

Martha Stoumen 'Benson Ranch Petite Syrah' 2018

Producer - Martha Stoumen

Provenance: Ukiah in Mendocino County AVA, California

Farming: Organic

Grape(s): 100% Petite Syrah

Vineyard(s): Benson Ranch

Fermentation/ Aging: semi-carbonic maceration of ~7 days before press at 13 brix and alcoholic fermentation as juice. Aged one year on the lees in neutral barrel.

Fining/ Filtration: none.

Sulfur: 11 ppm

Misc: Martha recommends decanting this wine as it is deeply structured and some aeration helps soften the tannins.



The Producer:

Martha comes to wine from a broader passion for agriculture and the Italian language. Her path led her to a farm in Tuscany where the singular nature of grape vines first took hold. From there she headed to Sicily where she learned under the great Giusto Occhipinti whose humanistic approach to clean viticulture forms the basis from which Martha evolves her own approach: "you're a human being, you know when fruit is ripe!"

Grape growers, winemakers are the rockstars of the farming world and so, Martha believes, there's a deep responsibility to be the vanguard of clean growing. Her project is a vehicle of agricultural justice: be the change you want to see in the world. Today, Martha is still in the early years of her fledgling winery and already folks are fighting for the few bottles they can get their hands on. She sources grapes from parcels she leases and farms herself as well as vineyards with multigenerational farmers working cleanly.

Up until 2017 Martha was doing literally 100% of the work, producing 2,500 cases a year. With 2018's harvest she doubled her production, now working in the shared space at Pax and has hired Tim Lyons as her assistant and fellow Broc alum Lorren Butterwick to help her with sales and marketing.

The Vineyard

Benson Ranch, a 5 acre site Martha has leased since 2015 and farms with the assistance of Pete Johnson from Hawkeye Ranch. The dry farmed, head trained vines

are 14 years old growing in free draining sandy loam without the customary water retentive clay layer for the area so there's very low mildew pressure meaning very little need to apply sulfur. What drew her to the site originally was the Nero d'Avola and for a time she wasn't sure what to make of the Petite Syrah planted at the top of the hill. Despite the site being very hot, the excellent drainage results in small berries with some bunches almost looking like currants rather than grapes. Petite Syrah has incredible capacity for high tannin and a deeply inky, vinous quality but Benson Ranch's saving grace has been its high acidity which helps balance the natural power of the variety.

The Cellar

Although Martha, like many American naturalists, has come to regard carbonic macerations as an easily overstated vinification approach, she employs a variant on it with the Petite Syrah to help tame the brutish grape. The whole clusters are very lightly foot crushed and the tank is flooded with some CO2 to supplement the off gassing of the alcoholic ferment in the bottom of the tank. As the fermentation continues, the lid will be slightly opened and juice from the bottom will be quickly pumped over the top. After 7 days of this style of maceration the wine is pressed and fermented as juice before aging on the lees in barrel for a full year in order to let the 'carbonic effect' diminish and allow the varietal and vineyard characteristics to manifest unimpeded.

Stoumen's barrel program was influenced by her time working at Broc: she looks for wineries that take the best care of their wood. Mostly sourcing from wineries she's worked with like Chalk Hill whose Chardonnay barrels she's fond of.

Every month she'll taste and top up each barrel. If a particular barrel feels a little funky she may decide to add somewhere between 15-30 ppm sulfur. The only other sulfur addition will be made just before bottling. The decision is mostly based on taste and smell although she does factor pH into the decision. To date, Martha has never fined or filtered any of her wines but she isn't dogmatically opposed, just has never felt the need.

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