm, finishing with very suave tannins and terrific length. Despite the elevated alcohol, this does not strike me as at all heavy. A warm October ripened the mourvedre well in 2003, notes Smith. (The equally promising 2004, tasted from barrel, features more grenache and less mourvedre, and showed liqueur-like sweetness and a briny, iodiney quality intensified by vibrant acidity.)