

A Hero's Journey

PRIEST RANCH'S LATEST VINTAGES SHOWCASE AN ESTATE WHOSE RISKS ARE WORTH THE REWARDS **by Kyle Billings**

In the 1860s, a man named James Joshua Priest joined the legions of hopefuls flocking to the West Coast in search of gold. Through determination and a bit of luck, he found it—just not the kind that glitters. He serendipitously established his namesake ranch in the eastern hills of Napa Valley, a perfect location in which to grow grapes. His legacy endures today in the form of Priest Ranch Wines, whose sprawling Somerston Estate was founded when Priest Ranch was united with several adjacent properties in 2004, and in the limited-release bottlings it produces that also bear his name.

At a recent tasting conducted at New American restaurant Lunetta in Santa Monica, California, Priest Ranch winemaker Cody Hurd and CEO Judd



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PRIEST RANCH WINES

Priest Ranch winemaker Cody Hurd.



Priest Ranch's Somerston Estate in Napa Valley.

Wallenbrock showcased the release of the 2021 James Joshua along with other new releases in the portfolio. As we sampled the offerings, including the 2024 Grenache Blanc, the 2024 Sauvignon Blanc, and the 2021 vintage of Bordeaux-style blend Remedy, the conversation turned toward the bounty of Somerston Estate. Wallenbrock described it as the “true hero” of the operation, offering Hurd a “spice rack” of estate fruit, 17 varieties in all, to choose from.

At 1,682 acres, it enjoys a diversity of terroirs, with hillside plots of different aspects and elevations ranging from 850 to 1,615 feet. “We’ve got some [slopes] facing west and facing east, some south, some north,” said Hurd. “I’m telling you, everything that you could imagine, the property has.” Wallenbrock noted that sourcing fruit at these elevations presents Hurd with additional challenges. “It’s kind of hard to tame mountain fruit,” he acknowledged. “[It’s] the tannic structure that you have to tame, and he somehow miraculously [succeeds].”

The 2021 James Joshua is notable

given the climatic challenges felt in back-to-back vintages, which Wallenbrock charitably described as a “dance with Mother Nature.” According to Hurd, very little wine was made from the estate in 2020 due to wildfires, while the 2021 season was shortened by drought. Despite this, Hurd suggested that he and his team learned a lot about their vineyards as a result. “We actually ran out of water on the property, so we dry farmed a lot that year,” he explained. “We thought we needed to hammer [certain parcels] with water on really well-drained soils on a rootstock, 101-14, that doesn’t grow secondary root-hairs, so it doesn’t actually take up a lot of water. [But] we dry farmed it that year and it was one of the most vigorous years of the canopy.”

The 2021 James Joshua was sourced from three signature parcels on the estate and aged for 26 months in French oak. The cépage is a secret that Cody is unabashedly happy to preserve. “Some people put it out there that this is 100% Cabernet,” he said. “I’ll let you decide; I’m not going to



Somerston Estate is home to 17 different grape varieties.

tell anyone. I think it’s fun. . . . I want to be able to play around with it. This is the best wine on the property for that particular vintage when it comes to blending. . . . I want to be able to do whatever I want with this blend, and I always want it to be a mystery.” *LD*

Tasting Notes



Priest Ranch 2024 Grenache Blanc, Napa Valley (\$30) Fermented in stainless steel with native yeasts, this Grenache Blanc is indeed steely yet possesses an enticing richness layered with fleshy pome fruit and peppered with lemon zest and lychee. The dense, concentrated finish sings with lime candy. **92**

Priest Ranch 2024 Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley (\$30) Audacious flavors abound—a kaleidoscope of herbs, pineapple, wasabi, melon and peach—along with a signature boldness that is impossible to ignore. Tension and grip take hold, buoyed by an irresistible citrus lift swathed in white flowers and pear. **95**

Priest Ranch 2021 Remedy, Napa Valley (\$85) This Bordeaux blend aged for 26 months in (75% new) French oak boasts notes of cigar box and tobacco leaf that precede a parade of dark cranberry, black cherry, and blue fruit. A chassis of firm tannins is adorned with savory spices that billow alongside plumes of smoke and freshly picked strawberry. **94**

Priest Ranch 2021 James Joshua, Napa Valley (\$145) This wine is a master class on finesse, with seductive dark chocolate that fuses with rhubarb and cranberry. Rose petals and dried violets adorn a satiny texture with harmonious tension. Richness lingers on the palate—and in pleasant memory—with weight and refinement. **96**

Priest Ranch 2022 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$60) Taste the soil: sweet and generous, threaded with minerality and espresso. Suede tannins are sleek and faintly dusted with dark chocolate. Black plum is introduced, graceful and poignant, alongside new leather and cedar sprinkled with nutmeg. **95**
—Meridith May