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Effects on Aroma, Flavor

Making Rocks District Syrah

Using grapes from the same vineyard, Billo Naravane found a way to make two distinct wines that flaunt Walla Walla's newest sub-AVA's unique terroir.

Elaine Chukan Brown

Based in Sonoma, California, **Elaine Chukan Brown** serves as the American Specialist for *JancisRobinson.com* and is a contributing writer to *Wine & Spirits*. Her work has also been featured in *The World of Fine Wine*, *San Francisco Magazine* and *Men'sHealth.com*, among others, and appears on her own website, *WakawakaWineReviews.com*. Elaine is known for her wine illustration work, which has been described by *@KermitLynchWine* as "a new standard in wine reviews."

IN THE SOUTHWESTERN CORNER of Walla Walla's newest sub-appellation, The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater, stands the **SJR Vineyard**. Home primarily to Syrah but also Grenache and Viognier, the almost 8 planted acre site grows in the signature basalt cobbles and gravel that gave the sub-zone the moniker local vintners prefer, The Rocks.

The Rocks was recognized as a registered AVA in February 2015. Geologist **Kevin Pogue** articulated the appellation boundaries based almost entirely on its unique soil conditions, a basalt-cobbled alluvial fan deposited by the Walla Walla River at the southern part of the valley. The stones of The Rocks District resemble those that have made Chateauneuf-du-Pape famous, but unlike their French counterpart, the tumbled basalt boulders of The Rocks District can be found up to 600 feet deep. While the basalt has eroded to

a shallow iron-rich topsoil in portions, the stones dominate the landscape throughout the sub-zone.

The SJR site was established in 2007 entirely own-rooted, owned and farmed by the **Robertson** family. With a focus on making exceptional single-vineyard wine, the Robertsons have chosen to invest in fine-tuning their farming practices for the site, making incremental improvements every year. At the same time, they have made small quantities of Syrah for their own **Delmas** label, since 2010, in order to better understand the site while selling the remaining fruit to other artisan Walla Walla producers.

Billo Naravane has served as the winemaker for Delmas since its advent. He also produces his own label, **Rasa Vineyards**. In 2013, Naravane began also making a Rasa Syrah from the SJR Vineyard. As a result, Naravane is producing two unique Syrahs from the same site. Along with father and daughter team **Steve** and **Brooke Robertson**, Naravane shares the process of how they were able to choose and execute two distinctive wines from the same vineyard.

Fine-tuning the Farming for Syrah

"We're growers first because for quality, so much of the effort is on the grower's side. On the business side, we've got to build those elements into the plan early on," said Steve Robertson. "We're always at heart 10 years ahead of ourselves when planning for the success of our vineyard and winemaking program."

With a long-term goal of making unique, high-quality and site-specific wine, the Robertson family has chosen to focus first on fine-tuning the farming practices in their SJR Vineyard. The business plan then allows for a primary financial investment in continuously upgraded farming as the vineyard continues to be understood. At the same time they have chosen to invest in small production wine-making to understand how the site shows in the cellar and bottle. As they improve the farming then, they are able to fine-tune the stylistic choices for the wine while ensuring the vineyard delivers those characteristics.

The iron-rich soils of The Rocks, combined with the natural tendencies of own-rooted Syrah, encourage an abundance of vigor in the site. Fine-tuning the farming for SJR has depended especially on



ELAINE CHUKAN BROWN

Making Rocks District Syrah

learning to work with the vines to channel that vigor in a more productive manner. Adjustments in this regard have been numerous.

With such an abundant canopy it has been essential to open up the fruit zone to allow air and sun penetration while avoiding excessive sun exposure that can lead to sunburn. To help reduce canopy growth, the vine trunks have been trained to grow with multiple s-shaped cinch points to pinch sap flow. Also, because the region readily hits freezing temperatures in the winter months and the vines are planted on their own roots, keeping reserve canes buried at the end of the season acts as an insurance policy against the possibility of losing a trunk to winter freeze. If such cold weather damage occurs, the reserve cane can be trained as a new trunk once air temperatures have improved again. At the same time, allowing reserve cane growth captures some of the additional vigor of the vine by diverting power from the canopy.

While daytime temperatures in The Rocks can be quite warm, nighttime temperatures still drop significantly. The colder nighttime temperatures

can slow ripening and extend the already late harvest for the variety. To take advantage of the unique properties of the region's basalt boulders, the SJR team chose to retrain their vines to establish a lower fruit zone. During the day, the dark basalt boulders absorb the solar heat and then release that heat slowly at night. By lowering the fruit zone, the Syrah gains additional ripening time as the basalt slowly releases heat over the evening hours.

Though most farming in the Walla Walla area relies on VSP training, the SJR team has found the Syrah clones they have on their site tend to want to flop rather than grow vertically. With the wire restrictions on the canopy associated with VSP, the canes tend to flop side-to-side, reducing leaf exposure and airflow. At SJR, the team has found that using cross arms helps to provide more canopy space for the natural tendencies of the Syrah canes to allow for greater airflow, as well as additional fruit shading.

Additionally, vineyards in The Rocks District tend to deliver higher pH levels due to elevated potassium, with 3.95 or 4 pH being common. As



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Father-daughter
team Steve and
Brooke Robertson
who run the SJR
Vineyard and
Delmas projects
with winemaker
Billo Naravane.

director of viticulture Brooke Robertson explained, one of the tricks that the SJR team has developed to help work with the elevated potassium levels of the region is to leave second crop a bit longer on the vine, as it acts as a potassium sink to help reduce it showing up in the fruit.

She also said that they have found vineyard practices are only part of the picture. “With the unique conditions of the vineyard, the timing of when you hit farming practices makes a huge difference in wine quality,” she said, and it depends on being in the vineyard regularly.

While the Robertsons have steadily improved the farming of SJR, they have also slowly increased their production of the Delmas Syrah.

Honing Site-expressive Style

In getting to know the characteristics of the SJR Vineyard, the Robertsons and Naravane decided to start by working with what was there. As the site was planted to both Syrah and Viognier, the first step was in trying small lot fermentations with some just Syrah and others co-fermented to include Viognier. Over time, they experimented with what proportion of Viognier worked best with their long-term stylistic goals for the site.

“We played around with Viognier and settled in on the Côte-Rôtie style for Delmas,” Naravane said. The Rocks District is known for producing meaty and earthy savage characteristics. With the heat of the basalt stones, lighter herbal characteristics of Syrah are generally burned off, more commonly leaving notes of bacon fat and pepper. At the same time, the southwestern corner of the sub-appellation in which the SJR Vineyard sits tends toward a prettier, more elevated rendition of those earthy tones. With this in mind, the addition of Viognier accentuates the lighter aromatics possible with the site creating a refined, floral note to layer in with the meatier aromas of the Syrah.

From 2010 to 2012, while getting to know the unique conditions and expression of fruit from the SJR Vineyard, the Robertsons and Naravane produced only a 50-case bottling of Syrah they called the Tribute Series. The small production wine allowed them to experiment with the techniques that would best deliver the site-expressive style they wished to hone from SJR. By taking the first three years to fine-tune the Delmas winemaking, they were able to determine the proportion of Viognier, the length on skins before pressing and the oak profile they prefer in order to capture the elegance desired. In 2013, when they felt they had found their house style, they increased production.

Once the Delmas style was determined, the trick was to find another style of wine appropriate to Naravane’s goals for his Rasa label that would be both distinctive from Delmas while still site-expressive. For Rasa, then, Naravane decided to accentuate the robust characteristics of the site. “With Rasa, we took it in a Hermitage style with a lot of whole cluster and more extended barrel-aging in a more extracted style,” he said.

Both Syrahs offer the bacon fat and earthy-iron notes of the SJR Vineyard. Delmas leans towards an elegant expression with lifted aromatics and silky tannin. Rasa, on the other hand, offers greater density and concentration on the palate with a bit more tactile tannin. In this way the two wines share a flash of the vineyard character while capturing two distinct styles in the glass.

Making Delmas

When harvesting, Delmas fruit is picked by taste, based on when the flavors are starting to come together. A lot of this decision is based on long-term knowledge of fruit in the region and visiting the site frequently after veraison. As harvest approaches, Naravane explained, he tastes the fruit once or twice per day.



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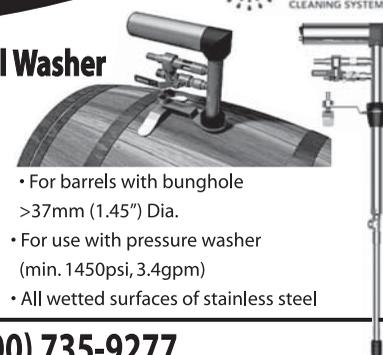
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“In The Rocks things shift dramatically within 24 hours. The potassium can shoot up. You can get another 100mg pick-up in the grapes that quickly,” Naravane said. “You have to be very attuned to potassium levels in relation to phenolic and flavor development. But that means learning to look past the sweetness of the fruit to recognize when the phenolic ripeness is there.” Though Naravane is not picking on Brix, he explained that they have found the balance of phenolic ripeness, flavor development and potassium levels has tended to show in a window of 23.8° to 24.5° Brix for both the Delmas and Rasa labels.

Fruit is brought in, and 30ppm SO₂ is added. With naturally higher pH levels in the fruit, Naravane views a small sulfur addition as an important way to inhibit undesirable microbial growth. Though textbook winemaking would advise doing an acid addition to make a pH adjustment at this stage, Naravane explained that doing so in this case “would kill the soul and the terroir of the wine.” With this in mind, Naravane avoids the practice. “At the end of the day, I don’t think we lost the age-ability of the wine,” he said.

The fruit is then cold-soaked for five to seven days. Delmas fruit is inoculated with three different types of yeast that offer different glycerol compounds and initially different aromatic influences. “Over time the fermentations converge, but the yeasts start off really differently, giving the final wine another layer of complexity,” he said.

The goal for Delmas includes silky tannins in the final wine. With this in mind, only one or two punch-downs are done during cold soak and fermentation. Additionally, punch-downs are generally performed by hand in order to minimize extraction and avoid harsh tannins. For Delmas, fermentation is done in inert vessels, usually macrobins, with 50 percent

whole cluster included underneath whole berries, and a co-fermentation of 8 percent Viognier.

As Naravane explained, so far Delmas has been pressed at dryness, “but that is not our philosophy. The philosophy is to press when phenolics are in balance. It just happened that that was about three days after dryness. As fermentation approaches dryness, we taste at least twice a day because I don’t want to miss that window.”

Naravane emphasized the importance of deciding on one’s approach to pressing when executing house style. “Pressing is one of those defining points in winemaking. During the press cycle, we are at the press, tasting, tasting, tasting. As we slowly increase pressure, we are careful because at some point, the feel of the phenolics and tannin turns. When it turns to that slightly bitter, harsh edge, cut the press,” he said. In taking this approach the Delmas team is choosing to give up around 20 percent of the juice they could gain from the remaining pulp; but as Naravane said, they only want the best juice. In this way, he views pressing as one of the essential steps to establishing house style.

After pressing, the wine is settled for 24 hours and put to barrel with all of the fine lees. Gross lees are removed. Rocks District Syrah has a great ability to integrate with the right type of new oak. Delmas is then put to barrel with 50 to 60 percent new barrels by volume and the rest once-filled. As they continue to expand production, they will also be integrating concrete. Delmas is inoculated for malolactic conversion (ML), which usually completes in four weeks to three months, depending on the year. At completion of ML, 50 ppm SO₂ is generally added.

Sulfur additions at this stage must be considered in relation to the natural pH levels generated by the sub-appellation. “With the higher pH levels [of the region] we can’t test molecular SO₂,” Naravane said. “So we have to make a trade-off. We add 50ppm SO₂, generally speaking, after ML. If we tried to get to 0.5 to 0.7 molecular SO₂, it would kill the soul of the wine, so we have to compromise.” Naravane explained that the lower SO₂ levels mean it is more important to taste from the barrel regularly to make sure the wine is on track and also to maintain a focus on good, clean cellar practices.

The wine is topped every two weeks. Racking, however, is minimized. “We avoid racking unless really necessary because Syrah, just as any red wine, can only handle so much saturation of oxygen before it falls off. Every racking is an introduction of oxygen, so we are careful not to rack or to rack under bulldog with gas, unless it needs oxygen at that stage. We like to reduce oxygen saturation and racking for the wine’s longevity,” he said.

The wine is bottled at 14 to 18 months, usually earlier depending on when the wine tastes ready, balanced with when the bottling line is available. So the wine is generally bottled in December with an October release.

Making Rasa

In establishing the Rasa SJR Vineyard Syrah in 2013, Naravane wanted to choose as many points of divergence from the Delmas Côte Rôtie-inspired style as possible. With this in mind he selected three techniques that would distinguish the two wines. While Delmas includes 50 to 60 percent new oak during aging, Rasa is done with 100 percent new oak fermentation and aging. Where Delmas uses 50 percent whole cluster, Rasa includes 100 percent whole cluster fermentation. Delmas is made through both inoculated primary and secondary fermentations. Rasa undergoes ambient yeast primary fermentation and inoculated malolactic fermentation. Additionally, Rasa does not include any Viognier.

For Rasa, harvest is based on frequently walking the vineyard and tasting fruit as described for Delmas. Generally, the two labels have been harvested within two days of each other.

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The wine is brought in 100 percent whole-cluster and put straight to new open-top puncheons with 30ppm SO₂ added. “We want to avoid adding too much SO₂ because it can produce H₂S if too much is added, but 30ppm is enough to knock back microbial activity,” Naravane said. The fruit undergoes a five- to seven-day cold soak between 50° and 55° F and allowed to start a natural ferment.

Naravane explained that because of the higher pH levels, allowing the wine to start with an ambient ferment was one of the most stressful parts of making the Rasa Syrah. To mitigate that, the wine is checked six times a day, essentially every three hours, to stop a bad microbe before it can do more damage.

Naravane clarifies that if a bad microbe takes off in an otherwise ambient fermentation, then it is important to do a high proportion addition of *Saccharomyces* to knock back the microbial activity. “If you add a two to three times concentration of *Saccharomyces*, it will kill off microbes in two to three hours,” he said. Even so, with SJR Vineyard he has never had to do a yeast addition, and the Rasa Syrah has been able to progress cleanly with ambient fermentation. As he explained, the healthy YAN levels of the site mean that even with higher pH the wine ferments cleanly relatively easily. If the site had both high pH levels and low YAN, it would be appropriate to inoculate and use nutrients to avoid fermentation problems.

During cold soak and fermentation, three firm punch-downs are done per day. When the wine reaches 13° Brix during fermentation, they then do the only aerated pump-over. “At that point the yeast is starting to get tired, and studies have shown that oxygen saturation helps rejuvenate yeast life. So, at 50 percent sugar depletion when the yeast are getting tired, an oxygen saturation, through an aerated pump-over, helps yeast to ferment to form healthier

membranes and get the oomph it needs to finish,” Naravane said. During fermentation, he monitors temperatures to maintain 85° F and below. If the temperature begins to reach above 85° F, he will do a punch-down to help cool it off.

As fermentation is approaching a close, he keeps tasting for balance of phenolic tannin structure, fruit extract and acidity. “Once those are right and the wine is in balance, then wherever in the fermentation cycle it is, I will press.” After pressing, Naravane settles the wine for 24 hours and racks it off gross lees, taking the fine lees with the wine back into the same puncheons in which fermentation occurred (after the heads are put back onto the body). The wine is inoculated for ML, and SO₂ is added after completion. Racking and topping are done with protocols similar to those listed for Delmas. The wine is aged in barrel for 31 months based on taste. It is then bottled and held 12 to 13 months before release in May. The 2013 Rasa SJR Syrah will be released in 2017.

By focusing on incremental improvements in both the vineyard and cellar, the Robertsons and Naravane have been able to steadily fine-tune the quality of their SJR Vineyard, as well as the Delmas and Rasa Syrahs. The step-by-step approach allows for greater insight into the specific needs of the site and how best to work with those in the cellar even when some of those best practices stand outside textbook winemaking techniques. Additionally, by selecting defining points of divergence, such as the use of whole cluster, the proportion of new oak, and whether or not to inoculate primary fermentation, Naravane has been able to produce two distinctive examples of wine that nevertheless are both site-expressive. [WBM](#)

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