

MAY/JUNE '11

Wind Gap

By Stephen Tanzer

"I started Wind Gap to make wines that I thought would express the cool aspect of the Sonoma Coast," Pax Mahle told me during our annual tasting. "What's interesting here is the chance to make wines where the fruit is fully ripe but the numbers, to a technocrat, just don't make sense." It's always been a given, he thinks, that to have powerful expression you need to have superripe grapes, but that's just not the case. "The best European wines have been proving that for years." Mahle said that he actually thinks that the ease with which fruit in California achieves ripeness can work against making wines of ideal complexity. "The sun is California's cross to bear," he said; "if you aren't careful, the freshness and purity can be burned out while the grapes are still on the vine, which is why I decided to look for sites in colder wind gaps, which means slower growing seasons that won't run wild with ripeness."

2009 Wind Gap Chardonnay Yuen California

(a 50/50 blend of fruit from the James Berry Vineyard in Paso Robles and the Brosseau vineyard in Chalone): Bright gold. Exotic, perfumed scents of orange rind, pear, white flowers and toasted grain. Mellow, round and velvety on entry, then tighter in the middle, offering juicy orchard fruit flavors and higher-pitched citrus and mineral qualities. Finishes on a silky note, with lingering sappiness and florality.

91

2009 Wind Gap Pinot Gris Windsor Oaks Vineyard Chalk Hill

Bright orange. Enticing aromas of strawberry, pear and jasmine. Juicy, spicy and quite dry but also expansive, with very good depth to its dusty mineral-accented orchard fruit and red berry flavors. The tangy, persistent finish leaves notes of spices and pear skin behind. This was raised completely in concrete eggs and was fermented entirely on its skins. It comes in at 12.6% alcohol.

92

2009 Wind Gap Pinot Noir Woodruff Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains

(12.6% alcohol; raised in 50% new French *barriques*): Vivid red. Perfumed, expansive aromas of raspberry, potpourri, Asian spices and minerals, plus a hint of smokiness. Sappy and precise, offering energetic red fruit flavors and notes of allspice and star anise. A touch of vanilla adds depth and sweetness to the very long, spicy finish. This is delicious right now. Mahle said that this vineyard gives fruit "that has an expression similar to the Sonoma Coast; it's kind of Sonoma Cruz."

92

2009 Wind Gap Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast

Bright red. More extroverted than the Woodruff bottling, displaying scents of red berry preserves, cherry compote, spicecake and rose oil. Starts off broad and fleshy, then firms up in the mid-palate, offering spicy strawberry and raspberry flavors and a touch of bitter cherry pit. Finishes with good tangy bite and a lingering floral nuance. This wine is made of a blend of fruit from the Gap's Crown and Griffin's Lair vineyards and was raised in 20% new French oak; it's alcohol is 12.6%.

92

2008 Wind Gap Syrah Sonoma Coast

(12.1% alcohol, with a pH of 3.65): Inky ruby. Seductive perfume of cherry pit, blueberry, olive and Asian spices, along with a strong mineral quality. Velvety and bright on entry, then energetic and sweet in the mid-palate, with impressive energy to its black and blue fruit compote flavors. Very pure on the bright, extremely long finish, which features lingering floral and mineral nuances. These grapes were harvested on November 5th, 6th and 7th.

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2008 Wind Gap Syrah Armagh Vineyard Sonoma Coast

(12.7% alcohol; no new oak): Glass-staining ruby. Heady aromas of cassis, blackberry liqueur, violet oil

and olive are enhanced by exotic notes of Indian spices and woodsmoke that gain strength with air. Deeply pitched black and blue fruit flavors show impressive concentration but there's an unlikely elegance here too. Packs a serious punch and finishes silky and long, with lingering spiciness.

93

2008 Wind Gap Syrah Griffin's Lair Sonoma Coast

Bright purple. Vibrant, heady aromas of cassis, blueberry, candied licorice and Moroccan spices, with hints of violet and mocha. Sweet, creamy and deep, with a layered quality to the cassis, bitter cherry and floral pastille flavors. Remarkably lush syrah with a broad, palate-staining finish that features suave tannins and a whiplash of dark berry fruit. I'd hold off on opening this for at least a few more years. Mahle fermented all his 2008 syrahs with whole clusters.

94

2009 Wind Gap Syrah Griffin's Lair Sonoma Coast

Inky purple. Exotic bouquet combines wild dark berry, cherry compote and licorice, lifted by notes of potpourri and cracked pepper. At once dense and juicy, with a compelling sweetness to its intense blackberry, boysenberry and violet pastille flavors. Bright acidity and a deep Moroccan spice quality give this wine energy and aromatic persistence. The blue fruits continue on the finish, which refuses to let up.

95

2009 Wind Gap Orra North Coast

(69% grenache, 21% mourvedre and 10% counoise; no new oak): Medium red. Pungent, spice-accented aromas of peppery red berries, cherry, blood orange and herbs are lifted by a floral topnote. Sappy and focused, with a peppery quality giving lift to its bitter red fruit flavors. Possesses very good mid-palate heft, with firm tannins adding shape and grip to the persistent finish.

91

2008 Wind Gap Rana California

(58% grenache, 30% mourvedre and 12% syrah; raised in neutral oak): Glass-staining ruby. Showing blacker fruit aromas than the Orra: cassis, blackberry and cherry, along with notes of licorice and rooty sassafras. With air, exotic floral and apricot nuances come up and carry onto the palate, which offers deep dark berry preserve character and a velvety texture. The floral note lingers on the long, spicy, highly perfumed finish.

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