

the drunken cyclist



I have three passions: wine, cycling, travel, family, and math.



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Rediscovering Napa Valley: Spending some time at Hourglass

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I had never met Jeff Smith, one of the proprietors of Hourglass, prior to that April encounter, but there is no doubt that he had travelled my same route up to Napa Valley countless times. Born and raised in the Valley, Jeff ventured south to San Francisco with dreams of becoming a rock star while his father and mother toiled on their property, yielding fantastic Zinfandel for the better part of two decades.

When Jeff's father succumbed to cancer (followed shortly by the vineyards being essentially eradicated by phylloxera), Jeff felt the call of familial obligation, left his rock star days behind, and drove north: back up the 101, then Sears Point Road, eventually reaching the Hourglass Estate in Calistoga, north of Napa. He took the reins of the family estate and replanted the phylloxera infected vines with Cabernet Sauvignon, thus starting anew the ascendance of the vineyard and, eventually, the brand.

A decade and a half later, Jeff and some investors purchased the Blue Line Vineyard, which would become the eventual site of the modern winery and, along with the original Hourglass Vineyard, the basis for the continued success and fame of the Hourglass wines.

On a bright March afternoon, I joined Jeff, winemaker Tony Biagi (of, most notably, Plumpjack fame), and the lovely Kimberly Charles of the aforementioned Charles Communications, as we ventured into the cellar for a tasting.

Before expounding on the tasting itself, it is worthy to note that the winery and cellar balance on the traditional/modern teeter in such a way that neither holds sway: both are equally represented, and the facility is impressive. Not in an ostentatious or overblown way (think of many of the newer wineries that have popped up along Highway 29 in the last decade or so), but in a tasteful, thoughtful manner, embracing both form and function.

The tasting, like most of my experience at Hourglass, was informal and without pretention (which I thought was outlawed in Napa, but I digress). Tony started with a brief description of the two vintages: 2015 was rich and opulent while 2016 was more reserved.

He also shared some other views on winemaking:

Tony tries to do everything (e.g., blending) before fermentation, since it is such a violent activity.

He would rather sacrifice aromatics for texture, which can result with many wines being rather closed initially—he feels mouthfeel is far more important.

While there are clones with every grape variety, usually they are only mentioned when talking about Pinot. Why? Well, according to Tony "Pinot people are dorks....Really Burgundy is baseball cards for adults."

There are several different Cabernet clones planted at Hourglass, mostly Clones 2, 4 and See Clone (named as such since it was originally planted by Harry See of See's Candies at what would eventually become Silverado Vineyards).

As I left the winery, heading off to another appointment with Kimberly, I wished that I could have spent more time with Tony and Jeff as I saw a little of myself in each of them. Jeff was bombastic and joyous, with a deep hearty laugh while Tony was engaging, yet introspective, with his mind no doubt running at full capacity.

As I climbed back into my rental car, I had a bit of an odd feeling: Had more wineries had a similar approach to Hourglass, I perhaps would never have felt the urge to venture Westward to Sonoma.

Perhaps.



As for the wines? All were stellar....

2015 HGIII Red Blend, Napa Valley:

"Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Italian Mixed Blacks." An outgrowth of Tony's blending philosophy. Some of the juice that does not make it into the other wines. Bright cherry and raspberry covered in mocha. Fruity on the palate with slight grip on the back-end. **OUTSTANDING. 90-92 POINTS.**

2015 Hourglass Blueline Estate Merlot:

81% Merlot, 13% Cabernet Sauvignon, 3% Petit Verdot, 2% Malbec, 1% Cabernet Franc. Much bigger and more muscular than your "typical" Merlot, but still plenty of bright fruit. Needs time, but look out. **OUTSTANDING. 91-93 POINTS.**

2015 Hourglass Blueline Estate Malbec:

100% Malbec. 100% new French oak for 17 months. Jeff, perhaps channeling his inner rock star, called this a "Panty remover." Deep blue fruit with imami. The weight of the wine is evident but not the tannins, since, as Tony put it, "the tannins have bonded to the color." **OUTSTANDING. 90-92 POINTS.**

2015 Hourglass Blueline Estate Cabernet Franc:

88% Cab Franc, 12% Cabernet Sauvignon. Dark red fruit and tobacco. Whoa. Double whoa. Maybe even a triple whoa. Creamy and unctuous, this goes on forever. **OUTSTANDING PLUS. 94-96 POINTS.**

2016 Hourglass Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley:

Retail \$40. Bright and tart, wonderfully balanced. One of the best Napa SB that I have had. **OUTSTANDING. 92-94 POINTS.**

