Winemaking Philosophy

We use classic winemaking techniques, which means embracing the knowledge and skills winemakers have gained by hard work over the last 2,000 years and applying them to our mountain fruit. We craft wines with balance that pair well with food. Ideally, Starfield wines will express

- Distinctive fruit, spice and floral aromatics
- Multiple layers of flavor
- Balanced acidity or "juiciness"
- Long, lingering finishes
- In whites, fresh aromas that remain vibrant for 3 or more years
- In reds, enough structure and tannin to cellar for 3 to 15 years

Our lighter reds like Cinsaut and Grenache will improve in bottle 3-5 years, while our bigger reds like Mourvèdre and The Miner's inch can benefit from cellaring for 5-15 years.

White Wine Fermentation

We whole-cluster press and neutral barrel ferment whites at 55 degrees, observing and tracking the direction of each barrel in the cellar, leaving nothing to chance. After primary fermentation, if we think the wine needs more texture and some additional complexity, we'll put a few barrels through malolactic fermentation. For most of our Rhone whites, we inhibit malolactic fermentation to allow the wines to develop vibrant, fruit-forward aromas. Most white wines stay on the lees for an extended period to increase softness and fullness, plus add a hint of nuttiness. However, on occasion when the lees are reduced, we rack the wines quickly to preserve the freshness. All our work is based on taste. We're obsessive barrel tasters.

Red Wine Fermentations

We manage the red fermentations for texture and aroma, and each year we do something different, depending on how the fruit develops.

Decisions while picking: When our Syrah or Petite Sirah ripen at the same time as either Viognier or Roussanne, we'll often pick 5-10% of those white grapes along with the reds and co-ferment. The whites add unique floral characters and layers of flavor to the wines. When the varieties don't ripen at the same time, we'll ferment separately and, depending on taste, blend some white wine in later.

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Decisions at the destemmer: When one of our Rhone reds could benefit from extra flavor, we'll reserve a portion of whole clusters, and add those to the destemmed fruit in the tank. That ancient technique adds bright herbal and spicy notes, particularly to lighter wines like Cinsaut and Grenache.

When we want to soften a bigger red wine, we'll increase the proportion of whole berries. We do that by destemming into a bin, lifting the bin up to the tank, and gently setting the whole berries into the tank – preserving most of the berries intact. That also gives us a more dynamic fermentation and adds another layer of flavor. Alternatively, when we want to increase the structure of a wine, we'll move the must through a gentle pump to break up the berries and increase the tannin in the wine.

All red wines: We first cold soak red varieties 24-48 hours, which adds extra color, and gives us time to modify our plans, based on each specific lot of fruit. We tank ferment all reds in stainless steel, and typically pump over twice a day. Most reds ferment at 86°, although we allow some varieties to sometimes ferment up to 90° to favor certain volatile esters. For lighter reds like Grenache or Cinsaut, we press at dryness. For bigger reds like Petite Sirah or Mourvedre, we'll usually press at 6°- 8° Brix to reduce the tannin in the wine. Occasionally we'll take one of the bigger wines, like Syrah or Tempranillo, and use extended maceration to soften the tannins. Although we have a written plan, we treat every wine and every year differently.

Yeast

We inoculate with a variety of yeasts to enhance specific aromas and textures rather than leave them to chance. We use Persy for many of the Rhone reds, which enhances spicy and fruit forward wines, and QA 23 for most of the Rhone whites, which lifts tropical, citrus and floral aromas. In varieties with higher levels of acid, or higher Brix, we'll often use Prix de Mousse for more consistent quality. Each year we'll trial one or more new yeasts to see if we can add additional layers to our wines or bring out the fruit or floral profile. We plan to try RC 212 (typically used for pinot) in several of our Rhone lots in 2023.

Elevage

We barrel age most reds for 18 months in 225 liter barrels, using 10%-70% new oak. For lighter reds like Cinsaut and Grenache we use 10% – 25% new oak, for the Miner's Inch we range from 20%-30%, for Rhone blends we often use 35%. For the Cinsaut and Grenache, we prefer more refined new French oak like Taransaud, Sansaud, Francois Freres or Remond. For bigger Rhones like Syrah or Mouredre, we also use those barrels, but add more expressive French oak from coopers like Ermitage or Demptos. We typically use tight grain M+ barrels from 8-10 different coopers a year, primarily French oak, but some Hungarian and American oak depending on the wine.

Fining

Each year we do fining trials, to see if the wines need a little extra polish. Cinsaut & Grenache often do not need fining. However, most of the bigger reds benefit from light fining. We usually fine our red wines with egg whites, Four egg whites per barrel is typical, but of course, we're obsessive tasters. Each wine is different. Some get none, some get more.

Experiments, Changes & Blending

We run 3-4 experiments every year, trying different coopers, different yeasts, different processing techniques. Based on results, we may change our process in future years. We run blending trials every year. We blend the whites in the February after harvest, and bottle in March or April. We trial blend the reds in April-May after harvest, and then final blend them just before bottling in June the following year. Our red trials often result in reserving some of our Rhone whites to blend with our Rhone reds. If we can enhance aromas and mouthfeel in distinctive ways, or add a layer of flavor, we love to do that.