

THE CHALK REPORT

Food, Wine, Travel

WINE REVIEWS: The Immortals

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by Andrew Chalk



When I have to drink wines like these so young (it is the current release) I am left with feelings of schadenfreude, ennui, pan perdu (?) at the oenological infanticide. How would such an age worthy category have emerged after a fleeting twenty years in the cellar (especially an 'immortal' wine)?

A BLOW THE CELLAR DOORS OFF RATING

I knew nothing about Immortal Estate before this tasting and was blown away. Generally, I save reading the background material to wine reviews until after I have tasted the wine, so as not to predispose me to anyone else's opinion. When I read the collateral material here I discovered that critics from Robert Parker's Wine Advocate and critic Jeff Dunnuck had both given the 'Impassable Mountain' 100/100 points, a less than 1 in 1000 event. I could not get any professional 2016 scores for the 'Slope' but would place it in the upper half of the 90s. In particular, it is less inscrutable to drink now.

THE VINEYARD

The 'Immortal Estate' brand is made by Hidden Ridge Vineyard from a 50-acre 1998 vineyard set high in the Mayacamas Mountains, close to the dividing line between Napa and Sonoma Counties. This affords early morning and late afternoon ocean breezes and protection from inland valley heat. Soil is a dog's breakfast of uplifted alluvium and decomposed volcanic material. Aside from being remote to reach (a matter which drones are likely to ameliorate in the next few years) the vineyard is topographically formidable. Slopes approaching 55 degrees at times ('Slope' was named 'Slope 55' for a time) make basic agricultural operations a major effort and the difference in latitude from 1100' to 1700' between the top and bottom creates what are legitimately multiple growing zones.

The new ownership (since end 2016, see below) have gone through an orgasm of additional planting including petit verdot, cabernet franc, malbec, mourvèdre, grenache, sémillon, sauvignon blanc, sauvignon musqué, and rolle (vermentino). This broad swathe of viticulture suggests a major change of course from the 100% cabernet sauvignon wine being made now. I ask winemaker Timothy Milos if they are preparing for Armageddon. "I'm not sure our plantings will divert Armageddon! The majority of the vineyard will remain cabernet sauvignon (some 86%) with about a percent each of the other bordelaise varieties. We planted sauvignon blanc and sémillon to our coldest north facing sections of the vineyard that have struggled with ripeness as Cabernet, and varieties for rosé (rolle, mourvèdre and grenache) just above that. Our main consideration in planting for climate change was choosing a rootstock with a shorter vegetative cycle to reduce our season length and perhaps avoid the uncertain weather at the end of October. Drought tolerance was also an important consideration, although it was with the original plantings too."



THE TEAM

Winemaker Timothy Milos is the continuity factor, having made wine here for nearly 20 years. He trained at U.C. Davis, was formerly head winemaker at S. Anderson and then Cliff Lede.

Co-owner and GM Timothy Martin is part owner of cult winery Tusk and a former Lail employee and Melka Estates manager.

Co-owner Randy Nichols is a real estate developer who craves singular *lieu d'ites* when it comes to vineyards and whose company, Nichols Partnership, is currently developing the new Auberge property in Carneros—Stanley Ranch

WINEMAKING

Winemaking, as always seems to be the case with cult California wines, is remarkably mainstream. Hand harvesting takes place a few subsections of rows at a time as ripening progresses (judged by taste). It takes two full weeks to harvest the whole acreage.

Strict berry selection is by mechanical sorting (they have experimented with optical sorters as well). Then maceration seems to be the operative word. Cold-soak for 2-3 days prior to fermentation, mixing daily either by punch down or pump over. Milos says “Our total maceration time, crush to press, runs from about 30 days to over 60 on rare occasions. I find the balance is typically achieved between 35 and 45 days total time for Cabernet. The decision is based entirely on taste and varies from vintage to vintage.”.



TASTING NOTES

Immortal Estate 2016 'Slope' Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County, CA (\$75)

Winemaking: Fermentation is in 75% new French oak. Individual barrels from five lots were selected for the final blend which was racked twice before being bottled unfinned, and unfiltered in April 2019. Ageing since that time has been in bottle until release. A total of 21,060 btls, 288 magnums (so, despite Hugh Johnson's entreaties, they have not made half bottles)

Appearance: Totally opaque, purple rim, dark berry core;

Nose: Cassis, five spice (esp. the cinnamon), cherry, tobacco;

Palate: Chewy tannins, black cherry. Ready to drink now with prime rib or fatty steak cuts like ribeye or strip;

Immortal Estate 2016 'Impassable Mountain' Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County, CA (\$303)

Fermentation is in 85% new French oak. Full malolactic fermentation. Individual barrels from two lots were selected for the final blend which was racked three times before being bottled unfinned, and unfiltered in April 2019. Ageing since that time has been in bottle until release. A total of 4734 btls, 186 magnums, 15 jeroboams.

Appearance: Intense dark fruit core, ruby meniscus;

Nose: Cedar, blackberry, spice notes of nutmeg and clove.

Palate: Long complex finish of new French wood and fruit. Profound but approachable tannins. A feeling that this wine is less giving in its youth than the Slope but that it also has a more substantial recoil of flavor to be released on maturity. No qualms about keeping this a decade.

Samples