



Stags' Leap

PETITE SYRAH AND THE CHANGING SEASONS

“Papa, there go the geese, south for the winter,” her voice trailing up.

“Let’s go see ’em,” I said running from the bathroom with my toothbrush in hand. Zoë was one step behind me, the overhead honking getting louder as a second flock came toward us. I fumbled with the front door latch. Zoë jumped on the couch to look out the window. Parting the blinds, she found a clear view of the migration low above our house. I opened the door to the cool fresh air and ran to the edge of the porch. “There they go,” I thought, as if they really had somewhere to be. Wow. Zoë joined me outside and we watched them hurrying past, now through the loquat tree, now over the church, finally gone from sight, flying in a “V” formation, their morning banter falling away across town, over some other kids’ houses, more parents and children running to look at them.

“I’m cold Papa,” Zoë said in her penguin pajamas. “I’m going inside.”

I stayed silent and still in the pale blue dawn of our porch, taking in the return of the morning quiet. Where are those birds going in such a noisy rush? What could they possibly be yakking about? Are they chatting the way people chat when they ride bicycles or walk together? Is it meditative? Is it heavy conversation? Why not fly silently and stealthily? I’m told Canada Geese will fly for eighteen hours without stopping, and can reach speeds up to 70 miles per hour with a good tail wind. These birds were flying low; they must have just taken off from a nearby pond. “Have a nice winter, we’ll see you in the spring. Honk as you pass the house.”

This was my day to take the girls to school, so I’d gotten up extra early, checked on all my tanks and barrels, and slipped back home in time for coffee. It was not yet six AM, and the moon was a sliver of a waxing crescent rising up over the Stags Leap Palisades. The sight was



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so intensely subtle and beautiful it nearly lifted my Jeep off the road. I followed that moon eastward all the way to the winery. I love opening up the cellars while it's still dark. Everything is quiet, peaceful, magical, and calmly alive. Small, close, warm, the tanks of wine are fermenting. The lights are out; the stainless steel shines in the darkness. The aromas of fresh raspberries and strawberries, jam, roses, plums, every sweet fruit you've ever smelled, cascade down from the tops of the tanks, warm, enveloping, sweet and balmy.

It's been said that just after a new moon the sap is rising and everything wants to grow like mad. I knew that the early fermentations starting on this day would be strong, vigorous, and healthy, and that the yeast would be growing and turning terrific grapes into terrific wines. Specifically I was thinking about the Petite Syrah that we had just harvested two days prior from "the knoll" in Block Nine, a sweet spot of the vineyard that always ripens early. Microscopically, the yeast were multiplying, carrying out the fermentations, converting grape sugar into alcohol, singing and dancing, and living their lives to the fullest. There are 200 million yeast cells in every milliliter of fermenting juice, and they generate a lot of heat. Walking through the dark winery, I could feel the presence of those fiery little yeast. Silent, explosive energy.

At home, I feel that same energy when I go into the girls' room to check on them at night. Oona radiates: four years old, sound asleep, calm, resting, and yet so warm. Every cell in her body is at work metabolizing sugars, creating body mass, making more of Oona. In the bed next to her sleeps Zoë, seven years old. Even on a cool night she'll have thrown off all her covers, her little body also cooking. The children are at rest, but their beings are working, growing, filling the room with warmth. This is the intersection of extreme peace and explosive energy. This is the simple essence of life. And a tank of fermenting grape must is just as alive. On this day I could smell the very first Merlot on my left, and "the knoll" Petite Syrah on my right. The former was raspberry muffins, cloves, cacao and licorice, the latter was blackberries, plums, currants, black pepper and honeysuckle.



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Petite Syrah craves the company of the other Rhône varietals; she blossoms in their presence. The flavors, structure, and elegance express themselves with greater intensity and purity from the soft touch of cross-blending, just as a sliced summer heirloom tomato awakens and unlocks its flavors with a simple dusting of sea salt. We have been growing Petite Syrah (Pets as it's locally known) here on the ranch since the 1920s and we are continually re-planting and re-confirming our commitment to the varietal. The final blend of our signature Petite Syrah must always reflect the character of the grape, the land, and the vintage, and yet we relish our opportunities to accentuate, underline, and highlight the essence of the blend with sprinkles of Carignane, Grenache, Mourvedre, Syrah, Viognier, and others. We've long known that the earlier we put the elements together, the more interesting the marriage and the more subtle and seamless the blending, so we co-ferment the varietals as much as possible, remembering that we can only ferment grapes from a block of Pets with Syrah or Viognier in those years when they all reach their optimum ripeness on the same day. This is part of what defines a great vintage for us.

Every Autumn we become once again conscious of the cycles of nature, the rhythms of life. Summer tends to lock itself in, pulls you into a groove. Summer is summer day in and day out. Autumn arrives unexpectedly with a blustery wind and wraps you in her drama. Every day a few more leaves have turned; every evening the sun sets a few minutes sooner; every morning is just a little bit colder. Autumn is crisp, alert, and calls for action. You recall all the things you need to do before winter sets in. The same things you did last year. You think about firewood, the coming fall and winter festivals, the long nights ahead, and how you will spend more time indoors, more time at the table, see friends you haven't seen for a while. You stoke your internal fires against the coming darkness of winter. You put away the rosé, if there's any left, and you dip into your more contemplative wines, indoor wines. Merlot, Cabernet, Petite Syrah.



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For our family, autumn is harvest, it's the aromas of the newly fermenting wines, it's the children putting on their warmest fuzzy feet-pajamas, it's carrying the girls to bed and snuggling with Karin in front of the first fire of the year, remembering where we were this time last year, five years ago, ten years ago. It's a time to slow roast a leg of lamb, let it rest, slice it down pink, light a candle, and pull out a Petite Syrah that's been in the cellar for a few years. It's a time to raise a glass, ponder the migration of the geese, and go about the business of creating next year's memories.

Kevin Morrissey, winemaker

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