

SAXUM HEXE

2018 HEXE

57% Grenache, 15% Mataro, 13% Graciano, 10% Syrah, 5% Petite Sirah
ALC: 15.9%
Cases 750 ml: 825
Cases 1.5L: 50
AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District
Released: July 2021
Release Price: \$148
Drink: now - 2040

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

Hexe is already made from our blackest, most brooding Grenache lots. Then along comes a vintage like 2018 that is extra black and brooding, and you get... Well, you guessed it. A deep, dark intense wine. I love tasting the Hexe side by side with the Rocket Block. They're such different expressions of Grenache. Each beautiful in their own way. The Hexe is blackberry, licorice, smoked meats, and a bit of dark chocolate all wrapped up in silky tannins. Lay this baby down for a couple of years and you will be greatly rewarded.

As for the 2018s we are offering, well you've heard me talk about the 18s before. Dark, intense, powerful. They are indeed. I think spending the extra year in barrel was exactly what these beasts needed to tame them a bit. But believe me, they are still in need of laying down for a few more years. They have some structure that will reward your patience.

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, Sept 2020

Rating: 97-99

Drink: n/a

Also deep purple/blue-hued, the 2018 Hexe is still aging in a mix of barrels. (There's a small amount of amphora.) Lots of jammy blackberry, crushed flowers, smoked meat, and chocolate notes give way to a full-bodied, opulent, incredibly sexy barrel sample that has silky tannins, no hard edges, and a great finish.

2017 HEXE

58% Grenache, 27% Mataro, 11% Petite Sirah, 4% Tempranillo
ALC: 15.8%
Cases 750 ml: 1058
Cases 1.5L: 80
AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District
Released: July 2020
Release Price: \$148
Drink: now - 2032

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

I don't need to tell you how happy I was with the inaugural release of this wine, the 2016. We never had a new wine get the magic triple digit score except for that one. We are super proud of it.... As for the 2017 version? It's a perfect follow up. Maybe not as structured as the '16 version, but definitely more open and approachable, which I really enjoy. It is a blast of dark fruits and spicy herbs on the nose and in the mouth it is pure sexiness. Long smooth tannins and complexity that goes for

days. Please do not miss out on this wine. Really, it's sexy. Drink this wine.

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:

Jeb Dunnuck, Sept 2020

Rating: 99

Drink: 2020-2035

Built around old, head-trained vines right outside the winery and 58% Grenache, 27% Mataro, 11% Petite Sirah, and the rest Tempranillo, the 2017 Hexe is another gorgeous, sexy 2017 that's a joy to drink. Offering loads of blackberries, chocolate, white pepper, black licorice, and bouquet garni-like aromas and flavors, it's full-bodied, ultra-pure, seamless, and gorgeously put together. Drink this stunning wine over the coming 10-15 years.

Josh Reynolds, Vinous, Dec 2020

Rating: 98

Drink: 2026-2036

Dark violet. Explosive red/blue fruit preserve, incense and floral aromas show superb clarity and complementary hints of smoky minerals, incense and exotic spices; a candied licorice note emerges with aeration. Juicy and impressively concentrated yet surprisingly lithe as well, offering alluringly sweet Chambord, blueberry, cherry pie and lavender pastille flavors and emphatic spiciness. The extremely long, energetic finish features insistent florality and smooth, rounded tannins that merge seamlessly with the wine's clinging fruit.

2016 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

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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, Oct 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.

Josh Reynolds, Vinous, Dec 2020

Rating: 98

Drink: 2025-2035

Deep, glistening magenta. A hugely fragrant bouquet evokes ripe red and dark berries, exotic flowers, licorice and incense, and a smoky mineral overtone builds in the glass. Juicy, deeply concentrated and seamless in texture, offering alluringly sweet, palate-coating creme de cassis, cherry-cola, spicecake and floral pastille flavors that spread out smoothly on the back half. Closes supple, sweet and incredibly long, with gently building tannins adding shape and subtle grip.

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.

Erin Brooks, Wine Advocate, May 2018

Rating: 95

Drink: 2021-2036

The 2016 Hexe is a blend of 56% Grenache, 13% Petite Sirah, 10% Syrah, 9% Mataro, 7% Zinfandel and 5% Tempranillo aged 31 months in various vessels, including 66% new oak and 17% amphorae. Deep ruby in color, it gives aromas of blackberry preserves, baked marionberries, black cherries and red berries with accents of dried citrus peel, dried flowers, charcuterie and an earthy undercurrent. Medium to full-bodied, intense and still tightly wound, it has a firm, lightly chewy frame and well-woven freshness, finishing long and perfumed. 770 cases produced.

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

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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.