

Stirring The Lees With James Molesworth

Tales of Brave Ulysses

Christian Moueix's latest odyssey starts to bear fruit

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Christian Moueix is no stranger to historic wineries, from [his cluster of Right Bank properties in Bordeaux](#) to [Dominus Estate in California](#). In 2008, he added another to his coterie, when he purchased 40 acres of vines just a few miles up the road from Dominus in Oakville.

The [Swanson Vineyards](#) property was being used at the time for the winery's popular Merlot, though it has a vinegrowing history that dates back to the late 19th century. With no family interested in taking over the running of the property, Clarke Swanson decided to sell. Moueix, who likes to ride the back roads on his bicycle in the evenings, already had his eye on the place. A deal was struck, and Ulysses was born.

Though he's happy at Dominus, Moueix had been thinking about another odyssey. "When this opportunity came up, a short mile away, close to Dominus, it was the right fit," says Moueix.

Since purchasing the property, Moueix and his team, led by [winemaker Tod Mostero](#), have replanted nearly the entire vineyard. They switched from Merlot to mostly Cabernet Sauvignon, with a little Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. They also switched from a cordon trellis system to lyre, to give the fruit zone more shade and aeration, protecting it from harsh late-day sun and late-season heat spikes (see the accompanying video for more on this).

The property is similar to Dominus in its alluvial fan of dark loam and silt over gravel, though overall the soil is "fluffier and easier-draining," according to Mostero. As new planting went in, irrigation was also removed, as Moueix prefers [dry farming](#). The consistency of the soil helped make the switch easy.

"When you dry farm, water stress is going to arrive during the season. But we've seen here that it comes steadily and evenly through the season and vineyard, rather than in spikes in different parts of the vineyard, and that's a function of the soil," says Mostero.

As replanting progressed, crops from 2008 through 2011 were declassified. The 2012 Ulysses is the first vintage to make it to market, and the wine mirrors the vineyard plantings, with a high percentage of Cabernet Sauvignon (around 85 to 90 percent) followed by Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. The wine is vinified at the Dominus facility in basically the same technique; with [pump-overs](#) but no *pigéage* ([punch-downs](#)), then pressed off and moved to barrel for 18 months in 40 percent new oak, the rest second- and third-fill barrels.

Despite the similar winemaking and slightly similar soils, Ulysses wine is markedly different from that of Dominus. Ulysses comes across as brighter and more vivid, while Dominus is often marked by dark chocolate notes and more robust yet refined tannins. The 2012 Ulysses (800 cases made) shows exuberant fruit, with bright cassis and cherry compote flavors that are fresh and expressive. It's nearly all fruit, though, without serious depth or density, likely a function of young vines. As Moueix notes, "To be expected. The wine doesn't have its verticality yet."

In contrast, 2013 and '15 show noticeable progress, a result of the vineyard steadily maturing and additional blocks coming on line. A warm, dry year, the 2013 (960 cases) offers another very expressive beam of cassis and plum fruit, but more noticeable hints of anise and loam start to appear. The 2015, still in barrel, takes greater strides, with more depth and complexity (or "verticality," as Moueix calls it) while the expression and layers of fruit keep pace. All three vintages are outstanding, with the 2015 clearly the best of the bunch. As the vineyard comes into full production, quantity could reach 3,000 cases.

"The '15 is what we hoped for when we started in 2008. We know these things take time," says Moueix. "But of course I'm not in a rush. It's the odyssey of a life in wine, learning to understand a vineyard, then improving and making mistakes along the way. Maybe it is my last odyssey, but it's also rewarding."