

Tablas Creek Vineyard is co-owned by two families, the Haas Family from the US and the Perrin Family of Château de Beaucastel, France. The vineyards are located in Paso Robles, with soils, terrain, and climate similar to Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Planting at Tablas Creek began in 1989, and they currently grow a wide array of Rhône varietals. The vineyards are certified organic, currently transitioning to Biodynamic, and some are dry farmed. There are 105 acres under vine,  $\frac{1}{4}$  of which are truly dry farmed. The other  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the vineyard has drip lines; however, these vines have not been watered during the growing season since 2009.

### **Why Dry Farm?**

Jason Haas, General Manager at Tablas Creek, indicates that the prime goal at Tablas Creek is to produce wines that reflect the characteristics of the vineyard sites. In addition to organic and biodynamic practices, dry farming is the best way to do this. Haas writes in his blog that dry farming may well contribute to the lower alcohol, balance, and intensity of their wines. He states that dry farming is key for producing wines of place and character, and also important for sustainable wine production.



Scruffy Hill, Tablas Creek Vineyard

The vineyards are modeled after Châteauneuf-du-Pape where irrigation is not allowed by law. For this reason, the vineyard sites in Paso Robles were picked to fit a dry farming goal, even though, without summer rains, it is considerably more difficult to dry farm in Paso Robles than in Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

### **The Vineyards**

Tablas Creek is located on the west side of Paso Robles at 1500 feet elevation. On average, they receive 28" of annual rain from November to April. The ground underneath the vineyards does not contain an aquifer, but has underground rivers and water pockets to supply vines with water. The soils are calcareous clay that hold moisture well. But in the summer, the top seven feet of soil is dry; the vines need to develop deep roots to find the water sources.

A fourth of the 105 acres of vineyard is truly dry farmed and head pruned with no drip lines. The spacing of the dry farmed vines is either 10X10 or 12X12 feet. These blocks yield 2 ½ to 3 ½ tons per acre. The other ¾ of the vineyards have drip lines, but have not been irrigated during the growing season since 2009. These vines may receive irrigation after the harvest that mimics natural rainfall when necessary, and the vineyard blocks are tightly spaced at 8X3 feet, which makes the vines harder to dry farm, and they are trellised.

Tablas Creek uses calcium tolerant rootstocks like 110R, 1103P, and 140RU. They are also currently experimenting with St. George rootstock.

### **Vineyard Management**

In the winter a cover crop is planted. Tablas Creek has different cover crop mixes including sweet peas, oats, vetch, and barley. In part of the vineyard, a mixed herd of sheep and donkeys is used to mow down the cover crop in the spring. The herd is not large enough to handle the whole vineyard, so for some blocks, the cover crop is mowed with a tractor and allowed to dry. A spader is used to incorporate the organic material into the soils and to create a dust mulch.

Replacement vines in the dry farmed vineyards are watered during the first year with a five-gallon bucket that is placed over the rootstock with a hole in the bottom for the water to slowly infiltrate into the soil.

Tablas Creek does have problems with frost. To combat this they use wind machines, fans, and large Mylar curtains to control airflows. They also have a sprinkler system for frost protection, but they do not have enough water to protect all of the vineyards by this method.



CAFF Field Day at Tablas Creek, 8/22/2012

### **Dry Farming in Paso Robles**

The west side of Paso Robles, where Tablas Creek is located, receives substantial rain and has clay soils that retain water well. For these reasons, Haas says, more people in the area could probably dry farm if they chose to. But there is the risk of yield loss associated with dry farming that scares people away. With a little imagination though, Haas states, dry farming could become more widespread.