

SAXUM BOOKER VINEYARD

2019 BOOKER VINEYARD

71% Syrah, 29% Mataro
ALC: 15.5%
Cases 750 ml: 620
Cases 1.5 L: 55
AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek
Vineyard: Booker Vineyard
Release: January 2022

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

I'm sad to announce that this is the last time you will see a Saxum Booker Vineyard offering. Unfortunately we are not leasing those blocks anymore. The news will be more heart breaking after you taste this one. It's definitely included in my top 3 Booker Vineyards we have ever made. ('06 and '11 round out that group.) Our '19 is on the spice driven side, so be forewarned, those who prefer Booker Vineyard on the fruit driven side, this one offers up more black pepper and black berry. I can sit and sniff its aromatics for hours... Man, I just became rather sad and nostalgic. I helped plant those vines 20 years ago! It was a good run Badger, a good run. Thank you for letting me have those blocks.

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, Sept. 2021

Rating: (97-99)

Drink: na

The 2019 Booker Vineyard is a Syrah-dominated blend ... this will be the last vintage for this cuvée. Blackberries, peppery stems, roasted meats, and spicy nuances all emerge from this powerful, ripe, concentrated, yet still impeccably balanced red.

One of California's unquestionably superstar estates is Heather and Justin Smith's Saxum Vineyards, and you won't find any finer examples of Rhône variety wines anywhere in the world. The proprietors of James Berry Vineyard, located in the cooler Willow Creek District of Paso Robles, the Smiths have seen incredible changes over the past decade, and they've traded their small, old-fashioned, yet perfectly adequate cellar for a brand-new cave and state of the art winemaking facility. And while changes of this magnitude can often result in hiccups in either the style or quality of the wines, that's certainly not the case here. I think the wines have never been better, and given the scores I've awarded in the past, that's saying something. Today, the Smiths release multiple cuvées, and while the focus in the past might have been the estate James Berry Vineyard, the portfolio includes numerous new vineyard sources and cuvées, most focusing on single vineyards and even specific blocks inside of a vineyard. This report looks at the 2018s and 2019s, and in a nutshell, these wines epitomize what I consider greatness in wine; the ability to offer both hedonistic and intellectual pleasure; intensity and richness without heaviness or any sensation of weight; singular profiles; and the ability to improve with bottle age. In addition, the purity and precision this estate can achieve are incredible, and certainly, many estates and winemakers in Paso Robles need to be tasting these wines to understand why they're great and what is possible from these incredible limestone soils. As a critic, it's always a challenge to try and understand why wines show differently and why one estate can produce brilliant wines and others struggle. Given the

prodigious wines the Smiths release year in and year out from different vineyards (and now even from different winemaking facilities), it's become increasingly apparent that the quality coming from Saxum is due to the genius of Justin Smith. After being lucky enough to taste these wines every year for well over a decade now, I can say that no one in California does Rhône varieties and blends better. I've written this many times in the past, but I'll say it again, this is one of the few mailing lists worth being on.

2018 BOOKER VINEYARD

74% Syrah, 26% Mataro
ALC: 15.5%
Cases 750 ml: 476
Cases 1.5 L: 50
Vineyard: Booker Vineyard
Release: January 2021

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

This is a great Booker Vineyard. It has everything that we have come to love from this bottling. Soaring dark Syrah dominant aromatics, rich texture, and silky smooth, long tannins. There is a bit more new French oak used here, and it really helps to flesh out that structure. It is a classic. If you like our Booker, you will love this version.

The 2018s are some of the most complex and nuanced wines we have ever released (and will definitely benefit from 3-30 years of aging.) Structured and built like a brick, while at the same time the copious tannins are coming together nicely. I really dig them. To be honest, I was a little scared when I tasted them last. They were so tightly focused and intense. Now I'm seeing how quickly they have softened up, coming out of their proverbial shells. I know it's cliché, but iron fist in a velvet glove suits them well. I have previously compared the 2018s to the 2016s, but now that I've had some time to get to know both vintages I find them to be less similar than I first thought... I think '18 might be better. Yes, you heard it here first. Our '18s might be better than the much regaled '16s. (And I'm not just saying that because I'm slinging them today!) I think the '16s may be a bit more generous and forthcoming, but the '18s will outshine the '16s in their complexity. I'm looking forward to some side by side comparisons in 5 or 6 years. It shall be a momentous battle!

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, Sept. 2020

Rating: 98

Drink: 2022-2032

Another powerhouse, the 2018 Booker Vineyard is based on 74% Syrah and 26% Mourvèdre that sees some stem inclusion and a full 20 to 26 months in 350-liter French oak barrels before being bottled unfinned and unfiltered. It's a youthful, primary 2018 offering incredibly pure black and blue fruits as well as notes of charcoal, graphite, roasted herbs, and charred meat. These carry to a full-bodied Syrah with a beautiful core of sweet fruit, ripe, polished, yet certainly present tannins, and flawless balance. Despite its overall richness and size, it still has a

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vibrant spine of acidity and freshness and a gorgeous finish. Give bottles plenty of air if drinking any time soon, and my money is on it benefiting from 2-3 years of bottle age and cruising in cold cellars through 2032.

Josh Reynolds, Vinous, Dec 2020

Rating: 97

Drink: 2026-2036

Opaque purple. Expansive aromas of dark fruit liqueur, incense, black pepper, violet and spice-cake, along with hints of olive and cola that build steadily in the background. Fleshy and broad on the palate, offering impressively concentrated black/blue fruit, spice-cake and violet pastille flavors supported by a core of smoky minerality. Pliant and appealingly sweet on the strikingly long, floral-driven, penetrating finish, which is framed by suave, harmonious tannins.

Erin Brooks, Wine Advocate, Jan 2021

Rating: 98

Drink: 2021-2038

The 2018 Booker Vineyard, a blend of 74% Syrah and 26% Mataro, has gregarious aromas of baked blackberries, coffee, dark earth and licorice with loads of spicy accents. The full-bodied palate bursts with concentrated, nuanced fruits, pure notes of chocolate and floral perfume lingering in the mouth. The sheer concentration of flavor is expertly foiled by its fine, silt-like tannins and seamless freshness, and it finishes with tremendous length and detail. I appreciate how drinkable this is straight from the bottle, though it will have more to show with time in the cellar.

I've been eagerly anticipating the 2018 vintage in Paso Robles, where cooler temperatures resulted in some unusually elegant, lifted wines. The 2018s from Saxum did not disappoint—these latest releases offer incredible concentration of flavor with surprising elegance and freshness. While they took some time in bottle to unwind, I'm pleased with how they have blossomed over time. These layered, nuanced wines have the intense flavor, ripe tannins and freshness for long-term cellaring, and while they're stunning now, they'll offer more a few years down the road. Cheers!

2017 BOOKER VINEYARD

76% Syrah, 24% Mataro

ALC: 15.8%

Cases 750 ml: 367

Cases 1.5 L: 60

Vineyard: Booker Vineyard

Released: January 2020

Release Price: \$98

Drink: 2022 - 2040

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

The 2017 Booker Vineyard is a departure from the other 2017 wines in this line up. It is on the masculine side of the spectrum, with dark fruits, charred meats and some bay and sage hiding in the background. However, on the palate you can tell it's a 2017 wine because of the sweet, polished tannins and pure fruit core.

The flavors in the mouth sneak up on you and then, when you least expect it, they clobber you in the long finish. We aged this wine in 30% concrete amphora, and a majority of the rest in new French oak. Out of our 2017 wines, this is the one to lay down for a long slumber. I'd give it at least 3 years if you can keep your hands off it.

During the 2017 growing season California was served an impressive heat wave that arrived at the wrong time, when the fruit was getting close, but definitely not there yet. We were faced with two options. Our first option was to pick the fruit that was starting to shrivel from the heat. Fruit with numbers saying the sugars were getting too high, acids were too strong, and tannins were too green. The second option was to let it ride. However, you can't predict the weather and could potentially lose the whole crop. A huge gamble. Well, we rolled the dice and let everything hang. Then we proceeded to bite our nails and watch the weather. Eventually the heat stopped and we ended up losing a portion of our crop, maybe 15%, but the remaining 85% was awesome. We had to spend a lot of time on the sorting table removing the damaged portions of the clusters, but it was all worthwhile. The wines are delicious! The 2017s definitely have a riper aromatic than the 2016s, but I rather enjoy that. The tannins are incredibly soft and smooth, making them very open and approachable in their youth. I like to think that the 2016s will ultimately be the better wines, but for the first 5, maybe 8 years of their lives, the 2017s might bring more pleasure, and bringing pleasure is what this is all about!!!

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, Oct 2019

Rating: 98+

Drink: 2022-2032

The 2017 Booker Vineyard got a few expletives and wows in the notes. It's a full-bodied, flamboyant, straight essence of Paso Robles beauty that's loaded with notions of black fruits, chocolate, ground pepper, candied orange peel, and spring flowers. It's a masculine, powerhouse of a Syrah, which is classic Booker Vineyard.

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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Josh Reynolds, Vinous, Dec 2020

Rating: 96

Drink: 2025-2035

Inky ruby. A deeply perfumed bouquet features ripe black raspberry, cherry liqueur, cassis, exotic spice and licorice qualities that show outstanding definition and mineral lift. Sweet and expansive on the palate, offering impressively concentrated black/blue fruit preserve, violet pastille, spice-cake and savory herb flavors that slowly tighten up on the back half. Shows superb energy and breadth on a strikingly long, floral- and spice-driven finish shaped by steadily building tannins.

Erin Brooks, Wine Advocate, Feb 2020

Rating: 95

Drink: 2020-2035

The 2017 Booker Vineyard is a blend of 76% Syrah and 24% Mataro. It was made with 21% whole cluster and aged 21 months in various vessels including 55% new oak and 30% amphorae. Deep ruby, it has a nose of blackberry and raspberry preserves, orange oil, dusty earth, garrigue, tar and loads of amaro accents. Medium to full-bodied, intense, layered and firm, the palate is lifted by fantastic juicy freshness and finishes long with oodles of floral and citrus accents. 430 cases were made.

Tim Fish, Wine Spectator

Producer Spotlight, Dec. 18, 2019

Rating: 94

Drink: 2019 through 2029

Spirited yet refined, with complex layers of blackberry, dark chocolate, grilled meat and licorice that take on richness and density toward well-buffed tannins. Syrah and Mataro.

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.

2016 BOOKER VINEYARD

73% Syrah, 27% Mataro

ALC: 15.6%

Cases 750 ml: 274

Cases 1.5 L: 50

Vineyard: Booker Vineyard

Released: January 2019

Release Price: \$98

Drink: 2021 - 2038

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

We are back on track with the 2016 Booker Vineyard. As you may recall, yields were so bad in 2015 that we didn't bottle a Booker Vineyard, but this wine makes up for it! In typical Booker fashion, it's primarily Syrah with a bit of Mataro thrown in. Great richness and texture like this wine always has in spades. We aged a chunk in concrete amphora, adding some great tension and lift to this bruiser. Black fruits, violets, crushed rocks, and maybe a little dried cranberry. I think it has the hallmarks to be a classic, but it's going to need some time in your cellar to really open up because the tannins are still pretty hefty.

Like I mentioned in my previous letter, 2016 is quite possibly the best vintage we have made. The stars aligned, and everything is just right. The perfect amount of fruit richness, the right amount of ripe tannins, the perfect amount of acidity, and incredible balance, all wrapped up with some nice freshness and aromatic intensity. We knew we had some great material right from the get go, and used a little less new oak than normal to let the explosive fruit and earthiness show itself properly. I am very happy with these wines!

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, Aug. 2017

Rating: 97-99

Drink: n/a

The 2016 Booker Vineyard is made from 73% Syrah and 27% Mourvèdre and saw 13% whole clusters and 100% new French oak. Inky colored, it gives up killer notes of blackberry, blueberries, crushed rock, and liquid violets in a thick, unctuous, structured and tannic style. It's a blockbuster, no doubt, but I suspect short term cellaring will be your friend.

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.

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William Kelley, Wine Advocate, May 2018

Rating: 96-98

Drink: NA

A blend of 73% Syrah and 27% Mataro, the 2016 Booker Vineyard ...—this year with 60% in new puncheons and the remaining 40% in large amphorae. It's harvested in two tranches: the first and larger pick is the south-facing slope that's exclusively Syrah and entirely destemmed, the second pick being the north-facing slope that includes both some Mataro and some whole cluster. The wine opens in the glass with a brooding bouquet of grilled meat, bay leaf and dark, plummy fruit, followed by a full-bodied, concentrated wine with great depth and tension but plenty of chewy tannin that is going to need some time to resolve. Everything points to it being absolutely superb.

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, Vinous, Sept 2018

Rating: 95-97

Drink: NA

Youthful purple. Intensely perfumed dark berry liqueur, Dark purple. Powerful black and blue fruit preserve aromas are complicated by hints of smoky minerals, incense and succulent herbs, and a subtle hint of white pepper develops in the glass. Juicy and concentrated yet surprisingly energetic as well, offering sappy, sharply delineated blackberry, cherry compote and floral pastille flavors and a touch of five-spice powder. The

impressively long, chewy finish features resonating floral and dark berry notes and dusty tannins that emerge slowly and steadily.

2014 BOOKER VINEYARD

68% Syrah, 32% Mourvèdre

ALC: 15.1%

Cases 750 ml: 280

Cases 1.5 L: 50

Vineyard: Booker Vineyard

Released: January 2017

Release Price: \$98

Drink: 2020 - 2030

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

The growing season of 2014 was so dry that it is the defining feature of these wines. You can tell the vines struggled to squeeze every last drop of available moisture out of their bed of rocks that we like to call our soil. The wines are tightly wound and concentrated, but in a different way than the 2013s, more stoney is how I perceive them. Wet stones and chalk, minerality, spices, and then the core of fruit. The tannins are more refined, or transparent, than the monster tannins of '13 or '12. These wines remind me of the 2010s, which never had huge tannins, but have evolved very slowly, taking their damn sweet time to really strut their stuff. They should be ready to enjoy in a year or two but I think they will show best in a decade.

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, Aug. 2017

Rating: 97

Drink: n/a

Made from 68% Syrah and 32% Mourvèdre, the 2014 Booker Vineyard is more elegant than the 2013, yet has terrific intensity and depth. Loaded with notions of blackberries, chalky minerality, spring flowers and violets, it has sensational purity of fruit, full-bodied richness, and building tannin. It shows the suppler side to the 2014 vintage and is certainly approachable today, yet it will be at its best from 2019-2029+.

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.

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Lisa Perrotti-Brown, Wine Advocate Sept 2017

Rating: 97

Drink: 2017-2034

The 2014 Booker Vineyard is a blend of 68% Syrah and 32% Mourvèdre and has a deep garnet-purple color, displaying aromas of cassis, espresso, violets and dried herbs with suggestions of bacon fat, lavender and Sichuan pepper. Full-bodied, rich and with beautifully ripe, fine-grained tannins, it has a generous mid-palate of ripe, rich fruit and great length, giving up loads of spice notes. (Note that no 2015 Booker Vineyard was produced.)

Josh Reynolds, Vinuous Nov 2017

Rating: 94

Drink: 2022-2031

Opaque ruby. Expressive, spice- and mineral-accented aromas of red and dark berry liqueur, incense and licorice pick up cola and rhubarb notes with aeration. Sweet and concentrated but also energetic and penetrating on the palate, offering intense black raspberry, spiced cake and floral pastille flavors and a bracing suggestion of peppery spices and smoky minerals on the back half. Finishes sappy, sweet and impressively long, with resonating floral and spice notes and supple tannins build slowly, adding shape and gentle grip to the wine's juicy fruit.

Tim Fish, Wine Spectator, Issue: April 30, 2018

Rating: 94

Drink: 2019 through 2027

A real bruiser, but this maintains a sense of depth and breeding, with floral raspberry jam and mocha aromas and intense, layered blackberry, peppered beef and crushed stone flavors that gain speed toward big but polished tannins. Syrah and Mourvèdre.

2013 BOOKER VINEYARD

67% Syrah, 33% Mourvèdre

ALC: 15.8%

Cases 750 ml: 320

Cases 1.5 L: 60

Vineyard: Booker Vineyard

Released: January 2016

Release Price: \$98

Drink: 2018 - 2028

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

You know how bullish I am on these 13s (I think about everyone is, actually), well, I haven't changed my tune since I wrote to you last. I am still really digging them. As always, these wines will need a few years of slumber, but they will reward you greatly. Juicy rich fruit, tons of sweet tannins, and incredible complexity. The depth is really what gets me going on them, ever changing layers that reveal new aspects of the wine with each sip. It definitely makes drinking them a joy.

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, Wine Advocate #226, Aug 2016

Rating: 98

Drink: 2018-2028

Leading off the wines tasted from bottle, the 2013 Booker Vineyard is one of the prettier, more elegant and pure examples of this cuvée I can recall. A blend of 67% Syrah and the rest Mourvèdre, fermented with 30% whole cluster, this total thrill ride offers sensational notes of crème de cassis, black raspberries, ground herbs and crushed flowers to go with a full-bodied, ultra-pure, silky and seamless style on the palate. This tannin quality is off the charts, but it needs short term cellaring to really show at its best.

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: 97

Drink: 2018 through 2030

A powerful wine that reveals a distinctive sense of place. Dark blackberry and loamy earth aromas lead to a core of rich, structured fruit, with bitter chocolate, olive and smoky, spicy dried herb flavors. The tannins on the finish are bold but polished, suggesting time in the cellar is a must. Syrah and Mourvèdre.

Josh Reynolds, Vinuous, Sept 2016

Rating: 94

Drink: 2019-2026

Bright purple. Intense, highly perfumed cherry liqueur and blueberry aromas are complicated by suggestions of smoky minerals, spiced cake and candied licorice. Sappy, appealingly sweet dark fruit and floral pastille flavors show impressive energy and pick up a hint of cola. The mineral element comes back with air and adds a sense of coolness to the wine's powerful fruit. Rich yet vibrant and precise, displaying superb balance and a gently tannic finish that leaves notes of sappy dark berries and allspice behind.

Justin Smith has just begun settling into his new, expansive cellar, a series of connected tunnels burrowed out of the hill beneath his old winery and home that is equipped with a variety of concrete and wooden vats and barrels of varying sizes. Smith told me that he's now able to adapt his winemaking to whatever conditions nature hands him. Unsurprisingly, this was one of the finest sets of wines that I tasted during my trip this summer. A look through barrels and tanks of Smith's soon-to-be bottled 2014s and infant 2015s indicates that Saxum's winning streak shows no sign of letting up. Too bad that there simply won't be much wine to go around. Incidentally, while these will never be inexpensive wines, I find that prices are extremely fair given the

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sheer quality of the wines and the fact that they are among California's most sought-after bottlings.

2012 BOOKER VINEYARD

73% Syrah, 27% Mourvèdre

ALC: 15.7%

Cases 750 ml: 310

Cases 1.5 L: 80

Vineyard: Booker Vineyard

Released: January 2015

Release Price: \$98

Drink: 2018 - 2028

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

The 2012 vintage was the only normal season we have had in quite awhile. Not chilly like '10 and '11, not dry like '13 was or '14 will be. It was completely average. I don't mean that in a bad way either. I just mean we had an average amount of rainfall, an average temperature range, and an average crop-load. It was actually quite nice working with an average season. But what I have come to realize after farming here for, well, for a long time, is that average seasons are quite rare, and not normal at all! I always get a kick out of our European counterparts' misconception that California farming is so boring because every season is exactly the same. Au contraire!

As for our spring release, we are offering the second half of our 2012 wines which are opening up beautifully. I popped the corks on all of them to do a little research for you (I know, the sacrifices I make!) and was shocked at just how much they have softened since the last time I tried them. They are starting to blossom! What perplexed me about this vintage was the tannin structure. It started out massive, and made me think that these wines were going to need years in the cellar before they began showing their stuff. I still think 3-5 years will greatly benefit the wines, but they will give great pleasure to those who can't hold out. I would drink the Heart Stone and maybe the Booker Vineyard first while you let the Broken Stones and Bone Rock slumber.

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, Wine Advocate #220, Aug 2015

Rating: 98

Drink: 2017-2027

A candidate for the wine of the vintage, the 2012 Booker Vineyard is a blend of 73% Syrah and 27% Mourvedre that was aged 20-26 months in 60% new French oak. It's a classic expression of the vineyard and offers up lots of smoked meats, cracked pepper, wild herbs and tons of dark fruit. Big, full-bodied, thick and chewy, it has gorgeous purity and sweetness of fruit. It shows surprising finesse and elegance with time in the glass, but make no mistake, it's a big, rich and decadent beauty that will benefit from short-term cellaring and age for 15+ years.

Needing no introduction for anyone that's followed the Wine Advocate or the wine scene in Paso Robles for any time in the past decade, Heather and Justin Smith's Saxum Vineyards

continues to fashion sensational, world-class wines from a number of top sites on the west side of Paso Robles. While I reviewed most of the 2012s last year, I was thrilled to see the late releases this year, and even more thrilled to see that the tannic grip they showed last year had integrated beautifully. These are great 2012s that will still benefit from short-term cellaring and age beautifully. Moving to the 2013s, this is a vintage Justin classified as a "classic" and I think it's safe to say he was thrilled with the wines. These have more density and richness than the 2012s, with more sweetness to the tannin, yet also the pretty, classy and lively profile that's the hallmark of the vintage. They'll be more approachable than the 2012s but still have 15-20 years of longevity. While Justin opted to not bottle any Rocket Block in 2012 (this is still a little up in the air), I think 2013 might be the year we actually see this tiny block of Grenache make it into a bottle. Smith is without a doubt one of the great winemakers of California.

James Laube, Wine Spectator, Issue: Web Only 2015

Rating: 93

Drink: 2016-20283

Presents a massive core of earth- and dark berry-driven flavors, with dense mineral, graphite, crushed berry and rock, mocha and raspberry accents. Ends with a sturdy wall of tannins. Syrah and Mourvèdre.

Josh Reynolds, Vinous, Sept 2015

Rating: 93

Drink: 20120 - 2026

Inky purple. Smoky blackcurrant and blueberry aromas show excellent clarity, with building Asian spice and floral pastille qualities adding complexity. Seamless and sweet in the mouth, offering lively dark berry preserve and candied violet flavors and a bright, spicy kick on the back half. Finishes with supple tannins and lingering floral and blue fruit notes.

2011 BOOKER VINEYARD

67% Syrah, 33% Mourvèdre

ALC: 15.4%

Cases 750 ml: 420

Cases 1.5 L: 80

Vineyard: Booker Vineyard

Released: January 2014

Release Price: \$89

Drink: now - 2026

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

The 2011 growing season was an extremely cool year for us. Not a single day was over 100° the whole season, which we have never experienced before. Normally a cool season might be a disaster for the late ripening Rhone varieties we grow, but, and this is why I am so blessed to be a grape grower on the Central Coast of California, the weather was mild and without rain that Fall. When the end of October rolled around in 2011 and most of our fruit was still on the vine, I was more than a little worried to say the least! It is not uncommon to get some rain in late October, and since we hadn't even started to pick, I had reason to be fearful. Thankfully the mild weather held perfectly

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and we were able to harvest fully mature fruit throughout November. Yes, November! Most of our fruit came in between Halloween and Thanksgiving, very crazy. So what does this mean for the wine that resulted from the extremely cool, late season? Well, it is a little lighter in color, but still quite dark, and a little lower in alcohol, but still comparatively weighty. The aromatics are what I find magical on this set of wines, the cool temperatures kept them amazingly fresh and ethereal. Definitely on the spice side as opposed to the fruit aspect that we normally see more of in a warmer year. In the cellar I tried to respect this character of the 2011 vintage. We used a little more whole cluster fermentation to soften the tannins and increase the spiciness and we cut down on the amount of new oak we would normally use to let the spice shine through even more. We also increased the amount of concrete aging vessels we use to really bring it all home with an exclamation point! I really like them, and I think they will be fascinating wines to follow over the next 20 years.

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, Wine Advocate #214, Aug 2014

Rating: 96+

Drink: 2015-2030

Beautifully done, and probably the most elegant, seamless version of this cuvee I've tasted, the 2011 Booker Vineyard offers terrific aromas and flavors of liquid violets, sappy underbrush, smoked, exotic spices and plenty of crushed rock-like minerality that are all carried by layers of sweet cassis and black raspberry. There's a northern Rhone-like character here, but it hits the palate with full-bodied richness, fantastic mid-palate concentration, and a seamless, layered and multi-dimensional mouthfeel that's hard to resist. Made from 67% Syrah and 33% Mourvedre and aged in 300- and 350-liter hogsheads (and fermented with varying degrees of whole cluster), this beautifully pure, polished and complex effort will benefit from short-term cellaring and have over 15 years of overall longevity.

This was another great visit with Justin Smith, and he continues to tweak and experiment with varying degrees of whole cluster and concrete, puncheon and barrel aging regimes. Looking at his 2011s, I was able to taste all of these from bottles in Colorado, and they've closed down substantially since I reviewed them from barrel. In most cases, these took a day or more to fully unwind, and the style here is much more Rhone-like, with spice, pepper and meaty aromatics paired with focused, firm palate profiles. These are gorgeous wine that won't start to show their full potential for another 3-4 years. The 2012s are just as good, if not better, yet are surprisingly tannic and structured. Given the up-front nature of the vintage, I was surprised by the tannin profile and more reserved style in most of the wines. Nevertheless, the concentration level here is on par with, if not slightly greater than, the 2011s, and they show the fabulous purity and focus of the vintage. Both of these vintages will need short-term cellaring. My favorite of the three vintages reviewed here, the 2013s offer thrilling density of fruit, massive concentration, and sound underlying structure that keeps the wines focused and balanced. I think short-term cellaring will be helpful here as well, but I wouldn't be afraid to crack a bottle or two on release either. Despite these vintage

differences, as I hope the reviews and scores show, these are incredible wines that make the most of this special terroir. Truthfully, there are few mailing lists out there worth being on, but without a doubt, this is one of them.

James Laube, Wine Spectator, Issue: Web Only 2014

Rating: 88

Drink: now through 2023

Ruggedly tannic, with ripe dark berry, dried herb, sage, stemmy and cedar notes, this tannic style begs for patience. Syrah and Mourvedre.

Josh Reynolds, Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar, Nov/Dec 2013

Rating: 94

Dark purple. Potent aromas of cassis, cherry liqueur, blueberry, Moroccan spices, violet and smoky minerals. Impressively deep but energetic, offering sappy dark fruit flavors laced with notes of mocha, violet, cola, five-spice powder and cracked pepper. Decidedly rich but this comes across as almost elegant, with impressive lift and energy thanks to bright, juicy acidity. The deep, sappy black and blue fruit flavors refuse to let go on the long, spicy finish.

Antonio Galloni, Vinous, Aug 2014

Rating: 94

Drink: 2015 - 2023

Pomegranate, plum, exotic spices, smoke and graphite are some of the many notes that are found in the 2011 Booker Vineyard. An exceptionally beautiful wine, the 2011 possesses remarkable depth and intensity. Expressive floral and citrus overtones develop in the glass, adding considerable brightness and aromatic nuance. Even though the 2011 is gorgeous today, my sense is it is holding back much of its potential.

Proprietor Justin Smith has done a magnificent job with his 2011s. Now that the wines are in bottle, they are every bit as impressive as they were from barrel. Readers who can still find the 2011s should not hesitate, as they are magnificent.

2010 BOOKER VINEYARD

81% Syrah, 19% Mourvedre

ALC: 15.9%

Cases 750 ml: 400

Cases 1.5 L: 120

Vineyard: Booker Vineyard

Released: January 2013

Release Price: \$89

Drink: now - 2024

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

I am really enjoying the wines from the 2010 growing season. It was an incredibly cool season (the coolest we had ever experienced until 2011 came along!). This allowed for some great hang time, which leads to great flavor and tannin development. October and November were ideal, dry and not too chilly, amazingly, everything ripened beautifully. (I was very panicked we would get an October storm like we did in 2009.) In

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the end, we were able to bring in some incredibly complex but intense fruit that was a pleasure to work with in the cellar. Speaking of the cellar, in 2010 we purchased a whole slew of concrete fermentors and were extremely happy with how well they turned our fruit into wine. I am sold on concrete as a fermentation vessel. The concrete definitely helped in softening up the prodigious tannins of 2010 and allowed us to keep the wines fresher and more focused. It is a lovely combination.

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, Wine Advocate #213, July 2014

Rating: 98

Drink: 2017-2037

The 2010 Syrah Booker Vineyard – a blend of 81% Syrah and 19% Mourvedre – is about as textbook a representation of a Paso Robles Syrah as I can think of. Locked and loaded with notions of ripe black and blue fruits, smoke, bouquet garni, espresso, and licorice, it is unabashedly full-bodied, rich, and yet elegant on the palate. Showing real class, as well as first-rate freshness, superb depth and concentration, and masses of tannin, this blockbuster Syrah needs a solid 3-4 years of bottle age to flesh out, and will keep for 15-20 years or more.

A benchmark estate for California, Saxum, under the helm of superstar winemaker Justin Smith, continues to produce some of the most compelling, profound wines on the planet. While Smith's wines are always full-flavored and intense, there has been a stylistic change over recent vintages, with the wines showing more obvious tannin and structure, as well as additional minerality and savory qualities. These 2010s exemplify this change and are all serious, structured efforts that will need bottle age to blossom.

James Laube, Wine Spectator, Issue: Web Only 2012

Rating: 93

Drink: now through 2024

A sizable wine that's rich, intense and harmonious, with a nuanced mix of extracted blackberry, spice, plum, licorice and cigar box flavors. Best to cellar. Syrah and Mourvèdre. Best from 2014 through 2024.

Josh Reynolds, Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar, Nov/Dec 2012

Rating: 94

Inky purple. An explosively perfumed bouquet evokes spicy red and dark berry liqueur, Indian spices, vanilla and floral oils. Spicy black raspberry and cherry-vanilla flavors are complicated by notes of violet pastille and show a plush, seamless texture. Gains weight with air but retains clarity. The spicy note carries through an impressively long, juicy finish, which features ripe, harmonious tannins.

2009 BOOKER VINEYARD

70% Syrah, 30% Mourvèdre

ALC: 15.8%

Cases 750 ml: 350

Vineyard: Booker Vineyard

Released: January 2012

Release Price: \$85

Drink: 2012-2021

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

The 2009 wines are quite powerful. There are some very substantial tannins on these wines, they are muscular! I feel that these late releases of the 2009's are going to benefit from a few years of cellar age, even more so than any wines we have ever made, so be patient with them. Enjoy some now, but be sure to stash some in your cellar so you can see how they evolve after a few years. You will be well rewarded for waiting.

REVIEWS:

Antonio Galloni, Wine Advocate #196, Aug 2011

Rating: 96+

Drink: 2014 - 2021

The 2009 Booker Vineyard is 70% Syrah and 30% Mourvedre from one of the rockiest, steepest hillsides in Paso Robles. Layers of dark fruit, spices, tar and licorice emerge from the glass in this deep, sensual wine. Booker usually sees the highest percentage of new oak, and elements of spiciness come through on the finish, although some of the oakiness blows off with time in the glass. Booker is another site Smith planted and continues to pull fruit from, in this case three blocks of Syrah and one of Mourvedre. In 2009 there were two lots; the first 100% Syrah vinified with 20-25% stems, the second a Syrah/Mourvedre co-ferment. Both lots were blended for the finished wine. Anticipated maturity: 2014-2021.

James Laube, Wine Spectator, Issue: Web Only 2011

Rating: 95

Drink: now through 2024

A rather muscular 2009, yet for all its firmness and density there's a purity of flavor, focus and persistence, gaining minerality yet driven by the tight boysenberry, blackberry and wild berry fruit. Ends with gripping tannins that make this all the more exciting. Syrah and Mourvèdre.

Josh Reynolds, Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar, Nov/Oct 2011

Rating: 94

Opaque purple. Wild, expressive aromas of dark berries, cherry-cola, candied licorice, woodsmoke and Indian spices. Sappy and expansive, with excellent clarity and depth, and a seamless character, to its sweet blackberry and mulberry flavors. Becomes spicier with air and finishes with superb energy and lingering sweetness.

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2008 BOOKER VINEYARD

92% Syrah, 8% Grenache

ALC: 15.8%

Cases 750 ml: 280

Vineyard: Booker Vineyard

Released: January 2011

Release Price: \$75

Drink: 2011-2024

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

The 2008 Booker Vineyard is a beast. It's a similar blend to the Bone Rock, but shows itself quite differently, with the massive fruit very much front and center, but great lift and nerve. I personally like this one even more than the 2007.

REVIEWS:

Robert Parker, Wine Advocate #190, Aug 2010

Rating: 98

Drink: 2010 - 2025

The 2008 Booker Vineyard (92% Syrah and 8% Mourvedre, which had also been bottled immediately before my visit) has an opaque purple color and a wonderfully sweet nose of black cherry, black currant, licorice, incense, and some Asian spices. The wine has seamless lushness, a voluptuous texture, stunning purity, and a very long, 40-second-plus finish. Booker is another top site that I believe was planted with Justin Smith's help. It is a 40-acre vineyard sitting on similar limestone soils. This incredible wine would probably benefit from a couple of years of cellaring, as the structure is more present, no doubt due to the high level of Syrah in the wine. It should evolve for 10-15 more years.

James Laube, Wine Spectator, Issue: Feb 28, 2011

Rating: 96

Drink: now through 2014

Starts out open-knit, rich and fleshy, yet builds intensity. Powerful, yet with a measure of restraint, delivering supple plum, blackberry and wild berry fruit, with touches of mineral and black licorice. This wows you with both gushing fruit and a dancing delicacy of finesse. Ends with chunky fruit flavors. Syrah and Mourvedre.

Josh Reynolds, Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar, Nov/Dec 2010

Rating: 94

Inky ruby. Raspberry and cherry preserves on the nose, with complicating notes of rose oil, Szechuan peppercorn and allspice. Impressively complex, sappy red berry compote flavors are given grip by a touch of cherry pit and gain sweetness with air. For such a massive wine there's uncanny energy here as well. The finish repeats the floral and spice notes and clings with superb clarity and intensity.

2007 BOOKER VINEYARD

95% Syrah, 5% Grenache

ALC: 15.5%

Cases 750 ml: 350

Vineyard: Booker Vineyard

Released: January 2010

Release Price: \$75

Drink: 2011-2023

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

Our 2007s, are what I feel is the best vintage yet for Saxum. So yes, I think each of these wines is the best that we have done, they are more complex, layered, and concentrated than previous years. These wines have a long life ahead of them due to their great acidity and tannin structure, yet they are enjoyable now because they are so well balanced. The 2007's are chameleons too. When you first pour yourself a taste they quickly start changing in the glass. Every smell and taste produces a new element, the first second there are violets and the next is roasted meats, truly fascinating. It will be a joy to watch how they develop in bottle over the next decade or more.

The Booker Vineyard was bottled in early summer 2009.

REVIEWS:

Robert Parker, Wine Advocate #184, Aug 2009

Rating: 99

Drink: 2009 - 2021

The inky/purple-hued 2007 Booker Vineyard (95% Syrah and 5% Grenache) boasts a floral-dominated bouquet with camphor, blackberry, roasted meat, and espresso scents in the background. The density, flavor intensity, richness, full-bodied power, elegance, and freshness are all hallmarks of this special vintage in the Central Coast. This wine should drink well for 10-12+ years.

One of California's super-star producers, Saxum owns one of the state's most remarkable vineyard sites, the James Berry Vineyard, which has been broken into a number of different blocks, all planted on rocky limestone hillsides. This estate's approach to winemaking is decidedly artisanal, with extraordinarily small yields as well as a minimalistic winemaking philosophy. Proprietors Justin and Heather Smith, who seem much too young to be producing such prodigious wines, fashion separate blends from the different blocks of the James Berry Vineyard. They also produce a cuvee from the 7-acre Heart Stone Vineyard (also planted on limestone soils) and one from the Booker Vineyard. Saxum's 2006s are all home runs, but the utterly prodigious 2007s should resonate for decades, and showcase the brilliant potential of these limestone hillside sites west of Highway 101. Kudos to everyone at Saxum. My visit began with two of Smith's experimental cuvees, which are only available to mailing list customers. As remarkable as the 2006s are, the 2007s are even more prodigious, showcasing just how brilliant certain Paso Robles terroirs can be. Even the most cynical observers of the Rhone Ranger scene will have to take notice of these wines. Even though some of the 2007s had just undergone bottling, I was blown away by how well they performed just a week after being bottled (often one of the worst

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times to taste a wine). In short, Saxum's prodigious 2007s are even more nuanced, complex, and concentrated than their brilliant 2006s.

James Laube, Wine Spectator, Issue: Feb 28, 2010

Rating: 94

Drink: now through 2014

Deliciously rich and layered, full-bodied and well-structured, with a complex core of blackberry, huckleberry, anise and mineral flavors that take on a tar and graphite edge on the finish, where the tannins give this traction. Syrah and Grenache. Drink now through 2017. 350 cases made.

Josh Reynolds, Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar, Nov/Dec 2009

Rating: 95

Inky purple. Complex aromas of black raspberry, cherry-cola, smoky Indian spices, violet and yellow rose. Pepper and smoke notes build with air and add complexity to the sweet black and blue fruit liqueur flavors, which are framed by velvety tannins. Wonderfully rich yet extremely fresh wine with outstanding finishing clarity and mineral-driven thrust.

2006 BOOKER VINEYARD

100% Syrah

ALC: 16.6%

Cases 750 ml: 275

Cases 1.5L: 46

Vineyard: Booker Vineyard

Released: January 2009

Release Price: \$55

Drink: now-2018

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

We aged it in new French puncheons for 20 months before bottling, like all our wines, it was only racked once and bottled without fining or filtration.

REVIEWS:

Robert Parker, Wine Advocate #184, Aug 2009

Rating: 94

Drink: 2008-2018

The denser purple-hued 2006 Booker Vineyard offers up aromas of acacia flowers, blackberry liqueur, charcoal, and graphite. Although not as complex as its 2006 siblings, it is a dense, full-bodied, mouth-filling wine that saturates the palate, and finishes stunningly long and pure.

James Laube, Wine Spectator, Issue: Mar 31, 2009

Rating: 94

Drink: now through 2015

Bold, ripe, intense and vibrant, with a full-throttle core of dark berry fruit that's rich, focused and full-bodied, offering blackberry, wild berry, plum and black cherry, picking up spice, flora, tar and black licorice flavors in spades. Syrah. Drink now through 2015. 350 cases made.

Josh Reynolds, Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar, Nov/Dec 2008

Rating: 92

Vivid ruby. Highly aromatic nose offers cherry, blueberry, violet and smoky Indian spices. Sappy and finely focused, offering sweet red and dark berry flavors, tangy minerals and a late note of candied flowers. Tannins slowly gain strength on the finish but are more than balanced by fruit. "Next year this will start getting mourvedre," Smith offered.

2005 BOOKER VINEYARD

92% Syrah, 8% Grenache

ALC: 15.9%

Cases 750 ml: 275

Cases 1.5L: 46

Vineyard: Booker Vineyard

Released: January 2009

Release Price: \$55

Drink: now-2023

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

This is a new planting, and like the Heart Stone Vineyard, I have been working with the owners from the beginning. It's a beautiful site located next to L'Aventure Winery, with very steep calcareous and siliceous soils. Meticulously farmed by Eric and Lisa Jensen, this is a vineyard that has vaulted to the top tier of California plantings. The majority of my blocks are on an east-facing slope, giving them gentle abundant sunshine.

The wine can be described as opulent, full-bodied and luscious, yet it still has great definition, with a nose of cassis, raspberries, and toast, and a finish that just doesn't stop, we shall see how it ages, but given the great balance I think it will be 12-15 years no problem.

REVIEWS:

Robert Parker, Wine Advocate #177, Jun 2008

Rating: 94

Drink: 2008-2023

A blend of 92% Syrah and 8% Grenache, the 2005 Booker Vineyard is the debut vintage of this 400-case cuvee produced from a hillside vineyard situated on the west side of Highway 101. It exhibits plenty of crushed rock, sweet black fruit, and underbrush/forest floor characteristics along with sweet tannin and a structured, muscular personality similar to a northern Rhone. Big and powerful yet precise and well-delineated, it should drink nicely for 10-15 years. The bottled 2005s are all performing well.

Josh Reynolds, James Laube, Wine Spectator, Issue: Mar 31, 2008

Rating: 95

Drink: now through 2013

Shows wonderful aromas of rich, chocolaty blackberry and boysenberry, with a touch of huckleberry. Dense, concentrated and sharply focused, this finishes with a long, layered, persistent aftertaste. Syrah and Grenache. Drink now through 2013. 350 cases made.

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

Rating: 93

Bright purple. Powerfully scented nose offers smoky cassis and bitter cherry aromas, along with cured meat, violet and cigarbox; really smells like Cote-Rotie! Sweet and round, displaying intense red and dark berry preserve flavors and a strong mineral undertone, finishing with building tannins. Balances depth and energy as well as earth and fruit. A fascinating wine.