

SAXUM ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

2022 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

54% Grenache, 38% Mataro, 4% Syrah, 4% Counoise

ALC: 15.9%

Cases 750 ml: 810

Cases 1.5L: 40

AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: November 2025

Release Price: \$159

Drink: now - 2050

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

This Rocket Block is all about in your face Grenache notes. Big, ripe, red fruits. Think cherry and cranberry that just jump out of the glass. The mouthfeel is all about smooth caressing tannins, a trademark of the '22 vintage. The finish is long and seductive, it clings to the palate, but clears out with some fun underbrush tones. If you've ever picked fresh blackberries down by the creek on a hot summer day, you'll know what I'm talking about!

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, August 2025

Rating: 98

Drink: 2025-2040

...aged 32 months in French oak, shows a ruby/plum hue and offers a perfumed, exotic nose of blackberries, kirsch liqueur, peppery garrigue, graphite, and exotic flowers. These carry to a full-bodied, seamless, opulent palate with incredibly polished tannins, a multi-dimensional mouthfeel, and a great finish. Despite its richness and concentration, it stays light on its feet and does everything right.

Matthew Luczy, Wine Advocate, October 2025

Rating: 97

Drink: 2026-2034

The 2022 Rocket Block James Berry Vineyard contains a lower percentage of Grenache this year, due to the high proportion of Mataro added during fermentation to balance the high sugar and high acid profile of Grenache in this harvest. It opens with a lush, red-fruited nose, complemented by dried flower, wet clay and lavender aromas, followed by a full-bodied, concentrated and punchy profile that characterizes this bottling, while retaining remarkable lift and dexterity. The finish is lively and impressively refined, cascading with layers of vibrant acidity, slowly swelling tannins and retronasal perfume. Despite the unmistakable power contained here, I find this to be an uncommonly elegant expression of the 2022 vintage.

Lisa Perrotti-Brown, The Wine Palate, September 2025

Rating: 95

Drink: 2025-2042

Deep garnet-purple colored - wow - the nose erupts with powerful notes of Chinese five spice, plum pudding, fruit cake, and potpourri, followed by hints of sandalwood and iron ore. The full-bodied palate delivers stewed blackberries and velvety tannins with a lively backbone and a long exotic spice-laced finish.

Eric Guido, Vinous, June 2025

Rating: 93

Drink: 2026-2032

The 2022 Rocket Block opens with a perfumed cascade of geraniums and violets, complemented by sugar-dusted blueberries and a hint of cocoa as it evolves in the glass. Freshly styled, it offers cooling acidity and wild berry fruits laced with floral notes. The palate is saturated and tense, with a tinge of edgy tannins that tug at the cheeks. Rocket Block was picked completely after the heat wave, with a large amount of triage performed in the vineyard and cellar to identify the best fruit.

2021 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

70% Grenache, 15% Mataro, 11% Syrah, 4% Counoise

ALC: 16.9%

Cases 750 ml: 530

Cases 1.5L: 40

AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: November 2024

Release Price: \$159

Drink: now - 2042

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

Our 2021 wines are a very classic vintage. A great balance of fruit, spice, tannin and fresh acidities. Nothing seems to be out of place, and I feel they will really benefit from 4 or 5 years of aging before they really show their stuff. Those tannins are powerful, but oh so nice. I really think the extra year these 21s saw in barrel polished them up quite well.

REVIEWS:

Jeb Dunnuck, August 2024

Rating: 99

Drink: 2024-2039

Incredible Châteauneuf du Pape-like notes of red and black fruits, peppery garrigue, leather, sandalwood, and graphite all soar from the 2021 Rocket Block, and this beauty hits the palate with full-bodied richness, a concentrated, layered, multi-dimensional mouthfeel, terrific mid-palate depth, and a great finish. This powerful, opulent yet flawlessly balanced beauty will evolve for 15+ years in cold cellars. All from the James Berry Vineyard, ... mostly destemmed and was aged 34 months in 32% new French 300-liter barrels.

Lisa Perrotti-Brown, The Wine Palate, June 2025

Rating: 98

Drink: 2025-2045

Deep garnet-purple colored, it thunders out with robust notes of boysenberry preserves, stewed plums, and blackberry pie, followed by hints of Chinese five spice, dried lavender, sandalwood, and black pepper. Full-bodied, the palate delivers a beautifully knit backbone of firm, grainy tannins and just enough freshness to frame the generous black fruit preserves flavors, finishing very long and fantastically fragrant.

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Eric Guido, Vinous, July 2024

Rating: 96+

Drink: 2028-2038

The 2021 Rocket Block impresses with its lift and grace, displaying a dusting of sweet spice and dried flowers complemented by a hint of red currant. This is juicy and racy in style, with supple textures offset by mineral grip. Ripe red and black fruits penetrate the palate with primary concentration as a web of fine-grained tannins saturate the senses. The 2021 finishes tremendously long and floral, leaving behind a bitter tinge of tart blackberry. Patience is required.

Matthew Luczy, Wine Advocate, June 2024

Rating: 98

Drink: 2025-2036

The nose is herbal, dark-fruited and elegant despite the apparent power coiled inside it, showing off aromas of resinous herbs, amaro, fruitcake and dark spice accents. The palate is simply gigantic, pulling no punches in its decadent, powerful richness that perplexingly remains tensile, agile and deft. The finish is fabulously decadent, lined with fine yet grippy tannins and graceful, elegant fruit flavors that pull off a soft landing despite the seemingly endless concentration behind them. This is an excellent example of Saxum's ability to produce wines that are equal parts powerful, graceful and balanced.

While there is no shortage of Paso Robles producers who hang their hats on going for the biggest and boldest wines in the area, Saxum's ability to craft powerful wines that deliver opulence and complexity while remaining balanced and authentic is second to none. Proprietor and winemaker Justin Smith's influence in the region is inescapable, as many other premier winemakers in the area either grew up with him, have hired him as a consultant, worked stints at Saxum, or any combination thereof. The wines are a true reflection of the region and, as such, are unapologetically bold and intense. However, they consistently offer nuance and elegance that are fleetingly rare in wines of their size and stature.

2020 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

82% Grenache, 13% Counoise, 5% Mataro

ALC: 15.9%

Cases 750 ml: 441

Cases 1.5L: 60

AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: November 2023

Release Price: \$159

Drink: now - 2042

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

Wow, another awesome Rocket Grenache! This wine is really bringing it. Red red fruits, think crushed raspberry and strawberries, with a kiss of black pepper and rosemary. (Is this a weird combo?) Whatever it is, it's so pretty, yet so powerful at the same time. I'm stoked on this wine, it might be my favorite of this vintage.

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!

REVIEWS:

Eric Guido, Vinous, July 2024

Rating: 94

Drink: 2026-2032

The 2020 Rocket Block mixes savory and sweet with an array of plum sauce, sage, black raspberries and cloves. This washes across the palate like liquid velvet, with bitter red and blue fruits that are perfectly contrasted by violet pastille and a core of juicy acidity. Staining and long, just gently tannic and full of energy, this slowly fades with citrus-laced blackberries notes.

Matthew Luczy, Wine Advocate, June 2024

Rating: 92

Drink: 2023-2038

While not overtly smoke-tinged, the 2020 Rocket Block James Berry Vineyard opens with a muted, inward nose that never quite lifts off the ground as it usually would. The palate is almost frustratingly delicious and sumptuous before transitioning to a finish tinged with gritty fruit framed by grainy tannins. While this, unfortunately, lacks the impressive power and elegance of its typical self, the effort here is to be commended, as the overall commanding nature of this site does show through despite the faults.

2019 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

70% Grenache, 19% Mataro, 7% Syrah, 4% Counoise

ALC: 16.6%

Cases 750 ml: 451

Cases 1.5L: 60

AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: November 2022

Release Price: \$156

Drink: now - 2040

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

This is what Rocket Block is all about.... soaring red fruit aromatics, rich yet lively flavors, smooth long tannins. Rich without being heavy. Floral. One of the best wines I've ever made.

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

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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

Scheduled to be bottled the week after this tasting, the 2019 James Berry Vineyard Rocket Block is a Grenache-dominated blend that includes 19% Mourvèdre, 7% Syrah, and 4% Counoise. It's a full-bodied beast of a wine revealing a ripe, sexy bouquet of red and black fruits, white pepper, sappy herbs, and flowers. It's one of those wines that brings incredible richness and power, yet still somehow manages to stay balanced, elegant, and light on its feet. There are 880 cases produced.

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 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

76% Grenache, 13% Mataro, 11% Syrah

ALC: 16.1%

Cases 750 ml: 400

Cases 1.5L: 60

AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: November 2021

Release Price: \$148

Drink: now - 2040

NOTES FROM JUSTIN:

Here's a wine that when we tasted it from barrel someone would inevitably say "dude, WTF is that?" It's Rocket Block. That's what the F that is.

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

Another incredible vintage for this cuvée, which comes from a small parcel of the James Berry Vineyard. Offering a huge nose of deep black fruits as well as a meaty, floral, full-bodied style, it shows Grenache's incredible ability to offer richness with no sensation of heaviness. With ripe tannins, flawless balance, and a monster of a finish, it's going to be in the same league as the 2015 and 2016.

Josh Reynolds, Vinuous July 2022

Rating: 98

Drink: 2026-2036

Bright purple. An expansive, finely detailed bouquet evokes ripe red and blue fruits, sandalwood, candied flowers and exotic spices. Gently chewy and penetrating in the mouth, offering intense Chambord, blueberry, lavender pastille and spicecake flavors and building botanical herb and mineral nuances. Shows superb clarity and mineral lift on the strikingly long finish, which features polished tannins and reverberating blue fruit character.

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.

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2017 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

78% Grenache, 14% Mataro, 8% Syrah

ALC: 16.5%

Cases 750 ml: 193

Cases 1.5L: 60

AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District

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 Dec 2020

Rating: 99

Drink: 2025-2037

Deep, bright-hued purple. Highly seductive raspberry liqueur, blueberry, exotic spice, potpourri and incense aromas are complemented by hints of musky herbs and smoky minerals. Juicy, seamless and energetic in the mouth, offering densely packed, wonderfully concentrated red/blue fruit preserve, cherry cola, spice-cake, licorice and candied lavender flavors that show superb delineation and vibrant back-end lift. Finely polished tannins lend shape to a strikingly persistent, penetrating finish that shows intense, mineral- and spice-driven tenacity.

Jeb Dunnuck, Sept 2020

Rating: 96

Drink: 2022-2034

Mostly Grenache blended with 14% Mataro and 8% Syrah, the 2017 James Berry Vineyard Rocket Block offers an exotic style in its kirsch and mulberry fruits as well as notes of candied orange, toasted spice, herbes de Provence, and white pepper aromas and flavors. Full-bodied and beautiful on the palate, with silky tannins, a fresher, elegant texture, and a fabulous finish, it

will benefit from 2-3 years of bottle age and keep over a decade. I don't think it matches the 2015 and 2016, but it's still a stunning wine.

Erin Brooks, Wine Advocate, Feb 2020

Rating: 94

Drink: 2020-2030

Medium to deep ruby, the 2017 Rocket Block James Berry Vineyard is a blend of 78% Grenache, 14% Mataro and 8% Syrah. The nose offers lovely tricolored berry fruits with notes of aniseed, lavender and potpourri. Medium-bodied, it floods the mouth with juicy, super spicy fruits, softly framed and finishing uplifted.

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

AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: November 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, Oct 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

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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 one, but without a doubt, this is one of them.

Erin Brooks, Wine Advocate, Feb 2020

Rating: 97

Drink: 2021-2036

The 2016 Rocket Block James Berry Vineyard, a blend of 59% Grenache, 28% Mataro, 10% Counoise and 3% Syrah, is an incredibly layered, nuanced wine. It was made with 17% whole cluster and aged 31 months in 100% new oak. Medium to deep ruby, the nose offers a laundry list of aromas: black cherry jam, cured meats, pink peppercorn, dried cranberries, pomegranate, red berry jam and nuances of blood orange, amaro, cinnamon stick and earth. The medium to full-bodied palate is just as layered, with a gently grainy frame and lip-smacking freshness to enliven the long, perfumed finish.

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 Robles'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 Feb 2020

Rating: 98

Drink: 2025-2037

Deep, glistening ruby. Intensely perfumed raspberry, boysenberry, exotic spice and potpourri aromas are lifted by a vibrant mineral element and a hint of white pepper. Shows superb depth as well as energy and sharp definition to its alluring sweet red and blue fruit liqueur, spicecake and floral pastille flavors, which slowly unfold through the back half. The blue fruit and spice notes drive an extremely long, seamless finish that is framed by smooth, discreet tannins and which shows outstanding definition and purity.

SAXUM ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

2015 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

89% Grenache, 11% Mataro

ALC: 16.4%

Cases 1.5L: 128

AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: November 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 its 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.

REVIEWS:

William Kelley, Wine Advocate, May 2018

Rating: (96-98)

Drink: NA

The 2015 Rocket Block James Berry Vineyard—which has 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 Robles' 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, Aug 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.

SAXUM ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

2013 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

100% Grenache, ALC: 16.4%

Cases 750 ml: 280

Cases 1.5 L: 60

AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: November 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 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 Raynolds. 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

AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: November 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.

SAXUM ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

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

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.)

2003 ROCKET BLOCK JAMES BERRY VINEYARD

50% Grenache, 40% Mourvèdre, 10% Syrah

ALC: 16.6%

Cases 750 ml: 250

AVA: Paso Robles Willow Creek District

Vineyard: James Berry Vineyard

Released: November 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