

Lucky Number 13

RECOGNIZING THE BENNETT VALLEY AVA

Bennett Valley, a gently sloping, elevated valley located just southeast of Santa Rosa, is Sonoma County's 13th appellation. Situated between three mountain peaks, it features well-drained mountain benchland soils, volcanic rock, early morning fog, a long growing season, and cool marine breezes flowing from the Sonoma Coast and San Pablo Bay.

As one of Sonoma's smaller appellations, the Bennett Valley AVA is planted to less than 1,000



Westerhold Family Vineyards proprietors John Westerhold and Sharon Bauman.

acres of vines primarily by family-owned grower brands; only one winery, Matanzas Creek, is open to the public. We recently tasted three wines from the region that piqued our interest.

The Westerhold Family Vineyards 2015 Pinot Noir from Bennett Valley (\$52)

comes from a drought vintage. The grapes' thick, protective skins help produce a dense, unctuous texture: a mouthfeel that creates a common thread in the three wines we tasted from the area.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTERHOLD



A postcard-worthy view of Bennett Valley from Westerhold's vineyard.

Winemaker Russell Bevan created a densely delicious red, deep and dark-hued with a nose of peppered plum and earth tones. Red velvet cake is a flavor characteristic of this wine. **95**

Bennett Valley Winemaker Jesse Katz, meanwhile, draws inspiration from his time spent in Bordeaux, where he tasted some of the best Sauvignon Blancs of his life. He was determined to create his label, Aesthete, as a tribute and even shipped barrels home from Bordeaux that were made especially for Haut-Brion Blanc.

Dry Stack Vineyard, with its marine clay-loam soils, is located on the eastern slope of Mount Taylor at 550 feet above sea level. The inaugural vintage of Aesthete 2016 Dry Stack Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc comes from an even ripening season, which Katz describes as "one of the most exciting vintages we've captured."



"This is one of California's finest examples of this Italian clone of Sauvignon Blanc planted in these gravelly, loamy soils," Aesthete Winemaker Jesse Katz says of the Dry Stack Vineyard.



PHOTO COURTESY OF AESTHETE

Aesthete 2016 Sauvignon Blanc, Dry Stack Vineyard, Bennett Valley (\$55)

The barrel program is evident in this weighty white. Perfumed tropical fruit creates a waft of summer pineapple, white tea, and gardenia, for starters. On

the palate, spiced melons and lemons develop floral characteristics. At mid-palate, the viscosity spreads to a creamy array of peach tart with a hint of salinity on the bright finish. **94**



Before temperatures dip below freezing during the winter months, Frostwatch Winery co-owner Brett Raven bundles up and heads outside to activate a frost-control system for the vines. Depending on the conditions, he will use either cold air drains or overhead microjet sprinklers that put just enough water on the vines to prevent damage. Pictured above are fruiting spurs encased in protective icicles hanging from the trellis wires.

Drink Frostwatch and Chill

THE MARINE CLIMATE GOES COLD IN WINTER FOR THIS CHARDONNAY

Frostwatch Winery co-owners Brett Raven and Diane Kleinecke met in the mid-1980s while attending the University of California, Davis. They purchased their Bennett Valley property in 1995, years before their 2002 first vintage. The Frostwatch moniker refers to the area's diurnal fluctuations, which become more extreme in the winter when chilly air pushes off the face of Bennett Peak and settles over their vineyard: There have been mornings when they've found vines encased in ice.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF FROSTWATCH WINERY

A cluster of the Platt selection of Chardonnay, which goes into the Frostwatch Ophira Reserve: tiny berries, tiny cluster, big flavors.

The Frostwatch 2015 Ophira Reserve Chardonnay, Bennett Valley (\$45)

is creamy—frequent stirring integrates the 100 percent new French oak—and unctuous with key lime and apricot on nose and palate. Aged for 19 months, it has a crème brûlée effect that's lightened and lengthened by a fine acidity, with a lemon edge. We paired this wine with sautéed shrimp and grilled chicken, noting its graceful and satisfying food-pairing abilities. **96** SJ