

SAXUM HEXE

2020 HEXE

51% Grenache, 17% Petite Sirah, 11% Graciano, 10% Mataro, 7% Syrah, 4% Carignan
ALC: 15.9%
Cases 750 ml: 594
Cases 1.5L: 60
AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District
Released: July 2023
Release Price: \$159
Drink: now - 2042

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

It's so fun tasting this wine back to back with the Rocket..... such different expressions of Grenache that are both tasty. This is definitely the dark side of Grenache. Black fruits and California sage, deep and dark, luscious. Unctuous bass. A finish that is a couple days long. (OK, maybe I exaggerate a little).

I'm sure many of you have heard the woes of 2020. Fires devastated the entire West Coast of the U.S. Nobody was spared, but fortunately the vineyards of Paso were not hit too hard. The closest fire to us was up in Monterey County, which is about 90 miles north. Nonetheless, we approached the 2020 vintage very carefully in the cellar by running every possible type of analysis to detect damage from the smoke that was occasionally thick in the air that summer. Although a couple of the lots were suspect, everything else was clean. Phew!

2019 HEXE

49% Grenache, 18% Petite Sirah, 16% Mataro, 9% Graciano, 8% Syrah
ALC: 16.6%
Cases 750 ml: 789
Cases 1.5L: 60
AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District
Released: July 2022
Release Price: \$156
Drink: now - 2040

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

The brooding side of Grenache. Dark fruited, sandalwood, black pepper. Long caressing finish. It's really fun to taste it side by side with the Rocket. I love it!

These 2019 wines have a little something for everyone, which is why I think I like them so much. Lifted, fresh aromatics of sage and spice and fruit. Along with lots of rich California fruit, deep textures, smooth tannins and lively acids that keep it all harmonizing so well. These days there are so many great wines out there that have one or the other. Rich, smooth tannins, or fresh, spice/fruit driven aromatics. I find it rare to have both, and frankly, that's my holy grail. What really piques my interest.

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, Sept 2022

Rating: 98-100

Drink: n/a

Coming from a warmer, sunnier terroir, the 2019 Hexe is a more black-fruited, powerful, masculine red based on 49% Grenache, 18% Petite Sirah, 16% Mourvèdre, and the rest Graciano and Syrah. Assorted dark fruits, chocolate, graphite, and chalky minerality all define the bouquet, and it hits the palate with full-bodied richness, a deep, concentrated mid-palate, and a massive finish. It's not for those looking for lightweight aromas and flavors, but this is a singular beauty that could come from nowhere else.

I was able to taste three vintages from Saxum, the late release 2019s from bottle, the majority of the 2020 lineup from barrel, and a handful of 2021 barrel samples. As I wrote last year, the 2019s are just brilliant, ripe, hedonistic, magical wines, and these late releases only reinforce that opinion. Looking at the 2020s, this is clearly a challenging vintage, with many wines having subtle smoky nuances and firmer yet still ripe tannins. Justin commented that the lab numbers regarding smoke taint were very low, so I think these are safe wines that will offer plenty of pleasure, although this is not a vintage to hide in the cellar. The 2021s that I was able to taste were terrific, and this will clearly be another terrific vintage here. In addition, they've planted a new vineyard located just four miles off the Pacific, the Cayucos Ridge Vineyard, and I expect we'll see more releases from that site in the future.

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.

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REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, Sept 2021

Rating: 100

Drink: 2021-2036

Another perfect wine is the 2018 Hexe, a blend of 57% Grenache, 15% Mourvèdre, 13% Graciano, 10% Syrah, and the rest Petite Sirah that's a 60/40 split from the James Berry and G2 vineyards. Full-bodied, concentrated, and incredibly pure, its vivid purple (it's not completely opaque) color is followed by ample dark berry and black cherry fruits as well as notes of candied orange, licorice, peppery herbs, and an incredible sense of minerality. It reminds me of a great vintage of Janasse's Châteauneuf du Pape Vieilles Vignes and is another tour de force from winemaker Justin Smith that will benefit from short-term cellaring and keep for 15+ years.

Josh Reynolds, Vinous, July 2022

Rating: 98

Drink: 2025-2035

Deep, shimmering ruby. Hugely perfumed aromas of ripe black and blue fruits, star anise, cola and mocha are complemented by a suave floral topnote. Pliant, expansive and appealingly sweet, offering lush black raspberry, cherry cola, vanilla, fruitcake and baking spice flavors underscored by a vibrant, smoky mineral quality. At once rich and energetic in character, finishing wonderfully long and precise, with solid spicy thrust, well-integrated tannins and reverberating florality.

Justin Smith's contribution to the success of Paso Robles and the status of its wines cannot be overstated. His Saxum wines are the most sought-after of the region, so expectations are always high when approaching a bottle, and it's always a pleasure to see results live up to or surpass reputation. That was emphatically the case this year, as this was one of the most successful lineups of wines that I have ever tasted, from anywhere. Longtime followers of these wines, lucky bastards that they are, know how uncanny they are for their ability to play depth and power off energy and finesse, and that's crystal-clear in 2018 and even the hot 2017 vintage. The extended growing season of 2018 helped the wines retain freshness while developing concentration, which any winegrower will tell you is the Holy Grail of their craft. In 2017 the heat of the growing season here on Paso Robles' limestone-soil-dominated west side was mitigated by the usual diurnal temperature shifts and, of course, skilled blending in the cellar helped immeasurably. While Saxum's wines command lofty prices on the secondary market, it should be noted that ex-cellar pricing remains extremely fair for such a sought-after producer.

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.

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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 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

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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 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.