

PENCE

VINEYARDS & WINERY



BACKGROUND & VINEYARDS

Blair Pence's love of wine started way back at the USC Delt House where, between shots of whiskey and beer, he enjoyed many great bottles of classic California Cabernets (they were cheap back then). This early exposure and interest led him to become involved in several different wine groups, culminating in a unique fascination with Burgundy, France. In his protracted attempt to understand the mysteries of these wines, Blair has travelled to Burgundy frequently and built lasting relationships with many of its vigneron. It was simply a matter of time before he jumped in himself.

With this as prologue, over the last dozen years, Blair has spent an incredible amount of time, focus and money finding and then developing his Sta. Rita Hills ranch in western Santa Barbara County into a premium vineyard and winery. Within the 200-acre working ranch and farm, we are farming organically over 38 acres of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Syrah and Gamay, with our first plantings initiated in 2005.

Seen from above, Pence Vineyard appears as an island on an elevated plateau which has been slowly eroded over time on all sides, and is thus fully exposed to merciless cold ocean winds, morning fog and other Pacific Ocean influences. It is this combination of stressful conditions that provides the character considered essential to making beautiful, balanced wines from our location. Geologically, the land comprises a complex collection of several different virgin soil profiles, including Tierra, Linne and San Andreas Series, all of which are unusually dense and permeated with a variety of rock, calcareous (limestone) material and clay.

The most complex wines are created from vines grown on slopes and challenged by their environments. Though more expensive to plant and difficult to farm than lowland fruit, the qualitative difference is palpable. Because of the significant variations in its elevations like a skateboard park, the vineyard is characterized by multiple sun aspects and varying slopes, making the soils all well-drained, but otherwise representing a quite varied terrain. These and other unique and challenging aspects of this site were critical in evaluating its vineyard potential.



The type of soil complexity, topography, climate and different terroirs at Pence Vineyards are reflective of the diversity of a much larger geographic area, in effect, representing a microcosm of our Sta. Rita Hills appellation. Given this incredible diversity, the opportunity to create a world class vineyard was clear. Thus, we took every effort to make sure we planted the vineyard block by block, row by row and selection by selection, to capture and optimize all the nuances of this incredible site. We also committed ourselves to organic farming using our own full-time salaried workforce, allowing us to individually farm our blocks at a much higher level than would otherwise be possible.

Given all this diversity, planning our vineyard site was a great challenge. Science came to the rescue; however, as recent advances in electro-conductivity measurement and other technology provided a systematic approach to reveal the boundaries of congruent soil profile sections as they relate to one another. The surface areas of the potential vineyard were measured as to their vigor and water bearing capacity and then computer processed to identify high density, geo-coded points of reference where deep soil profile samples were taken. Concurrently, detailed topographic aerial survey data were inputted into graphic computer programs that calculated slopes, sun azimuths, and drainage patterns. All this data was then processed into compatible visual images. The resulting graphic data sets, primarily consisting of soil composition (chemical and structural), water bearing characteristics (vigor potential), and sun exposure (aspect and slope) were layered upon one another with the intent to divide the site into subsets (blocks) that represent distinct and separate homogeneous growing conditions. In France, these conditions are collectively referred to as “terroir”, and it is credited in creating the distinctive characteristics of wine made from the same grapes, but grown in different conditions.

Using this technology, we could efficiently develop our vineyards to achieve the same level of separation as the various tiny appellations within Burgundy, which were painstakingly identified by Cistercian monks over two millennia of trial and error. The result is a patchwork of irregularly shaped sections of varying size and orientation. Each block was given a unique prescription for soil preparation (ripping and amendments), assigned a preferred rootstock (vigor and water tolerance), and received a suggestion of appropriate varietals and their respective selections that would be optimum for its distinct terroir. The clonal suggestions were then evaluated within the context of an estate program that would provide a variety of flavor profiles, and a mandate that both Heritage and Dijon selections be represented in the final mix.



All Pinot, Gamay and Chardonnay blocks are planted in a high-density configuration of eight-foot-wide rows with either three foot or eighteen inch spacing between each vine, while the Syrah sections planted as densely as two feet square (7,000 vines per acre). The objective is to maximize wine quality by limiting the fruit zone of each cordon and creating competition among root systems. Each vine has its own emitter and each block is irrigated by a separate zone that is controlled at the primary well. With ample water capacity from four wells, the entire vineyard has sprinklers to establish annual cover crops and provide frost protection.

Our Pinot Noir selections are grown in our richest, clay-limestone soils. We currently produce three small terroir-driven bottlings that range in size from 100-400 cases. These individual cuvees reflect the unique characteristics of their respective micro climats, with specific pruning protocols for each block. Our main offering is our Estate Pinot Noir, which comprises a selection of nine different blocks. Our new ten-acre expansion is entirely devoted to Pinot Noir, further evidence of our commitment to this varietal and our enthusiasm for its ongoing potential in our vineyard.

Our Estate Chardonnay program features a massale planting of six Chardonnay selections and two specific clone selections. As in our Pinot Noir program, each block has its own pruning protocol. Chardonnays from our region have a very lemon, citrus profile and exhibit incredible freshness, vibrancy and minerality. They also have great concentration and when approached in a restrained aesthetic, their transparency is pure and their flavors balanced and driven. A touch of salinity also weaves its way through the wines.

In 2014, we grafted a very few acres of our Pinot to Gamay, the other red grape of Burgundy. From this small block, we produce three limited bottlings: An Estate Gamay, a Passe-Tout-Grains appellation inspired blend we call PTG, and a sparkling wine made under the hands of San Francisco Chronicle's 2016 California Winemaker of the year, Michael Cruse.

Lastly, we are enamored with cold-climate Syrah and are inspired by the aromatics and structure of these wines originating from the Northern Rhône. Syrahs from our region are unlike anywhere in California, leading us to believe we can produce some of the best New World interpretations of this varietal. The wines have amazing purple nuances, pepper spices, cooking herbs, black/green olive and great energy.

