

IN FOCUS |

## Tablas Creek: Beaucastel in California

By Jeff Cox

**It took two** decades of hard work, but Château de Beaucastel of Châteauneuf-du-Pape has cloned itself in California with results that warrant giving its flagship wines the title of 'Esprit de Beaucastel'.

Jean-Pierre Perrin of Beaucastel and Robert Haas, founder of Vineyard Brands and the winery's American importer, started talking about a joint venture to grow Rhône varietals in California as early as 1979. It remained just talk until 1987 when Jean-Pierre, his brother François, and Haas started exploring California to find the right site. For two years they looked at potential vineyards, searching in vain for the kind of calcareous soil and warm, dry climate that makes Château de Beaucastel's wines so exceptional.

Undeterred, they kept searching. At Paso Robles, they ran into winemaker John Munch of Adelaida Cellars. 'I gave them a taste of some Syrah I'd made from fruit grown on the west side of Paso Robles, on chalky soils,' Munch says. 'When they tasted it, they got this look on their faces.' Munch drove them to the vineyard. 'When we got out to the western hills, the Perrins just about got down and kissed the soil. They all knew this was it.' The soil on the rolling hills, from 425m to 550m above sea level, was littered with big

white chunks of limestone shale. It tested at an alkaline pH8.5 – the same as the soil at Château de Beaucastel. Lack of summer rain and poor soil meant that yields and berries would remain small and intense. Haas and the Perrins bought 50ha of grazing land in 1990 and named their new winery after Tablas Creek, a small stream that runs through the property.



The next problem was finding the right clones of Rhône varietals. The Grenache available in California, for example, has large pink berries that give light and fruity wines, while the Grenache clone at Beaucastel has small, dark, intensely flavoured berries. It became apparent that they would have to import rootstocks. Getting the grape scions and stocks through US quarantine and virus testing took three years. It was 1995 before they got a handful of cuttings of Marsanne, Roussanne,



Grenache Blanc and Viognier for white wine and Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre, and Counoise for red.

'At this point,' Haas said recently, 'we've planted about 32 of our 50ha. Plus, we have 16ha of our neighbour's property under a long-term lease. Production is up to about 12,000 cases – 65% red and 35% white.' As in France, the vineyards are cultivated organically.

Tablas Creek Vineyard's current releases are its 1999 red Reserve Cuvée and its 2000 Clos Blanc, each priced at \$35. Its next release will be in October 2002, and there'll be name changes. The red will be called Tablas Creek, Esprit de Beaucastel and the white will be Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc.

The winery also makes small amounts of rosé that's mostly Mourvèdre, thus more like a Bandol than a Grenache-based rosé such as Tavel, and a Chardonnay called 'Antithesis'. Eventually, Tablas Creek will have 45-49ha planted, about three quarters red varieties and the rest white, with a total production of 25,000 cases.

'As the vines mature, we're seeing more depth and interest,' Haas says. 'The site is affirming what we originally thought about its potential quality.'



www.tablascreek.com  
805.237.1231

### TABLAS CREEK: THE WINES

■ **Tablas Creek, Reserve Cuvée 1999**

★★★★★

Bigger in structure than a Châteauneuf-du-Pape, with silky ripe tannins, ripe black cherries, black plums, and a hint of blueberries in the rich, round middle. A long finish ends with a sprinkle

of Syrah's black pepper. Best from 2004 through 2010, though very drinkable now. **\$35**

■ **Tablas Creek, Clos Blanc 2000**

★★★★★

A pretty pale straw gold wine

that offers a clean, aromatic nose of nectarines and rose petals. The refreshing, medium-bodied palate, with hints of spicy cinnamon in the background, finishes with a flavor of ripe peaches. Drink now through 2006. **\$35**