



TABLAS CREEK VINEYARD

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|------|----------------------------|-------|---------|
| 2004 | ROSÉ | ROSE | 91 |
| 2003 | CÔTES DE TABLAS | RED | 91 |
| 2004 | CÔTES DE TABLAS BLANC | WHITE | (87-89) |
| 2003 | CÔTES DE TABLAS BLANC | WHITE | 88 |
| 2003 | ESPRIT DE BEAUCASTEL | RED | 92 |
| 2004 | ESPRIT DE BEAUCASTEL BLANC | WHITE | (89-91) |
| 2003 | ESPRIT DE BEAUCASTEL BLANC | WHITE | 91 |
| 2004 | GRENACHE BLANC | WHITE | (89-91) |

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|------|---------------------------|-------------|---------|
| 2003 | MOURVÈDRE | RED | 88 |
| 2003 | PANOPLIE | RED | 95 |
| 2004 | ROUSSANNE | WHITE | (90-92) |
| 2003 | ROUSSANNE | WHITE | 90 |
| 2003 | SYRAH | RED | 90 |
| 2004 | VERMENTINO | WHITE | (87-88) |
| 2003 | VIN DE PAILLE (ROUSSANNE) | SWEET WHITE | 90 |
| 2004 | VIIGNIER | WHITE | 88 |

The western frontier of the hallowed Châteauneuf du Pape domaine, Château de Beaucastel, in partnership with their longtime importer, Robert Haas, Tablas Creek continues to ratchet up the quality level of their estate-bottled wines from their gorgeous vineyards on the limestone hillsides west of Highway 101, not far from the Pacific Ocean. 2003 was a very strong vintage at Tablas Creek, and while 2004 appears to be a lighter weight year, the wines are fragrant and assertive.

Tablas Creek seems to have the right formula, but it has been a long road in trying to educate the public. I tend to agree with the idea that the finest Rhône Ranger wines that emerge from the corridor between Santa Barbara and Paso Robles are blends, not single varietals, but of course the latter are much easier to market and sell. As evidenced by the likes of Tablas Creek and the region's other top wineries, the finest blends seem to provide more nuances, complexity, and flavor dimensions than the single varietals can achieve. Of course, the *terroir*, vintage conditions, and winemaker play a part as well. The **2003 Côtes de Tablas Blanc**, a blend of 45% Viognier, 32% Marsanne, 16% Grenache Blanc, and 7% Roussanne, is a full-bodied, light golden-colored, tank-fermented and aged effort offering notions of citrus blossoms, pineapples, and other exotic fruits, loads of personality, and a dry, crisp, food-friendly personality. Enjoy it over the next 1-2 years. Composed of 68% Roussanne, 27% Grenache Blanc, and 5% Viognier, the **2003 Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc's** alluring nose of rose petals, honeysuckle, quince, licorice, and white currants soars from the glass of this light gold-tinged wine. Complex and pure, with a super texture as well as a long, concentrated finish, this is a boldly styled white that combines elegance with power. It should drink well for several years. Aged in both barrel and tank, the full-throttle **2003 Roussanne's** crisp underlying acidity buttresses its big, honeyed style. There are abundant quantities of waxy tropical fruit notes, but little wood influence is noticeable. This wine should be consumed with strongly flavored poultry or fish dishes over the next 2-3 years.

The final blends of the 2004 whites revealed fragrant personalities, crisper acids, and less muscle and concentration than the 2003s. The **2004 Côtes de Tablas Blanc** possesses exotic honeysuckle, white peach, and floral characteristics, medium body, and zesty acidity. The fuller, richer, more structured **2004 Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc** exhibits copious aromas of citrus blossoms, rose water, lavender, and apricot marmalade along with good structure, crisp acids, and an admirable finish. The full-bodied, more unctuously-textured, thicker, heavier **2004 Roussanne** exhibits plenty of marmalade, buttery, waxy notes with good underlying zesty acidity, and little wood influence. The terrific, zesty, stunningly aromatic **2004 Grenache Blanc** possesses good acidity, loads of body, and undeniable personality. I also enjoyed the **2004 Vermentino** (called Rolle in southern France). White currant, licorice, and floral scents emerge from this medium-bodied, screw cap-finished white. The **2004 Viognier** offers up aromas of honeysuckle, apricots, and peaches, and more minerality than most California Viogniers.

The finest California rosé may emerge from Tablas Creek. Their **2004 Rosé**, a dead-ringer for a California version of Tavel, is a full-throttle, big, exuberant, dry example bursting with character. Fashioned from 62% Mourvèdre, 28% Grenache, and 10% Cunoise, its deep pink color is followed by a stunning nose of plums, raspberries, and figs. Full-bodied, with superb fruit as well as tremendous crisp-

ness and authority, this is amazing stuff. However, like virtually all rosés, it is best consumed during its first 12 months of life to take advantage of its aromatics and fresh flavors.

As for Tablas Creek's red wine program, the 2003 vintage produced relatively powerful offerings emphasizing elegance, finesse, and flavor authority. The **2003 Côtes de Tablas**, a blend of 60% Grenache, 24% Syrah, 12% Mourvedre, and 4% Cunoise, represents a souped up version of a California Côtes du Rhône. Its sweet candied cherry/kirsch liqueur, licorice, resinous, loamy soil, and white pepper notes are followed by a generous, medium to full-bodied, pure, complex, delicious wine to drink over the next 3-4 years. The **2003 Esprit de Beaucastel**, a blend of 50% Mourvèdre, 27% Syrah, 18% Grenache, and 5% Cunoise, exhibits a saturated deep ruby/purple color in addition to a superb nose of blackberries, blue fruits, crushed minerals, new saddle leather, animal fur, and flowers. With wonderful concentration and purity buttressed by considerable structure as well as moderately high tannin, this foudre-aged effort will benefit from another 1-2 years of cellaring, and promises to keep for a decade or more.

The limited production, 300-case cuvee of **2003 Panoplie** is California's answer to the famed Beaucastel Châteauneuf du Pape Hommage à Jacques Perrin. A blend of 69% Mourvèdre, 21% Grenache, 7% Syrah, and 3% Cunoise, this inky/blue/purple-colored offering begins slowly in the glass, but after five minutes of swirling and coaxing, it roars to life, offering backward but promising notes of black truffles, creosote, blackberries, cherries, cassis, road tar, and melted licorice. Boasting a full-bodied, super-concentrated mouthfeel as well as considerable tannin, delineation, and structure, it is a wonderfully knit, personality-filled wine that was aged completely in neutral *demi-muids* prior to bottling. Give it another 2-3 years of bottle age, and consume it over the following 10-12+.

Tablas Creek also produced a small quantity of single varietal wines, which I enjoyed, but not as much as their blended cuvees. The deep ruby/purple-tinged **2003 Syrah** reveals camphor, acacia flower, crushed rock, and blackberry aromas, medium to full body, and chalky tannin in the finish. It's a very fine effort, but I would encourage this winery to continue with their avant garde blending program as opposed to the single varietal wines. The **2003 Mourvèdre** offers notes of saddle leather, resinous, loamy soil, cherries, plums, and figs as well as a hard finish. It requires consumption during its first 5-7 years of life.

The blends for the 2004 reds had not been finalized, but I tasted through all the component parts, and it appears the wines will possess vivid perfumes, but perhaps not the depth, muscle, or concentration of the 2003s. The 2004s should be nicely balanced as well as aromatically compelling, with beautifully pure, elegant, medium-bodied flavors.

Lastly, there is a small quantity of sweet dessert wine. The **2003 Vin de Paille**, fashioned from 100% Roussanne dried on straw mats, possesses 9.1% alcohol and 23% residual sugar. It is an elegant but dense effort offering a medium gold color as well as notes of marmalade, rose petals, licorice, oranges/tangerines, pears, and honey. It should drink well for 4-5 years.

