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## Blankiet Estate |

Passion for the vineyards and wine runs up and down the Napa Valley but for some reason we've met several truly impassioned individuals with vineyards in and around Yountville. Take Blankiet Estate for example; owners Claude and Katherine spent several years searching for particular hillside vineyards on the western side of Napa Valley. In 1996 they located hillside property from what used to be part of Domain Chandon's holdings and they began developing the vineyards. This is prime vineyard property and it is surprising that it was never developed as such considering it sits right above Dominus Estate and one of Napa's most historic vineyards, the Inglenook Vineyard.

As with a number of vineyard sites in and around Yountville on the western slopes of the Mayacamas mountain range, there is an unbelievable amount of rock that forms the hillsides. It's volcanic ash, white and fairly porous - parts of Blankiet's vineyards are literally covered with this white rock. As a result the vines have to certainly struggle for nutrients - 15 year old vines almost look stunted in places within a number of blocks. Contrast those with much more fertile growing conditions on the valley floor and you have vines significantly larger.

Claude calls his vineyard "a puzzle of microclimates" and terroir; it is certainly that. It is surprising in such a small area how the temperature varies throughout the property. Various exposures and soil types change dramatically. 16 vineyard acres are planted - Jim Barbour originally developed 2 acres of the vineyard and David Abreu planted, developed and continues to manage the additional 14 acres. Cabernet Sauvignon is the largest planted varietal with Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot also grown on site.

"Always ask questions - do not become complacent, remain curious," - these are mantra's that Claude has followed throughout the development of his vineyard. He came to enjoy wine later in life (although he did grow up in Burgundy). With a long career running a textile finishing company (stonewashed jeans) that was known for its innovation - Claude carried that innovation over to developing his vineyards and winery.

Some notable ideas were developed and implemented in his own vineyard. During very high heat spikes in the summer it is critical that the grapes do not reach certain temperatures as essentially they will start "cooking". Blankiet developed a misting system used during such heat spikes and this system can be controlled on a block by block basis. Claude had seen this idea used to keep people cool in places such as Palm Springs and essentially applied the same principle to his vineyards. This system does require some water use but he is lucky to be sitting above one of the largest aquifers in the Napa Valley. Looking for a way to protect the grapes from infrared energy during heat spikes, they tested a wide variety of shading materials. After trying numerous options they found a material that worked well and each year during the later part of the summer strips of this material are rolled out and placed over the fruit zone only - depending on the individual blocks or vineyard exposure.

The first vintage was produced in 1999. Each year harvest takes about 6 weeks due to all the "mini" harvests they make. Individual rows or parts of blocks are roped off based on when the fruit is ripe. Only that section is picked during each of the mini harvests. Every cluster is hand inspected several times - in the vineyard and when it reaches the sorting table. Sorting is based on a cluster by cluster basis and only the most ripe berries drop off the end of the sorting table and make it to fermentation. The sorting requires a certain patience; only 3/4 of a ton is usually processed per hour. Both Claude and Katherine work the sorting table each time grapes are brought into the winery.

The attention to detail and micro management in the vineyards carries over into their winery operations. The winery is state of the art, clean and very functional. Nothing goes to waste - they even keep 150 ml bottles of wine for topping the barrels. Blankiet Estate focuses on a two flagship wines each year, both proprietary reds; their wines are neither fined nor filtered and 100% new French Oak is always used during the aging. The style of their wines have changed over the years, in part depending on the winemaking team.

The 2007 Proprietary Red Wine Paradise Hills Vineyard (60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 40% Merlot) is an elegant wine with more red than dark fruit showing on the palate. The bouquet is clean with a nice floral component (lavender). It is a rich wine but has a beautiful balance to it. Expansive flavors of black fruits including blackberry and black current complete the rounded mouth feel. A balanced structure of moderate tannins completes the very pleasing finish.

The 2008 Proprietary Red Wine Paradise Hills Vineyard is predominately Cabernet Sauvignon with some Merlot and small amounts of Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc. This is the current release at the time of this review. It is dark ruby in color with sweet vanilla, hints of browned sugar and rich black fruit on the bouquet. This wine is lively from both the bouquet to on the palate. Compared to the 2007 vintage which is more refined, this is a bigger and more voluptuous wine. It shows a rich expression of their vineyards fruit with significant complexities of flavor.

Their 2009 vintages feature a "Right Bank" styled predominantly Merlot as well as a Medoc styled wine (mostly Cabernet Sauvignon with some Merlot). We tried a barrel sample of both wines - for young wines they are already coming together quite well. A second wine is called the Prince of Hearts and always features one of their personal art pieces as the label.

Blankiet Estate also makes tiny quantities of a Rose, available at the winery or through their mailing list only; this is an atypical Napa Rose. One of our favorite Rose's in the valley is made by Notre Vin – it is no surprise that Notre Vin's winemaker is also Blankiet's winemaker (Denis Malbec). Blankiet's 2009 vintage is made from Merlot by the Saignée method (bleeding juice from the tanks). This wine is aged in all new French Oak. The oak is there but it's not overwhelming as you would think. The wine is dark salmon in the bottle with a very slight amount of residual sugar left which is barely perceptible. This bouquet is very clean, floral with notes of raspberry; for a "rose" it is a big wine with good depth of flavor.

We have seen a lot of vineyards and talked to many vintners throughout Napa as we've worked on this project. It is always refreshing to yet again be inspired by both the vintner (Claude) and what they have accomplished (the estate & dedication to their vineyards and quality wine). Total production is about 1500 cases each year (varies from vintage to vintage of course) and much of the wine is sold through their mailing list. Each bottle is labeled with a Prooftag which guarantees its authenticity (use of microscopic bubbles generates a three-dimensional code unique to each bottle) which can then be verified online or with a smart phone. To join Blankiet's mailing list and for more information visit: [www.blankiet.com](http://www.blankiet.com)